

When a college contracts ‘adjunctivitis,’ it’s the students who lose

BY JOSEPH FRUSCIONE July 25, 2014 at 2:15 PM EDT



Adjunct activists are petitioning the Department of Labor about their working conditions. Photo by Flickr user [Bill Selak](#).

Editor’s Note: Adjuncts now make up more than 70 percent of all college and university faculty, often juggling a course load at multiple universities, earning an average of \$2,500 per course. And now they want the Department of Labor to know.

[Joseph Fruscione](#) is familiar with that lifestyle. After 15 years as an adjunct at three Washington, DC-area universities, he left academia this past semester to pursue a career as a freelance writer and editor – and activist. He’s part of the adjunct movement that is [petitioning](#) the Labor Department’s Wage and Hour Division about what they say amounts to “wage theft” when they are only paid for the hours they spend in the classroom and not for the research, prep and student-counseling that go into being a good professor.

Fruscione appears in Making Sen\$e’s story about [older college professors](#) squeezing younger ones out of tenure-track positions, and we caught up with him again in 2014 for our story on [“adjunctivitis.”](#) One of the adjuncts in that story, Loyola Marymount’s [Arik Greenberg](#) shared his story with Making Sen\$e readers ([“How one professor’s American dream turned into the American nightmare”](#)), as did another former adjunct, now race car driver, Ingrid Steffensen ([“Two loves: An adjunct’s journey from the classroom to the racetrack”](#)). And the protests of [homeless adjunct Mary-Faith Cerasoli](#) this spring sparked a social media movement that we documented on this page.

In the column below, adapted and expanded from [his own blog](#), Fruscione updates readers on the adjunct movement and explains why students, parents, alumnus, and anyone concerned with America’s future, should be listening to adjuncts’ concerns about the state of higher education.

— [Simone Pathe](#), Making Sen\$e Editor

Soon, American college students will be returning to campus — or perhaps arriving at one for the first time. Students and their parents may not know, however, that they’re arriving on what a [New York Times headline](#) from February called “the new college campus.” Virtually gone are the days when a majority of professors were full-time and tenured (or at least tenure-eligible), which gave students a remarkable amount of stability, educational continuity and mentorship opportunities. Nowadays, such professors are the minority of college educators.

In their place are ever-increasing ranks of adjunct professors — some part-time, some full-time, all effectively impermanent. This true [new faculty majority](#) comprises almost 75 percent of professors at both private and public institutions. Adjuncts’ contingent, precarious situation is directly linked to the ever-rising cost of tuition that students and their parents will be paying

off — perhaps for decades. To be an adjunct professor means several troubling things:

MAKING SENSE INTERVIEW

Is Academia Suffering from
'Adjunctivitis'?

- Most are not paid a living wage (the national average is \$2,500 per course)
- Some lack office space and access to computer and library services
- Many have contracts lasting only one semester
- Many have to teach at multiple schools and/or hold part-time jobs
- Many lack basic faculty rights and freedoms (such as the ability to protest unfair working conditions)
- Many have no voice in their colleges' governance committees
- Most have no means of promotion or advancement
- All are non-tenure track, meaning that they lack the job security, stability, academic freedom, and other rights that define tenured and tenure-track faculty status

Since contingent faculty deserve a more secure, fair employment status, university policies must be revised to allow the majority of professors to participate more robustly in student support and learning. Then, and only then, will students be able to learn from and engage with their professors most effectively.

American higher education has changed — rapidly, dramatically and problematically. A [recent report](#) from the American Association of University Professors provides (among other things) three very troubling statistics. From the mid-1970s to 2011, hiring of full-time tenure-track faculty rose 23 percent; of part-time faculty, 286 percent; of full-time non-faculty professionals, 369 percent.

Out of context, a 286 percent bump in hiring university teachers would hit the sweet spot. Regardless of grade level, students need

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plenty of experienced, accessible teachers. In context, though, 286 percent hits a sour note. In roughly 40 years, the two biggest jumps in university hiring have been the ones that help students least: adjunct faculty and (even more nettlesome) senior administrators in the form of provosts, vice-provosts, deans, associate deans, and many others who don't teach. The drastic increase in adjunct faculty means fewer office hours available for student counseling and mentoring relationships, as well as less job stability for these contingent professors. Most adjuncts have no health, retirement, or other benefits and cannot afford to "retire" from teaching. (Ever.) Full-time part-timing has become the norm on this "new" — but not better — campus.

That's why we — a group of 10 current and former professors — are sending a petition to [David Weil](#), the administrator of the Wage and Hour Division at the U.S. Department of Labor, to investigate faculty working conditions, mistreatment of adjunct professors and student learning conditions in higher education. So far, the over 2,300 (and counting) people who've signed [our petition](#) hope things will change. Anyone can sign and share this petition — you don't have to be a current or former professor, student, tuition-paying parent, or university employee. You simply have to care about the state of the American college and university.

Given Weil's background as a professor and his expertise in labor and economics, we know this petition will resonate with him — and hopefully spur meaningful change. A fellow activist, [Ann Kottner](#), came up with the idea and wrote the first draft. (Ann recently blogged about the petition for [Scientific American](#).) From there, strong collaboration among current adjuncts, a tenured professor, a dean, and others was key to getting the petition out quickly, clearly and effectively.

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But we aren't the only ones willing and able to speak about how much higher education has changed; there are many voices in many different movements around education, labor, academic freedom, and related issues. Students and parents, especially, should know more about how the colleges they're attending or paying for their child(ren) to attend really work.

We're thrilled that the petition is going strong. We exceeded 2,000 signatures faster than any of us thought possible a week ago — helped along, in part, by those who've tirelessly shared (and reshared) it on social media. But we don't want this petition to be one of those things you sign, share, and wonder about later.

So what's next? Why do all these signatures matter?

Ultimately, we want the petition to initiate an investigation into what many of us know: American higher education is broken, and students are being hurt by it, almost irreparably so. We don't need another overpaid provost or (as some tweeters have termed it) "deanlet" to talk about a "strategic plan," "vision for the 21st century," or "flipped classrooms" while never teaching a class. As one of my petition co-writers [noted](#) earlier this year, we need fairly paid, fairly treated professors for our students. We also need equitable, stable working conditions for university faculty and staff. We need strong, stable learning conditions for university students.

Adjunct faculty make on average \$25,000 a year, according to [recent data](#), while dealing with job instability, poor office conditions, assaults on free speech, unfair dismissals, and other issues that ultimately hamper student learning. As we stress in the petition:

Unlike full-time tenured faculty, the meager pay of contingent faculty often covers only eight months of the year. Summer contracts are hard to come by, generally being the privilege of tenured faculty to earn extra compensation, and the pay periods for those contracts too frequently leave contingent faculty teaching for a month or more with no pay check at all.

In the shorter term, our plan is to hand-deliver the petition to Weil (and, if we're fortunate, get the attention of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions). Adjunct professors, students and parents need the might and resources of a government department on our side. The movement has had an ally in Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., and other Democrats on the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, whose report on adjunct labor conditions provided what Miller called "[an alarming snapshot](#)" of the issue. But we're already

ADJUNCT VOICES

[How one professor's American dream — teaching — turned into the American nightmare](#)

familiar with those conditions; we now need action.

Let's be clear: this is not a group of current and former academics asking for more money to do less work, for universal tenure, or for anything else to evade teaching responsibilities. A professor's job, first and foremost, is to teach. This is ultimately about improving student learning conditions in the 21st century by, in part, improving and stabilizing faculty working conditions. In asking the Department of Labor to investigate the troubling state of American higher education, we want Weil and others to help improve the environment for all faculty, students and staff on our campuses.

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Think, for a moment, about a few things:

Colleges pay enormous salaries to their upper-level administrators while cutting faculty salaries by dismantling tenure and moving faculty to piecemeal adjunct positions — all while citing “pending cuts” and “budgetary realities” that somehow only affect faculty and students.

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Colleges keep treating their students like customers, their faculty like cheap and renewable labor, and their leaders like CEOs — none of which propel student learning nearly as much as necessary in the 21st century.

Such fracturing (or “adjunctification”) of college teachers keeps hurting students because professors have limited time to hold office hours, often have to work multiple jobs to make ends meet, and must further subdivide their attention between additional students, campuses and income streams.

So whether you're a student, parent, professor, alumnus, or anyone else connected to a university, you should be troubled by these developments. When more and more universities

spend time and resources hiring senior administrators and raising tuition, they devalue teaching and teachers, as well as create strained learning conditions for the most important demographic of any school: students. Such massive financial disparities and casualization of educational labor do a lot of things, but helping students be the writers, thinkers and researchers we need them to be in the 21st century isn't one of them.

We touch on some of this in the petition:

At the same time that faculty jobs have become the equivalent of Walmart employment, the numbers, pay, and perks of administrative jobs have increased at nearly twice the rate as full-time, tenure-track faculty hires. For example, the City University of New York, a once tuition-free public system, is [currently paying \\$18,000/month](#) for its new chancellor's apartment — the annual equivalent of salaries for twelve part-time adjunct faculty. At George Washington University, several senior administrators make [over \\$1 million annually](#) at a school whose tuition is among the highest in the nation, and several other provosts and deans make high six figures as well. Not surprisingly, these kinds of administrator wages often correlate with high student debt and low adjunct faculty wages.

Read, if you can stomach it, [this fine piece](#) by Lawrence Wittner on the growing economic divide on our campuses. For Wittner, “[Administrators’] rapidly-rising income reflects, in part, the fact that the boards of trustees of most higher educational institutions are dominated by businessmen, who, naturally, are accustomed to the outlandish incomes and perks of the corporate world.” Moreover, “The extraordinary growth in the number of administrators can be explained partially by the fact that bureaucrats tend to multiply. Thus, a top administrator, such as the campus president, likes to have subordinate administrators doing his or her work. In turn, the subordinates like to have additional administrators working for them.”

When we talk about “extraordinary growth” on a college campus, we *should* be talking about expanded educational resources, learning facilities for students and stable full-time hires for faculty — not yet another

ADJUNCT VOICES

[Two loves: An adjunct's journey from the classroom to the racetrack](#)

upper-level administrator making a corporate-equivalent salary.

More lower-level administrative hires — such as counselors and advisers — can greatly help students. Hiring another senior vice associate “deanlet” (or whatever titles they’re using now) instead of a full-time teacher, though, seems to help no one — certainly not students and their teachers. When schools run their budgets dry because they’ve added so many senior administrators that “market realities” or “pending budget cuts” only allow hiring adjuncts on semester-by-semester contracts, no one — save perhaps the admins making high six figures — benefits. No one.

We also address such massive hiring disparities in the petition:

The momentous but gradual change over the last 30 years in the proportion of full-time, tenured, and tenure-track professors to contingent professors has reversed itself. Now, approximately 76% of college professors are contingent labor, predominantly hired on a semester-by-semester contract and making an average of \$2500 per 3-credit course. The average yearly income of an adjunct professor hovers in the same range as minimum-wage fast food and retail workers, with many of the same labor problems: lack of job security, inability to find enough working hours to support themselves, lack of health or retirement benefits, periodic unemployment, and outright wage theft.

We — former and current professors, undergraduate and graduate students, parents, and all university workers — need to be proactive and vocal on our campuses and social media. We’re not talking about issues affecting a relatively small, privileged, and “low stress” class of professors. We’re talking about a pattern of mistreatment affecting well over a million university faculty — and many more students — on campuses across the country.

Let’s not forget that the university labor problem, ultimately, will determine our students’ and our nation’s educational futures. If the new norm on campus is contingent professors with short-term

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contracts, subpar compensation, and minimal job security, the new norm for students will be unsustainable at best, and destructive at worst. None of us is advocating that all professors should be making six figures, driving luxury cars, teaching only occasionally, and otherwise living it up. Most professors are dedicated to the labor-intensive work of teaching, regardless of our fields, levels of experience, and numbers of students.

Yes, some part-time professors fit the original model for an adjunct professor: an experienced professional who teaches a class in his or her area of expertise. Such work can be fulfilling — a full-time lawyer or journalist (or whatever) can be a useful resource for students. If this true part-time teaching were the rule rather than the exception, we wouldn't have needed this petition. But since the rule is essentially [full-time part-timing](#) for 70-plus percent of professors, less stability for part *and* full-time faculty, and mounting financial inequalities on our campuses, we are petitioning David Weil and the U.S. Department of Labor to investigate higher education — not for the sake of a chosen few professors, but for the sake of students.

Watch Paul Solman's report on adjunctivitis, featuring Fruscione, below:

 1/18 Can a tax help cut down greenhouse gas pollution?



