

A part-time freshman writing staff: Problems and solutions

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Consider the following hypothetical—but by no means impossible—situations.

Scenario one: The federal government has recently adopted a proposal to establish throughout the country a chain of independent freshman writing centers. These centers have no affiliation with any college or university, public or private. They are run with minimal overhead. Located in central urban and suburban locations, they are housed in no-frills workmanlike facilities staffed by former part-time writing instructors. Many of these instructors are Ph.D.s for whom the job market in English does not exist. Each center has two administrators, and, given its federal funding, emphasis is placed on filling positions with minority candidates. Pay is at least equivalent on a prorated basis to that received by full-time English instructors with equivalent service, experience, and qualifications at public and private colleges in the area. While public universities are not significantly affected by the establishment of these writing centers, private colleges, with their substantially higher tuition rates, soon discover that because the centers are located no more than a few miles from any major private college, they are attracting more and more students. Anxious at first to save several hundred dollars—a sum that still buys a lot of phonograph records—the students find they have, in the best sense, gotten more than they had bargained for. At the writing centers they come to understand that freshman writing is not simply a basic course endured in order to move on to those areas that a “real” college education is about. Rather, they are introduced to a new, exciting view of the process of perception. They find out that to write *is* to learn. And they are taught by a group of instructors whose enthusiasm, skill, dedication, and self-respect are infectious. The success of the centers spurs a lawsuit, as the private colleges and universities seek to discredit them by refusing to transfer credits. The federal government responds by threatening to withdraw any federal program funding to these private schools, but the threat proves unnecessary, as the courts rule that the refusal to transfer such credits is discriminatory. The private colleges can do nothing but watch as the bottom drops out.

Scenario two: Classes begin tomorrow at the large state university. All part-time freshman writing teaching assignments have been made. Some sections were assigned six weeks ago, others last week. But the night before the semester begins, the Part-time Teachers Union gathers its members at a local meeting hall and calls a strike. At first the administration reacts calmly. After all, aren't part-timers scabs at heart? But there is no time to arrange for classes to be covered by the following day, and many students arrive to find no teachers in their classrooms.

The students hardest hit, of course, are the ones least able to cope with the chaos and uncertainty of such a situation, the incoming freshmen. Students taking other introductory level courses are better off. But even many of these discover, at best, some full-time faculty member apologizing for the absence of their instructor and for the inconvenience that absence may cause. Urged to return for the next class, the students are assured that an instructor will be present. Throughout most of the university, however, students have simply been left to face an empty desk. Administrators order chairpersons to start making phone calls to secure a part-time staff by midweek. Some department heads enthusiastically comply while others only go through the motions. Regardless of the attitudes of department chairpersons and directors of freshman-level programs, there emerges the shocking discovery that most potential part-time instructors are unwilling to cross the picket line. The few that are willing are either poorly qualified, or too limited in numbers to make an impact. As one week turns into two, and two into four, the part-timers, with little to lose, harden their position. Ultimately, in the fifth week of the semester, a compromise is reached. But a good third of the semester has been lost, students are distressed, and the image of public higher education has been badly damaged in the eyes of the tax paying public.

Both of these scenarios have a certain ingenuousness about them, avoiding some of the complexities that each situation would entail. Nevertheless, what they do highlight is the growing discontent among part-time, college-level instructors and their determination to do something about it. The failure of most administrators and full-time faculty to address the problems of part-timers with anything more than a fleeting glance suggests also that when the slaves rebel, they may have little concern for the well-being or survival of their masters.

A review of research. Although there is still little action, there is a growing literature on the position of part-time faculty. There is, of course, some variation in evidence and conclusions drawn from study to study, but there can be no question that part-timers account for a significant percentage of the teaching staff at junior colleges, colleges, and universities throughout the country today. Jack Friedlander's study of part-time faculty in the junior colleges reveals that they account for over 56 percent of the faculty in those institutions.¹ In four-year colleges and universities, part-timers account for approximately 20 to 25 percent of the faculty,² and a 1979 study of the problem by Leslie and Head estimates that, overall, one third of the "academic work force is comprised of part-time faculty."³ Clara Lee R. Moodie, in a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, makes reference to three community colleges in Illinois that "operate entirely with adjunct faculty members—there's no regular faculty at all."⁴ The reality clearly is that this group of colleagues occupies a substantial space in the world of higher education and plays a valuable role there.

Who are these part-time instructors? Howard P. Tuckman, in the December, 1978 issue of the *AAUP Bulletin*, draws some well-defined pictures for us. He recognizes the following six categories: the semi-retired, the student, the hopeful full-timer, the full-mooner ("part-timers who hold a second job of 30 hours a week or more"),⁵ the homemaker, the part-mooner, and the part-unknower

(part-timers whose reasons for becoming part-time are not known). Each of these categories presents a particular set of problems, and it is just this diversity that has kept the part-timers uncoordinated as a group and lacking the perception of a common bond. But in the area of freshman writing especially, part-time faculty are beginning to look to each other for the emotional support necessary to confront their overseers. Their discontent is growing, in this inflationary age, along with the recognition that they are being sought by colleges because of cutbacks in full-time faculty and the expansion of developmental and basic-skills writing programs.

Part-timers in academe will not get very far, however, unless they can demonstrate that they have the qualifications expected of a full-time faculty member in the same discipline. It appears they may have some difficulty doing so. A study by Tuckman and Vogler reported in the May, 1978 issue of the *AAUP Bulletin* indicates that about 81 percent of the part-timers in their sample "hold credentials which they believe equal to or greater than those necessary to fulfill the requirements of their part-time employers."⁶ However, the authors conclude that the qualifications of this group "are not equal to those of the full-timers, on average." And in a recent feature article in the *New York Times*—the very publication of which points up the expanding public interest in this issue—reference is made to the AAUP study's conclusion that "because of low pay and lack of fringe benefits, an incentive exists for part-timers not to acquire or maintain skills."⁶

If it is in fact true that the qualifications of part-timers teaching freshman English in particular are limited—and I have seen no statistical study that separates part-timers according to discipline—then it is possible that our students are being victimized along with the part-time faculty who teach them. The problem here is that we just don't know, and nothing in our professional training helps us find out. In "Teachers of Composition: A Re-Niggering," Dennis Szilak recognizes this problem when he talks about "the disposable composition teacher" who goes from one year to the next without raises or fringe benefits.⁹ Such teachers may be unqualified. Or, ironically, they may, in fact, be highly qualified for the job but be *viewed* as lacking the qualifications of their full-time colleagues precisely because "the teaching of composition has become a highly refined skill . . . that is learned almost entirely by diagnostic practice rather than advanced study. . . . The Ph.D. is usually not required nor encouraged among teachers of writing."¹⁰ If teaching writing is a skill different from teaching literature, then we have yet to differentiate carefully the qualifications that help us define an instructor's suitability for teaching these two distinctly different disciplines. Unfortunately, this message is one that most full-time English faculty still have not heard.

Part of the problem is that even those of us who do perceive these differences have not yet placed sufficient emphasis on the appropriate selection, training, and support of part-time faculty. A 1973 study by Bender and Breuder of junior colleges where more adjunct than full-time faculty were employed indicates that few of these colleges had developed plans for selecting, orienting, training, servicing, or supervising their part-time staffs.¹¹ And a 1977 study by Grymes "failed to discover a single in-depth, on-going, in-service training program for adjunct

faculty members. The most ambitious programs consist of little more than a brief orientation session at the beginning of the academic term and, perhaps, a hand-book.'¹² Robert Smith has addressed this weakness by recommending a professional-development contract related to selecting, orienting, developing, and evaluating part-time faculty. He argues that, currently, recruitment is too casual and "likely to be outside of the preferred Affirmative Action expectations and that too few faculty members participate in the selection process."¹³

A solution: involving part-time faculty in decision making. The problems of providing students with qualified part-time instructors and of making part-time instructors feel that they are valued members of the institution they serve are two sides of the same coin. Both problems can be ameliorated, if not solved, by involving part-timers in making decisions important to their professional work and welfare.

First, the problem of hiring qualified part-time faculty could be solved, in part, by placing part-time freshman writing instructors on hiring committees. Prospective instructors are normally interviewed by a department personnel committee, which frequently consists of tenured professors who seldom, if ever, teach freshman courses and who know little, if anything, about either the theory or the practice of teaching basic writing skills. This type of interview will not result in the effective hiring of part-time faculty. The selection process can function effectively, however, if part-time instructors of freshman writing who have been with the college or university for at least two years are invited to participate in preliminary interviews of prospective additions to the staff. Who knows better what to look for in a successful part-time freshman writing teacher than a part-time member who has demonstrated his or her effectiveness to the satisfaction of the department? Further, the involvement of part-timers in the selection process can serve as an extremely positive statement about how much the department values their services. Thus, the integration of adjunct faculty into this process immediately serves both practical and psychological objectives.

The formal involvement of seasoned part-timers with new recruits should not stop with the selection process. It should continue through orientation and evaluation. I would go even further than Smith in arguing the necessity of involving part-timers in the administration of these areas. As for orientation, although the values, goals, and structure of a freshman writing program should be set down in writing, there are still many questions that the instructor new to the discipline or the college will need to ask throughout the semester. New instructors are sometimes loathe to come to the writing program administrator or the department chairperson with problems for fear that their concerns may be interpreted as weakness or inefficiency. As a result, many of their questions are answered incompletely and, at times, inappropriately by some part-time colleague on his or her way to another job—or not answered at all. Again the victim in such a situation is not only the instructor but his or her equally insecure freshman students. The formal involvement of select part-timers in an orientation program that runs throughout the entire semester and the availability of these instructors on a regular basis can solve many problems encountered by new instructors and head other problems off even before they arise.

Part-time faculty should also be involved in conducting evaluations of their

part-time colleagues. It is to the part-timer's advantage that peer evaluation take place on a regular semester basis for anyone who has taught at the college for, say, three years or less. Student evaluations alone are not sufficient since, as Szilak points out:

. . . despite the amount of individual attention that composition teachers must necessarily give to students, writing courses overall do not fare well relative to other courses in student evaluations. . . . Education is trivialized by handing it over to students' approval by way of opinion polls and marketing surveys. Students trained to see learning as the taking in of more information persistently criticize writing courses for not teaching them anything, which is to say, new content.¹⁴

Of course, in departments where the freshman sections far outnumber upper-level courses, and where the number of part-timers may be equal to or greater than that of full-time faculty, peer evaluations become a burden. But it is a burden worth bearing, because encouraging experienced part-timers to sit in on assigned classes of their colleagues should have the same practical and psychological benefits as involving part-timers in the selection process. The burden does not fall entirely on the shoulders of full-time faculty. Experienced part-time writing faculty are made to feel that their judgments are valued by the people with whom and for whom they work.

Involving part-time instructors of freshman writing in decision-making should not be viewed by full-timers as a threat to their own power. To see it as such is to play into the hands of administrations that have been playing these two groups of colleagues against one another for too long. Cortland R. Auser writes that "the essential measurement for humanity in the areas of language and literature is the concern we evince and act upon to aid those other members of the profession who have been forced as a result of professional irresponsibility to live 'on the periphery.'"¹⁵ But the attitude of too many teachers of literature remains that of the so-called professional quoted by George Nash in "Who's Minding Freshman English at U.T. Austin?": "'Freshman composition is an elementary course, one readily taught by teaching 'interns' . . . ; it is dubious that the best interests of the department are served by . . . requiring . . . highly experienced members to expend their energies in this manner.'"¹⁶

Such an elitist attitude is no longer tenable. It leads to an unacceptable isolation of part-timers from full-timers, and what can only become an inferior program in freshman English. Although the Yeshiva decision insisted that "By practice and tradition the members of the faculty are masters not slaves,"¹⁷ Paul Connolly insists that we have never asserted or accepted our administrative responsibilities. He says, "Our problem is that faculties joked too long and too irresponsibly about their independence. If we were too cerebral for this too, too solid world, administrators were not. They picked up the multiversity's reins while we rode our hobby horses."¹⁸ Perhaps it is time for us to get down off our hobby horses and come to the defense of our part-time colleagues and of the integrity of our programs.

There are some signs that the profession is beginning to move in this direction.

Both the AAUP and the American Federation of Teachers have begun to turn their attention to the problem. Studies of the part-timers' situation in higher education have appeared with growing frequency in the *AAUP Bulletin*. In the Report of Committee W, 1976-77, Mary W. Gray recommends the establishment of tenure tracks for certain part-time faculty, arguing that if such a tenure system discourages the hiring of part-time faculty "this may well be for the benefit of the profession. . . ."¹⁹

The AFT position paper on this subject also supports this point of view, recommending that "the use of part-time members of the instructional staff should be limited to the minimum necessary to enrich the curriculum and to enable the institution to respond to fluctuations in enrollment." The paper also states that "conversion of full-time positions into several part-time positions must be stopped." And, like the AAUP, the AFT also suggests that "when negotiating contracts, locals should consider the possibility of creating a title less than full-time with tenure, . . . rank, pro-rata salary, and other benefits . . . for part-time personnel."²⁰ In fact, Jane Flanders in her article, "The Use and Abuse of Part-Time Faculty," cites a number of colleges and universities at which "part-timers receive salary and fringe benefits proportionate to those of full-time faculty and are eligible for promotion and tenure in the normal ways. Such part-timers are expected to fulfill such departmental responsibilities as serving on committees, attending faculty meetings, and advising students. They are subsidized in their research and professional activities."²¹

But the part-timers Flanders describes are in the minority and do not represent a realistic picture of the freshman writing instructor's situation in the immediate future. In this period of declining enrollments in the arts and sciences, of budgetary cutbacks and inflationary spirals, we can, nevertheless, begin to demonstrate the support that has been missing in our relationship with the part-time freshman writing faculty. I have suggested already several ways this can be done. In addition, part-timers must be given the so-called privileges and amenities—really the necessities—that most of us take for granted. Part-timers must have adequate office space. No teacher of freshman writing can function effectively without a place to hold private conferences with students. Yet there are still many schools that do not provide this necessity. Part-timers must have parking spaces within reasonable distance of the building in which they teach, and they must also have money to attend conferences and deliver papers on the subject of freshman writing. As full-timers, we can divert funds—if we are willing to sacrifice a conference or two ourselves—to make certain that appropriate part-time members of our faculty are given the opportunity to grow and share ideas with others in the field. Again, this is not an amenity; it is a necessity. No decisions regarding the shaping of a freshman writing program, the choice of texts, the nature of evaluation, and the makeup of schedules should be made without the involvement of the part-time staff.

And there are some real amenities—professional courtesies, really—that part-timers are also due. For example, at graduation ceremonies, part-timers should be invited to march in the faculty processional. They should also be appointed in a timely fashion. In most cases, it is possible to make definite appointments of part-timers to freshman writing courses several months before the semester begins.

This requires careful planning on the part of full-time faculty and chairpersons. It also requires a willingness to refrain from offering a wide variety of unpalatable upper-level courses because if they are cancelled, a full-timer can always be slotted into a freshman writing section at the last minute, unprepared, and at the expense of both the students and the part-time instructor.

At Fairleigh Dickinson University's Madison campus many of these suggestions are being implemented. This year the position of assistant director of Freshman Writing was created and it went to a part-timer, who teaches six hours and receives an additional three hours worth of compensation each semester for fulfilling this role. The assistant director is responsible for orienting new part-time faculty to the program, supervising book orders, and serving on the Freshman Writing Committee, which creates the proficiency examination. In addition, she meets regularly with the director of the program to explore new ideas. Recently, she participated in a three-day writing workshop in New York City, along with the department chairperson and another full-time faculty member.

Last spring we brought two members of the Academic Foundations Program at Rutgers-Newark to our campus to run a three-day seminar on teaching basic writing skills for our freshman writing staff. As it has become necessary for us to increase the number of developmental writing sections, our best part-time instructors have been urged to prepare themselves for teaching such courses. Our spring seminar is a first step in that direction. By thinking ahead, we hope to preserve the academic life of our best part-timers rather than letting them wander from school to school as the regular freshman courses dwindle and the basic-skills courses increase.

The most recent recommendations by the AAUP on the status of part-time faculty (the establishment of tenure tracks, prorated pay, fringe benefits, and institutional grievance procedures)²² go a long way toward recognizing the ultimate needs of part-time instructors, but it may take some time before such recommendations are put into effect on a meaningful scale. In the meantime, there are concrete steps that we can take within our departments to let our part-time instructors of freshman English know that we view them as colleagues whose contribution to the health of higher education is still vital at this point in our history. At some schools around the country, some of the suggestions I have outlined are being implemented. But at just as many others, change is still far from a reality. Soon the scenarios that I outlined previously will begin to look even more realistic than they do now. The time for action has arrived.

Notes

¹ "Using the Talents of Part-Time Faculty," *Junior College Resource Review*, (December 1978).

² Elizabeth Lowe and Alton L. Taylor, "Part-Time University Faculty: An Analysis of Work and Salary Cost," p. 2. Paper presented at Association for Institutional Research, May 13-17, 1979, San Diego, California. Quotes 1978 study by Leslie.

³ David Leslie and Ronald Head, "Part-Time Faculty Rights," *Educational Record*, 60 (Winter 1979), 46.

⁴ "The Overuse of Part-Time Faculty Members," March 10, 1980, p. 72.

⁵ "Who Is Part-Time in Academe?" *AAUP Bulletin*, 64 (December 1978), 308.

⁶ Howard P. Tuckman and William D. Vogler, "The 'Part' in Part-Time Wages," *AAUP Bulletin*, 64 (May 1978), 74.

⁷ Tuckman, p. 75.

⁸ Gene I. Maeroff, "Colleges Turn to Part-Time Professors," *The New York Times*, February 26, 1980, p. A12.

⁹ Dennis Szilak, *College English*, 39 (September 1977), 26.

¹⁰ Szilak, p. 26.

¹¹ Cited by Friedlander, p. 3.

¹² Cited by Friedlander, p. 4.

¹³ "The University and Part-Time Faculty," pp. 7-8. Paper presented at annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, San Antonio, Texas, November 10-13, 1979.

¹⁴ Szilak, pp. 29-30.

¹⁵ "Part-Time Employment; 'Nothing as Desperate. . .,'" *ADE Bulletin*, n. 43 (November 1974), 12.

¹⁶ *College English*, 38 (October 1976), 127.

¹⁷ Quoted by Paul H. Connolly, "Faculty Members: Hired Hands or Managers?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 25, 1978, p. 40.

¹⁸ Connolly, p. 40.

¹⁹ *AAUP Bulletin*, 63 (August 1977), 142-43.

²⁰ James Landers and Mayer Rossabi, "Statement on Part-Time Faculty Employment," American Federation of Teachers Advisory Commission on Higher Education, AFT-AFL-CIO, Washington, D.C., item number 640. (Thanks to my colleague, Jean Atthowe, a member of our part-time freshman writing faculty, for directing me to this document.)

²¹ *Bulletin of the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages*, 8 (September 1976) 49.

²² "The Status of Part-Time Faculty," *Academe* (Bulletin of the AAUP), 67 (February-March 1981), 29-39.