

From Adjunct to Tenure Track: Reflections and Advice on Navigating an Academic Career in the 21st Century

July 8, 2013



Credit: "Adjunct Instructor" by pixelszen on Creative Commons/Flickr.

By Ella Díaz

The academic career has changed dramatically over the last two decades. Some would even argue that things started to change long before the twenty-first century and for various reasons. However, it is now indisputable that junior colleagues and graduate students feel deep anxieties and pressure about their futures in the university. Finding a tenure-track job in the year that one completes her doctorate is unlikely, especially in arts and humanities fields. The alternative to the tenure-track or multi-year postdoc is to work as an adjunct instructor, which typically means to "teach on a contract basis, often booked one semester at a time" (Bradbury 2013). Making up 75% of higher ed faculty, adjuncts are the new majority in academia, but this predominance is not beneficial. This certainly was the case for me when I completed my Ph.D. in American Studies in 2010. I had been an adjunct lecturer for four years prior to completing my degree, and would continue as contingent faculty until 2012, when I accepted a tenure-track position, after two years of rigorously applying for lectureships, assistant professorships and postdoctoral fellowships.

In January 2012, MLA president Michael Bérubé reported that "adjunct, contingent faculty make up 1.5 million people teaching in American colleges and universities. Many of them working at or under the poverty line, without health insurance; they have no academic freedom worthy of the name, because they can be fired at will" (Bérubé 2012). A bleak outlook, Bérubé sums up the spiritual and psychological crises for recently graduated and unemployed or underemployed educators—who find their ideological and political commitments to research, teaching, and service, overshadowed by their need for health care, income to pay back student loans, and the intellectual

resources that can only be guaranteed by a tenure-track position (library privileges, research funds, an office, etc.). Furthermore, Bérubé's point on the lack of academic freedom for adjunct faculty has ripple effects. Adjunct instructors can feel an indescribable alienation from their labor and personal integrity because they are overburdened with the fear of unexpected dismissal and not knowing semester-to-semester if they will be employed. Subsequently, they self-censor in the classroom, avoid interpersonal relationships with students who seek mentorship, and withdrawal from the larger community of the university (O'Shaughnessy 2012). Aptly entitled *Ghosts in the Classroom*, Michael Dubson's 2001 examination of the plight of contingent faculty elaborates on the dilemma of being expected to perform at a professional level while not being treated professionally.

I also can't help but consider the scarcity of tenure-track jobs at present in the context of other changes and shifts that create greater precarity in our communities—from draconian immigration laws and enforcement, to the banning of books and dismantling of programs in U.S. Latino/a Studies. The point I hope to make by spelling out the individual impact and collective toll of an adjunct faculty majority is that the stakes are higher for those of us who work in Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies at the university level than for scholars in different fields. If we are not present in the university in viable and sustainable ways, we are not able to create, shape, and put forth the knowledge that heals and advances our communities. I have in mind Jason Richwine's 2009 dissertation which contends that low IQs among "Hispanics" in the U.S. are a genetic failure and contribute to the intellectual deterioration of the nation. His manuscript has been mentioned recently in the press and factors in political discourse on immigration reform, reminding us that knowledge is always constructed, and we have to make sure that we are part of its production.

In what follows, I offer several insights into my transition from an adjunct lecturer of six years to a tenure-track assistant professor. I am aware that every situation is different, including mine. Nevertheless, I believe some of my experiences may offer a perspective to recent graduate students and adjunct faculty that can facilitate professionalization, whether or not one is on a tenure-track.

One of the most important insights I can offer adjunct lecturers and recent graduates is to think strategically about your labor. Sure, you are teaching classes—from writing lesson plans and assignments, to grading student work and holding office hours (at cafes, coffee shops, and the other meeting places of the adjunct lecturer with no office.) But look more closely at what you are doing. Are you conversing in multiple languages? Are you participating in reading or writing groups with other colleagues or graduate students? Are you discussing curriculum for the upcoming semester? I ask because I have recently realized that part of the problem of contingent labor in academia is the alienation one feels through the denial of professionalization, a process that is largely made up of vocabulary and official terms. Of course, the process of professionalization in academia isn't only linguistic; it also includes levels of access that facilitate research and ultimately, scholarship, through funding, institutional privileges, and a sense of job security. But on the average day, reading and writing groups, bilingual networks, classroom instruction, and student tutorials, are the ways you labor, whether you refer to them as such. Each of these activities are essentially what tenure-track colleagues are doing; they are simply told what to call such activities: a writing group, a language enrichment meeting, a student research group, a curriculum committee and other academic service and research.

In my first year as a tenure-track assistant professor I have had several trainings in which I have been introduced to professionalizing vocabularies. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that I have been using concepts of "universal design" in my classroom and "service-learning" components in my syllabi; I have also been a longtime contributor to undergraduate curriculum planning, but now I am on an official committee with senior colleagues. In other words, I have literally been taught how to talk about what I am doing when I am lesson-planning, writing course descriptions, instructing, researching and writing. As an adjunct instructor, your reading or writing group may not be funded by

your university, but the work is the same and it is important to know how you have labored when conversing with tenured faculty, interviewing for positions and networking.

In the process of identifying your labor, it is imperative to value everything you do—be it a lecture at a local history society, a public library or a community center. I didn't realize all of my labor value until my new senior colleagues commented on how many times I popped up on Google for 2011-2012. As an adjunct lecturer, I had to hustle for venues and invitations to present my work. I inquired with galleries, community centers and public history groups for lectures and events. In doing so, I increased my public profile in ways I did not expect because most of these organizations have websites and advertise events and programming. During my job interview and campus visit, I heard several tenured faculty remark on my community activism and creative projects. Moreover, my work outside the university also inspired new academic research and took me in directions I would have never gone if I had stayed safe and entrenched in the university. But many MALCSistas already know the value of community-based work because you're active in local organizations and causes as part of research, service-learning, civic duty or spiritual care. It's time to merge these activities (at least on paper) with your professional profile.

Also, how are you accounting for all of your writing? For many of us in humanities fields, we must publish a book and peer-reviewed articles to achieve tenure. But, in the twenty-first-century, other genres and outlets for writing are imperative, and many of you are blogging on your own websites, or on sites like *The Huffington Post*, *Vice*, and our fledgling *Mujeres Talk*. While blogging is not weighted on the level that the aforementioned publications are for tenure, it offers a particular visibility that can enhance your public profile. So, if you blog, you should make note of it in a professional way, including on your CV, school profile or even business cards. Are you linking your blogs to other known sites? Are you tracking your hits? You never know who's reading your posts. Recently a tenure-track colleague of mine sent me an email exclaiming that she was thrilled by a blog on the very topic of obtaining a Ph.D. in a humanities field, despite the shrinking pool of tenure-track opportunities. The blog she was so excited about was written by an adjunct instructor. There are two points I hope to make with my example. The first one is that name recognition is incredibly helpful for contingent faculty. If you're writing blogs or other online commentary, you are building a reputation that may be helpful to you down the road for getting an interview, or even while on an interview, because you never know who is a fan.

The second point I want to make with this particular example is that despite our titles, we are all colleagues, whether one is an adjunct lecturer, professor, instructor, practitioner, artist, etc. It is a system of power (that grows more corporate in structure every day), which categorizes us into different positions; it is not our degrees, nor our scholarship or very persons that have done so. Remember: numerous framers of our fields, including Gloria Anzaldúa, were contingent faculty.

Bérubé touches on the issue of collegiality in his report. He comments that after referring to an adjunct instructor as his colleague, the person thanked him because it was rare when she was referred to as such by her own tenured colleagues. While I don't want to overemphasize Bérubé's anecdote or suggest that it is a cure-all to the hardships faced by contingent faculty, the sentiment is not lost on me because, in my six years as an adjunct lecturer, when I was treated by tenured colleagues as, well, a colleague, it made an impact on my teaching and my occupational identity. Moreover, for colleagues who are already tenured, I suggest you reach out to your adjunct colleagues. Mentoring junior colleagues who are in departments as adjuncts can be disconcerting for tenured faculty because they are sometimes unsure how to advise them on advancing. But advice is always welcome and so is friendship.

It is important to remember that the culture of silence that surrounds the changes to the academic career is not our culture. And if the changes that are happening are not ours by desire or design, our

responses to them should not perpetuate the problem by not talking about them, whether we are tenured or not. In fact, our culture offers a powerful alternative to the status quo, as lecturer and blogger Annemarie Perez recently wrote in response to the flurry of online articles on the dismal state of the academic job market: “Yes, part of me reads these articles and understands. The job market / adjunct situation is bad. Rejection sucks. Uncertainty is hard. But nothing is ever certain. My family is proud of the adjuncting work I do, proud of the editing work I do, proud of me. They wouldn’t understand (or care) about the difference between a tenured and untenured position. To them all employment is uncertain, all work has dignity” ([April 16, 2013](#)) Perez’s statement is powerful for all of us to remember. It definitely reminds me of who I am on a daily basis and motivates me to speak with undergraduate and graduate students about why I wanted a Ph.D. in the first place. Ironically, the reasons that I wanted to be a professor are the very same ones for the Chicana undergraduate, who came to my office last May to ask me to be her advisor. Her reasons for wanting to become a Ph.D. aren’t innocent, naïve or overly idealistic. They are time-tested, honorable and based on tradition. With this blog, I hope more of you will weigh in and offer advice and testimony on your experiences.

Ella Diaz is an Assistant Professor of English at Cornell University. Her research is on the interdependence of Chicana/o and Latina/o literary and visual cultures.

Comment(s):

1. *Ella Diaz* July 10, 2013 at 10:55 AM

I have also had time to catch up on some of my journal reading and I recommend that folks check out George Lipsitz and Barbara Tomlinson’s brilliant essay on accompaniment in this last spring’s AMST Quarterly. My thoughts in the above blog fit nicely into this larger perspective of the stakes of our work as academics: https://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/american_quarterly/v065/65.1.tomlinson.pdf

2. *Theresa Delgadillo* July 14, 2013 at 9:46 AM

Ella,

Thanks for this blog essay offering both advice and perspective on the adjunct situation. Readers might also be interested in a recent blog on this topic in the Chronicle of Higher Education titled “I’m an Adjunct, Not a Volunteer.”

A colleague recently asked me for advice about an adjunct offer she received and it occurred to me that we know much more about advising someone in negotiations for tenure-track jobs than we do about advising them on adjunct work. For example, must one accept the teaching load and salary that is offered or is there any room for negotiation? Where are better places for adjunct work? Should you try to do service as an adjunct to prove that you would make a good tenure track hire or do you stick just to your work? What can we do to diminish the reliance on adjunct faculty? I appreciate how your essay calls us to discuss these topics more openly.

3. *CR* September 24, 2013 at 7:22 AM

I believe this is another reason why the US can’t compete in the global marketplace— an education system can hardly thrive and remain worldclass when educators have to struggle and new talent isn’t incentivized to enter and stay in academia.

This entry was posted in [Professionalization](#) and tagged [adjunct instructor](#), [contingent faculty](#), [Ella Diaz](#), [graduate education](#), [higher education](#), [Identifying your labor](#), [Job market advice](#), [Tenure track](#) on [July 8, 2013](#) by [mujerestalk](#).