

Professors in Poverty

Con Job: Stories of Adjunct and Contingent Labor

The fight for a living wage has been a hot-button issue over the past five years. In a time when college tuition is at an all-time high, the prospect of getting an upper-level degree and working at a college or university would seem like a sure bet for anyone. And yet, in 2015, a PhD does not guarantee a great living. In fact, it doesn't guarantee you will be able to get by at all.

Adjunct professors (aka contingent labor) make up more than 51 percent of teaching faculty at colleges in the United States, across all levels (community colleges, research universities, etc.). An adjunct professor is just like any professor that teaches: has an upper-level masters or PhD, a full classroom of students to teach, exams to administer and curriculums to have approved. The only difference between an adjunct and a full-time professor is that adjuncts are hired by course; they are considered sub contractors, paid by the course they teach and have no job security for the following semester. They also tend to make \$25,000 or less a year.

Full-time professorship is a slowly dying occupation. Schools will always have full-time professors; someone has to run to programs and get

research grants. But adjuncts are the new Uber of higher learning. Adjuncts deliver the same level of competent instruction for half the price and there is no commitment by the college or university to pay benefits. Even as professors retire, fewer universities are putting those positions on the tenure track. Instead, they claim to be "more flexible to student needs" by hiring adjuncts. In reality, they are cutting corners on salary and benefits.

The truth is adjuncts are struggling to meet their own needs, and thus struggling to do what they love: teach. About 22 percent of adjunct professors live below the poverty line. That does not account for the thousands of others who live at or just above it, in a US economy who's "poverty line" would actually have to be doubled in the majority of it's cities for a family of three to afford basic living necessities. In short, many adjuncts are poor.

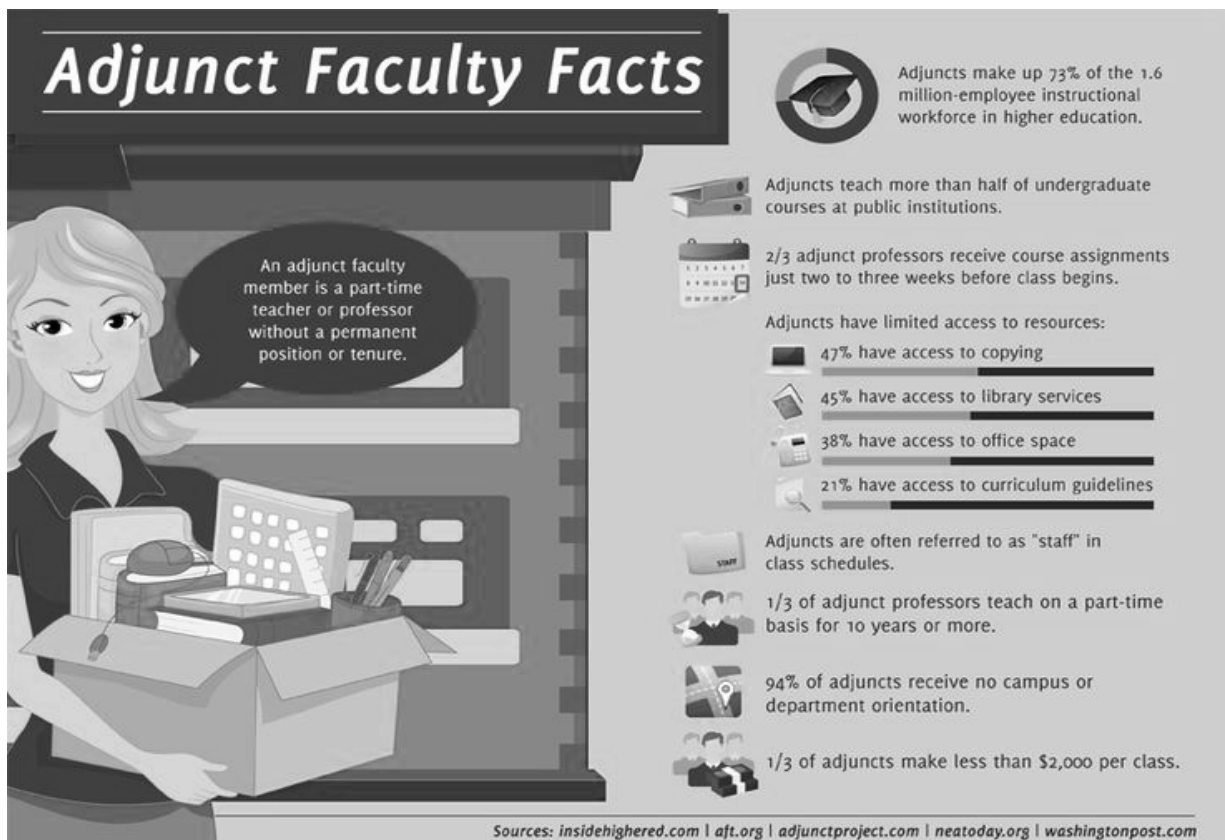
With well over a 40 hour work week preparing curriculums, grading papers, and writing lectures, their pay generally averages out to about \$10.00 an hour. The starting pay at Starbucks is generally about \$10.00.

Men and women who have dedicated their lives to academia are often taking on course loads on

multiple campuses, in hopes of making ends meet. They have no idea if those same courses will be offered the next semester and must do what they can to make their money stretch. Many take jobs outside of academia, from retail to driving Uber to supplement income. Others need even more help. Twenty percent get earned income tax credit payments. Over 100,000 adjunct professors nationwide are on government assistance. seven percent are on Medicaid.

With so much additional responsibility to survive, many adjuncts can't hold regular office hours at any of the campuses they teach. This comes at a huge disadvantage to their students who may need extra help, one-on-one tutoring, or to talk about the course. Still, colleges insist that the current model is the best way to serve its students. But the truth couldn't be any more clear: it's strictly about the money.

The sub-contractor business model is becoming increasingly popular in our "shared economy" society. But is it really working? Industries from Airbnb to shared rides are going before Congress and local and state governments as the demand for regulation is rising.



Balancing the budget on the backs of Baltimore educators

By Joe Rosalski
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It used to be that education was one of the untouchable professions in times of economic downturn. This changed in 2008 when the recession hit. Ever since, every sector of education from private to public, from elementary to higher education, continues to be impacted by the economy in some way. Private schools have been forced to shut their doors due to low enrollment and rising debts (the Norbel School in Elkrige closed in 2011, and Compass Academy in Halethorpe shut its doors in 2014, for example). Higher education has felt much the same sting in the post-recession period with lower enrollment and half empty classrooms negatively affecting numerous colleges and universities. As a result, they have either slowed hiring or stopped filling teaching positions altogether, deciding to augment their workforce instead with adjuncts and non-tenured faculty who are paid at a lower rate and typically have no access to health care or other benefits.

So what happens when the budget falls short? The obvious answer is cost cutting. The recent layoff of 21 guidance counselors and librarians and 13 teachers in Baltimore City, along with 24 assistant principals, shows the lack of regard officials have for the future generation of city students. These people on the front lines of education are the ones who truly make a difference in the lives of those

students, interacting with them every day; another 57 support staff were also let go. While the layoffs have been minimized from an earlier estimate of approximately 1,000 people, any layoff in education is one too many.

No one goes into education to become wealthy. Many of the teachers I know work side jobs just to make ends meet or to be able to put some small amount of money aside. Many of my colleagues at the college level piece together two or three different positions and still make far less than a full-time professor. Thus is the state of education in America. Our teachers — the ones who are meant to inspire us, the ones who instill a sense of hope and pride in us, the ones who are our biggest cheerleaders — are the ones impacted when overspending and mismanagement of funds finally catches up and needs to be corrected.

Why is it that we never see those at the top of the food chain take a pay cut? Our leaders need to lead by example; however, no one ever freely gives up two things in this world: power or money. And as we all know, the latter of the two makes the world go 'round. While the school district struggles to close a multi-million dollar deficit, those at the upper echelons of Baltimore City Public Schools continue to eat up millions of dollars in salaries. As a WBAL I-Team investigation pointed out in 2015, the top 149 positions in the system's front office earned almost \$16 million in pay with more than half of those positions

taking home more than \$100,000 per year. While some staffers on North Avenue will be impacted by the current layoffs announced on Thursday, how many of those top positions in the school system will see a cut in salary to offset the deficit? Will the mayor cut a portion of her \$176,000 salary? Or will the City Council president and city comptroller cut a percentage of their \$116,000 salaries? Perhaps the City Council members who earn almost \$70,000 per year for their part time jobs, or Liquor Board members, who earn about \$30,000 per annum for their approximately one-day per week job, will cut their salaries?

Rather than making up the budget shortfall on the backs of city school employees — those hard-working men and women who help make the real difference in the lives of our young people — perhaps it's time to rethink where the blame truly lies for the budget issues and hold those in power more accountable.

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“Professors in Poverty” Study Questions

1. This is a country that hasn't raised the minimum wage in almost 6 and ½ years, however many have suggested that adjunct professors be paid hourly. Do you think this is a viable solution? Why or why not?
2. Why are individuals in the United States willing to accept a culture where people can work full-time and still not be paid a living wage?
3. Is paying a lower wage to adjunct professors worth a lower tuition for students?
4. Adjunct professors are considered independent contractors and therefore do not receive benefits (healthcare, retirement, vacation or sick days, etc...) What are the outcomes of this situation?
5. Does the phenomenon of 'professors in poverty' cause students to not pursue graduate education?

