

THE ADJUNCT AS SCHOLAR

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Uncertain wages, lack of affordable health-care, and an ever-shifting schedule. These are a few of the problems many adjuncts face in an educational system that increasingly relies on them. These problems are real, and they leave many adjunct instructors with nagging feelings of doubt, frustration, and disquietude. I've been an adjunct at various schools for ten years—during my PhD program, while I worked a full-time teaching job that didn't pay enough to feed my growing family, and now as a full-time adjunct (or what my boss at one school calls an "academic mercenary").

After a bit of time adjusting to what it means to enter the gig economy, I've come to love the benefits of being off the tenure track, one of which is that I have more time to engage in scholarship. I know that many adjuncts will object to my characterization of "free time"—and with good reason. For many adjuncts, particularly those teaching on campus at multiple institutions, the margin for scholarship just doesn't exist. The same is true for people at teaching colleges, which is the majority of professors in the field. There are only so many spots at research universities that will provide the time and financial stability to pursue scholarship.

Keeping those caveats in mind, I think there is a way forward for the adjunct as scholar. First, much of a full-time professor's job is spent working on the business of the institution—that is, committee meetings. Such work is good and right, but it consumes mental and emotional energy. Humans have a finite amount of mental energy, and working on committees and engaging with our colleagues—good things—use that mental energy.¹ As anyone who has ever been to a dud of a meeting or sat on what seems like a pointless committee (or worse, a contentious committee) understands, meetings do not always use our mental energy in the best, most productive, or most effective ways.² Time and energy that would have been spent debating details of the core curriculum can now be diverted to that manuscript you've been meaning to submit for publication.

Second, adjuncting can allow for a more flexible schedule, particularly for those who teach online.

Adjunct scholars can use this flexibility to their benefit by planning their research and writing time for when they are most productive. For me that's early in the morning; for you it may be the middle of the day or some other time. The key is taking advantage of the flexibility that adjuncting affords and putting it to use for your scholarship. Instead of devoting your optimal brain time to a committee meeting, you have freedom to prioritize your research and writing.

These two things—time and energy—are vital for producing meaningful scholarship. Adjuncts often lack the third component—institutional support for research—but that mountain can be scaled. For instance, you can most likely claim tax deductions for research expenses, including travel, to help offset cost (ask a tax professional). You can apply on your own for research grants from organizations that do not require you to be a full-time instructor, and institutions you adjunct for might offer small stipends or grants to support research.

Of course there are drawbacks to the adjunct life, and of course the ideal for pursuing scholarship is a research professorate. But that's not where God has me—or you, if you're an adjunct. Rather than ruminate about the downsides of adjuncting, I've found that appreciating and taking advantage of time and energy freed up by not being a full-time faculty member more than makes up for the model's detriments. **D**

¹ On Amir, "Tough Choices: How Making Decisions Tires Your Brain," *Scientific American*, July 22, 2008, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/tough-choices-how-making>.

² James C. Garland, *Saving Alma Mater: A Rescue Plan for America's Universities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), addresses well the drain that committee meetings have on faculty time and resources, with special attention given to the financial loss associated with requiring faculty presence at ineffective meetings.



RUSSELL L. MEEK is currently writing a commentary on Jonah–Habakkuk for Kregel's Kerux series, along with a trade book about how the Old Testament saved his faith.