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The adjunct dilemma

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Quad 136

The Adjunct Dilemma

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The Adjunct Dilemma



All but the most well-endowed colleges and universities rely to some extent on adjunct faculty members to teach their students. Some programs, often evening and weekend offerings, rely almost exclusively on adjuncts, while in more traditional programs, like the bachelor's degrees offered by the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, adjuncts are often in the minority but are still crucial to the institutions' functioning. (At CSB and SJU about 80% of our faculty members hold traditional tenure-track positions.*)

Adjunct faculty have been in the news both locally and nationally. Earlier this summer adjunct faculty at Hamline [voted to join the Service Employees International Union \(SEIU\)](#). Faculty at the University of St. Thomas [rejected unionization](#) in a similar vote. At the [Federal level](#):

More than 500 adjunct professors and their advocates have signed a [petition](#) calling for the U.S. Department of Labor to investigate their working conditions. The petition's authors, all current or former adjuncts at various colleges and universities, allege that they are being paid for only part of the work they do, and that that amounts to wage theft. The petition is addressed to David Weil, director of the agency's Wage and Hour Division, and urges him to "open an investigation into the labor practices of our colleges and universities in the employment of contingent faculty, including adjunct instructors and full-time contract faculty outside the tenure track."

The goal of these actions is to raise the compensation paid to adjunct faculty and possibly provide them with more stability by requiring universities to offer adjuncts tenure track jobs after some period of employment.

It is undoubtedly difficult to be an adjunct faculty member. They typically have the same terminal degrees that their tenure track colleagues have—most often a Ph.D. Adjuncts are paid a fraction of what tenure track faculty earn (50% or less), and in most cases adjuncts receive no benefits. Furthermore, there is little stability for adjuncts whose employment is a function of demand and can be released at the end of a semester or academic year.

Yet it is exactly these realities of the adjuncts' life that make them a necessity for most colleges and universities. As schools face tremendous pressure to keep costs and tuition down, adjunct faculty are a low cost way to cover some course offerings.

In addition, as enrollments fluctuate or demand for certain subjects varies, adjuncts provide essential flexibility for departments and the administration because there is no long-term commitment to adjuncts as there is to tenure track faculty. Even non-tenured junior faculty who are tenure track are assumed to have a six year commitment from their employer, at which time a tenure decision is made.

In a perfect world, schools and adjuncts would both like all faculty members to be tenure track. While often adjunct faculty are excellent and committed teachers ([see this Northwestern University study](#)), having a stable long-term faculty is in the interests of students who develop relationships with their professors that can often outlast their college days. Stability is also valued by the faculty who want experienced colleagues to share administrative and advising roles, as well as teaching responsibilities. But this kind of stability comes at a significant cost in terms of compensation and lack of flexibility.

The financial pressures being faced by the vast majority of post-secondary institutions make this perfect world unlikely to be realized anytime soon.

So as adjunct faculty exercise their rights to organize and seek higher wages, better benefits and more job stability are likely to bump up against the painful economic realities of higher education. Two outcomes are likely to result at unionized institutions:

1. Administrators will find it necessary to decrease the number of adjuncts they hire, as their cost rises. Those lucky enough to keep their jobs will be paid more, but at the cost of jobs to their newly unemployed colleagues.
2. Administrators might well seek to replace open tenure track positions with adjuncts as they seek to efficiently spend limited compensation dollars to meet teaching needs. In this case we might observe the perverse outcome of unionization increasing adjunct positions at the expense of tenure track jobs.

A final irony could well be that non-unionized institutions will find they have a larger pool of adjuncts to choose from as their unionized competitors release adjuncts, thus putting downward pressure on adjunct wages. (If this analysis seems familiar, it is not unlike the analysis of the minimum wage that is a staple of introductory economics courses.)

While most in higher education would like to see higher wages paid to adjuncts and more tenure track positions for Ph.D.s, the resources for these outcomes must come from somewhere. Sadly, there is no such thing as a free lunch.

* Tenure-track simply means that the faculty member will be evaluated for tenure within a fixed window, usually 6 or 7 years. If they earn tenure, they have a job for life, assuming they fulfill their contractual obligations and their employer does not experience any financial exigencies.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | August 25th, 2014 | Categories: [Economics](#), [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).