

## **Deacon Blues**

They got a name for the winners in the world

I want a name when I lose

They call Alabama the Crimson Tide

Call me Deacon Blues

- Steely Dan, "Deacon Blues"

Lori Brown

I am a part-time lecturer. An adjunct.

I'm also a sales associate, a data integrity specialist, a test scorer, and a scoring leader.

This is not my attempt to offer a creative account of all of the hats that I wear as a teacher. These are the other jobs that I hold to pay for the privilege of teaching.

While I was working at the department store this past weekend, one of my co-workers – a college student – looked at me quizzically and asked, "If you teach at a university, why do you work here?" It is a question that I have asked myself often, usually in a state of utter befuddlement. When I chose to leave my full-time job to go to graduate school, I didn't realize the kind of financial insecurity to which I was consigning myself. I interviewed a number of faculty members about a career in academia and did extensive research on my job prospects. I'm not sure how, but at no point did I hear the word, "adjunct," which is odd, given that more than 50% of faculty nationwide today are part-timers ("Background Facts," n.d.).

Up until I returned to school, my career trajectory had a predictable pattern. The more responsibility I took on and the more complex my skill set became, the more benefits and job security I acquired. In order to teach at the university level, I have had to develop my most complex skill set to date. I now have the most autonomy and responsibility I've ever had. Yet I

have the same amount of job security, stability, and benefits that I had as an undergraduate cleaning houses and clipping parts at the local plastics factory.

**Please. Call me Deacon Blues.**

Of course, mine is not an impossible situation. “Adjuncting” is doable. You can go the plucky jack-of-all-trades route, cobble together a fluctuating collection of part-time, temporary jobs, and achieve a certain baseline of material comfort (insecure though it may be). But why, I ask, would we want to put people through that?

We have achieved a level of prosperity in our country that is far out of reach for people in other parts of the world. You would think the goal would be to insure that as many people as possible have access to the same degree of flourishing that we have achieved. Instead, our employers look at labor made cheap by the exigencies of absolute poverty and aspire to import the same conditions here. Our politicians tell us that we need to keep the minimum wage low to ensure that we remain competitive in the global marketplace (Thompson, 2015).

They forget that we are competing against people who don’t earn enough to meet their basic human needs. Rather than pulling those people up to our level of prosperity, we have decided that many among us ought to sink down to theirs so that some of us can have vastly more than they will ever need. Some of us call this freedom.

What justification do universities offer for the trend toward adjunct employment? It is much the same logic that leaders in other industries give for their low-paying, benefit-free, temporary jobs. Here is one such line of reasoning offered by Ronald Ehrenberg of Cornell University:

...[Universities] want to have the "freedom to arrange the workforce in the ways that they want," Ehrenberg says. This is particularly important in higher education, he said, since

administrators don't necessarily know which classes will be in the highest demand from one semester to another.

Using non-union adjuncts gives universities the flexibility to adjust if a course does not fill up, Ehrenberg says. "Administrations would prefer to have the freedom to say, 'Oops, sorry, don't need you this year'" (The Hechinger Report, 2015).

This emphasis on flexibility is often legitimized by an appeal to the financial challenges confronting higher education in our current climate. We see this line of reasoning in the following quote from James Glaser of Tufts University: “‘If we cancel a class because of low enrollment, we’ll be paying [some adjuncts] for that class,’ Mr. Glaser said. ‘It’s not efficient in a resource-challenged environment’” (Belkin & Korn, 2015).

There are valuable goods that are captured in these quotes: just-in-time flexibility and maximum cost effectiveness. Clearly there is value in the ability of an institution to respond cost-effectively to fluctuations in student demand. But this cost-effective, just-in-time flexibility conflicts with the good of providing people with non-exploitative working conditions - conditions that allow the employee plenty of room to construct a financially stable and secure life. It is not a given that we should grant the greatest value in this case to flexibility and maximum cost effectiveness.

Higher education has forgotten a basic tenet of the employment relationship. The employer and employee forge a cooperative relationship with one another. *Together*, they provide a service the purchase of which keeps their cooperative relationship intact. Thus, they ought to share a reasonable balance of benefits and risks. In the current state of higher education, the adjunct employee bears an unjust proportion of the risks and the university enjoys an unjust proportion of the benefits.

Consider this: Adjuncts are required to have a minimum of a Master's degree. We are expected to have an ever-expanding wealth of knowledge about our subject matter. And we are required to have high-level customer service, teaching, and instructional design skills. We are also expected to work autonomously, with minimal oversight. Many of the skills that are required to lecture at the university level are on the order of skills required for middle and upper management.

In return for these requirements, we are given part-time employment that often comes to an end in the summer. We receive little to no benefits (in my case, a free parking pass). Our pay does not compensate for the lack of benefits in the way that a consultant's fees would. And we face the ever-present possibility of losing a significant portion of our income when Administration exercises its freedom to say, "Oops, sorry, don't need you...."

Some people argue that we aren't making the same contributions to the university as are tenured professors; thus, we shouldn't be earning the same pay. I get that point. But the *maximum* that I can make at my university is \$28,000; \$23,000 when I subtract the health insurance that I buy on my own.

At the low end, my tenure-track colleagues are earning around \$50,000 per year plus benefits (Allan, 2016). When you factor in their benefits, my tenured and tenure-track counterparts are making much more than twice my salary. Is their contribution really that much greater than mine?

When the university hires people like me, they cut their costs in half...and then some. Thus, the university gets the labor that it needs at bargain basement prices to provide its primary service and maximum flexibility while the lecturer is placed in a position of profound financial insecurity and instability.

I remember the day when I realized that, as an adjunct, I have stretched before me a field of contingent, part-time, unstable employment opportunities. I have to regularly perform a cost-benefit analysis to determine which employer to keep happiest. How do I make myself available enough to all of them to keep all of the jobs that I need to make ends meet?

On that day, I realized how fundamentally unfair it is to be scrambling to please them all, knowing all the while that they will offer me no long-term employment, no benefits, and a rate of pay that doesn't even begin to make up for the loss of what used to be commonplace elements in my compensation package.

Eventually, it dawned on me that mine is a situation I hold in common with many people in many other occupations. The woman behind the register at Meijer at 10 o'clock at night would share with me that she is a substitute K-12 school teacher who would rather be teaching full-time. A fellow sales associate in the lunchroom would tell me that he also works in insurance but had to find another job when they cut his hours. In the circles that I travel today, I've grown accustomed to asking, "What else do you do for a living?"

I try to understand the philosophy that underlies a larger movement across all sectors of our economy toward this kind of contingent staffing. The answer seems to be the widespread adoption of free market fundamentalism. I have a difficult time deriving personal understanding and explanatory power from that term alone, so I pay attention to the narrative that I hear from the canaries in the goldmine: my students who have been reared in the age of neoliberalism. This is what they say:

*I am not the author of conditions that cause some people to have so much while others have so little. If someone fails to win the social lottery, it's not my job to help improve their condition. There are simply winners and losers in the world. Not everyone can win.*

*And when someone loses, it's not my job to fix it. It's just the luck of the draw. It would be too much of an imposition on me and too great a restraint on my freedom to be required to change the terms of the lottery.*

So many of my students treat our free market lottery as though it is some kind of natural phenomenon. They fail to see that we create the terms under which the lottery operates. For example, we decide how much externalization of the costs of doing business and wage exploitation people can use to amass their personal fortunes. We determine how much a person can lose when they make a mistake or their plans don't pan out or they enter into a state of vulnerability and need or they are born with some physical feature that makes them a target of unconscious, opportunity-limiting bias.

I often remind my students that we create the world that we live in. While some forms of social organization serve us better than others, given our unique needs as a species, there is a lot of room for experimentation. But some experiments are better than others at ensuring a good life for all of us.

### **What kind of world have we created?**

One refrain that I often hear in my Business Ethics classes is that the company has to do whatever it can to survive. The business owner has to look out for their own interests and put food on their own table.

The stakes are set so high when students talk about their personal interests. Raising their prices by a slender margin is characterized as a starvation diet for their family. Yet, when they consider the interests of others, suddenly the stakes contract. Thus, child slave labor on cocoa plantations is treated as an unfortunate consequence that needs to be borne in order to keep costs low and customers happy.

## **Is this the kind of world that we want?**

A continuum exists that stretches from highly collectivist to highly individualistic worldviews, and each of us has our unique position along that scale. This makes sense. The human being is an amalgam of self-interested and empathic, pro-social elements. In order to thrive, we need a certain level of control over our lives and a certain amount of dependence upon a community of others. We haven't yet figured out how a society should best balance this human need for independence and communal support.

Independence, autonomy, and a sense of personal responsibility play an important role in the flourishing of the human being. But there is such a strong emphasis placed on these features in our country today. We have cast our fate with the extreme of individualism without really knowing if our choice is the best one for all of us. The evidence strongly suggests otherwise.

In our role as employees and - for some of us - active participants in the governance of the university, we can acknowledge that higher education is operating in a "resource-challenged environment" without assuming that the best way to respond is to under-compensate the majority of the people who provide its chief service. Instead, we can recognize that the challenges to our resources have been caused by a particular ideological framework that demonizes social investment and offers in its place an anorexic ideal of individual freedom that only works for a sliver of our population. Among ourselves, we can continually push against and challenge that framework and its assumptions.

As educators, we can bring that ideology to the conscious awareness of our students and ask whether this is the world that they wish to construct. We can point out that a) the best path to human flourishing remains an open question; b) the predominant path we have chosen has

severely negative consequences for many of us (not to mention the planet); and c) the way that we order our society today along our fundamental continuum could always be otherwise.

There is a network of free market fundamentalists - the famous Koch Brothers among them - who are well aware of the contribution they make to the construction of our society's predominant beliefs and material conditions. They are devoting billions of their financial resources to the promotion of their ideals, including millions that go to universities. To the degree that we repeat or resign ourselves to the refrains of these free market fundamentalists, we help build a world where people preserve their minor interests at the cost of the major interests of others. It is a world of great economic inequality and a form of freedom that offers little to most and a great deal to a few.

We, too, must remember that we play our part in the construction of this world, and we must ask whether this is the legacy that we want to leave in our wake. If not, then we have urgent work to do.

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