

Too many dream of a charmed life in academia

In reality, there's a growing underclass of poor, over-educated college teachers known as adjuncts

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The academic dream is a powerful thing. To be surrounded by brilliant colleagues, working on discovering new insights for the betterment of society, is a heady prospect. To enjoy ironclad job security, to rest easy deep into middle age as your peers in the private sector grow anxious about being laid off, would be an almost unimaginable relief. And to enjoy both the company and the respect of energetic youngsters, not to mention free gyms, lots of time off and good healthcare—it's no surprise that for many, academia is an ideal job.

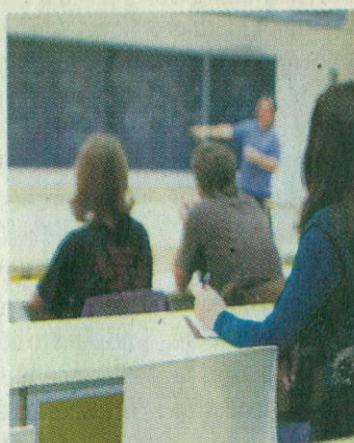
But for most, that dream never becomes a reality. US universities are seeing the rise of a growing underclass of poor, overeducated college teachers known as adjuncts, clinging to low-paid insecure jobs with little hope of advancing to the coveted ranks of the tenure track. Tenured and tenure-track positions have increased by about a quarter since 1975, and the university system has expanded. But part-time positions have more than quadrupled. Meanwhile, the number of doctorates granted in the US grew by about two-thirds.

This shift happened during a

time when US college tuition was soaring. Now college enrolment is stagnating or even falling, meaning that more tuition increases are unlikely. If universities were shifting toward adjuncts and away from the tenure track when times were booming, imagine what they'll do now, when they're forced to conserve their resources.

Not a great life

What is life like for an adjunct? Not great, according to *New Faculty Majority*, a website founded by pro-adjunct activists. In 2010, the median part-time college teacher pay had a full-time equivalent of \$24,000—less than half the salary of the median kindergarten teacher. And not all part-time faculty can even get full-time work hours. Adjuncts also received essentially no wage premium based on their credentials—in other words, so much for that advanced degree. Benefits were also minimal, with only 23.4 per cent of part-time teachers at public universities receiving health coverage. Reports from the American Association of University Professors paint a similar picture. For a graduate student, this kind of low-paid work can be just another cost of getting an education. But for an adjunct, it's a life of poverty. *The*



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Guardian ran an article about the harsh life of adjuncts, telling one anecdote about a middle-aged teacher turning to prostitution to pay the bills. Other stories include homelessness and dependence on food banks.

Why would a highly educated, skilled worker in a rich country such as the US condemn herself to a life in the poorhouse? Surely, someone with the intellectual firepower to teach college students could get a job in digital-media marketing, or as a paralegal, or in any of the other middle-class occupations available to educated, hard-working Americans. One answer is that adjuncts are making such sacrifices for the chance to pursue the

academic dream. That would put academia in roughly the same class of occupations as acting and professional sports, where large numbers of unsuccessful lower-level aspirants struggle for years in the hopes of landing a coveted chance at a glamorous, high-status position.

The odds

But how many adjuncts really achieve that moonshot? Anecdotally it's said to be unusual. And there are certainly several huge barriers in place. The first is simply long odds—with the number of tenure-track positions barely growing and adjunct numbers exploding, the chance of going from the latter to the former keeps getting worse. Second, tenure-track jobs are often the result of publishing research—unlike grad students, adjuncts often hold other jobs and don't have a lot of extra time to work on papers.

Third, in order to interview for tenure-track jobs, adjuncts typically have to pay their own travel costs and conference-registration fees (unlike other candidates). And fourth, there's the chance that a long career as an adjunct simply makes a candidate look less promising, even before age discrimination is taken into account. There are

other reasons to be a poor adjunct, of course. Some people undoubtedly love teaching college kids, and are willing to endure poverty in order to do it. Others are retired and need something to do. But it's possible that many adjuncts are desperately chasing an academic illusion that, realistically, they will never catch. Over-optimism is one of the most consistent findings in the psychology literature on behavioural biases.

There's also the cultural factor. Many people who go through the academic system idolise it. Their mentors and life advisers tend to be tenured professors, to whom doing anything other than academia probably sounds like failure.

What will end the misery of the adjuncts? Unionisation helps improve pay and conditions a bit, but doesn't change the basic equation. Nor are universities likely to be morally shamed into treating adjuncts more like tenure-track faculty. The only solution is for fewer people to go into the non-tenure-track college lecturing profession. Lower the supply of over-optimistic quasi-academics willing to endure relentless poverty to cling to the fading light of the university fantasy, and the wages of adjuncts should rise. **BLOOMBERG**