

Colleges' adjunct instructors carry big teaching load for low pay, no benefits

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Evelyn Christner has a job — actually, four jobs — with low pay, negligible sick time, no vacation or health insurance, no retirement plan, no guarantee of work and zero long-term job security. Christner doesn't serve french fries or run the cash register at a convenience store; she teaches anthropology and sociology to college students.

Part-time adjuncts like her, who freelance without the benefits of tenure or even regular employment, make up the majority of college instructors in the U.S. Tight budgets are pushing colleges and universities to rely increasingly on adjuncts (sometimes called associate or contingent faculty members), but their lives often are a far cry from the ivory-tower image of traditional academe.

Jack Cooley, senior vice president for academic affairs for Columbus State Community College, knows that the life of an adjunct is hard. He wishes the college could hire more tenure-track faculty members and pay adjuncts more, but it can't afford to. Most years, just 35 to 45 percent of Columbus State's classes are taught by full-time faculty members. "We rely heavily on our adjuncts," Cooley said.

This semester, Christner, 58, who has a master's degree in cultural anthropology and is only a dissertation short of a doctorate in biomedical anthropology, is teaching one course each at Columbus State, Columbus College of Art & Design, Franklin University and ITT Technical Institute. Next semester? She can't say; adjunct instructors typically find out only weeks before classes start whether they'll be hired to teach a course.

They also can put unpaid hours into preparing for a class, only to find out that it's canceled because too few students enrolled or a full-time faculty member was assigned. Christner once saw \$3,000 she was counting on disappear that way. "That can bring you to tears," she said.

Around the country, adjuncts and their supporters among regular faculty members are advocating for better working conditions. A year ago, a group called the New Faculty Majority organized a "national adjunct walkout day" to draw attention. In Ohio, about 200 adjuncts have joined the Ohio Part-Time Faculty Association, according to David Wilder, co-chairman of the group.

Groups in Cleveland and Columbus hope to organize a union, Wilder said, but Ohio presents a special challenge: The state's collective-bargaining law for public employees excludes part-time college instructors.

Between one class and the next, Christner's office is in the back of her Honda CRV, where she keeps color-coded files for each of her courses. She drives from teaching gig to teaching gig and walks into her next classroom, usually toting a tall iced tea and pulling a filing case on wheels, packed the night before with the next day's essentials.

At the rate of around \$50 per hour in the classroom — with no pay for time developing the course, planning or grading papers, let alone driving from class to class — and with two part-time summer jobs, she figures she cleared about \$30,000 in a year.

While she would welcome relief from any of the challenges of her job, "the biggest disadvantage is (the lack of) job security." Advance notice and semester-to-semester certainty would help. "It would be so much less stressful if they would just say, 'Here's what we want you to do for the next year.' "

She knows she could earn better pay and benefits in a semi-skilled job. She keeps teaching, she said, because "I

like what I'm doing. I really think I'd be miserable in another field." She's been relying exclusively on teaching for 13 years.

Columbus State's Cooley admires that determination. "You look at what (adjuncts) have to do to put together the equivalent of a full-time job, and it's moving," he said. Among higher-education administrators, he said, "how to help your adjuncts" is a constant conversation."

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