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The academic job market

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Quad 136

The Academic Job Market

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The Academic Job Market



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Among the many issues related to economic models of higher education, especially the viability of residential liberal arts colleges, is the role of adjunct faculty. To significantly simplify a complex academic job market, there are two types of jobs for professors.

The first is the classic tenure track job. It is a permanent position, meaning that the institution expects this specific position to continue to exist into the foreseeable future. It almost always requires a Ph.D. It pays a market driven wage, typically determined by looking at a market basket of peer institutions. It offers benefits like health care and a retirement plan, among other options. Once a faculty member successfully gets through the tenure review process (usually after about six years), he or she receives tenure and the promise of lifetime

employment—barring some kind of financial exigency for the institution or gross incompetence on the part of the faculty member. These jobs make up the majority of jobs at the most private four year institutions in the United States and most of the top-ranked public institutions. Tenure track jobs represent about a quarter of all academic jobs.

The second professorial job is that of an adjunct, or part-time faculty member. These jobs often continue from year to year but do not include the explicit promise of permanence. They often require a Ph.D. but some graduate degree is almost always required. Compensation is also market-driven, where the comparison market basket is adjunct pay at other institutions in the same geographic region. Pay is usually per course and ranges from \$3000-\$7500 and benefits are rare. Adjunct faculty may teach as many as five or six courses in a year, sometimes cobbling together a full course load across more than one institution. Adjunct jobs do not provide the opportunity to earn tenure. Adjunct positions are the majority of positions at many two-year institutions and at many less-prestigious state universities.

For Ph.D.'s seeking an academic position, of course the former positions are much more desirable than the latter, but from an administrative point of view, adjunct positions are an absolute necessity to make the economic model work. These positions provide flexibility in an uncertain world and help keep costs (and tuition) down.

For an institution that wants to deliver a personalized education with significant faculty interaction but cannot be sure of its enrollment from year to year, adjuncts represent a cushion that allows many educational institutions to exist. This flexibility certainly comes at a cost to adjuncts, who do not have the certainty or compensation that their tenure track peers have, but absent the flexibility that adjuncts offer, such positions for Ph.D.s who love their subjects would not exist. Only the richest of institutions, who hire very few adjuncts, can afford to have almost all their positions be tenure track.

There has been a move to attempt to unionize adjuncts and improve their working conditions, as this recent [New York Times article](#) describes, but anything that raises the costs of hiring adjuncts will likely lead to less employment at most institutions, who simply do not have the resources to pay adjuncts more. Alternatively, institutions could decrease the number of tenure track positions and increase the share of adjuncts in the overall faculty, in an attempt to keep total instructional costs under control. But there is no magic wand that will improve adjunct pay or working conditions that will not have unintended consequences.

This two-tiered professorial world is not new and is part of an increasing specialization in many service-based industries, as this [Chronicle of Higher Education article](#) describes, but as concerns about the costs of higher education continue, the role of adjuncts and the nature and quality of the educational experience will continue.

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