

Caged, but Not Confined:  
The Organizational Ambiguity (and Invisibility) of Part-Time Faculty  
in Community Colleges

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EDUC 2480  
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November 2007

## **INTRODUCTION**

The role of outsourcing and contingent part-time workers has become an important feature of the labor market in the so-called “new economy.” This phenomenon is currently being studied within many organizational realms, but this paper will focus on faculty in higher education. Scholars have documented the rise in contingent, short-term labor in higher education (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006) and the wage gaps between part-time and full-time faculty (Clery & Topper, 2007). More specifically, the focus of this paper will be on the role of part-time faculty in the community college. In the United States part-time faculty constitute about two-thirds of all community college faculty and teach about one-third of all community college courses (Twombly & Townsend, 2007). In California the 41,000 part-time community college faculty members make up about 70% of all community college faculty in the state (Regus, 2007). While there has been some important recent academic study of part-time community college faculty (Levin, Kater, & Wagoner, 2006), this subject is still in its infancy (Twombly & Townsend, 2007) and the literature is still spotty in documenting the complex roles of part-time faculty and qualitatively analyzing the socio-economic, professional, organizational, and ethical implications of the phenomenon.

## **METHOD**

The historian Marc Bloch conceptualized history as an “endeavor toward better understanding” and as a “science in movement.” Bloch argued that the “past is, by definition, a datum which nothing in the future will change,” but through the study of the

past humans can “endeavor toward better understanding” of the present (Bloch, 1953, p. 12-13, 58). Towards the end of “better understanding,” this paper will utilize an experimental methodology that seeks the very limited aim of subjective awareness. I will seek to *use my own past* experiences as an adjunct community college faculty member in order to subjectively understand the organizational identity and challenges that I have faced as an adjunct community college instructor. To do so I will be relying on both documents and my own personal memory of the events discussed in those documents.<sup>1</sup> I will use documents in order to conceptually “walk” through various personal experiences in a contextually grounded method of “remembrance” (Rosenberg, 2007) in order to develop conscious, subjective “awareness” (Searle, 2002). I will also be using organizational theory in order to conceptually and analytically define my experiences and, thereby, construct a form of knowledge based on my experience.

My “experimental” method is loosely correlated to a conceptualization formulated by Michele Foucault. He discussed the relationship between a philosopher and his/her theory: “A demanding, prudent, ‘experimental’ attitude is necessary; at every moment, step by step, one must confront what one is thinking and saying with what one is doing, with what one is” (Foucault, 1984, p. 374). In essence this paper will be relying upon the very old philosophical method of self-knowledge: applying a conceptual apparatus to personal experience in order to formulate knowledge, and out of this knowledge to build a sense of personal awareness and/or identity with which to frame and/or guide future action and thought. Using this method I will be addressing one primary question: What

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<sup>1</sup> The documents are part of an extensive “journal” of personal documents and correspondence preserved over the last decade. Specific documents used for this paper consist of written correspondence and email correspondence between myself and various community college faculty, administration, and staff.

has been my organizational role as an adjunct instructor and how do I as an adjunct instructor fit within the multiple organizations to which I belong?

## **DATA & DISCUSSION:**

### **What Has Been My Organizational Role as an Adjunct Instructor?**

There have been recent calls to re-conceptualize organizational structure and behavior in order to develop “new organizations” that are more responsive to “knowledge workers.” The new organizational challenges for dealing with knowledge workers revolve around how workers use knowledge, how workers use technology to organize and communicate knowledge, and what type of workspace best facilitates knowledge workers (*The Economist*, 2006).

However community colleges, like public schools, seem mired in older forms of bureaucratic rationalization and the “iron cage” of institutional structuration set forth by state and professional bodies, established administrative structures (Bidwell, 1965; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Giddens, 1971; Mintzberg, 1979; Scott, 1992; Simon & March, 1993), as well a political and professional movements for standardization and accountability (Vaughn, 2006). Given the “loose coupling” (Weick, 1976) or “structural looseness” (Bidwell, 1965) of educational organizations, educational administrators and department chairs often rely on “the enforcement of detailed rules of procedure” to keep organizational order, but often this can “alienate” instructors from the educational organization (Bidwell, 1965, p. 1017). Affiliation with professions or professional groups can be another mechanism of control over instructors (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), but professional standards and affiliations are also powerful sources of identity for

instructors, and this affiliation can sometimes conflict with administrative “control activities” and, thereby, be a source of alienation from the educational organization (Bidwell, 1965).

Full-time community college faculty are semi-professionals with a degree of “professional autonomy” (Baldrige, Curtis, Ecker & Riley, 1977), even though many faculty members in vocational areas do not have any formal educational degrees. Full-time faculty have a large measure of organizational “social control” because they are able to “consider and affect the ends and means of [the organization’s] collective activity” (Bidwell, 1965; Bidwell & Yasumoto, 1999). Thus full-time faculty can often identify with and participate in the educational organization of the community college because they have job security, good salary and benefit packages, varying degrees of professional autonomy, and they have the opportunity to participate in various administration decisions within the organization, especially at the department level. The adjunct community college instructor, however, has none of these attributes and, therefore, has an ambiguous and often invisible place within the organizational culture of the community college.

Because the adjunct lacks both the employee and professional benefits of the full-time instructor, the educational organization can seem much more like an “iron cage” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Giddens, 1971). But it is an iron-cage that only partially controls behavior within a limited and temporary context. Thus, some types of adjuncts, the “willing adjunct,” might find acclimatizing to the limited and temporary iron cage a minor inconvenience or even a necessary component of a positive affiliation. The willing adjuncts might include instructors who are not financially dependent upon the institution,

who don't mind the bureaucratic structure and limited autonomy, who operate within the institution on a limited basis (say only 1 class per semester), or who are seen as a temporary expert in high demand. However, some adjunct instructors, the "unwilling adjunct," want full-time work as higher education instructors, but due to administrative and state regulations cannot find such work. Unwilling adjuncts are often financially dependent on the institution, have a high degree of professional competency, expect a degree of autonomy, and operate (or want to operate) on a more permanent basis. To unwilling adjuncts the organizational context can seem unjust and predatory "iron cage." As an unwilling adjunct, I would like to explain several personal experiences that have led me, as an employee, to see my educational organizations as unjust, neglectful, and predatory "iron cages."

First, the employment process. A considerable amount of time goes into the application and interview process, albeit a bit less for the adjunct than for a full-time applicant (the full-time faculty application and interview process is generally much longer and more involved). An adjunct will invest a good 2-3 hours per job for the application and interview process, not including driving time, which could add another hour or more. This is all unpaid, and can be a risk given the large amount of adjuncts who apply for each employment opening. The level of respect accorded the adjunct interviewee during this process can often be very low. Adjuncts are sometimes squeezed, back to back, into a long day of 30 min interviews. I waited for over 45 min for one interview because the process was running late, and once I got into the interview I was treated quite curtly and asked only method oriented questions about how I taught. I was almost not interviewed on this occasion because the dean and chair had expected

interviewees to bring transcripts, yet I was not told either my phone or in the interview letter to bring anything to the interview (and I had specifically asked this question on the phone). I was also told in this interview that all textbooks had already been selected and all courses had predetermined syllabus outlines with student learning outcomes. Thus, I was basically being interviewed not as a professional teacher, but as a powerless employee who would comply with the “control activities” of the organization. I was not offered this job and thus wasted about 5 hours (including traveling) of my limited time on the application process.

Second, organizations make many demands of employees that are often outside the boundaries of the job description and are therefore uncompensated: interviews, welcome activities, orientations, paperwork, parking, organizational networking, familiarization with organizational facilities and resources, ect. Full-time employees who earn a livable salary from the organization and who are required to be physically present in the organization for much of the week can satisfy these requirements without much hassle, and they can often complete many of these tasks within paid working hours. However, part-time employees often live much farther from the job site, are on site for very limited amounts of time, are compensated at a rate close to 1/3 that of a full-time faculty, are only compensated for in-class instructional activities, and are not given much communication or commitment from the organization (I will discuss this later point in more detail later), yet adjuncts are often expected to participate (unpaid) in many routine organizational activities. I know that these small organizational demands can be quite a burden, especially when there are rigid processes and inflexible classified staff. For instance, paying \$45 a semester for full-time parking when you only make \$800 to \$1600

a month, driving about 2 hours roundtrip for a 3 hour unpaid orientation (that could have been condensed into 15 min worth of valuable information), or having to pick up a parking permit after 4pm when you work in the early mornings.

Another issue is employee compensation and job security. The adjunct in the California community college system can work a maximum of 9 credit hours within a single school district, which often amounts to a “full” part-time load of two 3-4 credit classes at about \$1,000 per credit hour per semester. A “full” part-time load of two 3 credit classes is worth \$6,000 while a “full” part-time load of two 4 credit classes is worth \$8,000. Now there will be a slight variation between a 3 or 4 credit class in the instructional hours per week, but any instructor will tell you that despite these slight differences in class times, an instructor works the same amount of real-time hours for both classes and yet could get compensated \$2,000 less for the 3 credit class. On top of the unequal pay, the compensation is only focused on classroom instruction and, thus, all activities external to the classroom (yet integral to the educational process) are unpaid: office hours, communications with students, meetings with students, grading, curriculum development, instructional planning, photocopying materials, reviewing new text books, organizational duties like paperwork and book orders, not to mention professional development which adjuncts are not eligible for (and which are unpaid if adjuncts take a day off from work to go to a conference). And of course the adjunct receives no health or leave benefits, and only some schools offer paid sick leave. On top of all this, there is no guarantee that the adjunct has a job the following semester (nor is it certain which hours on which days the adjunct might be offered work).

Within the culture of the educational organization an adjunct often feels invisible, expendable, and inferior, and these social judgments are often communicated in many subtle and not so subtle ways. A teacher strives to socially reach and academically teach his or her students with many different approaches, and this is often a real struggle with community college students, and yet for most schools an adjunct is invisible organizational member except for 30 minutes every two semesters. The evaluation process is perhaps the only time members of the organization speak in person to the adjunct instructor, and given the circumstance and the nature of being an adjunct (as discussed above), it is not pleasant exchange. The evaluation is designed around the limited time of the observer and for most schools you are basically told which day the evaluator will show up. There is never any communication about how observers evaluate classes, what standards or criteria they use, or what types of practices a particular department expects to see. Evaluators often show up for around 30 minutes and then they pass out a form for students to fill out. Rarely if ever does the evaluator actually speak to you, nor do they give personalized feedback, except if they find you doing something of which they do not approve. If you engage in an activity the observer disapproves of (say writing a short essay when the course is only supposed to teach up to paragraphs, which you can defend on cogent pedagogical and professional grounds), you are told simply that you must follow the department's rules and a negative comment is recorded on the evaluation. The evaluation is signed by the observer and the department chair, it goes into your file, and then the adjunct is organizationally ignored for another year.

Even if you are a good teacher, if you get good performance reviews, if you establish some relationships with full-time faculty, and if you have been with the

department for several years, then you still don't have job security. This makes most adjuncts feel highly expendable. Some semesters instead of the "full" part-time schedule you might be expecting (given your years of service and good performance reviews), you find instead that the department has offered you a "half" part-time schedule of one 3 or one 4 credit class: your meager pay is now cut in half. If an unwilling adjunct was only employed with one district and lived on strict budget, this would be a deep-poverty level wage (\$3,000 to \$4,000 for 5 months), and it would seriously effect the mental and physical well being of that human being. If the unwilling adjunct wants to survive, he or she has to work out of necessity within at least two districts to assemble a livable wage.

But some districts are very slow in giving you a teaching assignment. Sometimes a district might offer a course assignment, which conflicts with a teaching assignment from another school. Sometimes it seems your employers have forgotten about you and you fear that you have lost a job. Just this term one of my departments (for which I have been working for 3 ½ years) was very late (early November) in getting out teaching assignments for the following semester (Feb). I had emailed the coordinator I repeatedly over the course of two weeks and I got no response. I had to email the chair in order to ask if I had a job. He told me he didn't know and to wait for a response. Luckily the assignment finally came through (although there was a conflict and I could only teach one 4 credit course). As an unwilling adjunct I basically live 6 months at a time, and I have no guarantees that I will be employed or have a stable income for the next semester.

Finally there is a sense of inferiority that gets communicated to you in many ways, especially I would argue for the aspiring adjunct with a high degree of

professionalism and innovation. There are two humiliating examples that I have endured in my 3 ½ years as an adjunct, which I will now explain.

The first incident had to do with a Title V grant. At one school a flyer was put in all faculty boxes announcing that submissions were being accepted for innovative teaching grants. I applied and my proposal was accepted. The grant coordinator seemed very excited about my proposal and there was no problem about my adjunct status. The grant coordinator was going to contact the department chair in order to get support for the submission and plan a workload. The chair, however, said I had no right to submit such a proposal (innovations in teaching and curriculum) and that all teaching and curriculum were decided by the faculty (i.e. the full-time faculty). The grant coordinator emailed me and said that she would try to work this out. A week went by, and then another week. I emailed the grant coordinator, but no response. A month went by and I emailed the grant coordinator, but no response. Two months went by and I emailed the grant coordinator, but still no response. If I was a human being that had a semblance of value to the organization then I would have at least merited an email explaining to me that my grant proposal was rejected, but even this level of dignity is often denied to the adjunct.

The inferiority and powerlessness of the adjunct can take even more humiliating forms. At a different school, the former chair of my department was working in the student writing and learning center. She observed some of my student's writing and she felt that I was not teaching them appropriately. She wrote me a very angry and hostile email. In essence she said, "You are not doing your job and you are not following our department Student Learning Outcomes: change your teaching methods and assignments." I responded with a very long email answering her complaints, explaining

my teaching methodology and my curricular objectives, and explaining how all of my methods and assignments fully met department guidelines. I also said, in essence, that if she wanted to have a discussion that was fine, but a more collegial tone was needed; however, if she wanted to discipline my professional behavior then she was out of line because her comments should have been directed to the chair. Four months earlier I had actually given the chair a copy of the curriculum that I had been developing over the last two years. The chair had said in passing that it was great and to keep up the good work. However, later this day I received an angry email from the chair questioning my teaching methods and competency. The chair, to put it bluntly, was not a well organized person and did not appear to have any discernable leadership skills. After meeting with the chair face to face later that week it seemed like the situation was diffused; however, later that week I was told by the chair to correct my behavior (in very vague terms), which confused me because I thought the issue had been settled after our meeting. Not one day later the Dean of my college called and left a message on my home answering machine: “we will no longer require you for the next semester, thank you very much” (I had been previously scheduled to teach two sections the next fall). I was now out of a job because I had dared to develop my own curriculum. Basically I told the dean and the chair in an email that this behavior was indecent and unprofessional, and that I would be quitting after the semester was over. I also threatened to write a letter to the president asking for a review of the English department (I was never going to live up to this treat because I barely had time to write my resignation letter). Surprisingly, 5 months later I received a “bonus check” in the mail for about \$800, and about 9 months after that I received

another “bonus check” for \$800. However I never heard a word of apology from the dean or the chair of the department.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Based on my personal experiences, there are many reasons why the unwilling adjunct could be alienated from the educational organization of the community college. The bureaucratic rationalization, administrative “control activities,” and general incivility of the community college organization can seem like an unjust, neglectful, and predatory “iron cage.” And while professional affiliation and autonomy (Baldrige, Curtis, Ecker & Riley, 1977) is allowed for the full-time faculty, the adjunct is rarely allowed to act as a professional or to have much autonomy within the organization. I quite often feel like an invisible, expendable, and powerless temporary-worker. The educational organizations to which I belong often feel like “psychic prisons” (Morgan, 1997), and the structure of the organization often makes my job harder than it already is.

But the iron-cage can only partially control my behavior within a limited and temporary context. The “structural looseness” of the organization, combined with poor leadership on the part of full-time faculty and administrators, can often allow for informal openings, whereby adjunct instructors can resist dictated rationalization processes and develop free and/or professional agency. This free space can be used as a mechanism for multiple types of positive and negative behaviors within the organization and/or classroom, but I want to briefly focus on how I use this space to engage in “professional autonomy” (Baldrige, Curtis, Ecker & Riley, 1977). It is in the unpaid and unregulated space outside of the organization where I can develop my professional affiliations and

skills, and where I can develop curricular and instructional methods that will help my performance in the classroom. The classroom is also a largely unregulated, “free” space where I can behave as a professional in order to reach and teach my students in the most effective way I can. For me, the structural looseness of the community college is the only organizational feature that makes my workplace bearable as an unwilling adjunct.

Scholars have pointed out that organizational effectiveness is related to both the “mission priorities” of the institution and the decision-making process of the organization. Many scholars have argued that “consensual, participative decision processes” leads to greater organizational effectiveness in higher education (Smart, Kuh, & Tierney, 1997). If this is true for community colleges then 2/3 of the faculty are effectively bared from the decision-making process, which means the organization operates more like an aristocracy than a democracy: a select, fully-paid cadre of organizational elites dictate the mission, values, and organizational processes, while the majority of part-time employees simply toe the line as temporary, poorly paid employees. I find it hard to believe that this is an effective way to organize an institution of higher education, and it is certainly not a just structure. But it is cost-effective, and thus it seems within the U.S. system of higher education that market values supersede values of organizational efficiency or justice.

I would conclude by saying that adjunct instructors, especially what I have termed as “unwilling” adjunct instructors, have become a subaltern “other” within the organizational culture of American higher education, especially in community colleges (Bloland, 1995; Spivak, 1994). There are very few spaces open to the adjunct to “speak” and participate within the “center” of the organizational apparatus. The adjunct lives on

the margins of the organization as a temporary, isolated, inferior, and exploited laborer. If community colleges are to become more effective at the mission of educating students then the subaltern 2/3 of the faculty must be brought into the center of the organization in order to more fully participate in the organizational culture and planning processes. There is evidence that some four-year universities have tried to more fully integrate part-time faculty with some success (Kezar, Lester, & Anderson, 2006). It is not simply a matter of justice; it is also a matter of effectiveness: how can an organization devoted to teaching and learning operate effectively when 2/3 of the faculty are removed from the planning process?

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