

Adjuncts and Activism: How to use us well – for social good

CPED Convening Learning Exchange October 2019

Harriette Thurber Rasmussen, EdD
Fielding Graduate University

Michael Christopher Boyce
Doctoral Student, Northeastern University

Adjunct defined: "...a thing added to something else as a supplementary rather than essential part" (adjunct, n.d.)

Activism defined: "...a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action..." (activism, n.d.)

With these definitions, adjuncts and activism seem incompatible. How can something that is considered to be unessential result in vigorous action? In fact, one of our first thoughts upon looking up the definition of adjunct was, *we need a new word!*

For a variety of reasons though (Ehrenberg, 2006), adjuncts are rapidly taking over the role of teaching in higher education, with more than half of graduate and undergraduate classes now taught by adjuncts. This represents a 30% increase over the past 40 years (Davidson, 2017) and some believe this trend to be "a crisis now of epic proportion in higher education" (Davidson, 2017, p. 121). As the percentage of adjuncts teaching classes continues to increase, is there any concern about the organizational identity of the schools, when so few professors who are teaching actually identify with the school? Who is, so to speak, *minding the store*? We, two adjuncts teaching at a variety of institutions, are curious but given what is both a reality and opportunity for, we think, activism through practitioner perspective, suggest a proactive, rather than doomsday approach to adjuncts.

The various ways in which adjuncts are used across institutions are varied and changing: from the occasional supplemental faculty to accommodate scheduling, to adding specific expertise not available through internal resources, to teaching core foundational or research methods courses, to advising and chairing doctoral committees. In each of these roles, adjuncts can potentially propel activism, activate institutional goals, and support or inhibit student learning outcomes.

We have had very different experiences as adjuncts, which frame the pitfalls and possibilities of using adjuncts; they mirror the research that has been done on using adjuncts well, including, as examples, high levels of collaboration (West et al., 2009), mentoring opportunities (Meixner, Kruck, & Madden, 2010), and inclusion, with access to faculty meetings, curriculum assessment, and work teams (Fagan-Wilen, Springer, Ambrosino, & White, 2006).

Despite our different experiences in the adjunct world¹, we both recognize the power of the practitioner to promote activism. In our respective roles as change agent consultants, we are able to bring front line experiences in service of social justice through scholarly practice. In other words, using adjuncts well for social good.

References

¹ One of us teaches in US based doctoral programs; the other, a doctoral student at a CPED member organization, adjuncts at a number of Japanese universities.

activism. n.d. In *Merriam-Webster.com*.

Retrieved August 3, 2019, from

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/activism>

adjunct. n,d. In *Dictionary.com*. Retrieved August 3, 2019,

<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/adjunct>

Davidson, C. N. (2017) *The new education: How to revolutionize the university to prepare students for a world in flux*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Ehrenberg, R. G. (2006). *What's happening to public higher education?: The shifting financial burden*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Fagen-Wilan, R., Springer, D. W., Ambrosino, B., & White, B. W. (2006). The support of adjunct faculty: An academic imperative. *Social Work Education, 25*(1), 39-51.

Meixner, C., Kruck, S. D., & Madden, L. T. (2010). *Including of part-time faculty for the benefit of faculty and students*. *College Teaching, 58*(4), 141-137.

West, M. M., Borden, C., Bermudez, M., Hanson-Zaalot, M., Amorim, F., & Marmion, R. (2009). Enhancing the clinical adjunct role to benefit students. *The Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing, 40*(70), 305-310.