

THE CASE OF THE INVISIBLE ADJUNCT

[THIRD Edition]

Boston Globe - Boston, Mass.

Author: Christopher Shea

Date: May 9, 2004

Start Page: D.5

Section: Ideas

Text Word Count: 981

Document Text

Critical Faculties Christopher Shea's column appears in Ideas biweekly. E-mail: critical.faculties@verizon.net

HERE'S SOME CAREER advice for recent graduates from someone who knows: "Do yourself a favor and do not go to graduate school in the humanities. No, not even if you burn with a passion for your field of study that will not be denied. You CAN deny it, and in my opinion, you should."

That morsel comes from a woman who calls herself the Invisible Adjunct. She earned her doctorate in history in 1999 from a Top-10 department. She has spent the past five years fruitlessly looking for a good job, a tenure-track job. Instead, she has been stuck in part-time teaching positions - "adjunct" positions, the fastest growing job category in academia, the kind where you make maybe \$2,000 a semester, with no benefits, and none of the real professors know your name; the kind where you don't get an office and end up schlepping your papers around in a bag.

For the last year, on her popular weblog, InvisibleAdjunct.com, this anonymous young woman - a New Yorker in her 30s - has been warning potential young dupes away from her own career path, riffing on the absurdities of academia, and mining her own feelings about it all. A few weeks ago, however, she announced that she was shutting down her blog and saying good-bye to the academy entirely.

Her valedictory posting last month attracted nearly 200 comments from readers, including a grateful farewell from Anthony Grafton, a star history professor at Princeton ("Your blog has taught me so much," he wrote), and sent ripples through the blogosphere. She was a victim as well as an articulate critic of the hypocrisies and structural flaws of American higher education, and the message board on her blog had become a vital forum for the similarly disaffected.

"She created a conversation that let a lot of people in," says Timothy Burke, a tenured history professor at Swarthmore and an active blogger himself.

Few people realize how important part-time labor is to the modern university. According to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), nearly 50 percent of all faculty positions are now part-time, non-tenure-track - a proportion that has doubled since 1976. (Another 16 percent are full-time positions off the tenure track.)

"Adjuncts are like sherpas," says Patricia Lesko, editor-in- chief of Adjunct Advocate magazine, a bimonthly based in Ann Arbor that mixes investigative pieces about the plight of adjuncts with can-do advice intended to buck them up. "The people on the tenure track climb the mountain of tenure, while adjuncts carry the luggage of introductory courses with them."

The Bay State is no stranger to the problem. At Emerson College, roughly half the courses are taught by part-time faculty. Last month, after a three-year struggle, adjuncts there finally won raises of 15 to 20 percent and some health benefits for long-term teachers. At UMass-Boston, where adjuncts teach

three-fourths of all continuing education classes, they also get health insurance - though this is rare.

At UMass-Amherst, meanwhile, adjuncts will very likely be an issue in upcoming negotiations between the administration and the faculty union (which includes adjuncts who work at least half- time). Since 1994, the number of full-time tenured faculty at UMass- Amherst has declined 17 percent, to 894, according to Dan Clawson, a sociologist and vice president of the union. Over the same period, the number of "contingent" faculty - all teachers with no shot at tenure - rose 61 percent, to 210.

In such a climate, even young scholars with glittering resumes - like the Invisible Adjunct - are out of luck. In five years, there were precisely two postings of full-time, tenured positions in her subspecialty of European history. Her first year on the market, she got a campus interview at a very prestigious university. Since then, barely a nibble.

Many tenured academics criticize the adjunct system as exploitative, though few have done anything about a system that lightens their own workload. But the blogosphere was also buzzing last week about the decision of Erin O'Connor, a tenured English professor at the University of Pennsylvania who writes the blog "Critical Mass," to ditch her lifetime job and nice salary to teach at an independent boarding school in the Berkshires. In addition to general frustration with academic culture, O'Connor cited disgust at the "abusive system" that "chewed [the Invisible Adjunct] up and spit her out."

Young scholars aren't the only victims of the adjunct system. "It feels like you are part of some kind of fraud against the students," the Invisible Adjunct said in an interview last week. "I am not part of the department in the way they assume I am."

Despite the recent accolades, she still doesn't want to reveal her identity, she explained, saying she felt vulnerable because of her professional failure and her openness about brushes with depression and other personal problems.

But it was her pointed, non-rancorous discussion of the warped academic job market that caught most people's attention. Culture war issues - either from the left or right - were basically a distraction, she thought: "Get with the program, people. The biggest threat both to academic freedom and to academic standards is the corporatization of the university."

While ambivalent about the angry activism of some of her colleagues, she's scathing about senior professors who brush off adjuncts' complaints as trivial. "Does it make sense," she said last week, "for a profession to present itself as a profession - to encourage aspiring members - and then half a decade or a decade later, say, 'Sorry you're out of luck. But at least you're not picking tomatoes'?" What kind of profession runs itself that way?"

The Invisible Adjunct has no idea what her next step will be, but let's hope she thinks long and hard before taking her husband's advice. He's pushing law school.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Abstract (Document Summary)

"Adjuncts are like sherpas," says Patricia Lesko, editor-in- chief of Adjunct Advocate magazine, a bimonthly based in Ann Arbor that mixes investigative pieces about the plight of adjuncts with can-do advice intended to buck them up. "The people on the tenure track climb the mountain of tenure, while adjuncts carry the luggage of introductory courses with them."

At UMass-Amherst, meanwhile, adjuncts will very likely be an issue in upcoming negotiations between the administration and the faculty union (which includes adjuncts who work at least half- time). Since

1994, the number of full-time tenured faculty at UMass- Amherst has declined 17 percent, to 894, according to Dan Clawson, a sociologist and vice president of the union. Over the same period, the number of "contingent" faculty - all teachers with no shot at tenure - rose 61 percent, to 210.

Many tenured academics criticize the adjunct system as exploitative, though few have done anything about a system that lightens their own workload. But the blogosphere was also buzzing last week about the decision of Erin O'Connor, a tenured English professor at the University of Pennsylvania who writes the blog "Critical Mass," to ditch her lifetime job and nice salary to teach at an independent boarding school in the Berkshires. In addition to general frustration with academic culture, O'Connor cited disgust at the "abusive system" that "chewed [the Invisible Adjunct] up and spit her out."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.