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### Casualization: A Primer

Aaron Barlow

*CUNY New York City College of Technology*

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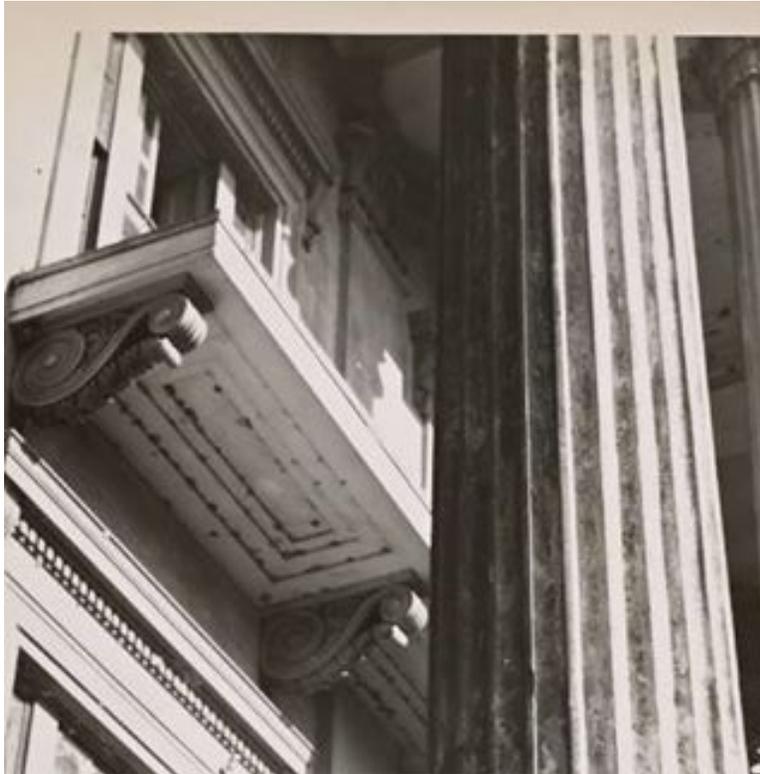
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# Blog



## Casualization: A Primer

Aaron Barlow

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*This is for those who don't yet understand, not for those who have lived it.*

Casual employees have never been treated well. They come and go with a shrug on the parts of institutional executives. Organizations know

that they need a certain number of permanent employees they treat well in order to maintain the cohesion of the enterprise and to manage the casuals. They want to keep that number as small as possible, preferring nothing but casual employees who could be hired and laid off as needed. The types of those employees considered mandatory did grow over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but that was because of employee unions and, in part, because growth is the nature of bureaucracy.

Over past decades, this growth has slackened (as has union power). The new ethos of a gig-economy has thrown us back to management models where workers are almost immediately replaceable. They are of too great an expense to be considered for permanent employment and perks. Digital possibilities and increasing (and often forced) uniformity of task allow a replacement employee to step right in when someone leaves, never missing a beat.

In line with this, a formula for easy replacement of college professors has been pioneered in for-profit on-line universities. The course structures are rigid and prepared and the teachers are called (in an unintentional parody of Paulo Freire) ‘facilitators.’ If one isn’t working out, a replacement can be slotted in without disturbance. While it is harder to shuffle people in and out of face-to-face classrooms, this flexibility of employment of casually hired (and let go) adjuncts has become attractive to all manner of colleges and universities, not just the for-profits, though they are the ones who illuminated the pathway.

As in the new gig economy as a whole, adjunct professors, like all casual hires, are seen not as employees but as tools to be used and discarded at will. The flexibility achieved is something executives and administrators

yearn for. Permanent employees and their demands can be a nuisance and often eat into the budget.

This reliance on casual employees causes problems everywhere, creating a new divide among American workers. It works even less well in schools than it does elsewhere. Students are not products (nor are they customers or clients) and they rely on the consistent presence of their teachers, not only over a single term but throughout the course of their studies. Good teaching requires performance that pleases administrators, of course, but it also requires consistency for the sake of individual students.

In the past, the ethos among casuals of all sorts, including those adjuncts who weren't simply teaching atop another career, was one of 'working your way in,' of hoping to become part of the permanent staff—and that ambition was lauded. Now, it is more often quashed. The idea of institutions of higher education today isn't to increase full-time faculty (or even maintain it) but to reduce it. That this ignores the impact on students is excused by imagined technological wizardry (like MOOCs, Massive Open Online Classes) and through emphasis on institutional survival in economic concerns.

Employing entities have always made moving in and up as difficult as possible, though they once did recognize the value of ambition and even gave additional, though generally token, reward to those whose struggles, either personally or through unions, achieved permanent status for them. These rewards long kept the casuals striving. They have been removed, on college campuses, even as distant hope for adjuncts.

Nevertheless, the pattern of encouraging one to pull oneself up to success is quite old in the United States, of course. We see it in the writings of Benjamin Franklin and, from the Civil War through the end of the century, in the boy's novels by Horatio Alger. Work hard, show loyalty and honesty, and you will succeed. It reflected a naïve attitude even then, but it was one Americans wanted to believe: Ragged Dick the bootblack becoming Richard Hunter, pillar of society.

So strong is the influence of this myth that most of us actually believe we've 'made it' on our own to wherever we are, that we have reached our current success through hard work, perseverance and native intelligence. Or, if we have failed, nefarious forces must be at work, perhaps, these days, the 'deep state.'

Both sides of this myth are destructive—and both play roles in the casualization cancer eating higher education. If the adjunct professors were as good as then tenure and tenure-track, the unstated thinking often goes, they would no longer be adjuncts.

Or someone or something is holding them down.

Factors at work in higher education are destroying the positive (as far as it goes) aspect of the myth and reinforcing the negative, pulling us toward what will soon become campuses of casual instructors "managed" by a rump tenured faculty. The most important of these, to no one's surprise, is money. A huge percentage of American colleges and universities receive government funding—and it has fallen off, and continues to fall. At the same time, in competing for students, colleges have had to offer more and new amenities, expensive. And they have necessarily taken on administrative staff to deal with expanding

governmental regulation. The one place frantic administrators see where growth can be squeezed to a halt is the habitat of the faculty.

In terms of Carnegie hours, a full-time professor making, say, \$50,000 a year teaching four courses a semester is costing the school roughly \$2,000 per credit hour (actually more, if you add it things like sabbaticals and release time for scholarship). Add to that individual office space, health care and other benefits, and the cost per 3-credit course rises well above \$7,500. An adjunct, even a relatively well-paid one, rarely earns \$5,000 a course.

That minimal 50% difference certainly catches the eyes of college budget officers.

In most cases, it's bigger: the reality is that the full-time professor makes around \$80,000 a year, or over \$10,000 a course on a 4/4 schedule, and an adjunct generally rakes in less than \$4,000 a course. In many cases, it costs three times (or more) as much to have a full-time professor teach a course as it does to hire an adjunct to do what many pencil-pushers see as the same "work." Even were adjunct lines to be converted to full-time lecturer lines on a 5/5 schedule, the cost would still go up that 50% in most places—if not right away, quickly thereafter as the lecturers start to receive rising benefits and the annual cost-of-living increases that adjuncts rarely get.

As recently as twenty years ago, adjuncts could hope for that chance at that mythical permanent position, for many schools liked to invite members of their adjunct pools to apply when faculty lines opened up, and quite a few adjuncts moved into the tenure-track rank that way. This created a bridge between casual and permanent employees, making

conversation and collegial interaction not just possible but normal. It created at least a semblance of a cohesive faculty.

But hiring has slowed these last few years. The adjuncts now see little chance of ever making the jump; they are caught in what has become an employment disaster with little possibility of relief. They could leave the profession completely, but for what? The gig economy has made casuals of many more people beyond academia, removing from work lives possibilities for advancement beyond temporary employment jumping from here to there. Adjuncts know that life may be no better elsewhere.

Not surprisingly, the resentments of adjuncts have grown over the last decade—even while general recognition of the inequities of the adjunct plight in universities has increased. With so little chance of ever “earning” a full-time position, casual employees are caught on the fringes of higher education and can barely hang on, let alone climb to the stable center. They are seeing the gulf between them and the tenured and tenure-track widen, and two separate cultures emerge.

This gulf is being exploited for the short-term benefit of the institutions (of the administrators, actually). By cutting adjuncts from faculty rights such as academic freedom, participation in shared governance and tenure, colleges and universities are laying the groundwork for claiming *all* of these rights can disappear without consequence in modern academia—at least, in teaching cohorts. While there is much to be said for creating different sets of standards for those primarily involved in research and those mostly focused on teaching, the adjunct question warps discussion, for the adjuncts fall entirely on the teaching side, allowing administrators to move toward

reducing *all* teachers to at-will hires while retaining their prestige researchers in low-teaching permanent positions.

To make such divisions work equitably, *all* professors, full-time or part-time, research heavy or focused on the classroom, need to be brought under a single umbrella of rights. Academic freedom, participation in shared governance and even tenure should not be the perks of successful service to the institution but should be part of the expectations of every professor. Once that common protection is in place, differing expectations within it can be practical without being open for misuse.

But that is not what is happening.

Right now, in needed attempts to move adjunct protection forward, some institutions are trying to expand the rights of casual faculty employees. At the City University of New York, adjunct professor will soon be making that \$5,000 per course and even can “earn” the right to three-year part-time contracts. But there is no contractual bridge between casuals and permanent employees, no laid-out path toward full-time employment and no insurance of rights under academic freedom, shared governance (outside of the common union, the Professional Staff Congress that represents all faculty equally in principle) and tenure, only a codification of difference. Possibility of new, longer contracts aside, like adjuncts elsewhere, CUNY adjuncts are becoming even more firmly trapped in an academic underclass today than they were twenty years ago. Though they may like their new and slightly less precarious position, they recognize that it is also certifying them as an underclass.

Adjuncts everywhere—even at CUNY—are increasingly angry—and they should be. Not only are they being made into a permanent economic academic underclass, but they are being directly cut off from many of what had grown to be considered the necessities of the profession, not the least being academic freedom, the right to participated in institutional governance and tenure.

Those of us in academia who are not adjuncts need to be more aware of what is happening to our casual colleagues than we generally are. The expansion of adjunct rights is slowed for a reason. The institutions want to limit those rights across the board and, through the growing reliance on adjuncts, they are doing so. Only by fighting back, by struggling for the rights of *all* faculty, can we stop this movement toward the casualization of instruction that will likely destroy all faculty rights and imperil the continuing success of American institutions of higher education.