

Non-Essential: Adjuncting During COVID-19

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Childress, Herb. *The Adjunct Underclass: How America's Colleges Betrayed Their Faculty, Their Students, and Their Mission*. UP of Chicago, 2019. 208 pages.

The world has changed dramatically since I began drafting this book review in November 2019. As we all cope with the COVID-19 outbreak, and unemployment is at levels not seen since the Great Depression, higher education will likely be changed forever. Few institutions know what the 2020–21 academic year will look like, but all know there will be acute financial implications. Many colleges are furloughing staff and faculty, cutting pay, and announcing hiring freezes. This new landscape makes Herb Childress's book, *The Adjunct Underclass: How America's Colleges Betrayed Their Faculty Their Students, and Their Mission* considerably more important and more ominous than when the book was released last year. His text percolates with numbers, personal stories from adjuncts, Childress's own experiences, and little hope. His message is that the system is built on injustices and erroneous public perceptions of higher education. In his own words, Childress says that this is "a book that grows from fundamental questions of what college is, what college teaching is, and why some participants—both students and teachers—are secure while other remain ever uncertain" (18). Those questions lead the reader to accepting that only systematic and widespread change would alter the way higher education currently operates. A cataclysmic disruption to the structures of these institutions is necessary for any change. The COVID-19 pandemic will create dramatic change in our institutions; that is certain. Reading Childress in the pandemic's shadow adds exigency and hesitant anticipation.

The book goes further than the stack of periodic articles sounding the alarm about the plight of adjunct faculty. Childress reviews the more public adjunct stories and reminds us of the bad pay, long hours, questionable working conditions, lack of benefits and job security, and the silencing of the dissenting voices; but this book is really about what higher education has become as a result of "systematically eliminat[ing] an entire class of professionals" (ix), those who are full-time, secure, and tenured. The COVID-19 crisis might draw back the ornate curtain made of the public perception

of teaching in college, the popular culture-created perfection, isolation, and reverence of the clichéd ivory tower elitism. If the public pays attention, they may discover “things about the college experience that are never included in the recruitment material” (Childress 4–5) The reorganization of faculty and teaching during this pandemic may reveal that, “your daughter’s early courses in academic writing, mathematics, and world languages will almost certainly be taught by someone other than a permanent faculty member” and that at “innumerable lesser-tier schools . . . the majority of your son’s faculty will be temp workers” that go by a variety of titles such as “adjunct faculty, part-time lecturer, visiting scholar, postdoctoral fellow, professor of the practice, artist in residence” (5), all to mask their contingency. Childress writes “once we go beneath the surface, we discover an ecosystem and mix of species entirely unlike what we might have expected” (2). Of all the unknown long-term financial effects of this crisis, for college faculty the worst will likely fall upon adjuncts. Their easily terminated contracts, if they have them at all, will force institutions to rethink who is doing the pedagogical work in the university.

Childress is writing about the adjunct underclass, but smartly puts it within the entire academic system that created and continues to feed it. This is a well-researched book with a thorough appendix of collected data, a long and wide-ranging bibliography, and a survey for graduate students that assesses the likelihood of them becoming an adjunct instead of getting a full-time faculty position, a back-of-the-magazine feature that is tongue-in-cheek, but deadly serious. Much of the book reads this way. The mix of narrative, commentary, data, and Childress’s indignation and sarcasm makes the text compelling. But as a WPA, it’s not good bedtime reading. These are the realities that make WPA work difficult and sleeping soundly impossible. You wake up startled, mind racing, feelings of hiring dread. Your fevered dream caused by enrollment numbers, ideas of how to fix the system and the voice in your head that tells you it won’t work, new initiatives that your night-brain concocts and the naysaying administrator who tells you it’s not in the budget. And then the alarm goes off at 5:00 a.m. and you get ready for working conditions for yourself or others that you just can’t change.

Reading this book as an insider who works with adjuncts daily, you will nod and maybe chuckle uncomfortably; we know all that rings true from our own experiences. Most of us understand or have lived the plight of the adjunct: the freeway-flyer of long commutes rushing to several different schools with varied curricula and expectations, and little to no support from colleagues who are also struggling. But when the reader is outside academia and not privy to the everyday of an academic institution, the anecdotes, exposition of how things work, and the manner in which Chil-

dress writes about higher education would make even the most generous of collegiate spirit pause and grimace. He concludes a chapter called, “The Comforts of Those Inside the Castle,” professing that the “tenured and tenure tracked faculty, administrators and managers . . . have every reason to protect their own turf, and ignore the needs of those beyond the moat” (112). Childress says that the university is made up of faculty “worthy of full membership in the community. But it’s easy to move quickly from that understanding to an unwarranted opposite statement: the people on the outside are unworthy” (113). And Childress doesn’t let us forget that the separation and unworthiness creeps beyond the full-time and the part-time divide and into the research and teaching missions of most universities. There are those who teach and there are those who do research. The disparity between the two widens as more universities rely on sponsored research grants and less on state funding because of the politically “manufactured public suspicion about intellectual life” (72). Those whose main responsibility is teaching are marginalized and devalued in an era where grant money is privileged.

Childress begins his second chapter: “Adjunct (n): something joined or added to another thing but not essentially a part of it” (19) quoted from the online dictionary, *Merriam-Webster*. Most instructors have told their students at some point to avoid using a dictionary definition as a way to introduce a topic in their research papers. But the strategy works here. Adjuncts are a part and apart. Childress expands adjunct contingency saying that in “higher education, the willingness to settle for less in the one area that matters most, is the outcome of a vast shift in our beliefs about who should go to college, and what kinds of experiences they should expect to find there” (17). He argues that contingent goes beyond how we categorize faculty saying, “College, especially college designed for those less than elite, is profoundly contingent. It’s contingent upon enrollment, contingent upon funding shifts, contingent upon consumer demand, contingent upon national educational and employment trends.(17) Couple that contingency with the absurd adage “Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach,” Childress reminds us of the cheapening of teaching and the “transactional consumer culture” that “reinforces the suspicion that college faculty are interchangeable content providers, that pretty much anybody can do it well enough as long as they have a little more knowledge than their students” (115–16). And in writing studies, this maxim is magnified by the belief that since everyone writes, anyone can teach writing. While Childress is speaking to all of higher education, his background and most of his examples center squarely on writing programs which “are often among the worst examples of imbalanced ecosystem” (27). And we know we are somewhat

culpable given that we are the ones who offer courses to most of or all students on our campuses; Childress highlights that the first-year student is most exposed to the contingent faculty. As WPAs, we might argue that colleges should staff the best teachers during a student's first year in college. It is first-year students who need the most support. But even as many adjuncts are great teachers, the system puts up roadblocks in every direction for them to have meaningful relationships with their students (37). Childress argues that tenure-track faculty take the best courses with the best students (usually advanced students in Junior and Senior year) saying, "when 70 percent of all American high school grads go off to college . . . great number of college classes won't be much fun to teach" (48). These required, get-them-out-of-the-way classes are given to the "contingent community" (49).

Childress reminds us of the system that produces the adjunct underclass: the glut of Ph.Ds with schools continuing to produce them along with the diminishing number of available tenure-track positions. Part-time teaching is the new normal. In writing studies, graduate programs have confidence for rhetoric and composition students because job ads in our discipline often outnumber the ads of subdisciplines in English studies. Even then, Childress argues, the conditions still have to be just right to secure those coveted positions. He compares getting a tenure-track position to Malcolm Gladwell's explanation of what it takes to become a professional hockey player in *Outliers*. The conditions have to be perfect. Candidates are at a disadvantage if they haven't gone to a strong undergraduate institution, moved directly into doctoral study at an elite program, completed the program quickly with published articles, book deals, lucrative grants from respected agencies, strong connections to noted scholars and done it all no later than their early thirties (60–64). Perfect conditions are required to secure the paltry number of faculty positions available.

Reminding us that tenure-track faculty make up only about a quarter of today's college faculty, the eager, freshly minted masters and PhDs have heard the woes of the academic job market, yet the most optimistic among us opt for part-time teaching to get their foot in the door. I know that any adjunct hiring offer I make at my institution includes the disclaimer that adjuncting for us will not lead to a permanent position. Childress would say that even with that reality, the system of hiring adjuncts who want to move into full-time positions is always a "bait and switch" (65–67). When one, with degree in hand, has no offers, being a temporary faculty member—that Childress defines as including "adjunct faculty, part-time lecturer, visiting scholar, postdoctoral fellow, professor of the practice, artist in residence" saying that they all work "course-by-course or year-by-year, with no guarantee of permanence, often for embarrassingly small stipends,

and often for no benefits” (5)—seems like a better career choice than taking work outside of academia.

Childress’s book deserves its place in the library of higher education books. Most have some chapter or section devoted to the issue of adjunct teaching. Next to texts such as *Our Higher Calling: Rebuilding the Partnership between American and Its College and University* by Holden Thorp and Buck Goldstein, *Academically Adrift* by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, Childress believes that the teachers of the students are at the heart of any reform. Even Cathy Davidson’s compelling and optimistic book, *The New Education* only mentions part-time labor a handful of times. She says, “the situation of adjunct and contingent labor threatens the future of the university, and so we must insist that full-time positions be replaced with full-time faculty,” but then curtly writes it is “doable” (Davidson 249). Our own WPA shelves on contingent labor that might include: the Modern Language Association’s *Statement on Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Members*, and a video copy of *Con Job: Stories of Adjunct and Contingent Labor*, *The Adjunct Underclass* reminds WPAs that we are on the frontline. Especially important to writing programs is the 2017 edited collection, *Labored: The State(ment) and Future of Work in Composition*. The authors are writing their chapters in response to the *Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing* from 1989. This statement borne directly from 1987’s *Wyoming Conference Resolution* raised the flag on part-time instruction more than 30 years ago, when the tenure-track and non-tenure-track imbalance was less severe. In Joseph Harris’s “Afterword” in *Labored*, he summarizes this retrospective of how far we’ve come, saying, “I was moved in reading this book by how so many of the authors in it seem to write out of a continuing sense of pain and exclusion” (287–88). And Childress’s book, writing more generally about adjuncts in higher education, echoes this pain and exclusion.

Contingency isn’t going away; if anything, we are becoming even more of a gig economy as more folks work from home. Independent contractors, the side-hustle, and 1099s are imbedded in our vocabulary about the evolving work force. And with COVID-19 and the increase of online instruction, the discussions about the high cost of college are only going to intensify the conversations about how colleges used to function.

The last chapter of *The Adjunct Underclass* offers four principles that offer a framework of how to move forward and jettison contingency. Childress believes that if we can reasonably agree that colleges should not “privilege content knowledge over the people who carry it,” that managers should not shape and steer the business of education, that employees are not in “fixed roles of fixed expertise,” and that “an internal disciplinary audi-

ence” should not evaluate programs (154), contingency is not an option. These final principles don’t offer a fix for the inequalities of faculty positions in higher education, but it is important to read or reread Childress’s book while academia grapples with the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic reveals or reminds us how we teach, pay for instruction, and how we treat and consider contingent faculty. The long-term fiscal-tightening that all universities are now under is an opportunity for institutions to look at instruction and staffing in ways that are fairer and more moral than the system that we have inherited and that we as WPAs begrudgingly perpetuate.

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