Adjuncts: Solutions for a Mistreated Majority

By DEBORAH LOUIS

According to best estimates, some 800,000 faculty members, close to two-thirds of the total nationwide, are adjunct, "contingent," or "lecturer." The severity of their plight, rapidly worsening in today's economic crisis, intersects the interrelated domains of human rights, fair employment, and the future of higher education.

In some parts of the country, successful union organization has substantially improved levels of pay, benefits, job security, and institutional support for those "auxiliary" personnel. In other places, a political history and environment favoring such action have yielded similar results. Across large portions of the American heartland and in the South, however, adjuncts remain vulnerable, exploited, and invisible.

In those areas where neither unionization nor social history presents strategies for significant improvement, adjuncts must rely on the conscience of informed and fair-minded administrators and legislators to act on their behalf. North Carolina can be viewed as a microcosm of the current instructional environment on many campuses, offering insights into how to create effective solutions. Not the least of the current challenges is the need for concrete data for accurate assessment of the scope and severity of adjunct issues. For example, North Carolina's 58 community colleges subsume the numbers and budget impact of adjuncts in the category of "part time" faculty members, together with those who work less than full time but enjoy annual contracts, prorated salaries and benefits, and labor protections as state employees.

As an adjunct at one of those community colleges seeking to articulate our concerns to salaried faculty members and administrators, I recently designed and disseminated a comprehensive survey to several hundred adjuncts on my own campus, where we make up what I calculate to be more than 80 percent of the faculty. The survey gathered information on the respondents' sociocultural profiles, how they viewed themselves as educators, and their experiences on our campus. It also included a section that allowed for open-ended elaboration or comments.

Despite the limited sample, the results were startlingly consistent with what observers have been saying anecdotally for at least a decade about the status and general character of adjuncts across the country. The survey found that:

- Two-thirds of the respondents are women who have children or dependent adults at home and whose pay, whether alone or with a partner's earnings, is essential to the subsistence of their households.
That is, few fit the common perception of adjunct faculty members as "fresh out of school" or retired and working to add experience to their résumés, meaning to their lives, or extra income to otherwise adequate bank accounts.

- Almost half teach three or more courses — one is teaching 12. Almost a third also work as adjuncts at other colleges, two-thirds have been adjuncts for more than five years, and half have been at it for more than 10 years. The perception of adjunct teaching as "temporary" or "entry level" appears to substantially miss the mark.

- Almost half were recruited for the specific courses they teach, and a third are dedicated to the community-college mission. Giving back to the community and entry-level experience, popularly considered prime motivators, are at the bottom of the list.

- Fewer than half find their work supported in terms of materials, assistance, or professional-development opportunities, and even fewer feel they are respected by salaried faculty members and administrators or that they are even perceived as part of the campus community. The joy of teaching and supportive relationships with their colleagues and department chairs produce what job satisfaction they experience.

- About a third report a climate of threatened job loss if they object to work outside their contract that is assigned or "encouraged" by immediate supervisors or other administrators. While most adjuncts reported that they perform many such services happily to the extent of their interest and capability, it is the factor of choice that distinguishes between collegiality and exploitation.

- Some department chairs mislead candidates by promising a salaried position within a year or two in order to fill positions to meet enrollment demands, according to respondents.

- While almost two-thirds of those surveyed would eventually like to move into full-time, salaried positions, most are realistic about the prospects of actually doing so. Two-thirds expect to continue in their adjunct roles for more than five years, while almost half are prepared to continue to teach on an adjunct basis indefinitely.

The survey responses also indicated that the most compelling issues include the need for increased base compensation, benefits, and expense reimbursements; more-flexible absence policies; tuition remission; and equal access to professional-development resources. Administrators, faculty associations, and policy makers should also be aware of concerns that involve state and federal labor standards, like working without contracts and inequitable delays in pay at the start of the academic year.

The fact that issues of compensation were front and center of the survey results is certainly no surprise. The standard baseline formula for college instruction is three hours of preparation and follow-up for every hour in the classroom. Thus a tabulation of hours spent per week per course would be a total of around 14 hours at minimum: three in the classroom, nine in preparation and follow-up, one hour working with students out of class, and one keeping up with disciplinary materials and developments. (That, of course, does not include time spent consulting with colleagues or supervisors, attending departmental meetings, or solving the technological problems that abound in our era of online instruction.)

For a Ph.D. paid $30 an hour, the average stated scale at my institution, that would total $5,880 for a 14-week course. That is, in fact, what I have found most full-time salaried faculty members are paid in my
region, excluding benefits. Adjuncts at area universities receive about half that, and my state's community colleges pay less than a quarter, generally $1,300 to $1,400 per course, which comes out to less than $6.50 an hour. And that's at the high end of the scale.

It is morally imperative and a matter of justice to resolve such inequities and improve other aspects of adjuncts' situation — most urgently at those institutions where adjuncts are least compensated and most vulnerable. Pragmatically, moreover, the increasing dependence of community colleges on adjuncts to prepare both new and displaced workers in our rapidly changing economy suggests that the sooner adequate support for adjunct faculty members is forthcoming, the better for everyone involved with higher education.

Here is how colleges could substantially improve the working conditions and performance of adjunct faculty members:

- Confront the isolation and alienation that erode the morale and potential effectiveness of many adjuncts by requiring sensitivity training for salaried professors and administrators, using "we" instead of "us and them" language, and creating a campaign that encourages a welcoming environment for adjuncts like those directed at students on many campuses.

- Equalize the status of adjunct and salaried faculty members as experienced, dedicated educators worthy of respect and appreciation by eliminating differentiation in things like identification badges, faculty communications, and professional-development opportunities. (My college made progress in that area by changing to uniform e-mail addresses and making electronic paycheck deposit available to adjuncts.)

- Create adjunct orientation and support programs.

- Identify successful ways that other institutions provide benefits and job security for adjunct personnel and replicate them or generate similar proposals for action.

- Clarify the procedure by which adjunct compensation is determined and then formulate intelligent strategies for increasing it to a conscionable scale.

- Establish a fully staffed, budgeted, and equipped office of adjunct equity and compensate adjuncts for their involvement on all institutional and local boards and committees.

- Ensure that adjunct contracts are completed at least two weeks before classes start, and that receipt of the first payment of the academic year occurs at the same time as for salaried faculty members.

State governments are key to systemwide improvement. They should:

- Pass legislation that requires adjuncts' pay increases to match mandated increases in salaried faculty members' pay rates, with financial penalties for local jurisdictions that fail to comply.

- Endow a statewide fund to support sabbaticals and other professional-development activities for adjuncts with more than 10 years of continuous service, regardless of location.

- Determine the cash value of benefit to the states' higher-education systems of the labor and financial support that adjuncts contribute each year. Then translate that into eligibility for increased allocation of state and federal funds for higher education and, in turn, for the financing of proportional benefits.
for adjuncts (similar to the principle of profit-sharing).

- Support independent, statewide adjunct newsletters, managed and written by adjuncts, and require the cooperation of individual colleges in their production and dissemination.

While some higher-education institutions, including community colleges, have already put in place many of the measures that I've suggested, others are holding fast to dysfunctional perceptions that continue to shortchange and marginalize their adjunct personnel. Administrators, legislators, faculty associations, and others should be taking the lead on behalf of what is, after all, the majority of our nation's postsecondary educators.

*Deborah Louis is an adjunct professor of political science, criminal justice, and women's studies at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College and Eastern Kentucky University.*

http://chronicle.com
Section: Commentary
Volume 55, Issue 39, Page A72

---

Copyright © 2009 by The Chronicle of Higher Education

Subscribe | About The Chronicle | Contact us | Terms of use | Privacy policy | Help