

# Time to Address the ‘Adjunct Problem’ Amid the Pandemic

By Larry Jaffee

Obviously, academia is in this pause moment because of COVID-19 with so much uncertainty surrounding the coming fall semester.

Society at large is questioning whether we need to get back to the ways things were pre-pandemic vs. embracing the opportunities to change what wasn't working in the first place. The latter is a metaphor for higher education.

Under the national AAUP's charter, all chapters have an obligation to "promote and protect" the economic interests of all faculty, including part-timers. Sadly, this does not always exist, and academia's shame of exploiting adjunct instructors is often not addressed in any meaningful way.

According to the National AAUP's "One Faculty" Principles: "Compensation for part-time appointments, including those in which faculty are currently paid on a per-course or per-hour basis, should be the applicable fraction of the compensation (including benefits) for a comparable full-time position."

Please show me anywhere that this is the case, or even comes close. It's an example of toothless, unenforceable proclamations that really have no basis in the real world.

Fact: Adjuncts generally earn a quarter or less than the compensation their full-time, tenured counterparts receive to teach the same classes. And we teach 70 percent of the courses.

We make a greater impression on college students than the tenured track, purely by the numbers, but also qualitatively (at least that's what my students tell me). Adjuncts are generally closer to the professions they teach, which is why students come to use for recommendations and career advice.

Meanwhile, administrations pigeonhole us as a "problem" that constantly gets swept under the carpet. Clearly, now they have bigger, understandable priorities, such as ensuring the health protecting against contagion and well being of all who are on campus.

Universities haven't cared much in the past in regard to the well being of its adjuncts, many whom are economically insecure without adequate healthcare, worry about their housing and feeding themselves and their families.

A few weeks into the national lockdown, I took an informal survey of 30 adjunct colleagues, and learned that nearly two-thirds had already lost income from other full-time jobs or businesses they operate.

In response to how important teaching at the institution was to their overall income, 21.43% said the majority; 35.7% said about half; and 42.8% said less than half. An earlier sur-

vey with 100 respondents found that 50% of my adjunct colleagues teach at other colleges, pretty much all in the same boat. As we know, most are projecting severe cutbacks in the fall.

In early May at a department faculty meeting, my chair didn't mince words. He said full-timers will be likely teaching courses in the fall they never had taught before, meaning adjuncts will be losing them.

I have to believe this is just a microcosm of what will play out in the near future at campuses through the state and country, public or private, expecting a shortfall in enrollments.

Furthermore, faculty are being told to revise their syllabi for a probable asynchronous class that we have no guarantee it will even run. Adjuncts do not get paid to create syllabi, and now there's every chance that a full-timer will take your class and possibly even your revised syllabus.

When adjuncts were told in mid-March they're now teaching remotely, we were basically told to jump, and we were expected to reply, how high? We worked through Spring Break with non-stop meetings, and the semester was extended by a week, for which neither we were paid, by the way.

I actually enjoyed teaching via Zoom, and my students seemed engaged during my lectures, notwithstanding one in China who couldn't stay up in the middle of the night. I recorded my lectures for her and she finished the course with no problem, in fact, receiving one of the highest grades.

Obviously, certain aspects of running a university must retain normalcy, such as contract negotiations, which are to commence next January where I teach. It was less than two years ago that me and another adjunct finally were allowed to become members of our AAUP chapter, after clamoring to be allowed in for at least a year. If you read the contract, you get the impression that adjuncts who even meet the relatively high threshold of three consecutive years of teaching 12 credits an academic year, are being dissuaded from joining with little incentive to do so.

What's listed as adjunct benefits – apparently boilerplate language carried over in every CBA – include taking the health plan at COBRA rates, an investment plan with no contribution from the university, and use of the computer system. At best, the first two are a severance package, and the third is ludicrous. How else could we teach the students, especially now remotely?

So why do I sacrifice .5% of my meager salary? Simply, it's to take a seat at the bargaining table. I've made my

*continued on page 15*

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# From the New York State AAUP President's Desk

*continued from page 1*

fault lines: senior citizens warehoused in substandard institutions, frontline workers whose ranks are dominated by women and people of color, communities that lack the resources to fight the pandemic, individuals without health insurance left to die alone.

It would be hubris to say that we can reconstruct our social, economic, political, and educational systems in a way that would allow us to avoid tragedies such as the current COVID-19 pandemic; it would be disingenuous to say that we can't construct a "new normal" that will allow us to better and more equitably face those future and inevitable tragedies.

So where to begin? At our own institutions, it is important that we insist on a strong faculty voice in decision-making related to the pandemic.

AAUP National has issued a statement on Principles of Academic Governance during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Our NYS AAUP Conference has begun to hear from our members and chapters about governance issues related to the pandemic and we are working to more systematically synthesize these experiences and develop resources (be on the lookout for communications from us on this topic).

A strong faculty voice is necessarily an inclusive faculty voice, and this is an area where academic institutions and even the AAUP have fallen short. We must do better to increase racial and ethnic diversity within our ranks (and at all ranks), to promote racial and gender equity, and make sure all who work in institutions of higher learning have access to a just and livable wage.

AAUP National has also assembled a racial justice

resource page on its website, observing that "Although higher education institutions have been part of the problem, they also have the resources to be part of the solution" and promising to take "a critical look" at past AAUP efforts while moving forward in an anti-racist direction.

Our NYS AAUP Executive Director, Sally Dear-Healey, and I also firmly believe our state conference must look critically at past efforts and move ahead in an explicitly anti-racist direction.

We have been hearing from members and chapters that they are looking for resources to move in this direction on their own campuses and we hope to engage many of you in initiatives to make real change in terms of racial equity in the academy.

This work will begin this summer. We are planning for another virtual meeting in the fall (and hoping that someday we will be able to meet in person at Syracuse University).

While details are yet to be worked out, we plan to feature anti-racism programming in the Saturday portion of the meeting and welcome suggestions and participation from our members and chapters.

If you would like to be involved in this programming please contact Sally at [sdearhealeyaaup@gmail.com](mailto:sdearhealeyaaup@gmail.com).

While we mourn the loss of family, friends, colleagues, and students and face the daunting economic and educational challenges posed by the COVID pandemic, I hope we can join together to envision and work toward a more humane, more equal, more just, and more sustainable "new normal."

*In Solidarity,  
Mary Rose Kubal*

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## Time to Address the 'Adjunct Problem' Amid the Pandemic

*continued from page 14*

interest known to the powers-that-be in rectifying past wrongs in the upcoming negotiations. Wish me luck.

The National Labor Relations Board itself has recognized that full-time and part-time faculty have a different "community of interest," perhaps not best served by the same collective bargaining unit (Seattle University, 2014). We'll see what's in our future. After all, adjuncts are supposed to have the right to fair representation.

To those professors fortunate to be on the tenure track, or

in an administrative capacity, I pose this question: Would you be an adjunct? And if the answer is no, well guess what? Your colleges have been running on the fruits of adjunct labor for far too long, and you'll probably be working harder than you ever did before if you arbitrarily cut across the board without taking into consideration that adjuncts by and large have been your product. Students will ultimately suffer. Good luck with that.

*Larry Jaffee has taught as adjunct assistant professor at the New York Institute of Technology since 2013.*