

# PIO Summer Retreat a Hit

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Twenty members of the PIO attended a day-long retreat on Monday, July 20 at the Heronwood Field Station in Oshtemo, about 15 minutes from campus. Richard Szwaja of Holistic Health served as the facilitator.



However, this retreat was unlike most retreats. We did not talk about the business of the PIO or the university or even the trials and tribulations of “adjuncthood.” Instead, we attempted to create a “community of colleagues.”

“We’re going to put the business side of the union away just for today,” said Szwaja. “I want to invite you to four conversations that have more to do with connecting ourselves to each other.”

The four conversations entailed looking at our (1) aspirations and inspirations; (2) vulnerabilities; (3) possibilities; and (4) gifts.

Participants met in groups of four or five to talk about these conversations and then shared their insights with the whole group not as a report but rather by discussing what they heard, felt and thought that “enlightened” them and could “enlighten” others. (Author Peter Block in *Community: The Structure of Belonging* calls this “harvesting.” Richard highly recommends this book.)

“Community is what unions were all about when they first formed in the early twentieth century,” said Tom Kostrzewa, PIO president. “Since WMU part-time (PT) faculty are so far flung on different schedules

and in different departments, it's difficult for us to feel a part of a community. This retreat gives us a real opportunity to form community."

Below is a summary of the conversations that "enlightened" participants about being an adjunct at WMU.

### **Conversation 1: Aspirations and Inspirations**

In general, participants feel good about their status as PT faculty because they are free from bureaucratic duties and political environments that tend to pervade and stifle their FT colleagues. They are members of the Kalamazoo community who are practicing what they teach and can give students a more authentic view of the field.

"Nobody is in this for the money," said one participant. "We have the passion to do this!"

One common element among the participants was that they felt they were sharing their gifts of knowledge, a passion for learning and a care and concern for students. In fact, most students do not see the difference between part-time and full-time faculty, so the quality of adjunct work does not suffer from quality. Many students ask PT faculty for recommendations. However, more and more students are recognizing that they have part-time faculty as their instructors.

Nevertheless, many FT faculty seem to dismiss PT faculty and their contributions to WMU. For example, they see adjuncts as "an army of warm bodies they have access to." They also regard instructors without a doctorate with pity and scorn. They don't involve them in faculty meetings. This varies from department to department, however, it is discouraging because participants said they want to be valued as professionals with credentials and expertise to share.

"Don't diminish my gift!" said one participant.

"We are giving back to the community through our teaching," said another. "We have invested in the university, and the university should be giving back to us in the form of jobs and reasonable wages."

This disregard for PT faculty is more likely a sign of ignorance about who we are and what we contribute to the university. For example, not long ago one senior-level administrator believed that the university had only 12 to 20 PT faculty members when there were 700.

On the other hand, PT faculty members remain full of hope, which was illustrated by one comment: "When we feel, act and live like we are worthy of the value we give, then people will notice."

Some PT faculty members aspire to be full-time (FT) faculty, especially if they are young, have loans, need health insurance and want to establish their household. They are juggling several different part-time jobs and activities. However, many are satisfied with this "living on the edge" existence. They may supplement their other income because they like teaching or they are semi-retired and need extra money. Others have been on the adjunct circuit for decades and are experts at tacking together a number of jobs and/or classes to make a living.



## Conversation 2: Vulnerabilities

In this conversation Richard invited the group “to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand,” in the words of Henri Nowen, a Dutch-born Catholic priest, professor and writer. Participants willingly shared their vulnerabilities as doubts about their self-worth and the constant need to protect themselves.

- “It wears me down professionally. Because I live from semester to semester, I never know if I’ll get another assignment.”
- “Can I be creative in my class?”
- “Are the students learning?”
- “I have a tendency to say yes to everything just to cover my vulnerability...and I certainly can’t ask anybody for help.”
- “Budget cuts may mean that my job is on the chopping block.”
- “Some students have the attitude that they are in college to earn their degree and move on. I’m finding that I can’t be all things to students.”
- “Tenured faculty are oblivious to the insecurity we feel because they don’t have to care.”

Vulnerability causes us to want to fix things, said Richard. He cited author Peter Block who suggests that we shift from fixing things to opening and creating new possibilities. For example, if we fear the story we are telling ourselves, then maybe we can tell ourselves a different story. In practical terms for the PIO, maybe we can be a model PT faculty union and work as an agent of change in the university in general.

Richard suggested Brené Brown’s TED Talk about “The Power of Vulnerability” ([https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability)). In it she tells how Americans have

numbed themselves to their feelings and cut themselves off from their connections—this includes the negatives as well as positive feelings like joy, gratitude and happiness. Brown adds that we also try to make uncertainty certain; we try to perfect things; and we pretend that what we do doesn't affect others. Unfortunately, as we do these things to work out of our vulnerability, we become more vulnerable. We need to remember that we are wired for struggle, but worthy of love and belonging. So the remedy to vulnerability is to find joy and gratitude in our lives; to let ourselves be seen as vulnerable; to love with our whole hearts even when there is no guarantee; to practice gratitude and joy; to recognize that to be vulnerable means that we are alive; to believe that we are enough. When we admit these things, we can then be kinder and gentler to other people and ourselves.

### **Conversation 3: Possibilities**

Looking at the possibilities turned out to be an invigorating experience for participants. One serious goal put forward was to connect and communicate with one another. A participant suggested that we extend the retreat by using social media to generate possibilities. For example, the message could read: "I see the possibility for ..."

Participants acknowledged that every PT faculty member is at WMU because they want to be. This is our strength because it gives us the power to choose. And the power to choose gives us the power to build community and to connect with each other around teaching—not around departmental meetings or bureaucratic structures. In this way we can embrace what we do as teachers of the next generation.

### **Conversation 4: Gifts**

Although Richard warned participants that people typically find it difficult to talk about their gifts, it is essential that we do so to help make changes in our situations and our world because we are essentially "living our gifts." Participants shared their gifts with each other to discover not only how they regenerate their own spirits but how they can and do energize their students, the university and the PIO through their gifts:

- Art
- Books
- Nature
- Deep contact with another human being
- Writing
- Analysis and asking good questions
- Withholding judgment until the time is right
- Reveling in uncertainty
- Envisioning what people can be
- Being approachable with compassion and kindness as a confidant and mentor
- Being a safety net for students by listening
- Believing in possibility, potential, talent, authenticity
- Recognizing beauty in its many forms
- Generating good ideas for action
- Using time wisely and making effective connections

## Wrap-Up

The day ended in an inspiring way as participants reflected on the entire retreat. Here are some of their comments:

- “I believe in the cause of the PIO.”
- “We are not alone in our struggle and we have potential for community.”
- “I’m recognizing the power of being a PT faculty member.”
- “Because we are from all over the university, we can become the most important cross-university group.”
- “I am inspired and validated in the work we do. I’ve made new connections and re-connections among the participants.”
- “I was reminded that I was born to be a teacher.”

Kevin Wordelman, administrator and lead organizer of the PIO, noted that the day had inspired his confidence and changed the way he thinks about his job and the union.

“We’ll be stronger as a group,” he predicted. “We’ve come light years here since the beginning.”