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Seeking the Path to Adjunct Justice at Marquette University

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As is well-known, over the last few decades, U.S. colleges and universities have increasingly relied upon faculty who are neither tenured nor on the tenure track to shoulder instructional responsibilities. Known as contingent, adjunct, or non-tenure track (NTT) faculty, this group's ranks have grown from 268,883 in 1975 to 885,803 in 2005, according to U.S. Department of Education statistics. During this same time frame, the numbers of tenured and tenure-track faculty have grown from 353,681 to 414,574. Today, three out of four new faculty hires are outside the tenure system.¹ With few exceptions, NTTs work without benefits or insurance, and their pay ranges from merely inadequate to embarrassingly low.

At Marquette University, where I teach in the Department of Theology, we have mirrored these national trends. Marquette pays \$3,200 for each semester length course, and NTTs (a group that includes newly minted Ph.D.s) teach one or two courses per semester. Marquette does not provide health or dental benefits, although NTTs may purchase these benefits if certain conditions are met. For example, those teaching only one semester may not purchase insurance through the Marquette plan; only those signed up for two semesters may do so. Even when NTTs can purchase insurance, given the cost, this would leave those who purchase the insurance coverage virtually without income—unless they find courses to teach at other institutions, which, of necessity, they do.² My colleagues in the theology department were concerned about this situation and, because Marquette is a Jesuit university, we attempt-

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ed to craft a solution based on moral and ethical precedents from our religious tradition. In April 2008, the Department of Theology addressed the situation of the seven Ph.D. adjuncts who had completed their doctoral programs with us and were currently teaching part-time as they sought full-time positions elsewhere. The following resolution passed unanimously in our department with no abstentions:

Moved that the Department of Theology advise the administration of our judgment that we, as an institution, have an urgent moral obligation to give health and dental care benefits to our Ph.D. adjunct faculty who are teaching at least two courses per semester.

As a Jesuit university, we felt that we should attempt to craft a solution based on moral and ethical precedents from our religious tradition.

The Department of Theology motion did not address the situation of all part-timers, and we saw it only as a first step. The phrase “as an institution” was added to the resolution in order to stress that the motion was based on the avowed religious and ethical commitments of this Jesuit, Catholic, and religiously ecumenical institution. To move this resolution into action and to let other departments know what we had done, the chair of our department, John Laurance, S.J., wrote in a letter to the university’s interim provost, David Shrock, that, “the Department of Theology is obviously not alone in the College of Arts and Sciences in employing adjunct faculty teaching two or more courses a semester,” and copied the dean of the college and the chairs of other arts and sciences departments.

The school newspaper published an article about our resolution and included an interview with one of our Ph.D. theology adjuncts. The article noted that “to keep her head above water she is currently teaching six classes at universities all over Milwaukee,” working more than 60 hours a week, yet still subsisting on the borderline of poverty. The article quoted John Pauly, Marquette’s incoming provost, who said he would not take a position on the Department of Theology resolution, noting that “the administration is always working to support part-time faculty but must consider the necessary tradeoffs in order to afford it.”

In an *Inside Higher Education* story on the Department of Theology resolution, acting provost Shrock said the university provides “a range of benefits for part-timers, including flexible spending accounts, tuition remission, an e-mail account, and a match in TIAA-CREF accounts of up to 8 percent after two consecutive years of work if the employee contributes 5 percent.” He cited “compet-

ing demands for resources ... as it allocates resources annually.” Both Pauly and Shrock used the limited resources defense in this discussion of why Marquette does not provide NTT faculty with benefits. Neither demonstrated enthusiasm for the Department of Theology resolution.

Prior to the April 2008 resolution, the Department of Theology had come up with a four-part platform to support our resolution: (1) an ethical argument; (2) theological arguments; (3) an argument about the nature of a university; and (4) arguments based on the damage caused by the proliferation of NTTs.

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AN ETHICAL ARGUMENT

In bioethics, there is strong consensus that basic health care is a fundamental human right. Most European nations, for example, have enshrined this moral principle in law with their national health care plans. In the U.S., many employers provide health care coverage as a standard benefit. Some corporations provide health care benefits for both their full- and part-time employees. The question posed by the Department of Theology at Marquette was: Can this university, with its publicly stated religious and moral commitments, rise to the moral standards of many corporations? Currently, we have adjunct faculty teaching some of the same courses full-time faculty teach but without the benefits they should be entitled to.

Were the part-timers not carrying so much of the course load, the tenured faculty would have their course load doubled or even tripled. We saw the ethical issue as one of justice and equitable sharing, given that we require first-rate teaching from our adjuncts but do not support them with a living wage (a hallowed term in the Catholic moral tradition) or basic benefits.

THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

In all of the Jesuit colleges and universities, the teaching of religious moral traditions is considered central to the purpose and *raison d’être* of the institution. The Department of Theology resolution called Marquette University before the bar of its own professed ideals, arguing that part of the genius of biblical morality in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions is in uncovering ingrained moral deficiencies and human strategies that are present in every age. A classic example

of this is the royalty-servant syndrome whereby the royals find ways to have under-compensated peons do their work for them. At Marquette, the tenured faculty are the royals, and their use of contingent faculty (servants) exemplifies this injustice. We insisted that the motion not be seen as a bleating plea to administrators but as a call to action that the university theologians would insist on, and continue to act on, in the face of the anticipated resistance.³

ARGUMENT FROM THE NATURE OF A UNIVERSITY

From Plato's Academy through the Islamic centers of learning formed in the ninth and tenth centuries in Morocco and Egypt, scholars have felt the need to bond together in the search for truth. The immediate precursors of the modern university trace back mainly to the degree-granting universities of Bologna and Paris in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This model of learning gave us the word "university," deriving from the description of such a collegium as a *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, a community of teachers and students. When the University of Paris was instituted in 1215, this hallmark was in evidence: "Many privileges were bestowed on [the university], making it a body independent of bishops, king, and Parliament."⁴ This ideal of non-interference was surely not always honored in the maelstrom of history, but the ideal was born; and that ideal is that truth is best served in a community setting, where disagreement and agreement can flourish side by side in freedom and civility.

From the start, the ideal of this revolution in scholarship was to provide a place where many minds could compete freely together. The university is a unique form of community with a distinguished etiology. Its main hallmark is academic freedom, and its mainstay is tenure. Academic freedom is something NTTs, whose



appointment and reappointment are often at the discretion of a single administrator, do not have.

In this scholarly community model, the essence of the university could be displayed on a horizontal line marked *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*. Under the horizontal line and supporting it are a series of vertical lines representing the auxiliary functionaries that keep the university viable: financial officers, deans, administrative services, physical maintenance staff. All of these administrative and support services work to assist the professors and students, who are the heart of a university.

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In the U.S., a contrary organizational model—the corporate model—has been slowly insinuating itself and reshaping higher education. The corporate model is pyramidal, with privileges, power, and perquisites shifting to the narrow top and everything below cast in a supporting role. Reflecting this corporate model are the seven-figure salaries of university presidents and the large six-figure salaries of vice presidents, deans, and provosts. In this model, “administration” comes to be seen as “the university,” exercising increasing control over the *magistri et scholares*. This rewrites the script on the university as community, and it also subverts academic freedom. Corporations are hierarchical, not democratic and communitarian. The concentration of power at the top—with a two-tier system of professors, designed to increase institutional flexibility and keep personnel costs down, among other things—perfectly reflects the corporate model. But, it radically perverts the classical idea of a university.

ARGUMENTS ABOUT DAMAGE TO THE ACADEMY FROM THE PROLIFERATION OF NTTs

The Department of Theology took seriously the ancient medical axiom: *primum non nocere*, our first duty is to do no harm. The two-tier system does harm at many levels. The ideal of the university, reflected in the American Association of University Professors’ (AAUP) Recommended Institutional Regulations on Academic Freedom and Tenure, is that professors should be tenured or on a probationary tenure track. Exceptions to this should be “very limited.”⁵ This is not reality, as students are increasingly being taught by tenure-ineligible faculty who are part-time (or full-time but on fixed one- to three-year appointments) or by graduate students. During the 1990s, most new faculty mem-

bers were hired on non-tenure-track (NTT) positions.⁶ The grim and obvious by-product of this is that “due to the nature of their employment situation, part-time faculty do not have academic freedom.”⁷

The other side of that coin is the shrinking of full-time tenured faculty positions. Between 1995 and 2003, the actual number of full-time tenured faculty positions declined by more than 2,000. This trend is continuing because, for administrators, it embodies the irresistible appeal of lower costs and more administrative control.⁸ With a smaller cadre of independent tenured voices, administrative power is concentrated and enhanced. As a larger portion of the faculty are, perforce, a

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silent majority, business people, not academics, are making the big decisions.

The problems of NTTs have been cited in this journal and elsewhere. Summarily, they are: the absence of academic freedom, teaching at multiple schools at minimal pay and often without benefits, greater dependence on student evaluations because there is no peer review in most cases, teaching courses not wanted by the tenured faculty and at inconvenient times, no say in curricular development or university governance, and less opportunity to search for and qualify for tenure track positions. NTTs are frequently ignored when a search commences for a tenure track position. NTTs have no sabbaticals, merit increases, or advantages from seniority. Sexism rears its head in the two-tier system given that “women are more strongly represented among part-time faculty than among full-time faculty.”⁹

NTTs frequently enjoy slights from the regular faculty who, as one NTT put it, “seem to take it for granted that people who accept temporary appointments are somehow deficient or suspect academically.”¹⁰ At Marquette, the NTTs refer to themselves sardonically as “the little people.” Postdoctoral fellowships are a new form of contingent faculty, as are limited-term, full-time NTT positions. Graduate students who teach suffer many of the problems of NTTs and can be impeded by their class loads from completing their dissertations. All of the above inflict a kind of academic foot binding on the NTTs, hobbling them in their pursuit of a tenured position, perpetuating their subordinate status, and in some cases driving them from the profession. During the Marquette discussion, we argued that this relegation of NTTs to lower status has been borne with an ignoble indifference by regular faculty who are spared a lot of heavy lifting by this exploitative arrangement.

Overreliance on NTTs is unfair to students. For obvious reasons, full-time faculty generally can spend 50 or even 100 percent more time per credit hour on teaching in and out of the classroom than part-time faculty.¹¹ More than half of the courses students take in Marquette's Department of Theology are taught by faculty whose academic freedom is compromised because of their contingent, dependent status. Unprotected faculty can put themselves at risk if they attempt to generate a sense of excitement and passion for discovery in ways that might be seen as unorthodox. Their precarious status can put them at risk if they attempt to discuss the controversies that accompany real breakthroughs and horizon experi-

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ences in scholarship. In addition, students take fewer core courses taught by established faculty who are in a better position to know the background of the syllabi and the curricular goals of the institution.¹² In spite of their best efforts, overtaxed NTTs are less likely to have the time and opportunity to work with students outside of the classroom to inspire students to seek careers in their discipline. Universities also suffer when they send signals to students that there is no real institutional commitment to them since they are mainly taught by itinerant part-timers. Additionally, part-timers are more dependent on student evaluations, which can stimulate grade inflation.

While the effects on students may be fairly obvious, the exploitation of NTTs can also damage institutions. Tuition and fees rose during the 1980s and 1990s. In 1998, the congressionally appointed National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education said that investment in faculty had decreased in recent years, even as tuitions rose.¹³ "But even with substantial increases in student enrollments, many institutions chose to allocate proportionately less to their instructional budgets, and instead to increase spending on physical plant, new technologies and technology upgrades, and administrative costs."¹⁴ This prioritizing is related to the decline of tenured faculty as well as to the timidity of tenured faculty who do not speak up in the increasingly hierarchical ambiance of academe.

Of concern also are issues of professionalism. A profession implies highly cultivated skills in some area and commitment to the highest moral ideals of the society. Most charges of "unprofessional behavior" concern the latter more than the former, showing the prominence of moral standards in judging professionals. Regular faculty who passively tolerate a two-tier system—and benefit greatly in their salaries and teaching loads because of it—are liable to charges of unprofessionalism

on moral grounds. On a practical note, tenured faculty should notice that, as their numbers decline, more departmental duties and committee work falls to them.

Finally, the loss of tenured and tenure-track faculty can harm the broader community. By their nature, universities serve more than their students. They are centers of research, uncovering problems, nourishing democracy by supporting informed debate, unearthing socially subjugated knowledge, stimulating continuing learning in the community, providing a venue for educational and cultural events, and more. As more and more of the university faculty are NTTs and, thus,

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Marquette's mission statement says that "as a Catholic university, we are committed to the unfettered pursuit of truth. . . . We are firmly committed to academic freedom as the necessary precondition for" the search for truth. The statement also says the university is committed to "the fostering of personal and professional excellence." Given the multiple handicaps of NTTs listed above, their condition and their lack of effective academic freedom and just compensation violate those institutional commitments.

The Department of Theology resolution, of course, is only a start. However, this incipient movement at Marquette University bears watching as a test case. We have a resolution based on conscience and on the avowed religious commitments of this Jesuit university. Jesuit support of the Department of Theology resolution will be critical: Administrators at Jesuit colleges and universities do not rise in the morning thinking of ways to fight the Jesuits.

The limited resources argument of administrators will not hold. Full professors are paid reasonably well at Marquette, yet they receive salaries of about one-third of the provost salary or the salaries of other high-level administrators. Ethically speaking, given the limited size of the university budget, no one should be receiving \$300,000. That simply manifests the infection of the corporate pyramidal model of resource allocation. In the case at hand, it illustrates that money is there to provide more ethical treatment of NTTs.

If progress is made here at Marquette, it could—and probably would—influence the other 27 Jesuit colleges and could influence the broader academic community where this problem of mistreatment and overuse of NTTs is pandemic. It would be an example of moral and academic leadership worthy of the Jesuit educational tradition with its stress on social justice and on being a voice for those who have no voice. 

ENDNOTES

- ¹ These data were compiled by John Curtis with the AAUP Research Office and are taken from the U.S. Department of Education's *IPEDS Fall Staff Survey*; EEOC, EEO-6 Survey.
- ² At Marquette, as elsewhere, there are some part-time faculty who have full-time external jobs with benefits and who consent to contribute their experience as adjunct teachers. This is not a matter of concern. Our concern is for NTTs who have no such security.
- ³ Although their numbers are small, Jesuit priests hold important faculty and administrative positions at Marquette.
- ⁴ F.L. Cross and A. Livingstone. *The Oxford Dictionary*, 1032.
- ⁵ American Association of University Professors. Policy Documents & Reports, 22.
- ⁶ U.S. Department of Education, *IPEDS Fall Staff Survey*. See, also, J.W. Curtis and M.F. Jacobs. "Consequences," 5.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ⁹ Barbara K. Townsend, "Outsiders Inside Academe," 72.
- ¹⁰ On the perils of contingency, see Ernst Benjamin, "Reappraisal and Implications," 79-113.
- ¹¹ "Contingent Appointments and the Academic Profession," 23, www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/contents/conting-stmt.htm.
- ¹² www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/contents/conting-stmt.htm, 24.
- ¹³ National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education, "Straight Talk About College"
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*

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