

The High Cost of Adjunct Living

Los Angeles Metro Area

Executive Summary

There is a crisis in higher education.

Quickly rising tuition has resulted in record levels of student debt, putting higher education out of reach for more and more working families.¹ In fact, the total amount of national student debt has surpassed \$1 trillion, second only to mortgage debt in the United States. But while individuals and families continue to struggle with the cost of skyrocketing tuition, universities are shifting those resources away from the fundamental mission of instruction, in favor of administration and overhead.

This tipping of the scales toward administration is enabled by a strategy of replacing full-time, tenured positions with less-expensive part-time faculty, who are often hired on a temporary basis. Over the last 35 years, part-time faculty members have more than tripled.² These part-time faculty members (called adjunct faculty at many campuses) have become the majority of faculty in our nation's higher education system, replacing tenured or tenure-track faculty who were once hired permanently, on a full-time basis. Adjuncts often teach the same courses as tenured or tenure-track faculty, but in contingent positions and are compensated at levels that hover around federal poverty standards.

The median pay for contingent faculty, according to a survey conducted by the U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce, is \$22,041 nationally.³ This leaves increasing numbers of part-time faculty to deliver an increasingly expensive product—a college education—often while living in poverty as professors. This condition of poverty further manifests itself on campus, as many adjunct faculty do not have access to even basic resources such as office space, making it ever more difficult for adjuncts to do their best for their students.

As tuition costs soar, colleges and universities are driving down the cost of instruction by replacing middle-class jobs with low-paid, contingent positions. So where is our money going?

The New England Center for Investigative Reporting found that from 1987 until 2012, universities and colleges have added an average of 87 non-academic administrators and professionals for every working day, doubling the number of administrators and professionals across higher education.⁴ Meanwhile, over the last 35 years, the average salary for CEO's at private-independent universities has grown almost 175%.⁵

Being a university professor, once the quintessential middle-class job, has become a low-wage one, a trend that is propping up an increasingly expensive education system. These industry changes occur at the expense of students and families who pay high tuition, expecting a quality education. Professor and co-director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California, Adrianna Kezar explains that the quality of adjunct professors is not to blame for poor student outcomes, but the conditions surrounding adjunct employment. "Institutions do not set them up for success," she explained. "They hire them at the very last moment, a day or two before class, so they can't prepare for classes. They have no input into the curriculum, choosing textbooks, so they're often teaching off of resource that they're not familiar with. They also don't know the broader learning objectives of the department or school, so they're not tying in, or helping students to connect their learning to their other courses or curriculum."⁶

This economic confluence—ballooning student debt, administrative bloat, and the low-wage workforce who props up this system of higher education—is unsustainable for our nation's economy. Student debt hampers economic growth, and benefits highly compensated administrators, at the expense of students and faculty. Contingent professors are increasingly unable to make a living across cities in the United States.

The Los Angeles Metro Area is no exception.

Nonprofit universities in the L.A. Metro Area market rely heavily on a contingent academic workforce; in 2013, 72% percent of faculty, or 11,841 employees, were not on the tenure track.

This shift from a secure, well-compensated academic workforce to a temporary, low-paid workforce impacts the area economy where these colleges and universities are located, surrounding communities, and the L.A. Metro Area in general. Through an analysis of cost-of-living measures and a series of interviews, this report will explore the impact that the casualization of academic labor has on L.A. Metro professors and the potential impact on the economy and communities they call home.

Specifically, the analysis poses the question: How many classes does an adjunct professor have to teach to afford basic cost-of-living measures—housing, healthcare, food, the ability to retire? According to the U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce, the average course load of adjuncts is just over three classes per semester (about the same as a full-time student).⁷ The House Committee's study considered eight courses per year a full course load for professors.⁸ How much can adjuncts really afford to survive with wages and working conditions in this academic system?

The median pay per course in the Far-West—the area of the country where Los Angeles and Orange County are located—was \$3,300 for master's level institutions and \$4,500 for doctoral level institutions at private not-for-profit institutions. This means an adjunct teaching full-time—8 courses per year—may have an annual income of just \$26,400.

Findings include:

- An adjunct professor must teach between 24 and 33 classes a year—as much as 4 times a full-time course load—to afford the average home and utilities in the Los Angeles Metro Area.
- An adjunct professor would need to teach up to 5 classes per year to cover the cost of groceries for a family.
- An adjunct professor would need to teach 6 to 8 classes to pay for a cesarean delivery at certain Los Angeles Metro Area hospitals.

The increasingly contingent nature of academic labor is not an accident of history but a deliberate business model that leaves taxpayers holding the bag by depriving faculty of wages, benefits and job security, forcing them to collect food stamps and subsidized healthcare, and forgo saving for retirement. In many ways, the crisis in higher education mirrors the crisis in the broader economy, where jobs are increasingly low wage and part time, even while revenues and profits are increasing.

Contingent faculty are joining unions to raise standards.

Adjuncts in the L.A. Metro Area have already begun to come together to change the face of higher education in California. The 11,703 nonunion adjuncts at nonprofit universities in the L.A. Metro Area can stand with more than 23,000 faculty that have already unionized with SEIU to improve higher education and improve working conditions and benefits for adjuncts in the L.A. Metro Area.

According to the Coalition on the Academic Workforce, unionized faculty report more job security and have a median pay per course that is 25 percent higher than their nonunion counterparts. This translates to campuses having a consistent and stable workforce—a benefit to students and parents, who expect their tuition dollars be spent where it will help students most, like providing the best education possible. A secure workforce also benefits taxpayers, as faculty who are adequately compensated are self-sufficient, and are not reliant on public programs for assistance.

By investing in the dedicated instructors teaching our next generation of young minds, colleges and universities can fulfill their promise to parents and students, and refocus institutional priorities where they belong: student learning.

Transformation of the Academic Workforce: An Overview

In 2013, more than 1.5 million teachers worked in postsecondary education in the United States.⁹ Many of us think of these jobs as being filled by full-time, salaried professors who spend their days on campus educating their students, developing cutting edge research and increasing the depth of our academic knowledge. The reality is that institutions of higher education are increasingly relying upon contingent academic labor: professors that are hired on a class-by-class basis, semester-to-semester with no job security, paid minimal compensation, provided no benefits, and are outside the tenure system. Faculty teaching jobs—once considered a dream middle-class profession—have become one of the many precarious positions created by the new economy.

What does this transformation—the casualization of the academic workforce—mean? For colleges and universities, a well-paid, stable workforce is being replaced with a lower-paid workforce with no job security. For faculty, it means a dramatic decrease in quality of life and their ability to provide for their families in their chosen profession. The average annual pay in 2013 for a tenured professor at a private research university in the United States is \$167,118.¹⁰ In comparison, the average pay per course reported by adjunct faculty is approximately \$3,000.¹¹ Even if an adjunct teaches eight courses per year—considered a high course load—that person is making just \$24,000 annually with likely no benefits.

The institutions of higher education in the L.A. Metro Area rely heavily on a contingent academic workforce. In 2013, nearly 70 percent of full- and part-time employees with faculty status at four-year not-for-profit in California¹², or 21,621 faculty employees, were not on the tenure track or in the tenure system.¹³

This contingent academic workforce in the L.A. Metro Area's universities is frequently working on a part-time basis. In 2013, 58.4 percent of employees with faculty status, or 6,917 employees, are part-time.¹⁴

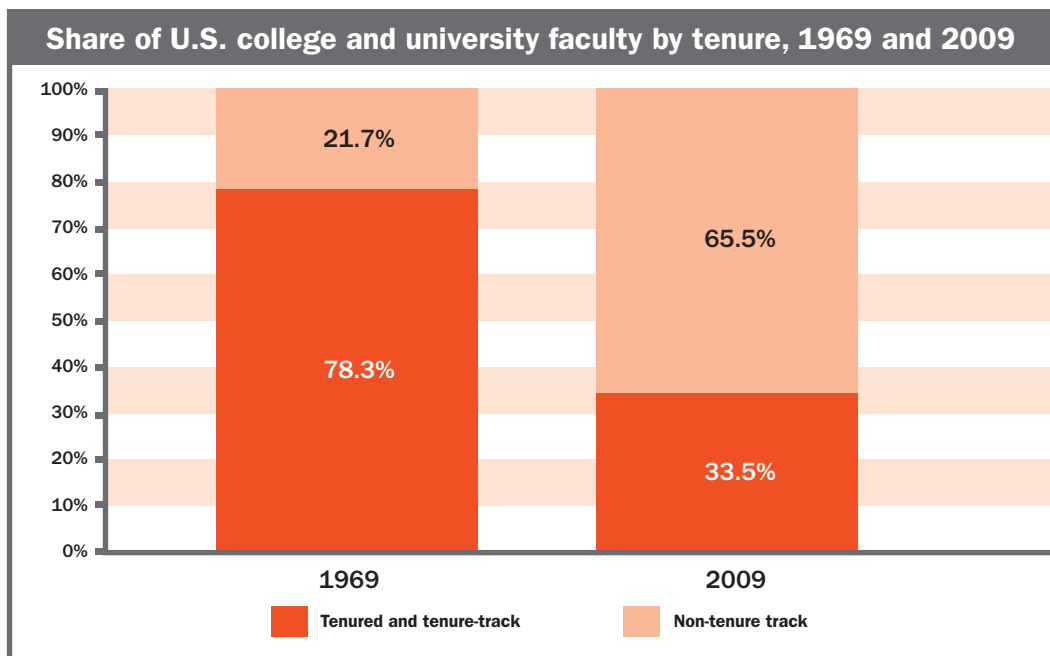
All of the adjuncts interviewed for this white paper reported a love of teaching and students, but many expressed concern for their future and their ability to afford continuing with the job. An interviewee teaching in Los Angeles said, “I love to teach and I’m good at it! I really value my students. A lot of the students I teach are first generation college students. I love to see them grow and always want to help especially in regards to writing recommendations, helping them get into graduate school, or just offering my personal time. It’s my responsibility to help students through their next process in life. [The university administrators] really don’t respect our time and efforts. When I think about it, I may get paid \$1-\$2 per hour when I calculate all the time I put into teaching; office hours, lesson prep, grading papers, etc. Fairness is all we as adjuncts really want; fairness in wages and access.”

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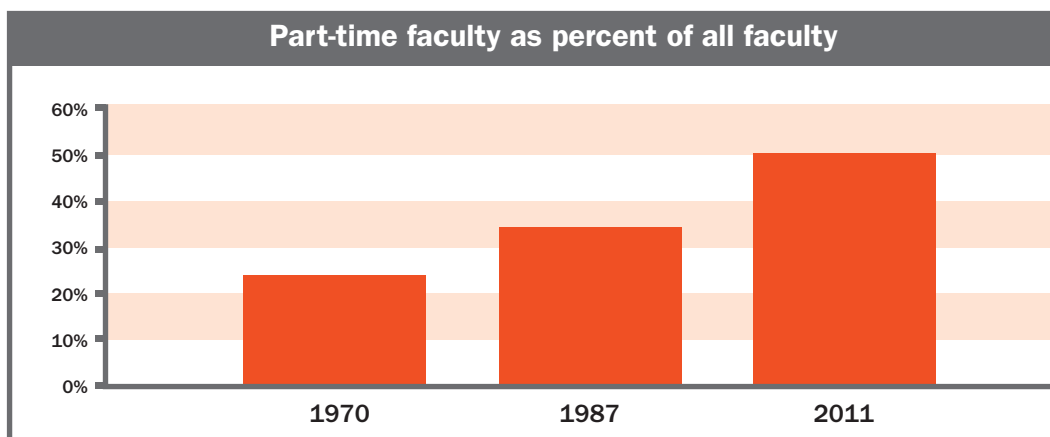
The shift from a secure, well-compensated academic workforce to a temporary, low-paid workforce impacts LA Metro Area communities and the regional economy where these colleges and universities are located. This report will explore the impact that casualization of academic labor has on LA Metro Area professors and the potential effects on the economy and communities they call home. Specifically, the analysis poses the question: How many classes does an adjunct professor have to teach to afford basic cost-of-living measures—housing, healthcare, food, the ability to retire?¹⁵

Transformation of the Academic Workforce: A National View

Tenured, full-time faculty positions are on a steady decline. In 1969, tenured and tenure-track positions made up approximately 78.3 percent of the faculty and non-tenure-track positions comprised 21.7 percent. In 2009, tenured and tenure-track faculty had declined to 33.5 percent and 66.5 percent of faculty were ineligible for tenure.¹⁶



From 1970 to 2003, the numbers of part-time faculty members in the United States increased 422 percent while full-time faculty have only increased 71 percent.¹⁷ In 2011, part-time faculty represented 50 percent of all teaching faculty at degree-granting institutions, up from 34 percent in 1987 and 22 percent in 1970.¹⁸



Adjunct or contingent faculty positions are often thought to be professionals that have careers outside academia, who teach a class occasionally to offer specific expertise or experience to students, or because they want to make some extra money. Part-time teaching, however, is not a choice for many part-time faculty members. A National Study of Postsecondary Faculty report showed more than 35 percent of part-time faculty, and half of part-time faculty in the humanities, would have preferred a full-time position at their institutions.¹⁹

Transformation of the Academic Workforce: Impact on the Individual

In California, full-time professors are paid a salary that varies widely across disciplines, but averaged between \$93,049 to \$149,596 in 2012–13.²⁰ Generally, full-time professors may teach up to 5 or 6 courses per year and spend the rest of their time developing research, serving on committees, meeting with students, advising graduate students, and preparing for classes.

Adjunct faculty often try to teach as many courses as possible to make enough money to pay their bills—many teaching 6 to 15 courses per year with classes at multiple colleges. An adjunct is often paid by the course, and the median pay per course for part-time faculty members in the Far-West region—the area of the country where the LA Metro Area is located—is \$3,300 at a master’s level private not-for-profit institution; \$4,500 at a doctoral level private not-for-profit institution.²¹ In comparison, the average tuition at a four-year not-for-profit institution in California was \$27,683 in 2012–13.²² Despite the high cost of tuition, an adjunct could teach 5 courses a year and only earn \$16,500 to \$22,500, or 12 courses a year and have an annual income of \$39,600 to \$54,000. As one adjunct teaching and living in Los Angeles explained, “In fall semester, for example, I’d be teaching two classes, trying to meet students when I could, working on at least one or two film projects at a time (paid), and also serving as a waiter four shifts a week, which is about 20 hours. The most money I have ever made was \$50,000 in one year, working at two schools, teaching an average of four to five classes a semester, and freelance work on top of that. The least money I have ever made was closer to \$35,000, when I was waiting tables, teaching two classes at one school, and freelance work.”

Contingent or adjunct faculty are rarely provided benefits. Even as the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2009, often referred to as ObamaCare, goes into effect, colleges and universities have begun to institute new limits on adjuncts’ hours to avoid their responsibility for providing affordable healthcare to adjunct professors.²³ In the L.A. Metro Area, the majority of adjuncts interviewed accessed their healthcare through L.A. Care, Healthy Way L.A., or the California health insurance exchange, although some are able to access health insurance through a spouse.

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Adjuncts have no job security. Generally, their contracts are per semester and they have to reapply for their jobs for the following semester. In addition, classes can be canceled up to the day they are scheduled to begin, and if that happens an adjunct is often not compensated for that class or for the work they have already done to prepare for the class. This unpredictability and lack of job security affects long-term financial planning. One adjunct teaching at a college in Los Angeles County explained, “About a month before the fall semester, they said I was going to get two more classes than usual. So I started budgeting for that. And then a week or so before the semester, they said, ‘Oh, we scheduled this wrong. Does this work for your schedule now? We’re going to schedule this class for here.’ I was like, no. So it was like, oops sorry, you don’t get the class. So that was \$5000 for the fall that was just gone. That’s happened a couple times.”

Part-time professors get little support for research, scholarship or any professional development. In 2003, part-time faculty reported spending 90 percent of their time on teaching, 6.6 percent on administrative and other duties, and 3.4 percent on research.²⁴ The growth of the academic contingent workforce with limited time or support for research or creative work has long-term negative consequences for scholarship and the public benefit. It also negatively impacts the adjunct’s professional development as it limits or prevents the possibility of professional advancement.

Meanwhile, the shrinking availability of tenure-track positions means that newly minted PhDs are finding it increasingly difficult to find full-time work and are more willing to teach as adjuncts at low rates with no security, resources or benefits. One interviewee teaching in LA County explained her frustration and disappointment: “The worst part is that realizing that sometimes they [the administration] just want a body in the classroom. And I often feel as if they don’t really care about the quality of the teaching or what the students are coming home with. Sometimes it’s like, ‘Oh we need to fill a class. So we’ll take one adjunct here and one adjunct here.’ The other thing that I’m really jaded about now is the salaries of the administrative positions. The percentage of new hires that are adjunct versus full-time, whereas there are all these new positions added in the administrative sector. That’s really depressing. It feels more and more like a corporation that is trying to maximize the attractiveness of the outside of the campus, but when you actually dig deeper into the education part, it seems like the students are getting a lower value.”

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The long-term impact on adjuncts who continue to contribute to their fields as experts and teachers also affects overall well-being and mental health. As one adjunct living and teaching in the City of Los Angeles explained: “Since I’ve been working in the university, I’ve developed a lot of issues with anxiety. Partly, it’s because I want to be professional, the work is demanding. I have a very high regard for the work in my field, and therefore put a lot of pressure on myself. Unfortunately, I have grown increasingly anxious over the years, although I know that I am very competent and professional. I notice that I’m often short of breath, for example. Or, when I started a job in another country, I developed a stutter. I speak three languages! Issues with anxiety are related to the high standards of our work, certainly, but I think they are mostly due, and quite worsened, by precarity. For example, the fall is always a very difficult period, because it’s the time to apply for teaching jobs. I think this problem is endemic to the field. In addition to the symbolical violence around the need to be knowledgeable, and issues of competition in the field, there is an additional level of economic violence that shifts the perspective somewhat. Precarity doesn’t provide a stable enough base to develop the strategies that might help to alleviate the symbolic issues. I also feel demoralized because it seems that the entire edifice of the academy is close to shattering. How can I face these students who are paying so much? I’m not interested in performing this violence that has been inflicted on me.”

Transformation of the Academic Workforce: Where do we go from here?

As many as 6,094,823 California residents may be struggling to make ends meet—more than 15 percent of California’s population.²⁵ Adjuncts in the LA Metro Area have decided it is time to come together to build a market-wide movement to improve compensation, benefits, job security, access to the tools and materials to do their work well, support for research and scholarship, meaningful access to academic freedom, and inclusion in the academic life and governance of their institutions.

Unionizing has made demonstrated improvements to the working conditions of adjuncts. In fact, median pay per course is 25 percent higher for part-time faculty represented by a union than for those that are not unionized. According to the 2012 Coalition on the Academic Workforce report, unionized part-time faculty also fare better on job security: 19 percent of unionized part-time faculty report they have some kind of job security, and 18 percent are even paid for course cancellation. In comparison, only 4 percent of nonunionized part-time faculty report having any job security, with only 10 percent reporting they receive compensation when a course is canceled.²⁶ Unionized adjuncts also report improved working conditions, such as increased access, support from their institution and opportunities to participate in governance.²⁷

Nationally, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) represents 23,000 faculty, 74,000 non-faculty higher education employees and 80,000 early childhood educators. Our adjunct faculty are organized in colleges throughout the country, from the Congress of Connecticut Community Colleges to the California State University system. And we are growing with campaigns in Washington, D.C., Boston, Seattle, Los Angeles, Baltimore, St. Louis, the San Francisco Bay Area, New Hampshire, Vermont and Upstate New York. In addition, the 2 million SEIU members and their children have a huge stake in the quality and accessibility of education—and we have a unique perspective on the challenges facing colleges and universities and an understanding that educational success depends on more than just the classroom.

In October 2014, part-time faculty at Tufts University in Boston overwhelmingly approved a landmark first union contract that makes groundbreaking progress in job stability, includes a significant increase in per course pay, and establishes new pathways for professional development. According to a Boston Globe report, “most part-time professors at Tufts University will get a 22 percent pay raise over the next three years and improved job security under a new contract that could influence negotiations at other schools in the Boston area and beyond where adjunct faculty have recently organized or are considering doing so.”²⁸

In the District of Columbia, SEIU Local 500 represents more than two-thirds of the adjuncts in the adjunct labor market, and has won improvements in compensation and benefits for their adjunct members. Contractually guaranteed benefits include increased job security, such as enhanced procedures for assignment and reappointment, and standards for discipline and dismissal. SEIU Local 500 has also negotiated better compensation packages, including pay increases that resulted in one department at George Washington University receiving up to a 32 percent increase.²⁹

California Faculty Association (CFA) represents tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty at the California State University system and is affiliated with SEIU, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the National Education Association. CFA’s contract—often considered the “gold standard” of adjunct contracts—includes increased job security, such as renewable, three-year contracts reserved for incumbents, and access to health insurance and retirement.³⁰

Methodology

The adjunct cost-of-living index in this report assumes an adjunct is compensated at a rate of \$2,300 per course or \$4,000 per course. According to AAUP's Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession, 2012–13, the median pay per course for part-time faculty members in fall 2010 in the Far-West was \$3,300 at a master's level private not-for-profit institution; \$4,500 at a doctoral level private not-for-profit institution.³¹ The four-year nonprofit universities examined in this report include bachelor's level, master's level and doctoral level institutions—and so the actual rate of pay an LA Metro Area adjunct is earning may be lower or higher depending on the school and the subject matter of the course.

Interviews with adjuncts living and working in LA Metro Area were done in November 2013 and December 2014. Adjuncts with teaching experience at 8 different nonprofit universities in the LA Metro Area were interviewed.³²

In this report, full- and part-time faculty that are not in the tenure track or in the tenure system will be referred to as contingent or adjunct faculty.

Academic Work and the L.A. Metro Area Economy

The LA Metro Area is an expensive place to live. For example, the cost of living in Los Angeles is 36.4 percent higher than the U.S. average, and the cost of living in Orange County is 46.4% higher than the U.S. average.³³ This analysis will compare certain cost-of-living measures in the L.A. Metro Area with the compensation paid to adjuncts in the market. As one adjunct describes, “I’ve been cut back to 21 hours a term, making my take home \$2000 for 3 months. There’s no benefits. I’ll survive by filing my tax return in January where I’ll get some of my taxes back from a visiting position and that’s how I will survive until May when another temporary job kicks in. I hope.”

Although many adjuncts express a love for their profession, they also are concerned about the sustainability of the profession with its current conditions. One instructor said, “I don’t think I’ll ever get a real job. I don’t think there are real jobs out there anymore. It’s all I can do to be ready to walk into the classroom. There’s no way that I have time to publish enough to be actually competitive in this world where the supply of jobs is kept artificially low. That’s why I think I’ll be permanently contingent.”

In order to supplement their low income and make ends meet, adjuncts often take on additional, non-academic jobs. One adjunct said, “Going into work, I thought, dang, I went to school for seven years. I have a master’s degree. Some of my friends from high school are starting to be able to pay for everything on their own and not ride off their parents. They have a decent job and benefits. Look at me, I’m doing something that I did when I was a kid—serving in high school—and still teaching at the same time. No one should have to do that. A couple times I’d see my students come in to eat. That was weird. They were like, ‘What are you doing, waiting tables here?’ I was like, ‘Yep.’ It was a little embarrassing, but that’s the reality of things.”

Academic Work and the Cost of Housing

How many classes must an adjunct professor teach to afford to rent a home in the L.A. Metro Area?

Median rent for a home in the City of Los Angeles is \$2,469.³⁴ As the federal Office of Affordable Housing Preservation notes, households spending more than 30 percent of income for housing are “considered cost burdened and may have difficulty affording necessities such as food, clothing, transportation and medical care.”³⁵

- An adjunct professor must teach between 22 and 30 classes a year to afford rent in the City of Los Angeles.³⁶

In Whittier, the median rent for a home is \$2,274.

- An adjunct professor must teach between 20 and 28 classes a year to afford rent in Whittier.

In Laguna Beach, the median rent for a home is \$4,154.

- An adjunct professor must teach between 37 and 50 classes a year to afford rent in Laguna Beach.

In Valencia, the median rent for a home is \$2,489.

- An adjunct professor must teach between 22 and 30 classes a year to afford rent in Valencia.

In Pasadena, the median rent for a home is \$2,150.

- An adjunct professor must teach between 19 and 26 classes a year to afford rent in metro Pasadena.

In North Hollywood, the median rent for a home is \$2,350.

- An adjunct professor must teach between 21 and 28 classes a year to afford rent in Utica.

In Westminster, the median rent for a home is \$1,654.

- An adjunct professor must teach between 15 and 20 classes a year to afford rent in Westminster.

In Long Beach, the median rent for a home is \$2,231.

- An adjunct professor must teach between 20 and 27 classes a year to afford rent in metro Long Beach.

Many adjuncts are burdened by their rental costs. One adjunct explained, “There was always a time in July, August, September where I’d just be terrified about making rent, because I couldn’t get teaching positions in the summer. So I would just borrow money. In L.A., there isn’t that big of a low end in the rental market. But I found it. I ended up moving in with my partner which made rent a lot more affordable. We spend a little under \$1000 a month, each.” Another adjunct shared her experience beyond financial burden: “I had to move into a house with like four people. I’m 42 and my roommates are in their late 20s or early 30s. So I’m declassified. I thought that at 42, I would be in a different place than my roommates who are graduate students. But actually they make more money than me.”

Many of the adjuncts we interviewed rent instead of purchase a home because of the instability of the work. An instructor explained, “In terms of the financial situation it means that my husband and I have decided to not to buy a house, not until it’s something that’s a sure thing. If I’m continuing as an adjunct forever, we’ll probably continue to rent. It’s difficult to know when I’ll have three courses or when I’ll go down to one. Plus, I still have the desire to put out the nation-wide search. So we’re not necessarily going to stay here, although we want to stay here.”

The lack of job security results in an adjunct living with the constant stress that their income could be taken away. One adjunct said, “I’ll calculate my budget months in advance in an Excel document. But I can only go as far as what I know. It’s tough, because the university doesn’t tell me what classes I’m taking until a few weeks before it begins. I can generally count on the character class that I’ve taught for the last seven years. Of course, it could always get taken away from me. But I know that they like the work that I do, and they’re dependent on me. But everything else I don’t factor in until I see that it’s there. It’s really stressful.”

How many classes must an adjunct teach to afford a house in the L.A. Metro Area?

Median home cost in the City of Los Angeles is \$530,400,³⁷ which results in monthly housing payments of \$2,670.³⁸

- An adjunct professor must teach between 24 and 33 classes a year to afford a home in the City of Los Angeles.³⁹

Median home cost in the Whittier is \$453,500, which results in monthly housing payments of \$2,294.

- An adjunct professor must teach between 20 and 28 classes a year to afford a home, in Whittier.

Median home cost in Laguna Beach is \$1,377,900, which results in monthly housing payments of \$6,808.

- An adjunct professor must teach between 61 and 83 classes a year to afford a home in Laguna Beach.

Median home cost in Valencia is \$464,500, which results in monthly housing payments of \$2,348.

- An adjunct professor must teach between 21 and 29 classes a year to afford a home in Valencia.

Median home cost in Pasadena is \$452,600 which results in monthly housing payments of \$2,290.

- An adjunct professor must teach between 20 and 28 classes a year to afford a home in Pasadena.

Median home cost in Long Beach is \$480,500, which results in monthly housing payments of \$2,426.

- An adjunct professor must teach between 21 and 30 classes a year to afford a home in Long Beach.

Median home cost in North Hollywood is \$469,200, which results in monthly housing payments of \$2,371.

- An adjunct professor must teach between 21 and 29 classes a year to afford a home in North Hollywood.

Median home cost in Westminster is \$240,800, which results in monthly housing payments of \$1256.

- An adjunct professor must teach between 11 and 16 classes a year to afford a home in Westminster.

Affordable housing was often cited as a struggle by the adjuncts interviewed for this project. When adjuncts are asked when they think they would be able to own a home, many respond as one Los Angeles adjunct stated: "Never."

Other adjuncts feel like they must give up on owning a home. An Orange County adjunct living in a median income suburb with her husband and two children stated, "We've given up the idea of ever owning a house. The house across the street from us just sold for half a million dollars. We're not in the greatest neighborhood. I was shocked. As long as we are living Southern California, that's not a realistic goal to own a home."

One adjunct shared how inconsistent work affects her housing decisions, "They never have classes for me in the summer. I have not found other jobs at other universities in LA. I've tried at Art Center, Otis, but it never pans out. For the last two years, I live at my mom's place in the summer and sublet my place in L.A., because I can't afford it. I'm 42 years old."

Academic Work and the Cost of Groceries

How many classes does an adjunct professor have to teach to afford groceries?

- An adjunct professor would need to teach from 1 to 1.5 classes per year to cover the cost of groceries for one person.
- An adjunct professor would need to teach up to 5 classes per year to cover the cost of groceries for a family.⁴⁰

Adjuncts with small course loads, a common occurrence in the summer, may struggle to afford groceries. One adjunct explained her food choices over the past number of years as an adjunct in Los Angeles: "I try not to go out to eat more than once a month. I pack my lunches. I don't buy cheese. I get a lot of bulk food. I make choices. I don't buy prepackaged cereals. I buy raw buckwheat and raw oatmeal. It's a consumer choice, political choice, but also economically based. But I don't deprive myself. I've never been hungry. But the thing that's shifting that is part of the learning experience is that you are raised with this idea that you will continue in this economic class with the class privileges. Yesterday, I went to a Los Feliz wine shop, I bought a wine for \$15. I appreciate that level of knowledge. But that's not really my income bracket. It's really had a shift in my class affiliation."

Courses available to teach are often in short supply during the summer, making already tight budgets tighter. One interviewee said, "You could go out and have dinner out, or you can get groceries for like 3 days. ... There have been times where it's like I have a thing of dried beans, giant thing of rice--there's my dinners for the next week. Things like fresh stuff are really expensive."



Adjuncts also budget tightly for costs for other necessary items. One Los Angeles adjunct explained. “Generally I will walk around campus and take free things from events. I will come home with a bunch of stuff. Every time I would go past the student health center at UCLA, I would take a toothbrush and a little thing of toothpaste. So I still have a couple. I’ve been rationing them. Toothbrushes are like \$4-5 each.”

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Academic Work and the Cost of Day Care

How many classes does an adjunct professor have to teach to afford daycare for one child?

According to reports, Los Angeles has one of the most expensive daycare costs in the United States.⁴¹

- An adjunct professor would need to teach 3 to 4 classes a year just to cover the average cost of full-time infant care at a child care center in Los Angeles or Orange County.
- An adjunct professor would need to teach 2 to 3 classes a year just to cover the average cost of full-time preschooler at a child care center in Los Angeles or Orange County.⁴²

One adjunct with children who are 3 and 7 years old said, “A substantial amount of our money goes to daycare, rent, and health care. And so one of [my husband’s] bimonthly checks, when it comes home, is less than two hundred dollars. His university has it set up so that our expenses for day care, rent, and healthcare are extracted first tax-free, but there is essentially nothing left over for that half of the month. You’d think tenure track faculty would be able to have a buffer, but it hasn’t really worked out that way. Rent is a little over \$2,000 a month. We have daycare on campus. But they keep raising it. It’s about \$1,131 a month now. It’s really high. When our two children were in daycare, it was over \$2,300 a month.”

At times, the high cost of daycare and working conditions in adjunct markets can have a negative effect in family life. An adjunct explained, “It puts a damper on the mood on our family. Between my husband and myself, we just have this lingering worry that’s there all the time. It’s harder to get really joyful about our work, when that worry is always kind of in the bottom, in the back. Otherwise, a big part of my life right now mentally is so many different directions. Alongside bills, there’s also these parent events at both schools, and frequent requests for us to donate to the class fund. It is especially hard for me because I’m balancing events on two college campuses where I work on top of my two sons’ schools. It’s all these different stimuli from all these different places. It makes me feel pretty darn crazy. I feel scattered in many different directions.”

Another adjunct offered, “Part of the problem is that when you’re working at all these different schools, they all have different schedules. They have different breaks. So trying to plan just the time to get away with the kids, when you do have the money coming, so often we just can’t find a time when our breaks match up. So the most we can hope for is a two-night weekend at the most. And then when we do have more time in the summer, there’s no money. That gets frustrating.”

“Me and my wife have wanted to have children for 8 years but felt like we couldn’t afford it. Now I’m 43 years old and may never be able to have children.”

The high cost of childcare also leads to some adjuncts feeling like children are not an option. One adjunct explained, “Me and my wife have wanted to have children for 8 years but felt like we couldn’t afford it. Now I’m 43 years old and may never be able to have children.”

Academic Work and the Cost of Transportation

How many classes does an adjunct professor have to teach to afford to get around the L.A. Metro Area?

- An adjunct professor would need to teach 1 to 2 classes to cover the average cost of automobile expenses and gasoline per year.⁴³

Especially in the Los Angeles Metro Area, many of the adjuncts interviewed reported that a car is necessary to travel long distances between campuses to teach classes. One adjunct who teaches at three different institutions in Los Angeles and Orange County said, “I fill up my gas tank at least twice a week. There was awhile there it was \$60 to fill my gas tank. So that’s almost \$500/month for gas.”

The long commutes between schools result in an additional layer of stress to the lives of Los Angeles Metro Area adjuncts, who must drive through traffic over long distances. One adjunct shared the chain of unexpected expenses and personal losses incurred due to difficulties with commute in the area, “There were times it would take me three hours to get to school, because of traffic or road closures. Some of the nightmares, there was enough snow that you’d shovel out and put the chains on. Then you get half way out of your neighborhood and then the chains didn’t work, because the sun was in a certain spot. So I’d have to get out and take the chains off. Then I get to another area and I’d have to put the chains back on. So my hands are cut and bleeding. And I’m covered in wheel grease and gunk. At a certain point, I said, ‘This has got to end.’ So we moved. But my daughter got a Fulbright scholarship to [her college]. But when we moved, she lost it, because we weren’t aware that it was based on the county we were in. We changed from San Bernardino to Orange County. So she lost part of her scholarship. She is now doing student loans for that.”

Even when attempting to minimize costs of transportation, the expense of owning a car also weighs on many of the adjuncts. One adjunct said, “We decided to get a Prius, but didn’t have a huge down payment on that car. So our car payments are another \$400 or so a month. On top of that is also gas, which is about \$25-50 a month, insurance, and maintenance, which is maybe \$400 a year.”

Academic Work and the Cost of Health and Medical Care

How many classes must an adjunct teach to afford medical care across hospitals in California? ⁴⁴

- An adjunct professor would need to teach 6 to 8 classes to pay for a cesarean delivery;⁴⁵
- An adjunct professor would need to teach 19 to 26 classes to afford care for a hip replacement;⁴⁶
- An adjunct professor would need to teach 47 to 65 classes to afford care for a coronary bypass surgery.⁴⁷

Although emergency medical care is expensive, it is often chronic medical conditions that cause the most stress. For example, one adjunct said, “I have a lot of things that I need, like medications and things that I need to make sure that I don’t dig myself into the hole even further, like going to the emergency room doctor instead of a real doctor. That was a huge stress, and it’s still kind of expensive. All the prescriptions add up. All the different inhalers that I have, and a cavity from today. That’s an even bigger expense than transportation.”

Some adjuncts report forgoing or delaying essential health care over years because of the expense. One adjunct reported, “I haven’t had dental insurance for the past seven years. So that was always out of pocket, which is kinda pricy. I don’t have eye insurance either. My parents helped me out to get glasses four years ago. And I just went to Costco for an eye appointment. I’ve had these frames for about four years. They’re pretty durable; I’ve kicked them around a lot. But it’s about time to get a new pair.

The combined cost of childcare and medical care for children is also expensive for adjuncts. One Los Angeles adjunct explained, “My son had ear tube surgery. Some kids don’t drain their ears very well, so there are fluids stuck in there, and the surgeon makes a small cut to insert a tube to help with the drainage. It was actually a very routine thing. It ended up costing us \$2,000 for this surgery at UCLA hospital.”

How many classes does an adjunct have to teach to afford health insurance?

- An adjunct professor would need to teach 1 class to afford the lowest priced single coverage health insurance per year.
- An adjunct professor would need to teach 2 to 3 classes to afford the lowest priced health insurance for family coverage. These low premiums often come with high deductibles—\$3,571 per year for individuals and \$6,198 for families—before the insurance plan will cover certain services, including some prescription drugs, emergency room visits and hospital stays.⁴⁸

Repeatedly, interviewees pointed to health insurance as one of their biggest concerns. One person said, “I had Obamacare over the summer. That was about \$200/month. That was the single biggest stress for me, after I finished my PhD, when I was getting ready to start being permanently contingent. I was really happy that Obamacare was there, even though it was expensive, because I absolutely have to have health insurance.”

Another adjunct reported supplementing minimal health insurance with public assistance, “I had to use free clinics and other means.”

Academic Work and the Cost of Student Debt

How many classes must an adjunct teach to pay back student loan debt?

The average cumulative student loan debt of all graduate borrowers who completed their degrees in 2012 is \$57,600, adjusted for inflation.⁴⁹

- An adjunct professor would need to teach 1 to 3 classes per year just to cover student loan payments.⁵⁰

Many adjuncts live with large student debt bills. The burden of high educational debt, which cannot be discharged through bankruptcy and can follow an individual for life, hinders meaningful savings and the ability to make major purchases such as a home.

“All my money is going towards bills and student loans. In 8 years after graduation my student loans (currently in deferment) have climbed to \$190,000. I’m trying to figure out how I will make those payments when they become due.”

Many of the interviewees were impacted by high student debt. One adjunct with student loan debt said, “All my money is going towards bills and student loans. In 8 years after graduation my student loans (currently in deferment) have climbed to \$190,000. I’m trying to figure out how I will make those payments when they become due.”

Another adjunct spoke about the combined debt load after marriage: “My husband has over \$100,000 for his PhD. And I have around \$60,000 for my MFA. It is outrageous. Our monthly payments are about \$1,485 a month. He has some private loans, because he was studying abroad. We’ll never pay it off. I mean seriously. We don’t actually ever look at that or talk about that. It’s just what we do and what we will be doing.”

Academic Work and the Cost of Entertainment

Adjuncts interviewed for this project talked about not being able to afford to participate in some of the fun things in life—going to restaurants or on vacations—because they could not afford the expense. One said, “Going to see a movie is like a pretty big thing for me. It’s interesting, because it connects to a larger political question about exile from capitalism. I have this utopia of it. But you really need a support system and a community to implement it.”

Another adjunct elaborated, “I only go to a restaurant a couple times a month. But movies--hardly at all. I go to the movies maybe twice a year. And I love the movies, being a filmmaker and professor. Concerts, hardly ever. I haven’t been to a concert in such a long time. It’s nice to go to the bar with friends, but I don’t do that too often. We usually just hang out at people’s houses. It would be nice to go to the gym, but I run on the street. Vacations, that’s a big one. We took a vacation for the first time in two years. It was a road trip and camping. The only time I ever fly is to go see family at home back east. A lot of times my parents pay for that plane ticket. I haven’t flown somewhere for fun ever in my adult life. I have never flown somewhere just to go somewhere that wasn’t where family is. I’m 33 years old.”

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Academic Work and the Cost of Retirement

Although some of the public and nonprofit colleges and universities allow adjuncts to enroll in their retirement savings plans, rarely, if ever, do colleges offer a matching contribution. Most adjuncts cannot afford to participate in any retirement savings plan. One adjunct professor said, “It’s very much a month-to-month thing. We’re just paying the rent, just paying the bills, just getting everything covered. But it’s hard to plan for retirement or the future.”

When interviewees were asked how they are preparing for retirement, most said they are not, including one who said, “Apparently, I have a retirement plan at [the university that I work at], but I doubt there’s a lot in it. I’m not worried about retirement. I’m worried about surviving right now.”

Often, interviewees expressed, “[The university] that I teach at has a 401K plan that they have never publicized to adjunct faculty. They kept sending me emails about a potential plan, so I probed and found out a plan existed. The 401K plan is not matched by the university.”



Academic Work and the California Economy

What does this low rate of pay mean to an adjunct living and working in the L.A. Metro Area—how do adjuncts make ends meet? Through our interviews, we found a reliance on the low- and no-cost programs offered through Los Angeles and Orange County’s social welfare programs.

The majority of the adjuncts interviewed were either insured through a spouse or they accessed free or low-cost health insurance through Covered California, California’s health insurance exchange. Until recently, certain eligibility requirements may have prevented many adjuncts from qualifying for the Medi-Cal program in California, although many may meet the income guidelines. For example, to qualify for Medicaid, an individual must have an income of \$16,105 or less and a family of four can earn no more than \$32,913 annually in 2014.⁵¹ If an adjunct teaches 4 courses a year and earns \$3,300 per course, he or she will have an annual income of \$13,200 and may qualify for Medical.⁵² An adjunct that is the sole breadwinner in his or her family of four could teach up to 9 classes and still qualify for Medi-Cal.⁵³

In addition to increased usage of the healthcare safety net, a low paid academic work force may need other social welfare programs to subsist. For example, to qualify for CalFresh (formerly known as California Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), an individual can earn no more than \$23,352 per year and a family of four can earn no more than \$47,712 annually in 2014. An adjunct can teach 7 classes per year and still qualify for food stamps. An adjunct with a family of four can teach 14 classes and still qualify for food stamps.⁵⁴

Also, adjuncts living in Los Angeles may qualify for Section 8 rent vouchers. For example, adjuncts living in Los Angeles may qualify if they are a family of four earning less than \$40,750 a year. An adjunct earning \$3,300 per class could teach up to 12 classes and still qualify for a family of four.⁵⁵

Additionally, adjuncts may qualify for California’s Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), which provides assistance with heating bills. To qualify, an individual can earn no more than \$24,236 per year. An adjunct can teach 7 classes per year and still qualify for this assistance.⁵⁶

The impact of high student debt loads may further complicate adjuncts’ lives and limit their spending power and their ability to save. Adjuncts may have to delay or forgo home ownership and will struggle when facing retirement. When asked the question: “How are you preparing for retirement?” many of the adjuncts interviewed laughed out loud in response. One adjunct in her forties stated, “I’m not worried about retirement; I’m worried about surviving right now. I have not been able to put anything aside for my retirement. There’s no retirement for me.”

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Conclusion

The current situation at institutions of higher education is not sustainable for the adjuncts who represent 58 percent of all teaching faculty at nonprofit universities in the L.A. Metro area. As one interviewee summarized, “When you’re dealing with the drama, and the politics, and the lack of pay, and when you see how other faculty around you are being treated, or the fact that the best and the brightest suddenly disappear, it gets really disheartening. And that drama then comes into your classroom and it eats up your brain space and emotional space. These students are paying \$40,000 to attend that school. It’s like, how much did you pay for this class? Do you know how much I’m getting paid for this class? It doesn’t even come close. It’s wrong.”

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Unionization has made demonstrated improvements to the working conditions of adjuncts. According to the Coalition on the Academic Workforce, unionized adjuncts report more job security and have a median pay per course that is 25 percent higher than their nonunion counterparts.⁵⁷

While this report has focused on adjuncts struggling to survive on adjunct wages, there are also adjuncts from Maine to California who, in forming a union, have greatly improved their financial situation. Adjuncts at American University for instance, not only fought for and won an increase in minimum pay rates per course, but also protections on recurring assignments and an expanded and more transparent evaluations process, among other important gains. While unionization has the potential to improve compensation and benefits, it also provides an avenue to improve job security, ensure a voice in the administration, protect academic freedom and provide a community for an atomized workforce.

Adjuncts in the L.A. Metro Area have begun to come together with Adjunct Action, a project of SEIU, to change the face of higher education in the L.A. Metro Area. This work must continue and grow so that the approximately 11,703 nonunion adjuncts at nonprofit universities in the L.A. Metro Area can stand with more than 23,000 faculty that have already unionized with SEIU to improve higher education and improve working conditions and benefits for adjuncts.

End Notes

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- 57 "Portrait of Part-Time Faculty Members," supra n. 26.

Notes



Adjunct Action/Faculty Forward is a campaign that unites adjunct professors at campuses across the country to address the crisis in higher education and the troubling trend toward a marginalized teaching faculty that endangers our profession. By coming together in Adjunct Action, we have the power to create change by building a marketwide movement to raise standards for faculty and students alike.

Adjunct Action is a project of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the nation's largest and fastest-growing union and home to more than 23,000 faculty who have won improvements in pay, job security, evaluation processes, and access to retirement benefits. We are currently active in Washington, D.C., Boston, Seattle, Los Angeles, Baltimore, St. Louis, the San Francisco Bay Area, New Hampshire, Vermont and Upstate New York and are excited to work with interested adjuncts in any market across the country.