How Much Is an Adjunct Worth?

April 1, 2011, 11:47 am  
By Isaac Sweeney

Few community colleges, it seems, try to accurately prorate the pay of adjuncts. It seems like colleges just pick a number, maybe an “industry standard,” and pay adjunct faculty members that amount per course.

At Blue Ridge Community College, where I am an adjunct in English, I get about $1,800 a course. There’s a weird system in Virginia’s community colleges in which, if I’m on a campus more than one day a week, I get a little extra pay — about $200 extra, or $2,000 a course. I guess that is driving money?

The trouble, and where the source of controversy will lie, is how to value an adjunct’s worth in comparison to a full-time faculty member. What percentage of work do adjuncts do as compared to their full-time counterparts? I mean, an adjunct doesn’t typically have to go to all those committee meetings or advise students or even worry about research and publishing, so it definitely shouldn’t be 100 percent. But 70 percent sounds fair, especially at a two-year college, where faculty members are usually expected to teach more than do research. All that “other stuff” couldn’t possibly take up more than 30 percent of a full-time faculty member’s time at a community college.

Here’s some math: If a full-time faculty member starts at $40,000 a year (like at Blue Ridge Community College), then 70 percent of that is $28,000. Divide that by a full load for two semesters, which is 10 total courses (five for the fall semester, and five in the spring.). Then the magic per-course rate should be $2,800.

For those who haven’t been paying attention, that figure is $1,000 more for each course than adjuncts, at least in English, receive at the college. That’s a lot of money that we are missing out on.

If you want to read more about pro-rata pay, a good place to start is the American Federation of Teachers’ Faculty and College Excellence page.

This entry was posted in The Two-Year Track. Bookmark the permalink.
These numbers hold exactly true for my campus as well. Adjunct pay is not even on the long term discussion plan by the faculty association—they've decided to focus entirely on full time pay, despite the sheer numbers of adjuncts involved. A bit frustrating.

If you do not like the pay or benefits, then go do something else. Sell cars. But please do not whine about your choice of a job. An adjunct is a part time employee, nothing more and nothing less. I have been one for years.

We contingent faculty members are much more than just part-time employees. Most community colleges, and in many cases, even four-year institutions could not operate without us. Our work is central to our schools since we often comprise upwards of 75% of the faculty and teach more than 50% of the sections, especially in developmental and required courses in math and English.

It is not whining to try to change our profession from the inside rather than just to quit and sell cars.

Since faculty working conditions=student learning conditions, when faculty are exploited, that exploitation negatively affects students (e.g., faculty who don't have offices, let alone office hours, are not available when students have questions). If we truly care about educating our students, we will improve conditions for those who teach them.

Betsy Smith, Ph.D.
Adjunct Professor of ESL
Cape Cod Community College

Why are some people so frightened and angry that someone, somewhere might be raising public awareness about their job description and recompense? Worker complaints have given rise to the weekend, workers-compensation and child-labor laws, and minimum wage: keep the complaints coming, please!

gplm2000 reminds me of the old bumper sticker "American: love it or leave it." I wonder how gplm2000 handles any complaints in his or her own life. If someone in your family objects to any aspect of you (which is surely unlikely), do you tell them to stop whining and to find a new spouse or parent? A few years ago at Harvard, it was $4000. In western Michigan, it's $2500.

And you're clearly very happy, judging from the tone of your reply?
lawison  4 months ago  in reply to szakin

Every single one of the replies to gplm2000 is spot on. The whole point in having forums like this is to encourage discussion about best practices, new technology, and whatever else might be on the minds of those of us in the field. There is nothing at all wrong with the subject of this article and it's certainly not whining, as gplm2000 terms it. In fact, I'd be much more concerned if there were nowhere for us to share thoughts and ideas or we were afraid to do so.

3 people liked this.  Like  Reply

bigtwin  4 months ago

Adjuncts are worth whatever they are willing to accept as pay to do the work. And as long as there are masses of adjuncts willing to line up to work for peanuts, I don't see how this could ever change.

20 people liked this.  Like  Reply

tdb489  4 months ago  in reply to bigtwin

1. @ Isaac why would a Ph.D. work for $40,000 per year? With a quick review of the Internet, it seems the minimum wage is $7.25 per hour. (Surely that is wrong?) Why go to college? The average wage for an auto worker is $40. The average salary for an associate professor (depending on the field) is $94,000 per year.

2. I have to agree with bigtwin. This will not change. Refuse part-time work. Force the university's hand.

3. My recollection of adjuncts was as cwinton describes them: "area professionals who would periodically come to campus to teach a course that would not otherwise be offered."

4. If the UW is willing to pay Ann Coulter $20,000 for one hour of ??????, I would say we are all insulted.

6 people liked this.  Like  Reply

softshellcrab  4 months ago  in reply to tdb489

The best money they spent was what they spent on the lovely Ann Coulter.

3 people liked this.  Like  Reply

olddean  4 months ago

At my College (Engineering) at my University (large R-1 southeastern) we pay $6,000 per course and I think that is too little. My number would be more like $9,000.

3 people liked this.  Like  Reply

ttaylor  4 months ago

An interesting approach but not entirely workable in solving the part time pay problem. I'm afraid that at many colleges you will have full time faculty that do none (or very little) of the additional work expected of full time faculty. At the same time there are those who are very involved in curriculum and institutional planning in addition to governance committees, etc. Not only to we advise students but we also serve as sponsors for student groups. I am now finding that serving on governance committees and college
committees actually takes more of my time as the number of full time faculty is being reduced by budget cuts. I should note that some of that committee work has been focused on increasing pay equity for part-time instructors. Now we find that this has unintended negative budget implications as our instructional costs are now compared to other colleges that pay less to part time faculty. "All that other stuff" takes more time than you realize. The fundamental problem is a lack of funding for all levels of education.

Many years back, adjunct faculty were area professionals who would periodically come to campus to teach a course that would not otherwise be offered, usually out of personal interest rather than any real expectation of monetary gain. This was true throughout higher education and set the pay standard at considerably less than these folks would otherwise have been employed for. As the ranks of unemployed professionals grew, the pool of those interested in being adjunct faculty also grew, which is what has held the pay levels where they are today. While I sympathize with the author, the fact is that adjunct faculty are like temps or substitute teachers, who historically have been paid at about half the rate of those who are full time. There is a difference for all kinds of reasons, some good and some not so, but by the author's own math, at 50% the pay for this kind of employee comes to $2,000 per course. I fully understand that temps and substitutes typically have had the spade work done for them, whereas an adjunct faculty member often will not, so perhaps what we should be pushing for is to have more differential pay options depending on what is being asked of an adjunct faculty member rather than paying them all on the same scale.

Sweeney's argument would be a good one for an adjunct union to make. But hard for an individual unless they can show that they provide something a lot better than other adjuncts. I think $1800 for a course is way low. In 1993 when I was a grad student I was paid $3000 by an R1 university to teach a summer course. We paid more than that at the US school I used to be a TT faculty at ($4000-5000 I believe). At least in econ. Here we are currently paying faculty who do a one day intensive "executive" course $2000.

I agree with cwinton, and I am a person who is very pro-adjunct. At my school, we couldn't live without them. And by the way, I have personally argued with our Dean to argue to pay adjuncts more than we do, and argued this more than once.

But cwinton is right. It is NOT a way to make a living. At my school, in my department, the adjuncts are still the old model, retired professionals or practitioners who are doing it either not really for the money, or at least the money is not the major consideration. Those who think this is a way to make a living, and argue from that basis, are off-base.

I agree that in the past, that was the purpose of contingent faculty. But things have changed, especially at community colleges. In my state, and at my community college, more than 75% of courses are taught by adjuncts, who, using the 70% formula as above, make about 1/2 what full-time faculty make per course.

Our ratio between full-time and part-time faculty is 3-1 in favor of adjuncts. Adjuncts teach core courses as well as those specialty courses—and almost 40% of adjuncts teach 4 courses a semester (the maximum possible), 8 courses a year—and earn about a third of what a full-time faculty member makes (whose load is 5 courses a semester). In my college, about 225 courses that should have been taught by full-time faculty are taught by adjuncts (the full-time faculty were given course releases for various reasons). The adjuncts aren't paid what the full-timer would have been paid for the same
This is not a substitute teacher situation—the adjuncts are employees of the college who have been teaching many of these courses for 10 or more years.

As the article noted, full-time faculty are also paid to serve on committees, hold office hours, and advise students—adjuncts do these things for free, as their contracts are teaching-only, which further reduces their actual per-hour income. Why do they do it? Because they care about their students, who might fail without this "volunteer" work.

Another interesting note: our state's community college presidents retain ALL the money from courses taught by adjuncts, while the money from courses taught by full-time faculty goes directly to the state, and only a portion comes back to the college as state aid. In other words, adjuncts are cash cows. So, in this dysfunctional environment, it is no wonder colleges take advantage of contingent faculty.

Let's say all adjuncts leave their jobs. What would they then do? There are NO full time positions available (or at least very few) available in the state, and at the bottom of openings are jobs in the Humanities. Should these professionals with advances degrees flip burgers? As someone else wrote, it's better to fight from within.

I think paying adjunct faculty on varying scales is an idea to explore, but it won't make a dent in the problem as long as states like mine allow colleges to hire adjuncts at low pay so they can then milk their courses for extra discretionary funds. State laws need to change, funding needs to change (to hire many of those adjuncts into full-time positions), and many full-time faculty need to change and embrace their part-time co-workers, not disparage them.

Thank you for pointing out what 'adjunct' actually means. It's an odd word to begin with, wouldn't you say? Anyway, I search my university's web site for 'adjunct' and found it ONLY in pages maintained by the legal department within statements of rules about tenure. It defines adjunct faculty as those who teach at the university but whose primary professional association is elsewhere. That's what adjunct means, and by that definition, I am not an adjunct -- nor are any of the many others who work under that designation at the university I teach at.

Over time, universities simply began hiring full-time teachers under this category beyond its actual meaning so courses could be taught, or taught with much less expense. Sickening.

BTW: Where I work, an 'instructor', on the other hand, is a professor-lite position with maximum duration of two years, with professorship anticipated within that time frame.

At my university, where the adjuncts are members of the faculty union, they get about $5000 per course, but they're limited to "under 3" courses per semester (usually 2, sometimes a deal can be made for 2.9 with team-teaching). How can anyone live on $1,800 per course, especially in a field where you're expected to grade papers and not just multiple-choice exams, so you'll have little time for other, non-academic, jobs?

Wow you guys need to move to WA. I get about $3,500 per 5 credit class plus health benefits. Granted I max out at $28,000, but have lots of time to decide what I do and when. We are treated mostly well, but it has been a long road. But they and we forget we are not FT. One must identify what one is willing to give vs. what the pay is for.

My School: The baby steps

AF have phones, computers, desks, email, offices (although shared, we make sure people have enough space to adequately work... except for FERPA privacy stuff. Apparently who cares about FERPA :-). I am trying to use this FERPA loophole to get better offices, direct deposit and twice a month paychecks (can you believe at one time it "cost too much to do that for adjunct"??), get a small stipend for two local PD day, can apply for up to $500 for personal PD money every few years, yearly teaching excellence awards -one
for FT one for AF, an AF committee, can participate in committees (no pay but baby steps), strong FT support... recently got a 100% matching of local dollars to state equity dollars!

In WA: The lawsuits (and legal maneuvering largely due to strong unions that represent both AF and FT)

AF have accumulated sick leave, unemployment, health benefits at 50% (and summer even if not teaching), strong FT support (unions that unite FT and AF; and they provide terrific protection for union workers).

Baby steps and lawsuits.

If I was hired FT: my entering pay would be about $45,000. (masters)
Of course our FT are the 2nd lowest paid in the state.

Lies, damn lies and statistics= Mark Twain I believe.

Quarter system: 45,000/(3 quarters x 4 classes) = $3750 per class. FT teach 4 classes per quarter with one class deferred as "governance." So a full teaching load is 3 classes per quarter.

My $3,500 doesn't sound too bad except I am capped at 8 classes per year (28,000; not including summer).

So what percentage of FT pay am I?
28,000/45,000 = 62%. Or 28,000/30,000 = 93%. or 28,000/33750 = 83%

Do FT do 11,250 in governance? HA ha ha aha
do do do do
NO ONE can SHOW that 75% of pay = 75% of work. A big union question. Some of us think that classes are worth more than governance monetarily. I do governance, more than many FT. I train new adjunct and FT! Students know no difference except some of us share offices.

I make $620 a credit hour, which works out to basically $1860 a course per semester. Which in turn is what, a little over $100 a week. Better than minimum wage, I suppose, but that doesn't factor in all the out-of-class time I spend grading, helping students both on campus and via email, writing lectures or refreshing myself on the reading...when all that comes into play, that's 40 hours a week for 4 classes. $100 week for 40 hours? Somehow, that just doesn't add up.

Don't forget the "free" work we must do to remain employed. At one of the universities I am at we must undergo 4 week of unpaid "training" before classes start. Additionally we must attend at least 6 hours unpaid "professional development" sessions throughout the semester. Sometimes they throw in even more "mandatory for continued employment" meetings. This quickly adds up in lost time at other working gigs, parking fees, etc. The extra work and hidden expenses are all above and beyond the officially contracted for
20 student contact hours (classroom lecture + office hours availability for students).

A bit of a side topic, but I always find it ironic that each place I adjunct at claims that they cannot afford new full time faculty (hence the numerous adjuncts)...mind you, this is at EACH college where we see the same adjuncts teaching. One semester I shared an office space at two different locations with the same adjunct. Talk about a waste of resources (for each of us) to have to travel and adjust our schedule to get to different locations when each of us could have just stayed at one college to do all the teaching.

I think it's the incidentals that bother them. Health care, pension contributions...those things add up. Much better to make YOU deal with that, and drive all over hell and creation to teach.

If only it was that easy. For starters, around here a Phd on your application makes a person over-qualified for many other jobs. Even if you are willing to lie on applications a quick background check can throw you out of the application pile for false disclosure. That and it is hard to explain away a 3-8 year gap in education / employment history if you want to go this route. Even more difficult for some people is spending 8 years in graduate school to get a good teaching gig, then finding those gigs drying up as universities and colleges move to the business model of adjunct staffing most of their courses. Money aside, what we see with adjuncting is a corresponding decrease in student performance. Those of us seriouly interested in education would like to see this trend change.

Although I understand the effort and hopeful anticipation of achieving a Phd., it is not a guarantee of employment nor should it be one. All it means is that you are expertly qualified in your field. The hiring organization must judge you against other applicants, decide on how much it can spend on you, and keep overall expenses as low as possible. As they said in the Godfather movie, "it is nothing personal, just business".

I'm sure this varies a lot from place to place, but at my institution there isn't any standard salary for tenure-line faculty -- each salary is negotiated individually at the time of hire, and the figure is influenced by the salaries in the field at competing institutions. As a result, salaries vary pretty strongly across the university. A new assistant professor in pharmacy or business can expect a much higher starting salary than a new one in history or English. The key issue isn't what the person is "worth," but rather what the market requires the school to pay.

Adjunct salaries are set by an entirely different process, in large part because the hiring process is much more decentralized. The university sets a rate at which adjuncts will be paid across a particular unit, and department heads can offer that rate to individuals when hiring. Again, there's no calculation of worth here, but rather a market influence. If the school finds that the going rate is making it hard to get enough qualified people, they'll raise it in the following year.

The markets at issue in the two kinds of hire are very different. Tenure-line faculty are hired by national searches, so we're competing with institutions all over the country. There isn't a formal search process for adjuncts, but rather an informal casting about for local people with the right qualifications. There are only a couple of other places within driving distance that can offer this kind of work, so there's really very little competition at all.

For institutions like ours -- and I think we're a pretty common type -- there's no real connection between
tenure-line salaries and adjunct salaries. They're set by different processes, they reflect different markets, and they vary independently of one another. As a result, discussions about their relative worth aren't particularly illuminating.

If an adjunct takes work to complement a full time job one night a week, then perhaps the pay is fair. If, however, a university staffs its courses with mostly adjuncts to the extent that adjuncts carry the same teaching load as full time faculty at 1/3 the compensation and no benefits, that is something that needs to be looked at.

Yes, there is a pay differential between full time employees and part time employees. Every organization that I am aware of pays less for part timers. I do not understand the gripes by the adjunct instructors. Is this a foreign concept to them? Ask WalMart what the difference is and why. Personnel costs are the single highest expense for any organization. As a result wise management tries to minimize them. Adjuncts are used to keep the cost of employees down. If one does not like this type of job, then do not do it. Very simple.

Long long time ago while I was still an undergraduate, I had to work at a large national retail store much like WalMart. The management hired two people; a single mother who worked full-time to support her baby, and I, the college student who worked part-time put herself through college. We both received the hourly minimum wage. The only difference was, she worked a full 40-hour shift, and I only worked about 15-20 hours maximum. But in the end, we were compensated on an equal scale for the work we would do. It was fair. I did not complain.

The adjunct pay however is not calculated on an equal scale, and that is simply not right - because there is no regulation to make it right. Just as you say, it's a way for employees to keep the cost down by taking advantage of the lack of regulation.

As for the if-you-don't-like-it-don't-take-the-job part, that sound like the bosses from the Industrial Revolution era. We don't remember them as "wise management" today, we think about them much differently.
working conditions. If they do, they will not be rehired. They work for slave wages, much like illegal immigrants. Adjuncts have no bargaining power and must keep their mouths shut if they want to eat. Administrators like the "flexibility" of using an exploited and silenced labor force so unlike the FT faculty who demand input into administrative decisions.

Who loses: the students, the university and the exploited labor force. You paint this as a choice issue, but other than administrators, no one has any choice at all in changing the status quo.

Unfortunately for those caught in the web of the (horrible) job market, the U.S. university adjunct system is designed to be part-time employment. This is not a job as a partner in a law firm--and barely analogous to a non-partner. This is part of a system that was designed, for better or for worse, to allow universities to bring in lecturers on an ad hoc basis to fill in for the overflow. Perfectly legitimate. Academic journeymen.

Whether or not that's good or bad, that's what the system is and how it was designed to work. It doesn't work badly for what it's designed to do--but the problem is that so many people want it to be a different system. I think that for those who want a part-time, academically oriented job, teaching as an adjunct is fine--as long as you're willing to settle for pretty much whatever is the going rate. Think of it as the intellectual's alternative to moonlighting in retail. No, you're not going to make as much as the full-timers, but you'll do okay. And you won't be digging ditches.

Is it comparable to the pay/status/authority/standing of a (full-time) tenure track professor? No. It was never intended to be. And unless the system is changed, it really cannot be expected to be. And, frankly, there has never been a full-time job known as "Adjunct Professor." It is by definition part-time work. For part-time wages. And if you take the job you really have to know that you're in it for the love of teaching and to either increase your Christmas account or make extra payments on your mortgage. Nothing more.

Should those folks who have earned a Master's degree or a Ph.D be paid minimum wage for important work? Absolutely not. Should universities pay minimum wage for adjunct services? Absolutely not. But if you think that intellectual part-timers should be paid a better-than-part-time wage, then either fight, or sue, or move. For years I was restricted by my inability to make geographical moves. Among other things, my salary suffered. Now I can count on mobility. Now I can make cogent requests for market salary rates. And I have done well. But if I were to have offered my services to whomever could and would pay for them in a limited geographical area then I would have had to take whatever was the going rate. Sorry, but that's just the way it is.

Bottom line--the work is important. The system is flawed. But no one wants to hear the whining. Again, fight, or sue, or move. Or do what you agreed to do, which was to help your students learn.

If you're doing your job at least they'll be grateful.
At my campus (which is not a research university) faculty spend about 25-50% of their time teaching. This is because the service commitments are much more than most adjuncts or administrators would ever admit and getting research starting with few resources is much more time intensive that most people would believe. So according to that, if a starting assistant professor is paid $60K per year an adjunct may be worth as little as $1800 per course (since faculty teach 8 courses per year).

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Like Reply

@gplm2000

In what sane world is teaching 4 courses a semester at a college considered "part-time" when the "full-time" faculty are teaching 2 courses a semester or simply handling administrative duties? It seems that one of the issues we are trying to engage with is that many departments are moving to an employment model where they have one or two full-time faculty for administrative duty, but rely on a legion of adjuncts to handle the actual teaching duties. Other issues include misleading the adjuncts into thinking there are viable opportunities for professional growth within the department and a future as a full-timer.

This reminds me of working at a factory and talking to a bunch of "part time" employees who averaged 40 hour weeks and had been around for around 10 years. Whenever the company was reaching the legal timeframe where they would have to pull them in as "full-time" they were all "let-go" for two weeks as there was no longer a "demand for their services." Once the company was cleared of the legal hurdle they announced a new "demand" and rehired all the part-time people again. The part-timers did not complain as they were making between $40-$120 per hour. There are some similarities with this situation as with adjuncts, but there are some important differences also.

Like Reply

Adjuncts are grossly underpaid almost everywhere. Largely because the market is flooded with people willing to do the work without arguing about the pay. I strongly advise people to think carefully about taking on this work given the low pay, poor conditions, and very low status. I also disagree with gplm2000 that part time work should necessarily be low paid or low status.

However, if we want pay and conditions to change, the workers need to assert themselves, including setting a personal bar below which they will refuse this employment. Unionization is another option though not a quick and easy one.

As long as colleges don't have any trouble finding employees with this kind of pay rate, they have no reason to pay more.

Like Reply

:-) Worth cannot be measured by pay.

Adjuncts who are repeatedly hired every three months (a quarter system) add value and consistency to students' educations.

I've been hired every three months for 13 years. Our VP of finances says "adjuncts are for flexibility" right. I've had - literally- the same load for 13 years, and with exactly the same schedule for 8 of those. I am by no means alone in this.

Like Reply
I'm constantly baffled that adjuncts think they are worth much more than they really are. This writer thinks an adjunct is worth 70% of a full-time professor. A better figure would be 30% or 40%. I teach 14 credits a term and my classroom/prep work makes up less than half of what I do (I kept track and work about 65 hours a week total). Using that as a basis, the adjunct in this piece is worth only about $1,600 a class compared to a $40,000 a year full-timer. I think that's too low (even $2,000 is too low) but to claim he is worth 70% of a full-timer proves how unrealistic adjuncts are.

I supervise adjuncts and in my discipline they don't have anywhere near as much work to do as a full-timer. I have found that they spend much less time prepping and much more time whining about their pay. The two I had this year both let students in a 3-hour class out after about 75 to 90 minutes each week. They think they can "wing it" and use their charming personalities to win over students while skipping through key material, compared to those of us who are there daily, having to teach the students who are ill-prepared by the adjuncts and enforcing the rules. I find that adjuncts act like "guest stars" in the education process, making a high-energy appearance but not understanding the true hard work involved in the daily grind. (I know this may vary by discipline--English teachers probably can't get away with that.) Adjuncts certainly have their own workload issues that all of us can be sympathetic with, but they should not claim to be worth 70% of a full-timer.