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The Adjunct Betrayal: How Universities Built an Empire on Academic Poverty

Dr. Sarah Mitchell stood before a classroom of thirty-five undergraduates at State University, delivering a lecture on 19th-century American literature with the passion and expertise that had earned her a PhD from an elite institution seven years earlier. Her students didn't know that after this class, she would drive across town to teach two more sections at Community College, then grade papers until midnight in her studio apartment. They didn't know that despite her doctorate and teaching five courses across two institutions, she earned $42,000 annually—less than the university's administrative assistants and barely more than the campus janitors.

Sarah represented the **meagre** reality beneath American higher education's glossy veneer: the adjunct professor, contingent faculty member, the academic precariat. While universities marketed themselves through images of distinguished scholars mentoring small classes, they had quietly **swept** their teaching workforce into a two-tiered system where 73% of instructors held temporary, low-wage positions without benefits, job security, or institutional support.

The **calculus** that produced this transformation was brutally simple. Tenured faculty positions cost universities $120,000-180,000 annually including benefits and research support. Adjunct instructors teaching the same courses received $2,500-5,000 per class—typically four classes annually for full-time equivalent work—with no health insurance, no retirement contributions, no office space, and contracts that could be cancelled with a semester's notice. Universities maintained their research prestige through tenure-track faculty while shifting teaching burdens to contingent workers whose poverty subsidized institutional priorities.

This wasn't accidental evolution but deliberate policy. Sarah had watched her department hire three new administrative positions—Associate Dean for Student Success, Director of Learning Assessment, Coordinator for Diversity Initiatives—each earning $80,000-100,000 with full benefits, while rejecting her application for a tenure-track position that would have provided job security and living wages. The department claimed budget constraints prevented converting adjunct lines to permanent positions, yet administrative overhead had expanded 40% over the past decade.

The **falsehood** universities perpetuated was that adjunct positions were supplementary employment for professionals teaching one course for extra income or retired professors staying engaged. This might have described the adjunct workforce of the 1970s, when contingent faculty represented 22% of instructors. But by 2023, adjuncts comprised 73% of faculty, with most cobbling together multiple courses across several institutions to approximate full-time employment without ever achieving job security or adequate compensation.

Sarah's typical semester involved teaching five classes totaling 150 students. She spent approximately sixty hours weekly on class preparation, teaching, grading, and student meetings—more than full-time employment. Yet her compensation remained fundamentally part-time, calculated per-course rather than as salaried position. The university classified her as

temporary employee despite continuous employment for six years, systematically **withholding** the benefits and protections afforded to permanent staff.

The impact extended beyond financial hardship. Sarah had no office where students could meet her during consistent hours—she held office hours in coffee shops or borrowed departmental conference rooms. She had no institutional email address students could reliably use to reach her. She had no travel funding to attend conferences maintaining scholarly currency. She had no research support or course release time to develop her expertise. She had no voice in departmental governance or curriculum planning despite delivering the majority of instruction.

The **calculus** of her existence had become grimly familiar: each semester, waiting anxiously to learn if her courses would be renewed or if budget "adjustments" would eliminate her income. Planning nothing beyond the current semester because she had no assurance of future employment. Applying desperately for the rare tenure-track positions—two hundred applicants competing for single opening—while watching administrators and staff positions multiply. Confronting the reality that despite her qualifications, dedication, and student success rates, she would likely never achieve the stable academic career she had trained for.

Sarah's experience teaching composition revealed the systemic neglect. The university mandated twenty students per section for tenure-track faculty teaching writing courses, recognizing the intensive labor of providing meaningful feedback. Yet adjunct-taught sections enrolled thirty-five students—a 75% workload increase—for the same per-course compensation. This wasn't cost-cutting but cost-shifting: the university maintained its commitment to small writing seminars for privileged students taught by tenure-track faculty while herding the majority into overcrowded sections taught by overworked adjuncts.

The **falsehood** that this arrangement benefited students through "affordable higher education" proved particularly galling. Tuition at Sarah's university had increased 180% over the past twenty years while adjunct compensation remained essentially flat. Students paid more while receiving less—instruction from faculty with **meagre** institutional support, inadequate time for student engagement, and constant economic anxiety affecting teaching quality. Universities pocketed the difference, funding administrative expansion, amenity upgrades, and athletics rather than educational mission.

When the pandemic **swept** through American higher education in 2020, Sarah discovered just how disposable institutions considered adjunct faculty. While tenured professors transitioned to remote teaching with institutional support—technology stipends, training, course development time—adjuncts received emails directing them to move classes online immediately with no additional compensation or support. When enrollments declined, universities simply canceled adjunct courses, eliminating faculty income mid-semester. The crisis revealed that "faculty" meant very different things depending on employment status.

Sarah had confronted the **calculus** of continuing in academia multiple times. She could pursue "alt-ac" careers—alternative academic employment in administration or student services—abandoning teaching and scholarship for stable employment. She could leave

academia entirely, joining former graduate school colleagues now earning twice her income in corporate jobs. She could continue adjuncting while pursuing a second career, treating teaching as expensive volunteer work rather than profession. Each option represented failure of the promise that doctoral training would lead to stable academic employment.

The psychological toll proved particularly corrosive. Sarah had internalized the meritocratic narrative of higher education: work hard, develop expertise, contribute to knowledge, and you'll be rewarded with meaningful career. Instead, she discovered a system that exploited her passion and commitment, using her investment in scholarship and teaching against her. Universities could pay **meagre** wages precisely because adjuncts loved teaching and believed in education's value—they would accept poverty to remain in profession they'd trained for.

The **withholding** of basic professional respect compounded financial hardship. Administrators referred to adjuncts as "part-time faculty" despite full-time workloads. Department chairs scheduled meetings during times adjuncts were teaching at other institutions, then complained about their lack of engagement. Students and colleagues often didn't know Sarah was adjunct rather than tenure-track, assuming she had the resources and security her title suggested. She performed the same work as tenured colleagues while receiving fraction of compensation and none of the professional standing.

Sarah had joined faculty union efforts to improve adjunct conditions, but progress proved glacial. Universities deployed the rhetoric of budget constraints while spending millions on facilities and administration. They claimed market forces determined compensation while suppressing information about adjunct pay rates and limiting faculty organizing. They promoted "flexibility" and "entrepreneurial" academic careers while actively preventing adjuncts from achieving stability that would enable professional development.

The **falsehood** that adjuncts provided inferior instruction particularly rankled Sarah. Her student evaluations consistently exceeded departmental averages. Her students succeeded in subsequent courses at rates matching or exceeding those taught by tenure-track faculty. She poured heart and expertise into teaching despite institutional obstacles. Yet the university simultaneously relied on her instruction while denying her the recognition and compensation her work merited.

The breaking point came when Sarah learned the university had hired a new Vice Provost for Strategic Initiatives at $180,000 annually—the same week her request for $500 to attend a teaching conference was denied due to lack of funding. The juxtaposition revealed priorities: administrative expansion took precedence over supporting faculty who actually taught students. The **meagre** resources available for instruction were further squeezed while administrative overhead metastasized.

Sarah began documenting the hidden costs of adjunct employment: the gas money driving between campuses, the coffee shop fees for holding office hours, the lack of health insurance meaning she paid full price for medical care, the inability to save for retirement or emergencies, the constant stress affecting her health and wellbeing. When she calculated her actual hourly

wage including unpaid labor—class preparation, grading, student meetings—she earned approximately $15 per hour, less than the barista at the coffee shop where she held office hours.

The system's sustainability depended on **withholding** information from multiple constituencies. Students didn't know that their instructors often earned poverty wages and lacked basic institutional support. Parents paying inflated tuition didn't know that funds were not going to education but to administrative expansion. The public didn't know that universities' educational mission had been subordinated to other priorities. The **falsehood** that adjuncts were supplementary rather than central faculty members allowed universities to maintain prestige while exploitation remained invisible.

Sarah eventually joined the growing number of "freeway flyers"—adjuncts teaching at multiple institutions, commuting between campuses, living in cars or sleeping in campus parking lots between classes. She met colleagues with PhDs from prestigious programs teaching seven or eight courses across three institutions to earn $50,000 annually. She encountered 55-year-olds who had adjuncted for twenty years with no prospect of ever achieving permanent employment. She witnessed talented scholars abandoning academia because the **calculus** no longer made sense—years of training leading to permanent precarity rather than sustainable careers.

The wave of adjunct unionization that **swept** through higher education offered some hope. Campuses organized, demanding living wages, multi-year contracts, and benefits. Some universities responded positively, converting adjunct lines to non-tenure-track but permanent positions with better compensation. Others fought aggressively, using legal technicalities to block organizing and retaliate against activists. Progress remained uneven, with gains at some institutions highlighting ongoing exploitation at others.

Sarah's reckoning with academia's **falsehood**s extended to her own complicity. She had encouraged undergraduate students to pursue graduate study without adequately warning them about job market realities. She had participated in perpetuating the myth of meritocracy—that hard work and excellence would be rewarded—when her own experience demonstrated otherwise. She had **swept** uncomfortable truths under the rug, maintaining professional optimism despite personal crisis.

The pandemic's disruption of higher education revealed the **meagre** foundations on which universities had built their empires. When institutions could no longer rely on physical campuses and traditional delivery modes, the exploitation of contingent faculty became newly visible. Students seeing their instructors teaching from cars or struggling with inadequate technology began questioning what their tuition funded. Parents recognized that "educational excellence" depended on poverty-wage instructors **withholding** their own needs to serve students.

Sarah finally left adjunct teaching after nine years, taking a position with an educational nonprofit at $68,000 annually—significantly more than her academic earnings with better benefits and working conditions. Her departure represented talent lost to higher education, expertise squandered because universities refused to provide sustainable employment. She

joined thousands of former adjuncts who had been **swept** out of academia not by lack of ability or commitment but by unsustainable exploitation.

The **calculus** that produced the adjunct crisis—maximizing institutional prestige and administrative expansion by minimizing instructional costs—had **swept** through American higher education with devastating effect. Universities built empires on the backs of contingent faculty earning **meagre** wages, maintaining **falsehood**s about educational quality while **withholding** the resources and respect that instructors deserved. Sarah's story, replicated across hundreds of thousands of adjunct faculty, revealed higher education's moral bankruptcy—institutions that claimed to value learning and scholarship while impoverishing the very people who delivered education to students.

Until universities confronted the **falsehood** that adjunct exploitation was necessary or acceptable, the promise of higher education would remain betrayed by institutions more committed to growth and prestige than to their ostensible educational mission. The **meagre** wages and insecurity that defined adjunct life represented not inevitable economic forces but deliberate choices—choices that could be unmade if universities prioritized teaching over administration, educational quality over institutional expansion, and faculty dignity over budgetary convenience.

 # Contrarian Viewpoint (in 750 words)

The Adjunct Choice: Why Sarah's Poverty Reflects Personal Decisions, Not Systemic Exploitation

Dr. Sarah Mitchell's narrative of victimization by higher education obscures a fundamental truth: her adjunct poverty resulted from personal choices to pursue oversaturated career paths and remain in positions offering inadequate compensation. The **meagre** wages she earned weren't exploitation but market signals she chose to ignore, preferring to blame "the system" rather than acknowledge her own role in creating unsustainable circumstances.

Sarah's **calculus** about remaining in adjunct positions for nine years reveals either irrational decision-making or preferences she's unwilling to acknowledge. After the first year earning $42,000 with a PhD, any reasonable person would recognize the position wasn't viable long-term career. Yet she stayed for nine years, continuously choosing adjunct poverty over alternative employment. This wasn't universities forcing exploitation—it was Sarah repeatedly accepting terms she knew were inadequate.

The **falsehood** underlying Sarah's complaint is that she was entitled to tenure-track employment simply because she earned a doctorate. Graduate programs produce far more PhDs than academic positions exist, a reality that's been apparent for decades. Sarah entered graduate school knowing—or should have known—that tenure-track jobs were scarce and competition fierce. Her choice to pursue academic career despite these odds doesn't create institutional obligation to provide employment meeting her expectations.

Universities aren't engaged in exploitation by offering adjunct positions at market-clearing wages. If qualified candidates accept $2,500-5,000 per course, that's the market rate. Sarah's assertion that this represents poverty wages ignores that she could—and eventually did—earn substantially more in alternative employment. The availability of better-paying alternatives proves that adjunct work isn't exploitation but voluntary choice by individuals preferring academic employment despite lower compensation.

The comparison between adjunct compensation and administrative salaries reveals Sarah's economic illiteracy. Administrative positions command higher salaries because they require different skills in tighter labor markets. A Vice Provost earning $180,000 isn't overpaid—they're receiving market rate for senior management expertise. Sarah's belief that her PhD in 19th-century American literature should command comparable wages reflects inflated sense of her own market value rather than administrative excess.

Sarah complains about **withholding** of benefits and support, but adjunct positions were never advertised as providing these amenities. She accepted per-course contracts knowing exactly what they included and excluded. Universities aren't withholding anything—they're providing precisely what was offered and accepted. Sarah's dissatisfaction reflects her hoping that accepting inadequate positions would eventually lead to better opportunities, a gamble that didn't pay off.

The claim that universities **swept** teaching responsibilities onto exploited adjuncts ignores that this arrangement benefits students through lower tuition than would be possible with all tenure-track faculty. Sarah's $42,000 compensation teaching five courses costs universities approximately $8,400 per course. Replacing her with tenure-track faculty would cost $30,000+ per course when benefits and research support are included. This savings directly benefits students through more affordable education.

Sarah's **meagre** resources resulted from spreading herself across multiple institutions rather than securing full-time employment elsewhere. This wasn't forced upon her—she chose to remain in academic positions despite their inadequate compensation. The availability of her eventual nonprofit position at $68,000 proves that better-paying employment existed throughout her adjunct years. She chose academic poverty over financial security, then blamed institutions for consequences of her own decisions.

The **calculus** of adjunct employment makes perfect sense for many instructors: retirees wanting intellectual engagement, professionals teaching specialized courses in their fields, graduate students gaining teaching experience. These appropriate uses of adjunct positions don't create exploitation. The problem isn't adjunct positions existing but people like Sarah trying to construct full-time careers from positions never intended for that purpose.

Sarah criticizes administrative expansion while ignoring that these positions serve legitimate institutional needs. Student services, diversity initiatives, and learning assessment respond to student and regulatory demands. Universities aren't diverting funds from instruction to unnecessary bureaucracy—they're adapting to changing educational requirements. Sarah's preference for more tenure-track positions doesn't make administrative roles illegitimate.

The **falsehood** about adjuncts delivering equivalent instruction quality to tenure-track faculty ignores that research-active faculty bring current scholarship and professional networks to teaching. Sarah may have received good student evaluations, but teaching composition and survey courses doesn't require the expertise and scholarly engagement that justify tenure-track compensation. Her work was competent but fungible—easily replaced by other adjuncts or graduate students.

Sarah's claim that universities "exploited her passion and commitment" reveals entitled thinking. Organizations aren't obligated to pay premium wages simply because employees are passionate about work. Her choice to accept low-paying positions because she loved teaching was precisely that—her choice. Universities offering positions at rates workers voluntarily accept aren't engaged in exploitation regardless of employee motivation.

The pandemic exposing adjunct conditions as problematic reflects changing expectations rather than newly discovered exploitation. Adjunct arrangements were always transparent to anyone paying attention. Sarah knew her employment terms, compensation, and job security from the outset. That she hoped conditions would improve doesn't create institutional obligation to improve them.

Sarah eventually leaving for nonprofit work at $68,000 demonstrates the system working correctly. She tried academic career, discovered compensation didn't meet her needs, and transitioned to better-paying employment. This is market functioning appropriately—workers seeking positions offering acceptable compensation and leaving those that don't. Her nine years adjuncting represented extended experiment in whether she valued academic work enough to accept lower pay, ultimately deciding she didn't.

The unionization efforts Sarah supported attempt to force universities to pay above-market wages for positions that clear perfectly well at current rates. If adjuncts were genuinely exploited, positions would go unfilled. Instead, universities have no difficulty finding qualified instructors willing to teach at current compensation. This proves adjunct wages aren't exploitative but simply lower than what some instructors wish they were.

Sarah's narrative **swept** aside personal responsibility for career choices while attributing all negative outcomes to institutional failure. She chose graduate school in oversaturated field. She chose to remain adjunct for nine years despite inadequate compensation. She chose academic employment over better-paying alternatives. Each choice was hers, yet she frames herself as victim rather than agent.

The **meagre** wages Sarah earned represented exactly what the market will bear for teaching composition and survey courses at institutions with abundant qualified applicants. Her PhD from elite institution doesn't change this economic reality. The **falsehood** she perpetuates—that credentials automatically entitle holders to specific compensation—reflects fundamental misunderstanding of labor markets.

Universities aren't **withholding** anything from adjuncts. They're offering particular positions at particular rates. Workers can accept or reject these offers. Sarah accepted for nine years, suggesting the positions met some needs even if not all preferences. Her eventual departure proves she could leave whenever costs exceeded benefits.

The adjunct "crisis" exists primarily in narratives by people who made poor career choices and refuse accountability for outcomes. Sarah's story doesn't expose systemic exploitation—it reveals someone who pursued unsustainable career path, ignored market signals for nearly a decade, then blamed institutions for consequences of her own **calculus**.