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## The Shadowy Downside of Adjuncts

The growth of part-timers raises questions of program quality and adequate preparation

**BY CHAROL SHAKESHAFT**

**Staffing campus-based preparation programs with adjunct faculty members can be worth millions of dollars to universities, but the practice neither prepares future administrators well nor grows a capability for better administrators in the future.**

My conclusions are based on my own and others' research and on 23 years as a tenured member of a graduate program in educational administration. While individual adjunct professors may teach wonderful courses and bring a wealth of experience to the classroom, the structure of universities and the needs of programs to be integrated, revised and monitored combine to make it difficult to deliver high-quality programs using adjunct professors.

I am not making the case that adjunct professors who are full-time administrators should never be used. However, I am arguing against inappropriate staffing that trades expediency and profit for quality. Good administrator preparation programs require a core of committed full-time faculty members. While this alone is not sufficient to ensure quality, this condition is a necessary first step. Programs that rely on a majority of part-time faculty begin with a handicap, one that can seldom be overcome, no matter how dedicated those part-time practitioners might be.

Educational administration programs that are predominantly staffed by adjunct faculty have

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three serious deficits.

First, over-reliance on part-time faculty is flooding the market with marginally prepared administrative candidates while enriching some universities.

Second, because university preparation programs have not accepted the discipline of measuring the field-realized career outcomes of their teaching, prospective students lack useful guidance about program quality and thus don't have the tools to differentiate between a good program and one that offers only a piece of paper. Part-time programs take advantage of the absence of published measures of quality.



*Charol Shakeshaft*

Third, the proliferation of adjunct-based preparation perpetuates the isolation of two groups--practitioners and professors--who might otherwise cooperate usefully.

### **Profit Motives**

New York's Nassau and Suffolk counties (Long Island) have 125 public school districts that serve 544,000 students. These districts average 21 entry-level administrative positions (chairperson, assistant principal, elementary principal, curriculum specialist) so, conservatively estimated, there are 2,625 entry-level positions in the area. Obviously, most of these positions are filled most of the time, but even if 10 percent of these positions turn over in a year (a high estimate, especially for chair people), then in any given year there are 263 entry-level openings to which beginning administrators can apply.

How many graduate programs in educational administration are seeking to fill those 263 openings and how many candidates are they producing? Eighteen colleges or universities offer New York State-approved (another part of this

problem) administrative preparation programs to students who live or work on Long Island. Completion rates for these programs range from 35 percent to 100 percent.

Using a model of 50 graduates from each program a year, Long Island universities are certifying at least 900 new administrators annually for 263 entry positions, more than three times the number needed. That also assumes, of course, there are no new graduate preparation programs in the metropolitan area or that Long Island vacancies do not draw regional and even national candidates.

The incentive for the universities never has been clearly documented. Using current salaries and information from three programs on Long Island, I have compared the income and costs of two programs using adjunct professors exclusively and one program that uses predominantly full-time faculty supplemented by a handful of adjuncts. At a typical stipend of \$2,500 per course, adjunct faculty members are only an eighth as expensive as a full-time professor (using an average salary of \$75,000 plus the cost of fringe benefits). Staffing programs with part-timers makes possible lower tuition and the university compensates by admitting more students. Based on current data for Long Island, the "profit" to the sponsors of programs taught by part-timers is between \$4 million and \$5 million more than for programs with full-time faculties.

Universities have used a number of strategies to build graduate programs and attract students. At least three programs on Long Island currently or in the past have shared a percentage of tuition revenues with a recruiter/program administrator in order to guarantee a supply of new graduate students. These lucrative programs employ an administrative coordinator and staff the classrooms entirely with adjunct professors drawn from the field.

I once heard an administrator who works for a university that relies on part-timers to bypass the use of regularly appointed professors say, "Why pay for the cow when you can get the milk free?" Given the dominance of men in part-time teaching about school administration, these aren't cash cows. They are cash bulls.

### **Flying Blind**

It is easy to see why these preparatory programs are popular with universities but what

about candidates for administrative positions?  
Why would they choose a program staffed  
predominantly by adjunct faculty?

Imagine a bright educator, needing the academic credentials to advance his or her career, looking at a graduate program that enrolls 900 students taught entirely by part-timers. That individual likely will understand the devaluing effect of everyone having the same cheap, convenient and quick credential. The smart candidate will differentiate himself or herself by choosing a quality program, but how can that choice be made when outcomes of programs are neither measured nor published?

Without meaningful criteria, those seeking a preparation program use whatever measures are available. Thus students compare programs by the available variables--price, location, ease and whatever the recruiter may have told them about job prospects.

Some universities and some professional organizations have been struggling to improve preparation programs in educational administration for 30 years. One consistent recommendation is the use of full-time faculty. Martha McCarthy in her 1999 study of the professorate in educational administration published in *Educational Administration: A Decade of Reform*, a collection of studies that analyzed improvements in administrator preparation, notes that although a minimum of five full-time faculty members is recommended, 40 percent of all graduate programs in educational administration nationwide employ fewer than five full-timers. On Long Island, 78 percent have fewer than 5 full-time professors in educational administration and 11 percent have no full-timers.

### **Mutual Isolation**

Most adjunct faculty members are recently retired or have full-time jobs as central-office administrators. They offer instruction that is nominally practice-based and they are efficient recruiters of new graduate students (who often believe that studying with the superintendent or director of human resources will lead to a promotion).

Campus administrators whose graduate programs run certification mills operated only by part-timers usually justify that practice by pointing out that their adjuncts are or were

practitioners and thus bring expertise from the school administration field. Research-based universities make an equally narrow defense of their practice, citing "Theory is job one." Regularly appointed, full-time faculties are assumed by practitioners to be stuck on theory and isolated in the ivory tower. Both stereotypes ignore the job of the professor in a preparation program--to teach. The expertise needed is the ability to foster learning.

Being a good administrator in a school system is not the same as being a good teacher. And neither is being a good researcher the same as being a good teacher. By using either administrative experience or research knowledge as a proxy for the ability to create learning environments, we have sold our students short and focused on secondary characteristics in hiring.

The common assumption that full-time professors think about "the big picture" or theory, as some call it, and that administrators bring relevance and immediacy is not only dismissively stereotypic, it misses the point. There are lots of kinds of administrators and nearly as many breeds of professors. A school principal who has been in the same district for her or his entire career is likely to be a very different teacher than a principal who has served in several school communities. A non-administrator who works with administrators in many school districts is not the same as a former superintendent who hasn't been back inside a school since the retirement dinner. Using current employment as an administrator as a proxy for field knowledge is a mistake.

In truth, I prefer research to teaching, probably because it is easier and has more rewards. Teaching demands more of me than research--more time, more study, more engagement, more commitment and closer scrutiny. Better teaching does not bring me rewards from the university or my field nor does it necessarily increase enrollment. And yet I spend hours on program development and preparation for classes, collaborating with my colleagues to deliver an integrated, articulated program. I do so because it is required for continued employment in my department; it's part of the job. I don't know whether I would spend as much time on this task if I belonged to another department where the culture ignored teaching.

The culture of my department is what keeps me

focused because we require that the majority of faculty be full-time, tenured or tenure-track professors; all professors must work with partner school districts; all professors must teach in all programs; full-time faculty must take turns teaching in the summer so that our students always have full-time faculty available; the course and curriculum decisions are made by the entire department and are not the property of individual faculty members; and everyone must incorporate practice into her or his teaching.

No high school principal would try to staff the curriculum with substitute teachers no matter how much the school board might save. Similarly universities are best positioned to prepare the next generation's practitioners when faculties can create teams, organizations and cultures. All that takes time and it takes full time.

Finally there is the matter of accountability. University professors are not noticeably accountable and that needs to be corrected. But a moonlighting school administrator who has to choose between fielding school board calls and preparing the night's seminar knows which one is related to continued employment.

Delivering a program takes time--time for meetings, time for shared projects, time for articulation across classes. Adjunct professors are rarely required to participate in this ongoing work, and even when this is the goal, expecting this additional time and commitment from a professional who is being paid peanuts is unrealistic.

Finally universities don't recruit and select adjuncts with the same care that we select full-time faculty. Most adjunct appointments never are advertised nor is the process open. Adjuncts are more likely hired because of friendship networks, alumni status or the potential to provide full-time faculty with a consulting payback.

### **Appropriate Uses**

Administrators do not teach at universities for the money. Nevertheless the payment structure at the university telegraphs the message that adjunct teaching is a minimal commitment. Working together in school district partnerships would allow universities and school boards to make decisions that create more time for the adjunct teacher, including planning meetings,

curriculum design and articulation activities.

One way to identify the best practitioners who are the best teachers would be to develop a regional adjunct pool. Practitioners who want to teach at local universities would apply to the pool and a panel of full-time professors from participating schools would judge their credentials, including examples of their leadership and teaching. Once an adjunct is accepted into the adjunct pool, any university could hire the person with the knowledge that rigorous criteria were used for selection. Application into the adjunct pool also would signal a commitment to program planning and developmental work in departments.

Adjunct presentations, shadowing experiences, mentoring, internship supervision, classroom visits to discuss practice and leading/developing simulations are activities that don't necessarily leave adjuncts with the responsibility of running an entire course or program but apply their experiences, insights and expertise in ways that will strengthen preparation programs.

Adjunct-only programs are a scandal waiting to be discovered. On Long Island, they are increasing in number. That does not mean there ought not be closer connections between the field of practice and the university. When practitioner expertise is added to the university base, everyone benefits, including the regular faculty. Adjunct-only programs are profitable, but they are also an obstacle to more thoughtful and more effective school administration.

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