TESTIMONY OF THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF CONGRESS/CUNY

THE IMPACT OF THE 2006-07 STATE BUDGET ON NEW YORK'S PUBLIC UNIVERSITY SYSTEMS

New York State Assembly Standing Committee on Higher Education
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My name is Marcia Newfield. I am an adjunct at CUNY. I've been teaching in the English department at BMCC for l9 years—women's literature, journalism, composition and, mostly, remedial writing to evening students. I have two master's degrees, one in English literature from NYU, one in early childhood education from the Bank Street College of Education. Six of my books for children have been published, as have poetry, newspaper articles and essays. I started adjuncting after working in educational publishing and saw it as a way to do valuable work and leave me some time for my writing. The low rates of pay and the lack of support services for both adjuncts and students motivated me to become a union activist. I was elected vice president for the 10,894 part-timers(as of 12/1/06) that CUNY employs—adjuncts, continuing education teachers, and graduate fellows. We call it the shadow university because we're not the folks who CUNY advertises on the subways, but we are the people who teach more than 50% of the classes, yet are not available to give our students the support they need.

The underfunding of CUNY forces students to work full time and then go to school full time in order to get student aid. When I see my students, they are tired and often discouraged and/or resistant to getting the skills they need. How much better it would be if I were available to meet with them in my office on days when we do not have class to give them extra help. But there are several obstacles to that: I only have one office hour a week for 28 students, and I share my office and computer with 60 other adjuncts. This makes privacy and focus difficult if not impossible. Try counseling someone six inches away from an irrepressible basso.

In order to piece together a living, many adjuncts have to work at several colleges. Someone teaching an equal or greater number of courses than full-timers earns $30,000 a year, or less, if they are teaching in one of CUNY's many language immersion programs. We have health insurance only if we teach six credits a semester, and if a class is cancelled at the last minute, we have to pay $413 dollars a month for COBRA. P.S. most adjuncts cannot afford it. Graduate students have no health insurance. I received a call yesterday from a 50-year old adjunct/ graduate student who had just broken her leg. She had been teaching chemistry and was scheduled for the spring semester. She was frantic, asking if we could provide any help, since

she depends on the money, yet has to be immobile for several weeks and may need an operation. NYSUT is working on a bill for short term disability for adjuncts, but right now there is nothing. Neither can we get accumulated sick days, unemployment, health insurance upon retirement, or sabbaticals. Pensions, even for those teaching twenty years or more, are so meager (for example, I would receive only $4,000 a year) that few who have depended upon adjuncting as a livelihood can afford to retire. With the prospect of $11,000 per annum from social security and the doughnut hole for drugs, I know I have to count on working until I die.

When the state treats its teachers so poorly, what kind of message does this send to our students about how their society values education? The contingent workforce is composed of dedicated people who have followed their passion for their discipline and who love their students. We can and must do better. A PBS program the other night focused on businesses and schools that had gone from good to great. A key component of success was valuing and empowering workers to exercise their creative potential and work as a team. The structure of contingency breeds isolation and alienation. You have the power to re-imagine and redesign higher education in this state.