

**Treating Chronic Illness:  
The AHA-OAH Standards: Are They Appropriate?**

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**The 2003 Joint AHA-OAH Committee on Part-Time and Adjunct Employment standards part-time/adjunct employment sought to confront the growing reliance upon non-tenure track faculty and the inconsistent manner in which many of them were treated. The standards recommended, among other things, improved working conditions, better collegiality and pay and a limitation upon adjunct usage, all largely ignored. This paper looks at the major problems associated with the joint standards and suggests several avenues of revision.**

In 2001 the executive boards of the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians created the Joint AHA-OAH Committee on Part-Time and Adjunct Employment to confront the widespread and increasing reliance upon adjunct faculty in institutions of higher learning. The joint committee evolved from a need for a permanent panel to consider what was considered a looming crisis. Two years later the joint committee recommended five standards for the employment of adjunct and part-time faculty. Both the AHA and the OAH endorsed these standards and have since maintained support for them. Having completed the standards the joint committee lapsed into inactivity. In 2009, with the adjunct issue far from resolved, the OAH Executive Board created the Committee on Part-Time and Adjunct Employment to continue the work of the defunct joint committee. Part of its mission

was to reevaluate the 2003 Joint Committee Standards. This paper represents a step in that direction.

The AHA-OAH joint committee defined its mission as one of information gathering and dissemination in order “to identify and promote strategies for solving the problems created by the inappropriate use of part-time, adjunct and similar faculty appointments”.<sup>1</sup> Since that time use of non-tenure track faculty has continued to rise and there is little indication that pay levels or job security has improved appreciably.<sup>2</sup> The joint committee had the difficult task of seeking better working conditions for adjuncts while simultaneously urging a limit or reduction in their utilization. Despite the hard work and good faith that went into their writing, over time and changing conditions certain fundamental flaws in the standards became obvious. While advocating much needed workplace improvements, the standards nonetheless reflected ambivalence about adjuncts as professional educators and, consequently, their current role in

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction, “Joint AHA-OAH Committee on Part-Time and Adjunct Employment, Recommendations, 2003”. Italics are mine. The author served on the Joint Committee at the time the recommendations were issued. He took no part in their formulation. The author is indebted to Professors Arthur Eckstein and Ira Berlin of the University of Maryland, College Park for their input on the joint standards.

<sup>2</sup> See Arlene Lazarowitz and Donna Binkiewicz, “Historians’ Contingent Workforce: Where Have They Been? Where are They Going?,” paper, OAH Convention, April 2010, 1; “One Faculty Serving All Students” An Issue Brief by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce,” February, 2010, [http://www.academicworkforce.org/CAW\\_Issue\\_Brief\\_Feb\\_2010.pdf](http://www.academicworkforce.org/CAW_Issue_Brief_Feb_2010.pdf).

academia. They also failed to reflect a sound appreciation of the role that funding (or the lack thereof) plays in the continuing use of adjunct faculty.

While it did address the shameful conditions under which many adjuncts work, the Joint AHA-OAH committee treated the growing use of contingent faculty as a contagion to be stopped and possibly reversed. For example, in its cover letter introducing the standards to the respective executive boards of the OAH and AHA, the joint committee asserted that the use of contingent faculty turns history departments into “bus depots rather than collegial meeting places” where “the reputation of ... departments ... declines in direct proportion to the number of part-time/adjuncts employed.”<sup>3</sup>

This decline resulted, the joint committee explained, because “these faculty spend much of their time commuting from job to job, do not have enough time to prepare courses, to meet with students, do not have access to libraries, computers, clerical assistance, office space, and the other necessities of instruction.”<sup>4</sup> Although the joint committee affirmed its support for “the many highly qualified, dedicated, and effective part-time and adjunct historians,” it also concluded that everyone involved, including “students are harmed by this.”<sup>5</sup> It apparently never

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<sup>3</sup> Introduction to the AHA-OAH Standards. 1, Joint AHA-OAH Committee on Part-Time and Adjunct Employment, May 6, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> IBID.

<sup>5</sup> IBID.

occurred to anyone writing these standards that contingent faculty are hired and re-hired based on their teaching ability and other professional expertise. In light of the more recent and realistic employment threshold principles drawn up by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce's Issue Brief, in light of the current budget crisis on most college campuses, and for reasons to be detailed in this paper, the 2003 Joint AHA-OAH Standards on Adjunct Employment warrant serious re-consideration.

The first problem one encounters with the standards is one of definitions. Equating 'adjuncts' with 'part-time faculty', excludes a sizable portion of what most of us think of as 'adjunct' faculty. A better approach might be to address the needs of all 'contingent' faculty: adjuncts, part-time lecturers, instructors, visiting professors and full-time untenured and non-tenure-track faculty. Combined, these cohorts constitute over half of all college and university faculty teaching in institutions in higher learning. At present the bifurcation of college faculty stratifies departments, casts adjuncts in a lesser light, and potentially weakens departmental effectiveness and coherence, and unless the standards make it clear what exactly is meant by adjunct faculty and asserts unequivocally that they have become a more or less permanent fixture among college instructional faculty, this condition will only grow.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See for example, Audrey Williams June, "New Analysis: Converting Adjuncts to the Tenure Track is More Easily Discussed Than Done," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 8, 2009, <http://chronicle.com/article/News-Analysis-Conversion-of/49089/>

The first joint standard urges that part-time faculty be included in “collegial relations and communications in their departments ...” This would mandate a defined probationary period and evaluation procedures that might help establish seniority in hiring perhaps and set pay increases. Inclusion would also require office space with a telephone, copying privileges, clerical and technological support, and parking provisions. This standard also recommends travel grants for conferences and workshops and, finally, sick pay, health insurance and other benefits.<sup>7</sup> It is imperative to keep in mind that furnishing such things depends as much upon available funding to history departments as a change in basic attitude.

Joint standard number two asks history departments to furnish statistical reports on the actual number of full-time, part-time/adjunct faculty, graduate students teaching independent courses and the actual number of courses taught by the various faculty classifications. Such statistics are fundamental to any accurate assessment, but they have not been reliably collected. That such statistics are not uniformly compiled might well indicate why there has been such resistance to addressing the current issue and, where it has been addressed, the results seem to have been sporadic and uneven.<sup>8</sup> Since the 1990s there have been numerous attempts to quantify faculty employment without a single, agreed upon set of numbers as witnessed by the apparently

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<sup>7</sup> AHA-OAH Joint Standards on Part-Time and Adjunct Employment, 2.

<sup>8</sup> IBID.

contradictive recent surveys by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce (2009) and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2007-08). As with definitions, this issue must be resolved before any concrete proposals can be made.

The third standard advocates “appropriate proportion[s] for courses taught by part-time/adjunct faculty.” This is highly problematic for several reasons. The number of contingent employees at all levels of institutions of higher learning has continued to rise, more sharply in some schools than others. The ratios propose limiting adjunct hires as follows: 30-40 percent of community college faculty, 10-20 percent for four-year institutions and 20-30 percent for research institutions. First, compliance with this standard would result in the loss of employment for a number of contingent faculty across the country – individuals whom, anecdotal evidence suggests, would have little or no hope of obtaining the newly created tenure track lines that are expected to appear once the economy improves.<sup>9</sup> But these ratios indicate another deeper problem with the third standard: a not so subtle negativity towards contingent faculty as scholars and teachers. Whether intentional or not, the limitation of contingent faculty demeans the concept of ‘adjunct faculty,’ demeans those individuals currently working as adjunct faculty and continues the already pronounced association of adjuncts with inferiority. Simply put, the third

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<sup>9</sup> American Historical Association, “AHA Joins Call for Fair and Equitable Treatment of All Faculty,” in *Perspectives on History*, February 24, 2010, <http://historians.orgs/Perspectives/issues/2010/1003/1003new2.cfm>

standard implies that reliance upon adjunct lecturers automatically indicates a decline towards the second rate. For these reasons standard three must be completely re-thought.<sup>10</sup>

The fourth standard recommends pay-levels for “part-time faculty at a minimum of 80 percent of what a full-time faculty member of comparable training and experience would be paid.” Though well intentioned, this standard does not comport with the realities of academic funding, even before the current economic down turn, that has in many cases necessitated not only an increasing reliance on contingent employees but a continuation of the present salary disparities between contingent and non-contingent. In order to staff the requisite courses, administrators hire adjuncts because they can pay them less and fire them easily. Rather than suggesting modest pay increases for contingent faculty, standards might shift emphasis to job security and promotion. Here again, it is essential to keep in mind that there are as many or more contingent faculty as non-contingent faculty on American campuses and that there seems to be an inverse ratios between waning budgets and adjunct employment.

If enough funding were available to limit the level of contingent faculty, more tenure track lines would be available and the need for adjunct faculty would fall. The decline in tenure track funding may be only partially due to funding. But the fact remains low pay for contingent

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<sup>10</sup> IBID.

faculty allows colleges and universities to provide enough instructors for the growing number of students. This is all the more true during the present budget squeeze, and will be for the foreseeable future.<sup>11</sup>

A third major point needs consideration, that is, the conflicting data about the number of contingent faculty currently working in history departments and academia. A recent survey by the Academy of Arts and Sciences as part of the Humanities Indicator Project reveals a far lower percentage of contingent faculty in four year colleges and Universities. The survey appears to be in conflict with the widely disseminated 2009 study by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce that puts the number of contingent faculty at upwards of 68 percent. A similar finding came from a 2004 poll by National Center for Education Statistics which put the employment ratios for history departments at 37.8 percent tenured, 16.2 percent tenure track, 8.7 percent non-tenure track and 37.3 percent part time.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> IBID, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Robert B. Townsend, "Putting Academic History in Context: A Survey of Humanities Departments," *Perspectives on History*, March 2010, <http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2010/1003/1003new1.cfm>; "State of Humanities Departments," Inside Higher Education, March 1, 2010, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/03/01/humanities>; "One Faculty Serving All Students" An Issue Brief by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce," February, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, National Study of Postsecondary Faculty, 2004, AAUP, November-December 2006, <http://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/07C10102-152C-429A-90CD-AED2E95C794C/0/TenureStatusTable.pdf>; Monica F. Jabobe, "Contingent Faculty Across Disciplines," AAUP online, <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/academe/2006/ND/Feat/jaco.htm>.



Standard five urged history departments to make public specific numbers of part-time/adjunct faculty and the number of courses they teach. It also promised to promote those departments that “undertake to meet these standards”. It appears most history departments have been unable or unwilling to comply with this standard.<sup>13</sup>

In sum, contingent faculty are not a disease to be quarantined and eliminated, even if such a thing were possible. Neither are contingent faculty a metaphor for poor scholarship and bad teaching. Call them what one likes, adjuncts, contingent faculty or part-time lecturers, they are an invaluable part of higher education, at minimum irreplaceable, highly skilled classroom instructors, and they are likely to remain a major part of higher education for the foreseeable future. They deserve better treatment in a more enlightened academic environment. And history departments deserve reasonable and workable guidelines to help bring this about.

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<sup>13</sup> AHA-OAH Joint Standards, 3.