News Roundup—Sybil Priebe, Editor, “TYCA to You”

Advice for Adjuncts and Part-Timers . . .

The backstory, as provided by rep Teresa Thonney: “Many English departments at community colleges rely on adjunct (part-time) instructors. Some of these instructors are hired with limited teaching experience, yet they often receive little more than a generic syllabus to help them prepare for class.”

Here’s what the reps asked each region: What advice would you give to a newly hired adjunct instructor at your college? If you are currently an adjunct instructor, what was the most helpful advice you received (or what advice do you wish you had received) when you were first hired?

Since the representatives’ reports have such great information, I’ll keep my input brief. I would tell any adjunct/part-timer to be aware of the give and take. They should protect their time and never feel obligated to do more than necessary.

TYCA-Pacific Northwest Report from Teresa Thonney

I asked Pacific Northwest TYCA members what advice they would give to a new adjunct (part-time) English instructor or what helpful advice they received when they were hired as an adjunct instructor. Three themes emerged from the forty-four responses: get informed, get involved, and be realistic.

Get Informed. Nearly every respondent said they would tell new adjunct instructors to get to know full-time instructors; ask to see syllabi, assignments, and textbooks; read curriculum guides and school policies; and know the department’s course outcomes.

Much of the advice focused on how important it is for new instructors to
align their student expectations with those of others in the department: Ask for examples of successful student papers; attend faculty orientations and norming sessions when they are available; seek out mentors; and learn about campus resources, such as the writing center and student success coaches.

Other practical advice offered for new adjunct instructors included these suggestions: Learn how to request leave or supplies, how to navigate course management systems, and where to get answers for questions about student conduct issues. Also, get to know the people who support our work: bookstore employees, tutors, print room technicians, student success coaches, IT and media specialists, and librarians. A couple of respondents said they would tell a new adjunct instructor not to be afraid to revise schedules and assignments when needed.

Get Involved. Another theme among responses was that adjunct instructors should get involved on their campuses: Go to department meetings, attend workshops and conferences, join committees, and take advantage of professional development opportunities. Getting involved helps a new instructor gain institutional knowledge and feel a part of the larger mission.

For adjunct instructors who hope to be hired for full-time positions, respondents emphasized the importance of not just coming to campus to teach and immediately leaving. Several respondents noted that their departments have tended to hire adjunct instructors for full-time positions because they know the quality of the applicant’s work. On the other hand, adjunct instructors who don’t know their own colleagues are at a distinct disadvantage if they apply for a full-time position at their college.

Be Realistic. Most respondents encouraged adjunct instructors to get involved on campus, but there were mixed opinions about the potential payoff for doing so. Because there will never be enough full-time positions for all of the qualified adjunct instructors, several respondents said they would advise new adjunct instructors to be realistic and financially smart: Don’t do extra work (such as attending meetings or advising students) that isn’t compensated; seek additional grant-funded contract work on campus; get a second job; develop a résumé that allows you to move on to something else if you aren’t hired full-time after a few years. Participate in activities that “mean something to you,” recommends one respondent, but not before considering “whether the time and labor you are investing is worth the reward.”

Respondents—both full-time and adjunct instructors—noted the exploitative nature of adjunct work in higher education and urged all instructors to advocate for change on their campuses.

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**TYCA-Southwest Report from Liz Ann Báez Aguilar**

My advice to the newly hired adjunct instructor on campus . . .

The majority of several full-time and adjunct faculty members across campus and the state of Texas whom I consulted responded that new instructors needed to receive information that was practical and applicable to their semester of teaching.
Yet the most obvious trend in preparing our adjuncts for teaching is to follow the checklist for “compliance.” This checklist consists of having all of the necessary items required by the state listed on your semester syllabus, the inclusion of student learning outcomes identified on each of your assignments, and your contact information and office hour schedule posted.

Yet, what advice would I give to a newly hired adjunct today? I would tell them not to lose the invaluable love and joy of teaching in their discipline. With all of the overwhelming changes affecting faculty across college campuses to include curriculum, shared governance, campus culture, community outreach, political and social climate including guns on campus, professional development, and limited resources, they must truly maintain the heartfelt desire to believe that their teaching will not only affect but transform others.

From recollection more than twenty years ago, the advice that I received from a full-time senior faculty member was to purchase the optional liability insurance provided by Texas Community College Teachers Association. I remember her stating “that if I ever need an attorney, this insurance would help me.” Her words resonated in my mind, and I kept thinking to myself, why would I ever need an attorney? As many of you already have witnessed, there have been hundreds of legal cases with regard to faculty issues, and those of us who have taught for more than fifteen years have also noticed that many students of today are unlike the students who embraced challenge and strong academic rigor.

The current practical and applicable information for new adjunct faculty would be to attend the open meetings of the faculty senate and adjunct faculty council at their respective campuses and to participate in the professional development provided by their colleges whenever possible. It is important for instructors to learn about all of the necessary resources that they will need to provide for their students when needed, and this list includes the writing and tutoring center, the counseling center, the veterans’ office, campus police, the food pantry, the IT help desk phone number and campus location, and student activities office.

Last but not least, every day is a new challenge for all of us in the field of teaching, and as educators, we must make it our priority to keep engaged in what is “new” in our own discipline that we love, value, and respect. Yes, amid our teaching, we must make time to research, write, attend conferences to keep us engaged in our field, exchange our ideas with others, and share the similarities and appreciate the variances of experiences of our colleagues across the spectrum of institutions of higher education.

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TYCA-West Report from Robert Lively

I think at some point, we have all received advice from a colleague who served as a mentor to help us navigate the world of academics and teaching. Those of us who
are full-time faculty are now in the position to give advice to adjuncts as they are beginning their careers. This advice and connection is important since many times adjunct faculty feel separated from their departments. Adjuncts may show up, teach their courses, and go home. The life of an adjunct can feel very isolated and lonely. Alex Arreguin, the WPA at Mesa Community College, recognizes the isolation of the adjunct faculty.

The professional life of an adjunct faculty can be very lonely and disconnected. That is because most are working multiple jobs across different campuses, and as a result, it is difficult to make connections with their colleagues. My biggest advice is to intentionally seek out those connections on at least one campus. Those faculty connections are vital not only to develop professionally, but also to gain a better understanding of the culture of that institution. Without these mooring points, our teaching and pedagogy can easily become fragmented and decontextualized.

Molly Maynard, the English Department coordinator at Truckee Meadows Community College, echoes this sentiment. She realized that part-time faculty often feel a bit disconnected pedagogically. Using the campus online platform, she has developed online materials to help adjuncts connect with the campus. It offers a place to look at lesson plans, assignments, and syllabi. Her emphasis on creating these materials was to give insights into the culture of the institution and give connections to people who shared the materials for the curricula.

The “TYCA Guidelines for Preparing Teachers of English in the Two-Year College” states, “Currently, most graduate programs either explicitly or implicitly professionalize students for careers at four-year institutions, with little or no attention to community colleges, the contexts where many graduate students are likely to make their careers” (TYCA 12). This observation is reflected in comments from Angie Flynn, a part-time faculty member at TMCC, who reflected what I wish someone would have told me, “You don’t have to teach everything! Just give them the basics! I’m sure many new teachers enter the field, as I did, with all sorts of grandiose ideas. I now use as my guiding principle: Will this be of use to these students in English 101 and beyond? If the answer is yes, then spending time on that particular aspect of composition is worth their time and mine.”

When adjunct instructors enter our campuses, the advice we need to give is on how to understand what our assessment means; that goals and outcomes are measures we all strive for; that our teaching styles must be adaptable to student populations that may not have learned about in their seminars. The main message I heard from adjunct faculty is that full-time faculty need to help make the departments more inclusive of adjuncts to create those “mooring points” that Arreguin mentions.
Works Cited

Arreguin, Alex. Text interview. 26 May 2018.
Flynn, Angie. Email interview. 15 May 2018.


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TYCA-Midwest Report from Alan Hutchison

Before teaching my first class as a grad student, my training consisted of being handed a syllabus, a text, and instructions to “go forth and teach.” I survived my trial by fire and have never looked back. Teaching is something I love, and I can’t imagine doing anything else. However, having been both a campus department chair and a district chair, I’ve also had to help newly hired adjuncts get up and running, often with little time, before the semester begins.

When I sent out this topic to faculty in the Midwest, Jim Stout from Williston State College sent me an interesting list of things to suggest to new adjuncts:

- Sit in as many of our classes as you can.
- Attend department meetings, if possible.
- Contact the writing lab and other support services about what they can offer your students and you.
- Ask us what writing demands the content areas require here.
- Request copies of each of our syllabi.
- Respond to your students within one day of email or LMS (learning management system) contact.
- Work to have your students finish the semester better at writing than they were when the semester started.
- Learn and use the LMS.
- Ask! Ask! Ask!
- Don’t even THINK you can “Wing it,” “BS your way out of problems,” or “Ignore them until they go away.”
- The First Law: “Do no harm.” (Hippocratic Oath)
- Please be teaching for more than the paycheck, or your work life-expectancy shall not be very long here.

As I discussed this topic with colleagues, it became apparent that advice fell into two general categories: nuts and bolts, much like the list above, and campus
culture. My college has five campuses and multiple attendance centers scattered throughout our multicounty district in central Iowa. No campus is alike, and each has its own campus culture and own way of doing things. While it may be the same class, it may have a different focus to meet the needs of its particular student population. (Not to mention different campus politics.) Some adjuncts teach on multiple campuses and frequently for more than one area college. The nuts and bolts may be similar everywhere, but understanding campus culture is the real key to long-term survival.

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TYCA-SE Report from Susan Slavicz (outgoing)

I began my college teaching career as an adjunct in 1982. Frankly, I had one and then two small children and a husband whose income was adequate and who worked long hours. I was happy for a while with the part-time work.

Eventually, I was teaching composition for three colleges at one time (sound familiar?) and called my car trunk my office.

The single most important advice I had from someone during this time was from a new department head at the university who bluntly said that while the school was happy to have had my help, in the future they were looking for instructors with doctorates. Reality check! The previous department chairs had been eager to use instructors they would never hire full-time, but this department chair did me a great service. I began to channel my energies into my community college work and was hired full-time at my current institution twenty-eight years ago.

During my time at Florida State College at Jacksonville we have continued to rely on adjunct help. We have supplied professional development to adjuncts by offering an adjunct orientation before fall semester and offering many of our professional development courses online. Even with the various levels of support, the fact remains that adjunct status can be lonely and frustrating.

If you are an adjunct and reading this, I would suggest that you reexamine your position. Do you have unrealistic expectations? Has the school hired no full-time instructors in the past five years? Has a school for which you have been an adjunct hired more than one full-time faculty member since you began adjuncting? If so, have you asked a dean or a full-time faculty member for feedback on your teaching or your performance? Teachers usually don’t like the term performance pay, but adjuncts, perhaps more than any other position in education, are judged by their performance.

Look at your student evaluations. Do the students complain that you won’t listen or are unavailable? Are you always on time with paperwork?

If your evaluations are stellar and you have a good relationship with other faculty and the dean, then I have one suggestion that I have given to people over the years, many who were hired full-time.

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The single biggest mistake I have seen adjuncts make is to assume that because of their work at the college, everyone on a committee knows their work.

Go into any interview as if you have not taught at the college and the people on the hiring committee are unfamiliar with your work (realize that some probably did not read your résumé). Be specific when answering questions and explain your answers just as if you are an unknown candidate. Bring in work you have done that is not listed on your résumé or talk about students you have helped at the institution. Above all, set a positive tone; your interview is not the time to complain about the institution but to show that your presence would benefit the institution.

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TYCA-Northeast Report from Leigh Jonaitis

It is a sad reality of our discipline that dwindling number of tenure-track jobs mean that there is an increase in contingent faculty. Our institutions rely on adjuncts, but there is often very little guidance provided to them. When I asked both full- and part-time faculty what advice they would give to a newly hired adjunct faculty member at their college, the primary recommendation was to connect with others. Some examples:

• Find a congenial veteran adjunct in your discipline, ask plenty of questions, and keep their contact information handy the first year.
• Familiarize yourself with your supervisor’s office hours and stop by or email. You will find that they are fine with you asking all sorts of questions from readings to assignments to classroom management. It is OK to ask these questions.
• Never be afraid to ask your colleagues questions about anything.

Others recommended connecting with the institution in other ways:

• Stay current on research and pedagogy. Learn to use technology and the educational software platform of the college. Prepare a swag bag with markers, eraser, stapler, highlighters, and so forth.
• Regularly check your school’s email. Your chair and administrators will send you emails with useful information from student services to faculty development.
• Seek out and take advantage of trainings and other professional development opportunities offered—not only will you learn new teaching techniques and strategies, but you will also meet other faculty and staff and learn more about the campus culture. Plus, in addition to being a résumé booster, some trainings come with a stipend!

There were also thoughtful comments on classroom approaches and pedagogical concerns:
• It’s OK if you’re not good at teaching—yet. So many adjuncts are working professionals in their field but don’t have degrees in education. Just because you have subject expertise doesn’t mean you know how to manage a classroom, effectively engage with students, design curriculum, and so forth. While these may not be skills you come in with, you can certainly develop them in time. So much of my first year of adjuncting has been remembering I’m also always a student.

• Learn how to use your institution’s course management system and grade book.

• Your students are adults, and you must respect them. Even though many can be immature at times, you’ll be surprised at how fragile their egos can be. Be aware that in our setting many students have had bad educational experiences in the past, and they are easily discouraged.

• Overplan rather than underplan. Remember that students can spot inauthenticity in a moment, so always be completely honest. Don’t reward false achievement.

• Remember that a positive attitude is contagious! Students who attend community college are hoping to make a change in their lives, so individualized instruction is crucial to students’ success.

• Each class will have a different personality; be flexible. Don’t be afraid to adjust curriculum learning needs to each individual class.

There were also several respondents who emphasized the need to make oneself known at their institutions:

• Be visible. Take every opportunity to get yourself out there, help out the department, and make sure people know who you are.

• Be flexible and ready for scheduling changes. It’s not personal.

• If it is your goal to work full-time, have a clear plan and do everything you can, as there are very few opportunities today.

Some respondents, however, felt that the best advice they could offer an adjunct is to not become one in the first place. One respondent “wished someone had warned me how frustrated I would feel.” Another respondent stated that he would tell a potential adjunct not to do so “unless you have to and you have other means of support.”

I leave you with this assessment of the state of contingent faculty, offered by a full-time faculty member who preferred to remain anonymous:

The situation of adjuncts is one of the greatest scandals in higher education today. The refusal of governments and administrators to face the challenge of legitimizing adjuncts and reversing the “gigization” of higher education is corroding the once-admired American higher education system and will ultimately destroy it. . . . My advice to new adjuncts is to not fall for the false lure of full-time employment dangled in front of them. Being an adjunct is not a road to a full-time position; it is a road to nowhere, a road to the condition of being a permanent part-time employee without benefits, without protection, and without rights. Adjuncts need to aggressively unionize and strike if need be in order to gain their
Adjuncts often feel stressed from having day jobs, freeway flying, and other personal responsibilities, so it is important to seek out full-timers who will support them when they are seeking guidance in lesson planning, dealing with classroom challenges, and navigating a new institution’s policies and norms. The goal of many adjunct faculty members is to attain a full-time position, so it is imperative that the adjunct understand the campus culture of the institution. New instructors need to observe colleagues and build a toolbox of teaching strategies and techniques they can use in the classroom. Building a connection with students is necessary for genuine student learning and employing successful teaching practices. Much of the advice for new adjunct faculty focuses on the importance of communication, observation, and flexibility.

Communication is key for adjuncts at a new campus. They should be aware of the basic digital, physical, and personnel resources available at the campus. The college website can be a valuable resource for adjunct policies on hiring, health benefits, evaluations, staff development funds, and so forth, and the department website can provide information on course learning outcomes and other relevant information. It is important to ask the dean or administrative assistant for course outlines to make sure their course design will meet the course expectations. Adjuncts should review sample syllabi as they plan their own and reach out to mentors whenever they need assistance.

Observing classes is highly recommended, especially observing seasoned faculty teaching the classes that the adjunct has been assigned, to learn diverse pedagogical practices and to build connections. Additionally, being evaluated by peers is learning opportunities where adjuncts gain valuable feedback about their teaching, ask questions about the college, and sometimes find a valuable mentor in the evaluator.

Other practical advice to adjuncts includes not using generic peer-editing guidelines that invite simplistic responses (e.g., “Does the paper have a good title?” “Does the paper have a clear thesis?”). Students can simply answer yes or no to these
and not really think critically about what they are reading. Instead, the peer-editing guidelines should have a heuristic value, inviting peer editors to create additional details and perspectives that the student author may not have considered. Adjuncts are also advised not to make written comments on rough drafts, or collect rough drafts, or devote so much attention to the drafting process that they effectively grade papers twice. Instead, they should give rough drafts a cursory read on peer-editing day, just enough to troubleshoot the paper (e.g., making sure students are on the right track for the assignment). Another helpful tip is to design assignments that include a presentation component, either small group or individual. The benefit is twofold: the class sees how other students have responded to an assignment, and presenters learn quickly whether they have effectively addressed the assignment guidelines.

Finally, flexibility is key to being successful at a new campus, and this includes being flexible with materials and teaching styles. Different colleges may have unique requirements for an otherwise common class (e.g., first-year college English). New adjuncts should also learn to forgive themselves often throughout the first semester and year of teaching. It's a learning experience full of many challenges and rewarding moments, so it's natural to feel lost and have questions. Consequently, they should try to find the right mentors who can help them navigate their journey in academia.

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