

The Gig-Economy Professor

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Fresh off finishing my PhD and applying furiously for every job I could, I was struck by the bleak reality that full-time, tenure track jobs in my field are rare. For example, I applied for—and did not get—a position that involved teaching twenty-four hours a year (eight courses) and serving as campus minister at a tiny college in the middle of Kansas. I was one of about 250 applicants for the job, which had an advertised salary under \$35,000—half of what I once made as a bartender. Those numbers can plunge a person into nihilism. But shifting our paradigm just a bit may highlight a unique opportunity for people willing to chart and cheerfully embrace a new career path in higher education: the gig-economy professor. Teaching part time is traditionally referred to as “adjuncting,” arguably the least respected and most financially unstable teaching job in higher education. The gig-economy professor finesses the adjunct model by putting her/himself in the driver’s seat, so to speak, much as we have seen with Uber drivers, Doordash delivery workers, and freelance writers and editors. In short, the gig-economy professor operates as a highly specialized independent contractor for a defined period of time to perform a particular task.

The most current data on adjunct faculty in the United States indicate that 73 percent of faculty positions are non-tenure track—or “contingent”—and

50 to 65 percent of positions are part-time, depending on the type of institution (four-year vs. two-year).¹ This data means that of every one hundred people on faculty, seventy-three of them lack the financial and psychological security of the tenure track. That is, schools make no commitment to those

seventy-three people beyond their current contract. Further, fifty to sixty-five of those people are only working part time. The reason for the significant drop in full-time positions seems clear on the face of it: schools need and want to “increase efficiency and reduce expenses, and the cost savings derived from replacing full-time instructors with adjuncts are potentially large. Adjuncts can be up to 80% cheaper than full-time faculty. ... The cost difference is even more pronounced when considering that 47% of schools do not offer benefits to part-time faculty.”²

In sum, schools need to reduce costs, and faculty pay is one clear way to reduce those costs significantly. (We must leave aside the questions

about administrative bloat and the enormous salaries earned by many administrators and athletic officials.) Because schools do still need people to actually offer the education they are selling, more and more classes are being taught by adjuncts, as the statistics above show. Further, more and more classes are being taught online, and the COVID-19 pandemic brought into clear focus just how diffi-

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cult—and important—it is to teach online well. This reevaluation of online learning, along with the economic realities of a post-COVID-19 system of higher education, gives adjunct instructors a few important opportunities.

First, though the shift to online learning was already well underway before the pandemic, its value is now clearer than ever. Nearly 50 percent of students took at least one class online in 2015–2016, up from only 15 percent in 2003–2004.³ Schools absolutely must offer courses online, and statistics indicate that this upward trend will continue. This transition to more and more classes being conducted online offers a clear benefit to the gig-economy professor: she or he may live anywhere and teach anywhere. No longer must an adjunct live in close proximity to a college or university in order to teach. This mobility allows adjuncts to take advantage of areas with lower costs of living or simply to stay near family—a value not to be overlooked for those with young children or aging parents. As a corollary, adjuncts can teach at any number of schools across the nation—or world—not only those within driving distance. Removing the distance barrier allows adjuncts both to be more circumspect in choosing which school to teach for and to teach for more schools in general.

Second, the shifting landscape in higher education gives the gig-economy professor an opportunity to demonstrate his or her usefulness both as an online instructor and as an expert in the field. Companies routinely hire the best consultants and contractors they can afford, who in turn strive to rise above the fray by developing a portfolio of outstanding work. Rather than seeing oneself as simply an adjunct, the lowest rung on the academic ladder, the gig-economy professor should reframe her role as a contractor providing a necessary service that requires significant skills in her area of expertise as well as in areas such as teaching, organization, and mastery of a suite of online learning platforms. Such reframing does involve some cost—the gig-economy professor cannot exactly claim full institutional loyalty, for she now works for herself with institutions as clients. The reframing, though, offers significant psychological benefit, in my opinion. Rather than being a lowly adjunct, the gig-economy professor is a highly trained professional whose skills are needed

and sought after by institutions of higher learning. The nuts and bolts of what actually occurs—teaching—may look the same, but I believe that reenvisioning one’s role as a skilled expert can go a long way toward reinvigorating both one’s teaching and one’s place in society as a conduit of knowledge.

Many PhDs who began their programs hoping to get the golden ticket of a tenure-track job have discovered that the ticket is not so golden after all. But it seems there’s another golden ticket that can serve the needs of both schools and the scholars they need to teach their classes: the gig-economy professor. It is a throwback, actually, to the days of ancient Greece when philosophers were paid directly by their students (or in some cases a patron). Ultimately, and particularly in light of COVID-19, schools are a business with a bottom line, and people with PhDs have a service those schools need. And while I would certainly prefer an explosion of full-time positions that give faculty freedom and protection, that is unlikely to happen. The same jobs that offer economic stability cost schools a lot of money—money that many are reluctant to invest in full-time teachers. One way to navigate these choppy waters—and recast the adjunct narrative—is to embrace the role of the gig-economy professor. Rather than seeing ourselves as lowly adjuncts begging for work, we can be proud of offering an essential service to both students and institutions.

¹ American Association of University Professors, “Data Snapshot: Contingent Faculty in US Higher Ed,” *AAUP Updates*, October 11, 2018, https://www.aaup.org/news/data-snapshot-contingent-faculty-us-higher-ed#.XsU1_WhKg2w.

² Eric P. Bettinger and Bridget Terry Long, “Does Cheaper Mean Better? The Impact of Using Adjunct Instructors on Student Outcomes,” *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 92 (2010): 598.

³ National Center for Education Statistics, “Table 311.22. Number and percentage of undergraduate students enrolled in distance education or online classes and degree programs, by selected characteristics: Selected years, 2003–04 through 2015–16,” *Digest of Education Statistics*, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_311.22.asp.



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