

Allegory of the Cave

-- Pamela Hanford

In Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," prisoners are chained to the floor and are unable to turn their heads. Therefore, their perceptions of reality are based on the shadows they see before them, not on seeing the shadow-makers themselves.

Upon viewing initial responses to our survey regarding SB847 (the senate bill to increase the maximum load for part-time faculty from 60 to 80%), I'm beginning to see another layer of "prisoners" within this allegorical cave. Instead of the "puppeteers" which move along on a platform casting shadows, the shadow-makers are part-time faculty who need to teach a load higher than 60%. This comparison probably surprises few readers. But who would have guessed that in this scenario we would see full-time faculty as prisoners chained to the floor of this cave, restrained in such a way that they are only able to see shadows? In order to understand why this is, let's consider that those "shadow makers," who are also prisoners.

These prisoners in this allegorical cave are not restricted in their perceptions, but in acquiring what they need to survive. They also are chained in a row (think 40,000 of them, side by side, so this is one BIG cave). Every day their food is brought, and placed just out of reach. So, perhaps with some straining, each prisoner can reach a piece of bread. But what these people truly need to survive, a well-rounded diet, is continually beyond their grasp. The cruelty is that they can see what they need, and it is almost within their reach, but each is restrained by chains which are just not quite long enough.

Many part-time faculty rattle their chains every day. They notice there are quite a few additional links that could be utilized. Many of them say, "If you won't set us free, please just add some length to these chains, so we can at least reach our food!" Then comes the uproar from the first group. Some of these, whose perception of even shadows is astute, look at the images played out before them and say "Yes. If we can't free these prisoners let us at least allow them to reach sustenance!" But others look and proclaim (with a great deal of self-righteous moral certitude), "We must free these prisoners. Lengthening the chain does not help them, we must let them go!"

And year after year, the argument continues, and still the part-time faculty are denied what they need to survive. Many of them shout back, "We wish to be free also! But while we struggle for that, PLEASE JUST LENGTHEN OUR CHAIN!"

The resounding response continues to be that lengthening the chain just continues the exploitation of part time faculty. And year after year the chain stays the same, while we reach and reach for something just out of our grasp.

The argument that allowing part-time faculty to work more hours at one district increases their exploitation is an argument of shadows and ignorance. The state and even most districts admit that parity for part time faculty would be a good thing. Everyone seems to be taking baby steps in that direction, but parity for part time faculty is a long way off, and everyone in this Community College Cave knows that. In the meantime, does that mean that it is better for an already exploited group to be held in by a very short chain?

Others insist that increasing the maximum load would take a step backwards, away from AB 1725. One full-time instructor writes: "I believe two things are likely to happen if the % is increased to 80%. Some part-timers will lose their teaching assignments as fewer faculty teach more courses. The districts may eventually hire fewer full-time staff as the pressure to eliminate the 75% rule increases. This will result in lower overall wages in community colleges." I agree, I think it is possible that some newer part-time

faculty may not receive assignments. But don't we wish to diminish the number of those "exploited?" Do we wish to continue pulling people strange cave and adding them onto those chains which are too short? Of course it would be best if AB1725 were enforced, but so far IT HAS NOT BEEN. We do not see any sign of its enforcement anytime in the near future. This too is no reason to oppose SB847, and doing so recalls that layer of prisoners with no perception of shadow or reality.

There are even part-time faculty who oppose the idea, although their numbers are few. One writes: "This is ridiculous. We should be organizing to get the State of California to properly fund higher education so that colleges could actually hire full-time tenured professor[s], that earn salaries, have full health and retirement benefits, and other job protections. Of course, those of us who are part-timers should have fair and just working conditions and pay, as well...but would you really want most faculty to be part-time? Is that the sort of higher education we want to see? This is an alarming trend that has been created and sustained, in large part, so that colleges and universities will not have to adequately pay their employees. It's cheaper to pay off us part-timers, because management is hoping we won't be around long enough to organize or fight back."

It is hard to determine at what level this writer's perceptions are "chained." First of all, there are many of us who are "organizing" and lobbying to improve the situation. And while the earlier commenter speculates SB847 will *diminish* the number of part-time faculty and appears to consider this would be a bad thing, this comment speculates SB847 will *increase* the number (and THIS would be a bad thing). Some opponents have said that increasing the maximum load will add to the numbers of part-time faculty, as this writer argues, but clearly AB847 would have the opposite effect. Because most districts are limited in how many classes they can give their senior, most experienced part-time faculty, they are forced to find newer, less-experienced teachers. There is more part-time faculty teaching the same number of classes, not a smaller number. Raising the maximum load to 80% means that *fewer* (and better qualified) teachers would be teaching the same amount of part-time sections. It also means that fewer new faculty will be drawn into the drudgery of this community college "cave." This clearly is a good thing.

Then we have had survey respondents who offer informed and intelligent insights: "Raising the maximum workload makes sense: for the students who will have more access to their instructors, for the colleges which will have more faculty able to participate in shared governance (since the part-timers will be spending more on campus as well as deans having to do less scrambling to fill classes), and for the part-timers who are at risk as they fly from district to district. They presently cannot further develop professionally because they can't remain on campus, are over-extended because they lose preparation and grading time to commuting (and thus find the lost time by giving up sleep and generally wrecking their health, not to mention family or personal relationships)."

Even though California Community Colleges do exploit part time faculty by paying them less and not giving them job security, the victims are not just the adjuncts themselves. Their health, their students, their families, and their teaching are all adversely affected by the necessity of working multiple districts to earn a living wage. Yes, equity would help. Freedom from this kind of exploitation would help. But until that comes, for God's sake, stop batting at shadows and PLEASE JUST LENGTHEN OUR CHAIN!"