**Is Adjuncting the ‘Kiss of Death’?**



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[*Image:*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071562/?ref_=nv_sr_2) *The Godfather: Part II (1974)*

Numerous commentators have observed that being an adjunct, as a [recent essay](http://chronicle.com/article/Skip-the-Department-Meeting/230241/) put it, “actually seems to decrease your chances of securing a tenure-track position.” Some have even gone so far as to label adjuncting a career destroyer, the proverbial “kiss of death.”

But is it really?

Maybe that’s true at four-year campuses; someone with experience at those institutions can better answer that. But I do have 28 years of experience at community colleges, where adjuncting actually can be a viable pathway to a full-time, tenure-track (or “continuing-contract”) teaching job.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t find any statistics from two-year colleges to show either the proportion of adjuncts who move into tenure-track positions, or of tenure-track faculty who began as adjuncts. I even consulted a highly-regarded statistical maven for a large national education organization, but he wasn’t aware of such a study, so I must conclude none exists. If I’m wrong, I’d appreciate someone pointing me toward those numbers. And if I’m right — well, there’s a dissertation topic for somebody.

Still, my impression is that both numbers are significant — that many community colleges routinely hire their own adjuncts (and adjuncts in general) for tenure-track positions, and that many tenure-track faculty members began their careers in the adjunct ranks. And so, unable to nail down hard numbers, I did the next best thing: I went to Twitter, asking my followers and people I follow in the two-year college sector if they do indeed make a practice of hiring their own adjuncts. I got quite a few responses from across the country, all answering my question with some version of “Yes.”

One professor from a small community college in the Northeast wrote to say that two of the five full-timers in her department began as adjuncts, and their latest tenure-track hire was not only a former adjunct but also an alum. A department chair in the Northwest noted that, over the last 20 years, four of 15 tenure-track hires in her department have come from her college’s own adjunct ranks. A dean on the East coast said that “roughly half” of his college’s full-time hires are former adjuncts. And a president at a large community college in the Southwest said such internal hiring takes place “a majority of the time” at his college.

For the record, in my department this spring we hired two of our own adjuncts for tenure-track positions and two more for full-time, non-tenure-track jobs. As I scan our faculty roster, I can see that about a quarter of the full-timers began as adjuncts in our department.

In short, the unequivocal responses I received reinforced my perception that adjuncting is not, in fact, “the kiss of death” at many community colleges.

Why not? First of all, our colleges are teaching institutions. We don’t penalize people for teaching, even if it’s “only” part-time, nor do we penalize them for being unable to pursue an active research agenda while trying to eke out a living by teaching on multiple campuses. We’re much more likely than our four-year counterparts to recognize that effort for the commitment to the profession it really is.

Second, the way the hiring process works at two-year colleges actually encourages people to start out on the adjunct track. While four-year institutions routinely hire new Ph.D.’s right out of graduate school, community colleges typically require job candidates to have at least a couple years of full-time teaching experience or the equivalent. Hence the age-old conundrum for community-college applicants: How can you get two years of full-time teaching experience if you can’t get a full-time job without two years of full-time teaching experience?

The answer is simple (if not easy): by adjuncting. The equivalent of two years’ teaching experience can be, in this case, precisely measured. Since the standard teaching load for most full-time faculty members at community colleges is 10 courses a year (or five each semester), then two years’ worth of experience would equate to 20 courses taught. An adjunct who teaches two courses a semester would thus accumulate the equivalent experience in five years — and someone who teaches, say, four or five courses a semester on multiple campuses could do so in two or three years.

The question of whether or not this is a good system lies beyond the scope of this post. I’m not defending it, much less promoting it; I’m just trying to explain how the system works for those who are intent, against all odds, on seeking a tenure-track teaching position at a community college. You might regard the system as exploitative and degrading, and I’m not going to disagree with you. I would just suggest that you might want to pursue a different line of work.

The bottom line: If you want to join the faculty at a community college, you’re almost certainly going to need teaching experience. One way to get it is by adjuncting. In fact, it might be the only way you can get it. Furthermore, teaching as an adjunct will not mark you as unworthy in the eyes of most of your full-time colleagues. Many of them began that way themselves.

One caution to keep in mind: While it’s true that many adjuncts end up getting a tenure-track job, it’s also true that many of them don’t. So even though adjuncting might not be the kiss of death in the community-college sector, remember, it’s no guarantee either.



[Rob Jenkins](https://chroniclevitae.com/people/119-rob-jenkins) is an associate professor of English at Georgia Perimeter College.

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