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Plight of Adjunct Faculty Needs More Attention From Foundations

By Pablo Eisenberg

The nonprofit world has its own caste systems, in which top leaders get high salaries, lavish perks, and special status, while people who do the real work in carrying out charitable missions receive poor pay, work under difficult conditions, and are not accorded the respect they deserve.

Nowhere is this situation as far-reaching as in higher education, which employs more than 580,000 part-time faculty members, known as adjuncts, who are paid far lower wages than their full-time tenured faculty colleagues and are rarely given health or retirement benefits or administrative support for their teaching. About 230,000 others serve as full-time adjuncts who are not tenured and, though many do receive some benefits, are also poorly paid, have little academic freedom, and are treated as second-class teachers.

In tough economic times, the plight of adjunct faculty members has become even more acute. They are paid by the course, and their compensation usually does not include the supplies they have to use, the out-of-class time they spend with students, and the often heavy expenses incurred in commuting to class, especially in rural and other non-urban areas. In community colleges, where the majority of college students are taught, they account for 80 percent of the faculty.

Most of these contingent teachers receive \$1,800 to \$3,000 per three-credit course. A few institutions pay more, from \$3,000 to \$6,000 per course, but they are the exceptions. Huge numbers of adjuncts, working six courses during the year, barely make \$20,000 a year, not enough to provide for a family or children. Many have to teach at three or four colleges to obtain sufficient work.

Because they work in stressful conditions, these faculty members are often not able to give their students the best instruction and experience they deserve.

That universities and colleges are doing an increasingly poor job in this respect should be a concern to people in and out of higher education.

Democracy requires a well-educated and informed citizenry, while civil society depends on visionary and responsible leaders who can effectively run nonprofit and other philanthropic organizations.

Governments at all levels and businesses also depend on the leadership and skilled work force produced by our institutions of higher education.

The difficult conditions that face adjunct faculty members—and the effect they have on society—don't seem to worry top university and college administrators, who tend to be more concerned with administrative and capital costs than with the well-being of their staff members or the quality of education offered to their students. Some colleges are now demanding that full-time contingent faculty increase their teaching load to five courses a year with no increase in pay while making no such demands of tenured staff members.

If the horrible working conditions of adjunct staff members were the only issue involved, it might be glossed over as just one of the gross inequities in our society.

Shamefully, it is a problem of which few people—students, policy makers, the public, and even university trustees—are aware.

Because adjunct faculty members do not have the job security tenure provides, they lack academic freedom. They also lack bargaining rights and the ability to appeal dismissals. Such conditions mean that many adjunct faculty members are fearful of risk-taking. Their occasional unwillingness to talk about controversial matters in class or to offend students who evaluate them should not be surprising. Those conditions are not good for either adjuncts or the students, but then so many universities and colleges don't seem to care. They are now run by quasi-corporate executives who often are more focused on fund raising than the quality of the education their students receive. Board members have shown even less concern for the issues facing adjunct faculty members at the institutions they oversee.

Trustees show far more concern for the people who run their institutions, approving compensation packages for top executives that continue to soar.

At least 24 college presidents are paid at least \$1-million in salary, plus other financial benefits and perks. Yet college presidents cannot seem to find the money from either their endowments or their operating funds to give a measure of financial justice to their academic “untouchables.”

Amid this gloomy picture, there is a ray of hope that may bring light to the landscape of adjuncts.

Last year several adjunct faculty members banded together to form a national association, believing that only such a coalition could garner the public support required for a serious overhaul of our dysfunctional university and college system.

Maria Maisto, a former part-time adjunct at the University of Akron and now a full-time nontenured instructor at the Cuyahoga Community College in Ohio, is one of the founders of the new national group, the New Faculty Majority.

She has described the goal of the new association: “to have a national staff and engaged membership working year-round for the transformation of the current exploitative academic labor system into an ethical structure that treats all faculty members with justice, fairness, and dignity.”

Ms. Maisto, who is president of the group’s board of directors, and her colleagues are an impressive group of dedicated teachers and activists.

They deserve wide public support. Foundations, which are always looking for organizations that will be successful and make a big improvement in social conditions, should consider whether to support the New Faculty Majority and other groups that seek to help adjunct faculty members.

And if foundations send a signal that conditions like those facing adjuncts are intolerable in the United States, perhaps other nonprofit organizations will join the call for change.

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