The Ethics of Hiring in a Time of Change

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The Ethics of Hiring in a Time of Change:  
A Response to the Final Report: MLA Committee on Professional Employment and to the “Statement from the Conference on the Growing Use of Part-Time and Adjunct Faculty”

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LET ME begin by telling you a bit about who I am. I am the chair of a moderate-sized English department at a Research I institution, Washington State University. Before I was elected chair I served as associate dean in the College of Liberal Arts. Before that I was a writing program administrator. Before that I taught for twelve years as a part-time adjunct at various institutions. Before finishing my graduate work, I served for two years as Peace Corps volunteer. So when I took over as department chair, I was aware of some of the issues raised in these various reports not only from an administrative point of view but also at a personal and experiential level; because of my Peace Corps experience, I have viewed my various administrative roles not only in terms of both leadership and stewardship but also in terms of being a change agent. One of the first changes I focused on in my own department when I took over as chair was what the MLA committee report calls the “moral and pedagogical double bind” (Gilbert et al. 9) of our profession—the twin problems of the overproduction of PhDs and the treatment of temporary instructors.

I have been able to bring about what I think are some modest improvements during my term as chair. My institution faced yet another round of budget cuts this past academic year. Armed with some of the data from last year’s ADE Summer Seminar West, I was able to convince the department’s executive committee that we should cut two TA lines. I did this by offering to take half of the hit myself—one of the lines was designated as the chair’s research assistant—and I asked the department to share the pain with a match. So next year the number of our TA lines, which has been steadily growing over the past decade, will decrease by two. It’s a small but encouraging start in controlling our contribution to the already overflowing PhD pool.

In the treatment of temporary faculty members, I have also made some inroads. Because of Pullman’s location (out in the middle of nowhere) and because the institution has a long history of valuing undergraduate as well as graduate education, the department has not traditionally hired large numbers of temporary faculty members. Still, the MLA report states that most English departments across the country no longer have enough full-time faculty members to teach the freshman and sophomore courses, and my department is no exception; at 35.5 full-time faculty equivalents we are down from our historic high of 41. Each year we must rely on ten to fifteen temporary faculty members to staff our regular undergraduate offerings. These teachers are of two sorts. In the first category, there are people who are place-bound, mostly spouses or partners of other faculty members (we have a long-standing custom of partner accommodation, since there are few employment opportunities in Pullman outside the university). The second group consists of our own graduate students whom we hire as instructors for up to three years while they search for permanent jobs. The first group, the place-bound, are in that oxymoronic job category, the permanent temporary; some have been at Washington State University longer than I. The latter group, our own graduates, is more transient, since most of those looking for academic jobs have found them by the end of their “three years and out” term. For the past decade our placement rate for PhDs has been hovering at about 80%.

In following the recommendations for equitable treatment of temporary faculty members (Gilbert et al. 33–34;
“Statement” 24–25), my department comes off rather well. Pullman is, as I have said, a small college town. The temporary instructors who are our colleagues are also our neighbors and friends, and we treat them accordingly. By contrast, when I was a temporary instructor at a large urban institution, all temps were hired to teach a maximum of two classes a semester. The normal full-time load was four classes per semester, but for us temps two counted as 40% because, as the chair patiently explained to me, the real load for tenured faculty members was five courses, but they had a one-course reduction for all their service. Since benefits started at 50%, the 40% administrative fiction allowed the institution to save a tidy sum. For twelve years I had no retirement plan. Luckily I was covered by my husband's medical plan, since I was not eligible for one on my own. By contrast, at Washington State University we have always hired our temporary faculty members in English at a minimum of 50% to ensure that they receive benefits. Further, we try, as much as enrollments allow, to get all of them who want full-time employment up to 100%. They also have all the support that tenure-track faculty members have (offices, telephones, mailboxes, access to travel funds to give papers at meetings, and so on). One thing they did lack was computer access in their own offices, but the first year I took over I put desktops in all offices by dipping into our endowed funds.

But this is not to say that Pullman is paradise for temporary faculty members. All of them still get that terrible letter firing them at the end of each year, reminding them that they are expendable and chipping away at their morale. I have addressed this situation by working with the dean to establish a series of three-year, renewable contracts for some of our place-bound faculty members. In certain areas where we had continuing enrollments that justified not terminating a contract at the end of each year, the funding could be made permanent, if not tenure-track. We filled the first of these, in ESL, last year, and this year we filled a second three-year, renewable lectureship in creative writing. We are gradually moving toward a cadre of place-bound instructors who have some measure of job security and who contribute to particular areas of the undergraduate curriculum.

For the other group of temporary faculty members, the former students who are now job hunting, I am working with the graduate director to formalize what has been informal practice—making these positions into structured “postdocs” in which our former graduate students learn to be faculty members. Again, our local situation makes this a natural move. Our graduate program has always aimed at producing scholar-teachers; we have required courses in pedagogy, and we have extensive mentoring of graduate students, including them as much as possible in the workings of the department (for example, there is a graduate student representative on almost every committee in the department). Our program is relatively small, and as a result our graduate students get a lot of attention and individual grooming.

When these students become temporary instructors, the mentoring and the inclusion in the life of the department intensify. They all serve on committees. We give them a variety of classes to teach, especially in their particular area of expertise; we also have several opportunities within the department for administrative internships. We have established writing groups in the department to help participants get things into print and colloquia for preparing participants to give papers at conferences. All these activities are already part of our departmental culture. I am now working with the graduate dean to make these postdocs include experience at outside institutions, as suggested by the Preparing Future Faculty initiative of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Our postdocs will “shadow” faculty members at other nearby institutions and experience a different departmental culture. As the MLA committee report notes, many graduate students do not understand that they will be working at institutions rather different from the one in which they are getting their degrees (Gilbert et al. 23). Our graduates (with one outstanding exception, who was hired by UCLA) have been hired into positions at comprehensive universities, regional state institutions, small liberal arts institutions, and community colleges. I want to help our former graduate students familiarize themselves better with these sorts of institutions and avoid culture shock during their first year of tenure-track employment.

In summary, I am working toward a two-tiered system, one that recognizes the needs of the institution for flexibility in meeting the rises and dips in enrollments (since we offer only one-year appointments to our postdocs for up to three years) but that also establishes some security of employment for those who are in all but name permanent members of our staff.

Having said something about the steps we have taken or hope to take to deal with the double bind of overproduction of PhDs and the situation of temporary instructors, let me turn now to the forces that push against our efforts to address both these issues and my own difficulties in dealing with them. The first force is economic. I mentioned earlier that the treatment of temporary faculty members at Washington State University is in compliance with almost all the recommendations of both these reports. But the one area in which we are not in compliance is equitable pay. Our temporary faculty members with PhDs are paid the grand sum of $23,500 a year. I have managed, through some administrative sleight of hand, to get the three-year, renewable positions I described earlier moved up to $28,000. But the bottom line is that we have a bottom line. There just isn’t enough money in our accruals pool or the dean’s reserve to bump
the pay for temporary instructors any higher, and we have lots of folks who are willing to work for the pittance we offer, even out in the middle of nowhere.

The budget reductions we have been undergoing exacerbate the problem. The most recent reduction mandated by the legislators requires us to self-fund our next salary increase. In what I see as one of the great ironies of my term as chair, I proposed and the executive committee approved offering up the three empty faculty lines in our budget that we have used over the years to fund temporary instructor positions. That money will now go to increase the salaries of our tenure-track faculty members. (I could say more about why I proposed this and why I still think it is defensible as a move in terms of the particular situation in which we found ourselves, but I can't tell you that I feel good about it.)

An issue that is addressed briefly in the MLA report is the relation of our shrinking budgets in academe to the larger economic picture in the country. As we all know, we are in an era of corporate downsizing and outsourcing; the concept of lifetime employment within any particular industry is gone everywhere except in academe. Legislators and corporate donors (and sometimes members of our boards of trustees) want us to emulate the corporate sector, to do more with less. They see nothing wrong with hiring cheap part-time labor—that is precisely what they themselves are doing to cut costs. One bank executive recently told the president of my institution how glad he was to hear that we were investing so heavily in technology (our most recent institutional initiative). He himself had saved millions by closing small branch banks and installing ATMs; the bank executive evidently expected Washington State's president to do the same. Machines would take the place of personnel—in this case, the faculty. The banking model of education that Paulo Freire inveighed against had already come to pass in the imagination of this corporate donor.

This larger economic picture is the context for the present argument that the academic enterprise needs to conform to corporate models. Our most persuasive argument against making academe conform to the corporate model is itself a corporate argument—that of quality control. Both reports do an excellent job of articulating that argument for us, and I believe they will be very useful in making the argument for more permanent lines to deans and administrators. One regional comprehensive institution, Grand Valley State University, in Michigan, is already bending to public pressure to put "real" faculty members in lower-division courses and thereby distinguish itself from other institutions nearby. The administration at Grand Valley has offered the English department eight new tenure-track lines to increase the representation of full-time faculty members in composition classes. Here is a model we can point to when discussing the issue of quality control with both administrators and the public we serve.

The second force that concerns me is also referred to in the MLA committee report: "Our tenured and tenure-track colleagues in English [. . .] will have to change their thinking about the nature of the work we do, its purpose and its structures" (Gilbert et al. 28). When the report of the MLA Committee on Professional Employment came out, I immediately sent it to our graduate director (someone very sympathetic to the situation, having also herself taught as a temporary faculty member). Without giving the matter enough thought, I followed the usual administrative routine. The MLA report went to the Graduate Studies Committee for review, with the expectation that the committee would develop a proposal that would go out to the rest of the faculty for discussion and a vote. And there in committee the whole thing died.

Looking back, I can see that in my eagerness to bring about change I had ignored some fairly obvious issues. First, I was asking faculty members to think beyond their own self-interest. Limiting the size of the PhD program would mean teaching fewer graduate seminars, directing fewer dissertations, and devoting themselves more to undergraduate education. Why did I expect them to agree that this was ipso facto a good thing? Second, I was ignoring one of the important driving forces behind higher education, that of cultural reproduction. I concur completely with the MLA report: there is a tacit agreement among faculty members in graduate programs that what we are about is cloning ourselves. Against all evidence to the contrary, a few faculty members in our department point to our one exceptional graduate student who was hired by a Research I institution as the model, ignoring the fact that he is the only graduate student in the history of our program to wind up at such a school.

Finally, I had ignored one of the most important principles of institutional change—that the process by which one brings about change is as important as the final change hoped for. One cannot, as I tried to do, mandate change through the usual hierarchical channels. According to Michael Fullan, in a book entitled Change Forces: Probing the Depths of Educational Reform, the old linear model of change in organizations (prepare a vision statement, get folks to buy into it, then begin implementation) simply does not apply—indeed, probably has never applied. Educational change is clearly anything but linear; Fullan argues that we need a new model for change, one based not on linear models but on chaos theory. Change agents need to understand what he calls the "Eight Basic Lessons of the New Paradigm of Change" (21–22). Here are several of the more thought-provoking ones:

- You can't mandate what matters (the more complex the change, the less you can force it).
• Change is a journey, not a blueprint (change is nonlinear, loaded with uncertainty and excitement and sometimes perverse).
• Problems are our friends (problems are inevitable, and you can’t learn without them).
• Vision and strategic planning come later, not first.
• Neither centralization nor decentralization works (both top-down and bottom-up strategies are necessary).
• Every person is a change agent (change is too important to leave to the experts).

To put these lessons into a plan of action, Fullan calls for change agents in educational institutions to engage in shared vision building and to build collaborative work cultures (12), enabling every faculty member to become an effective change agent.

What I find persuasive about Fullan’s work is the clear connection he makes between change agency and moral purpose in managing productive educational change. This moral purpose behind the educational enterprise, in which Fullan includes facilitating critical enculturation, providing access to knowledge, building effective teacher-student connections, and practicing good stewardship (8–9), is also behind these reports I am responding to here. The present situation—the double bind described in the reports—is, simply put, immoral. We must work with our faculty members and our institutions to change it. Let me close with some words of courage widely attributed to Margaret Mead. She was speaking of political change, but of course that is what we are about as well.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Works Cited

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