

# Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast

## Season 8, Episode 5: How to Help Adjuncts Not Want to Give Up with Kerry O'Grady

### Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

[00:00:00] **Catherine Ross:** Hello, and welcome to Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning, a higher education podcast from the Center for Teaching and Learning at Columbia. I'm Catherine Ross, the center's executive director. As a quick reminder for our listeners, in this podcast series, we are exploring dead ideas in teaching and learning. In other words, ideas that are widely believed and though not true, and that drive many systems and behaviors in connection to teaching, exercising what Diane Pike called the "tyranny of dead ideas."

[00:00:39] Hello, everyone. Today, I'm chatting with Dr. Kerry O'Grady about the systemic issues and the dead ideas that underlie those issues in the hiring and supporting of contingent faculty. Dr. Kerry O'Grady is a faculty affairs expert, award-winning curriculum developer, DEIJ consultant, and public relations practitioner. She is currently the Director of Teaching Excellence at the Samberg Institute for Teaching Excellence at Columbia Business School. Additionally, she is an adjunct instructor of management communications at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Recent past positions include faculty director and associate professor for the MPS in public relations and corporate communications program at Georgetown University. She holds a BA in both Journalism and English from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, an MS in Public Relations and Corporate Communication from New York University and an EDD in Leadership and learning in organizations from Vanderbilt University.

[00:01:47] Welcome to our Dead Ideas podcast, Kerry. I'm super excited to be talking with you today.

[00:01:53] **Kerry O'Grady:** I am too. Thanks for having me.

[00:01:56] **Catherine Ross:** All right, everybody. Let's set the stage. As I mentioned in the intro, we're continuing to look at systems that undermine

teaching, and today we're going to discuss some of the systems that often leave adjunct instructors struggling with things like last minute teaching assignments, little to no actual support for their teaching, lack of on-campus space, and many, many more.

[00:02:23] We're going to examine some of these normal or at least normalized practices around the hiring of adjuncts and uncover some of the conundrums of adjunct teaching life. I think in order to really understand how these systems came to exist and can exist and how they need to be changed, we should unpack some of the dead ideas about teaching that underlie them, and Kerry has agreed to help us do that. do that.

[00:02:56] So Kerry, if you could describe for our listeners what you've seen as some of the most important, egregious, unfair, systemic problems that in your research that you've done and that you've noted in a response to a Chronicle of Higher Education article on helping adjuncts not give up. And for our listeners, we'll link to that in the description. Could you share what you've learned and what you see as the sort of outstanding problems.

[00:03:32] **Kerry O'Grady:** I would love to. Before I do, I would really like to just take a minute and deeply bury the dead idea that adjuncts are less than or not as important as full time or tenured faculty, easily replaceable, and essentially gig workers that don't need dedicated training or resources. Changing the perception of adjunct faculty and realizing how integral they are within the higher education system is truly step one, in my opinion, to changing their experience in our schools.

[00:04:02] Currently, there are over 250,000 adjunct faculty working across the United States, teaching at all levels and across a variety of disciplines. And adjunct faculty are equally responsible for providing a quality, meaningful, and valuable education to students who pay for seats in our classrooms. And most adjuncts have very deep experience in their subject area, but have no background or prior teaching experience.

[00:04:31] They are really practitioner experts who want to give back and love mentoring and are passionate about teaching and learning. But if not trained properly before heading into a classroom, fear and imposter syndrome and pressure from students and disengagement and poor facilitation and classroom management can be devastating, manifest into a variety of negative ways that impact student learning, like great inflation and a lack of applied practice for students and a lack of proper scaffolding because there is no knowledge of importance for learning outcomes or objectives or theories or frameworks when

it comes to teaching and all of this really impacts a school's bottom line through dissatisfied students. So as an industry, I think the first dead idea that we need to debunk is that we need to start viewing adjuncts as assets to our teaching community versus accessories. And so I just wanted to set that stage before diving into a few ideas from my op-ed in the Chronicle.

[00:05:25] And so with that, I'll step down from my, my soapbox, but I believe that there are truly 3 main systemic issues impacting adjuncts today: a lack of formal onboarding, feeling like they're on an island while teaching, and minimal oversight with continuous improvement. So, I'll just quickly touch on an example from each of those.

[00:05:46] So just like any job that you're hired to do in life, teaching requires meeting expectations that are set by a boss or a manager, concrete opportunities to learn how to do that job well, and lots of practice. Many schools do not have formal onboarding for adjuncts that cover off on any of these items. And instead, onboarding typically includes calling a webinar with a short case of policies and procedures and about us slides. I'm not sure how this helps prepare adjuncts for the classroom. And spoiler, it really doesn't. So, onboarding should really support both the science and the art of teaching, including introduction to framework, syllabi development, active learning, assessment, and classroom management, with opportunities to practice and get feedback from senior educators. But the buck doesn't stop there. Just like any professional development in any job, continuous improvement should be an expectation set with adjunct faculty and included as part of their contract and as part of their teaching experience in any school. Faculty should expect classroom observations, feedback from leadership on their teaching, and accountability to join at least a few centers for teaching and learning or departmental opportunities per term. And this includes updating courses regularly, too. And being well versed in accessibility in DE& I applications in the classroom.

[00:07:08] **Catherine Ross:** And I would just say, based on my own personal experience working with many of these instructors across different institutions, there also needs to be transparency and clarity around how they're going to be evaluated. And an allowance of time for them to make improvements, because I've seen people after one year be let go because they didn't improve fast enough, as though that's something that's even possible when you don't get all the things you just described, right? And it's heartbreaking. So, I just want to add in that in my experience this has been a huge problem because then they're bringing in a new person the next time and you just play it on repeat over and over again.

[00:07:58] **Kerry O'Grady:** Absolutely. You just bring up another point that could be an entirely other podcast about evaluations of teaching and how the evaluations of teaching at the end of the semester truly dictate your future yet you never got an opportunity to discuss even midterm feedback. And opportunities to change. And how fair is that? Um, and so that part of that onboarding should be about the evaluation process and about the accountability of the department to help you succeed. And that doesn't happen as much as it should. And I firmly believe also that we need to ditch the dead idea that adjuncts are not responsible for anything besides teaching a class. And that they don't want to do anything to help, and they just fly in and fly out of their class, and that's the end of it. Adjuncts truly want to be part of the larger community of a school, and to your really good point, to understand assessment and the bigger picture at a school, their goals, their strategies for success in teaching. And so we really need to be more mindful of the experience of adjuncts coming into our community and building a community and support system around them to be the most successful that they can be starting from day one.

[00:09:21] **Catherine Ross:** Right. And, you know, also, where does teaching end? And student support, like, if a student asks you to write a letter of recommendation, do you say, no, I can't do that because I'm not paid for that time, right? Or, you know, whatever it is, your office hours, like, like students rely on those to be able to talk to you. Are you not paid for hosting those office hours? So, yeah. I'm going to segue us into the second question, if that's okay. Um, because my initial reaction to the things you've said are that it points directly to the dead idea that teaching, and you said this, is not a skilled undertaking. It does not need development, doesn't need resources, doesn't require planning or forethought. And I think that's really clear when you see things like you're offered the position a week before the class starts, right? And no one seems to think anything's wrong with that, except for maybe the adjuncts. Um, and I wonder if this relates to a whole bunch of dead ideas about what teaching is, right?

[00:10:32] So I'm going to be really reductive here, but just to make this point, like if you construe teaching simply as content, expertise, right? And we often, I think departments look for that when they hire contingent faculty, they're looking for some sort of specific content mastery. So, if you think teaching is just that content mastery and content coverage, that it's not a skill that needs development, then maybe it is relatively easy for some people, but if you believe that telling people what you know is not an act of teaching, then you have to understand that that's, it's a lot of work.

[00:11:19] So what are your thoughts? Are there these embedded assumptions about what teaching is that drive some of this that are at play here?

[00:11:29] **Kerry O'Grady:** So, if I could embroider that dead idea on a pillow and sell it on Amazon, I feel like I would be rich. I can see it now. Fake news. Teaching is not a skilled undertaking. And what you just said is such an interesting juxtaposition too. I believe that the root cause of this dead idea is that so many come into adjunct instruction with an inaccurate perception of how easy or difficult teaching is and what it entails to truly be good at it. And hiring managers, usually department chairs or lead faculty, don't help this misconception either. And I'm not trying to cause trouble here, but think about it. When is the last time that you heard of someone trying to get an adjunct to teach a class, last minute or otherwise, to your point, share that teaching isn't easy, there will be a learning curve, and training will be necessary to ensure they are set up for success. Almost never, right?

[00:12:25] **Catherine Ross:** Well, because even the tenured faculty never get that.

[00:12:28] **Kerry O'Grady:** Right. Exactly. And those faculty have had experience in the classroom up to the point of tenure, right? Instead, it's more often, are you available? Cool. Here's a past syllabus and some course notes and a plethora of links to resources. You'll be fine. Have fun. This is everything that you shouldn't do to ensure that a faculty member is set up for success. So I firmly believe that we need to start by being more honest about teaching during the interview process and spend time discussing steps that these faculty will need to prepare for life in the classroom.

[00:13:01] In my last two roles, I hired adjunct faculty and always included two important questions in the interview process whether I was hiring them last minute or not. Why do you want to teach and what do you think teaching entails? And the most common answers I got were that I wanted to do this to give back, or I'm not as fulfilled at work as I once was, or if I, you know, want to eventually teach full time. But when it comes to the responses of what they think teaching entails, a lot of the responses were networking, hosting speakers, bringing professional experience into the classroom, et cetera. And not once did I hear anything that would entail being a great teacher, facilitating lectures, managing difficult students' issues, grading effectively. So, in short, its, teaching is almost romanticized, and leadership enables this by not discussing the realities with perspective in adjuncts. And the training required to do the job well. And I think so, we need to be more transparent that teaching is a skill, a

muscle that needs to be developed over time to be strong and flexible and adaptable and effective, and that takes work.

[00:14:07] **Catherine Ross:** Yes. Absolutely. I'm speechless. It was so good. You summed it up so perfectly. So, if we go another level lower in terms of dead ideas, I think there's a It all stems from a profound devaluing of teaching vis-à-vis research in higher education. And that devaluation is so strong and so normalized in the academy that these flawed systems are created without anyone even noticing that they're based on a completely flawed premise.

[00:14:44] And I think you know, in fact, I've seen universities where they reward successful researchers with a teaching reduction, or they punish unproductive researchers with additional teaching loads. And those are the logical end point of the devaluation of teaching, right? Teaching is punishment. What could be better?

[00:15:08] You know, that was a while ago, and I know now that a lot of universities are more focused on trying to improve teaching and to improve equitable outcomes in student learning. But there's still this weird disconnect with these systems that continue to devalue the teaching of contingent instructors. So, I guess what I'm wondering is based on, on your research, what kinds of, are there some first steps that would have the most impact? You've already sort of referenced some of them in your, from your response to the, to the article. I have a hard time seeing like any low hanging fruit here, but maybe, you know, I, you started out with those three recommendations. Um, maybe that's a place where we could start with thinking about how we can address some of this.

[00:16:03] **Kerry O'Grady:** Yes, those are a good start, but I have some other very small, low hanging fruit changes that make a big difference. So first, leadership making themselves available to adjuncts is huge. And not just a town hall or sending out a survey either. I mean, dedicated time on a regular basis to talk to adjunct faculty with the goal of involving them in decision making, asking them what's really happening in the classroom. Because we know that a lot of decisions are made that don't involve the people who are actually doing the work, and that leads to a lot of resentment and isolation, and I feel like that is a big thing that needs to be solved. And also taking adjunct faculty feedback into consideration when making course decisions, right, or making changes to overall strategies and goals in the classroom.

[00:16:55] **Catherine Ross:** That's hard because typically the contingent faculty aren't always welcomed at faculty meetings where those decisions get made.

[00:17:04] **Kerry O'Grady:** Yes. Yes. And, you know, I have not found a very good answer as to why. There are all these administrative components to it that full time faculty need to have the service opportunities and to an extent I understand that, but with so many adjunct faculty being in the classroom and doing critical work why wouldn't we want their perspective on things that impact teaching when they're doing so much of that? It doesn't make sense to me. And I feel like that needs to change.

[00:17:36] **Catherine Ross:** Yes. And especially if they're teaching the lower-level courses that are the students entry points into a major, for example, they should, they should definitely be in those conversations because the number of students who will go on to major and something are dependent on that. And they're often teaching the largest courses. You know, if you think about in STEM, like, they'll be teaching the intro courses with 250 students, and they have the least resources available to them. You know, it's just, again, it's mind boggling to me that no one has noticed or seems to think there's anything wrong with this picture.

[00:18:17] **Kerry O'Grady:** And it goes back to the training component, too. Think about what would happen if we trained faculty well from the onset, and then they could be the people who let the faculty who teach courses after theirs know what's missing, what are the gaps. The student education would be so much stronger if we just opened up those lines of communication.

[00:18:38] **Catherine Ross:** Yeah, for sure.

[00:18:41] **Kerry O'Grady:** Another thing, or another, uh, small thing that makes a big difference is something that I like to call value-based compensation, which is non-paycheck incentives for teaching well and going above and beyond the call of just teaching your class. And so we can't pay adjuncts more leadership should consider other ways to add value like discounted or free parking near or on campus, which I know is a big conversation right now across many schools.

[00:19:08] Opportunities to network with other adjuncts through school sponsored activities. Other ideas could include showcasing and celebrating great work in the classrooms through social media posts and the website, or providing multiple adjunct award opportunities on the importance of certain teaching skills like active learning or applied practice or practicums. One thing that drives me crazy in this space is that there's so many award opportunities for full time faculty. And maybe one award per year for an adjunct. How is that going to incentivize them to want to do the best they can do? Not saying that extrinsic

motivation is, you know, the be all end all. There's always some intrinsic motivation to teach well, but there is something to be said about widely recognized adjuncts who do the job well that motivates others to do the job well.

[00:20:03] **Catherine Ross:** Um, as I recall, the last time I looked at the numbers, aren't contingent faculty teaching most of the classes more than tenured faculty? Like that in itself, just the sheer numbers would speak to why we should be doing that.

[00:20:21] **Kerry O'Grady:** You are correct. And giving them more opportunities to connect with each other. The other thing I've been talking about quite a bit is certificates or additional stipends for being part of committees, hiring committees, curriculum review committees, being part of service initiatives or creation of specific courses, or certificates for professional development they can put on their resume. Or part of research opportunities that they can help elevate their academic profile.

[00:20:52] Many adjuncts that really love teaching eventually want to be full-time. So why don't we help them do that? Uh, in any way, shape, or form, even if it's not here, that should be a benefit of their academic activity here, is to provide guidance on publishing and how to become a really great teacher that might potentially get a professorship at somewhere else.

[00:21:14] **Catherine Ross:** Or a lecture position, which tends to be more stable and, and now more and more schools I know are involved in trying to create promotion paths for lecturers and longer-term contracts for lecturers, right? Although the really funny thing I have seen happen is that when that happens, part of their promotion package is not research.

[00:21:40] They are not allowed to do research, not even on teaching, even though they teach. That's their main function, but they cannot do research on teaching because that would mean they couldn't teach as many classes. It is so backwards that it made me gasp when I heard that. How do you have a group of people whose primary responsibility is teaching and then they're not allowed to do any research on teaching. And the other side of that is research on teaching isn't counted as research. For even for the faculty who maybe are on a long-term contract or even on a tenure track, if they do research on teaching, that doesn't get counted as research.

[00:22:29] **Kerry O'Grady:** You're bringing up so many other systemic issues with the benefit to the school versus the benefit to the faculty member, right?



[00:22:38] **Catherine Ross:** Oh, that's a really interesting distinction. I hadn't thought of it that way.

[00:22:43] **Kerry O'Grady:** I think about it more than I should. But I mean that that opens up a whole other can of worms right and it also just leans into everything that we're talking about on this episode is prioritizing the teacher who does the work that can contribute to our school and our learning better versus what's going to benefit the school more.

[00:23:07] **Catherine Ross:** Right. Right. Oh, that just very neatly summed that up. All right. So how can we, or I don't know, I should probably say, can we address these deeply embedded systems and the beliefs that they're based on? Um, I know, you know, there's plenty of research, like you know the research, I know the research.

[00:23:33] We've seen, we know, that sometimes just sharing the research isn't the powerful tool that we would hope in persuading faculty or institutions even to make changes. So where do we turn? Where do we go for this?

[00:23:49] **Kerry O'Grady:** Well, the good news is we can address these issues, but only if there is a concentrated effort from school leaders to make systemic change when it comes to the adjunct faculty experience. And for that to happen, adjunct faculty needs and wants in relation to student success needs to be prioritized. And schools need to be ready for this kind of change because of all of the reasons we've already discussed. And it's going to take dedicated time, energy, and resources, too, which are not in abundance.

[00:24:19] **Catherine Ross:** Right.

[00:24:19] **Kerry O'Grady:** So, I think that's probably the biggest conversation that we have at any school is resources. Right. But to your point, there are many studies out there regarding systemic change with contingent faculty, including my own doctoral work, but research does not mean anything without human action behind it, right?

[00:24:36] So while the teacher and me would love to list off a whole bunch of papers and articles about the state of adjunct faculty, I don't think that's the best use of air time. I suggest an alternative. For anyone currently managing or hiring adjunct faculty, play the tape forward. And what I mean by this is to start considering what would happen if adjuncts got the onboarding, training, value-based compensation and continuous improvement opportunities and support that they deserve from the start of their experience at schools.

[00:25:07] Here are some spoilers from the end of the tape or the movie or whatever you want to call it. Happier students. Better evaluations. Less adjunct faculty turnover. Less recruitment and hiring time for departments and adjuncts who feel prepared and fulfilled in their roles and cannot wait to make their courses and their teaching better every semester that they're offered a class. I mean, how great does that sound?

[00:25:32] **Catherine Ross:** That sounds pretty great to me. But it does bring up another thing that we didn't really get into too much, the impact of these practices on students and their learning. How can we leverage that? As an argument.

[00:25:49] **Kerry O'Grady:** Absolutely. So, on top of everything that we've already talked about to encourage change because of the impact on students, I have one more that I'll leave you with. And I don't mean to sound like a brokered record, but let's just say it one more time for the sake of the part, for the sake of fans. The student learning experience should always be top of mind when we hire adjunct faculty. If we are inviting students into the classroom to learn, we should be creating courses with their specific needs as well as employers needs in mind.

[00:26:20] What we want or what we think means so much less than what the students want or think. That said, students sometimes need an adjunct who's a practitioner more than a full-time faculty member teaching a course. It's also important to remember that students do not distinguish between adjuncts or full-time faculty. And most of the time they don't care. I can tell you from my own personal experience as an adjunct at UMass, students don't care. They think that I have all day to answer emails and I love them for it. But the point is that they expect the same quality education across the board. And they know when faculty are ill-prepared to teach, are too busy to teach well or haven't been trained to teach well. And I firmly believe that it is an incredible detriment to a student to have an adjunct instructor who may on paper be an amazing CEO within with a massive contact list and great examples to talk about, but cannot facilitate knowledge.

[00:27:23] If students leave a class not knowing exactly what they can apply to future coursework or a job, the faculty was not effective and the student and learning experience was compromised. So, if we take the time to make some of the changes that we discussed today, we will support better learning for students, better student success, and more prepared, skilled and confident adjunct faculty who make higher education everything that we promise students every day, which will ultimately impact every school's bottom line positively.

[00:27:55] **Catherine Ross:** Well, I hope we could do that because, you know, the students aren't paying less tuition for these courses, even though universities are paying less money for these and to these instructors. So there is a real bottom line question there, right? Right.

[00:28:11] **Kerry O'Grady:** Absolutely.

[00:28:13] **Catherine Ross:** Yeah. Thank you for that and for the very concrete ways in which we could address all this.

[00:28:20] Thank you so much, Kerry. We're just so grateful for your participation in this eighth season of Dead Ideas.

[00:28:28] **Kerry O'Grady:** Thank you for having me, and thank you for a great conversation.

[00:28:34] **Catherine Ross:** If you've enjoyed this podcast, please visit our website where you can find any resources mentioned in the episode, [ctl.columbia.edu/podcast](http://ctl.columbia.edu/podcast). Please like us, rate us, and review us on Apple podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts. Dead Ideas is produced by Stephanie Ogden, Laura Nicholas, Jon Hanford, and Michael Brown.

[00:28:59] Our theme music is *In the Lab* by Immersive Music.