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Professors on food stamps: The shocking true story of academia in 2014

Forget minimum wage, some adjunct professors say they're making 50 cents an hour. Wait till you read these stories

MATT SACCARO

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You've probably heard the old stereotypes about professors in their ivory tower lecturing about Kafka while clad in a tweed jacket. But for many professors today, the reality is quite different: being so poorly paid and treated, that they're more likely to be found bargain-hunting at day-old bread stores. This is academia in 2014.

"The most shocking thing is that many of us don't even earn the federal minimum wage," said Miranda Merklein, an adjunct professor from Santa Fe who started teaching in 2008. "Our students didn't know that professors with PhDs aren't even earning as much as an entry-level fast food worker. We're not calling for the \$15 minimum wage. We don't even make minimum wage. And we have no benefits and no job security."

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Over three quarters of college professors are adjunct. Legally, adjunct positions are part-time, at-will employment. Universities pay adjunct professors by the course, **anywhere between \$1,000 to \$5,000**. So if a professor teaches three courses in both the fall and spring semesters at a rate of \$3000 per course, they'll make \$18,000 dollars. The average full-time barista **makes the same yearly wage**. However, a full-time adjunct works more than 40 hours a week. They're not paid for most of those hours.

"If it's a three credit course, you're paid for your time in the classroom only," said Merklein. "So everything else you do is by donation. If you hold office hours, those you're doing for free. Your grading you do for free. ... Anything we do with the student where we sit down and explain what happened when the student was absent, that's also free labor. Some would call it wage theft because these are things we have to do in order to keep our jobs. We have to do things we're not getting paid for. It's not optional."

Merklein was far from the only professor with this problem.

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"It can be a tremendous amount of work," said Alex Kudera. Kudera started teaching in 1996 and is the author of a novel about adjunct professorship, "**Fight For Your Long Day**." "When I was an adjunct, I didn't have a social life. It's basically just work all the time. You plan your weekend around the fact that you're going to be doing work Saturday and Sunday — typically grading papers, which is emotionally exhausting. The grading can be tedious but at least it's a private thing. It's basically 5-10 hours a day for every day of the week."

One professor from Indiana who spoke to Salon preferred to remain anonymous. "At some point early in my adjunct career, I broke down my pay hourly. I figured out that I was making under minimum wage and then I stopped thinking about it," he said. "I can't speak for everyone, but I essentially design my own courses. And sometimes I don't find out how many courses I'm going to be teaching until maybe Thursday and they start Monday. ... So I have to develop a course, and it's been the case where one summer I taught English 102 where the course was literally dropped in my lap three days before it started and I had to develop it entirely from scratch. It didn't even have a text book. That was three 16-hour days in a row developing a syllabus. ... You're expected to be in contact with students constantly. You have to be available to them all the time. You're expected to respond to emails generally within 24 hours. I'm always on-call. And it's one of my favorite parts of my job, I don't regret it, but if you factored those on-call hours in, that'd be the end of it. I'd be making 50 cents an hour."

Being financially secure and teaching at an institute of higher education are almost mutually exclusive, even among professors who are able to teach the maximum amount of courses each semester. Thus, **more than half** of adjunct professors in the United States seek a second job. Not all professors can find additional employment. An advanced degree slams most doors shut and opens a handful by the narrowest crack.

Nathaniel Oliver taught as an adjunct for four years in Alabama. He received \$12,000 a year during his time teaching.

"You fall in this trap where you may be working for less than you would be at a place that pays minimum wage yet you can't get the minimum wage jobs because of your

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education,” Oliver said.

Academia’s tower might be ivory but it casts an obsidian shadow. Oliver was one of many professors trapped in the oxymoronic life of pedantic destitution. **Some professors in his situation became homeless.** Oliver was “fortunate” enough to only require food stamps, **a fact of life** for many adjuncts.

“It’s completely insane,” he said. “And this isn’t happening just to me. More and more people are doing it.”

“We have food stamps,” said the anonymous adjunct from Indiana. “We wouldn’t be able to survive without them.”

“Many professors are on food stamps and they go to food donation centers. They donate plasma. And that’s a pretty regular occurrence,” Merklein told Salon.

Life isn’t much easier for those lucky enough to find another income stream. Many are reduced to menial service jobs and other forms of first-world deprivation.

“I ended up applying for a job in a donut shop recently,” said an Ohio professor who requested to go by a pseudonym. Professor Doe taught for over two decades. Many years he only made \$9600. Resorting to a food service job was the only way he could afford to live, but it came with more than its expected share of humiliation.

“One of the managers there is one of the students I had a year ago who was one of the very worst writers I’ve ever had. What are we really saying here? What’s going on in the work world? Something does not seem quite right. I’m not asking to be rich. I’m not asking to be famous. I just want to pay my bills.”

Life became even more harrowing for adjuncts after the Affordable Care Act when universities slashed hours and health insurance coverage **became even more difficult** to obtain.

“They’re no better off than people who work at Walmart,” said Gordon Haber, a 15-year adjunct professor and author of “**Adjunctivitis**.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, other professors echoed this sentiment.

“There’s this idea that faculty are cheap, renewable labor. There’s the idea that student are customers or clients,” said Joseph Fruscione, a former adjunct of 15 years. “And there are some cases where if a student is displeased with a grade, there’s the notion where they’re paying for this, so they deserve an A or a B because of all this tuition.”

“The Walmart metaphor is vivid,” Kudera said. “There are these random schools where they’re just being terrible. But as some of the schools it seems like there’s some enlightened schools and it doesn’t seem like every single person who speaks up loses their classes. It varies school to school. They’re well aware some of their adjuncts may not afford toothpaste at the end of the month or whatever those kinds of tragedies may be.” He suggested looking at the hashtag **#badmin** to see transgressions and complaints documented in real time.

Robert Baum, a former adjunct and now a dean, was able to provide insights from both sides of the problem.

“That pressure [to make money] has been on higher education forever,” he said. “A lot of the time when I was an adjunct, things were very black and white and what I’m finding is that the graying is happening a lot. I’m losing track of the black and white.” Still, Baum noted that the current system was hardly ideal, and that change was necessary. “The Walmart model is based on the idea of putting the burden on taking care of the worker on either the state or on the worker’s credit card or on the worker’s family. And that is no different than what I’ve experienced across my adjunct life. No different. Zero difference.”

Ana Fores Tamayo, an adjunct who claims she was blacklisted over her activism, agreed with the latter parts of Baum’s assessment.

“Walmart and the compartmentalized way of treating faculty is the going rate. The way administration turns around and says, for instance, where I was teaching it was probably

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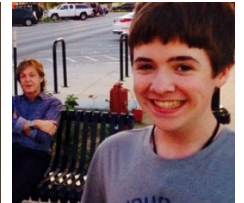
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about 65% adjunct faculty. But the way they fix their numbers, it makes it look as if it's less when they show their books because the way they divide it and the way they play with their numbers it shows that it's less."

"As soon as they hear about you organizing, they go on the defensive," Merklein said. "For instance, at my community college, I am being intimidated constantly and threatened in various ways, hypothetically usually. They don't like to say something that's an outright direct threat. ... They get really freaked out when they see pamphlets around the adjunct faculty office and everyone's wearing buttons regardless of what professional organization or union it is. They will then go on the offensive. They will usually contact their attorney who is there to protect the school as a business and to act in an anti-labor capacity."

The most telling phrase in Merklein's words are "the school as a business." Colleges across the country have transitioned from bastions of intellectual enlightenment to resort hotels prizing amenities above academics. Case in point: The ludicrously extravagant gyms in America's larger universities **are home to** rock climbing walls, corkscrew tracks, rooftop gardens, and a lazy river. Schools **have billions** to invest in housing and other on-campus projects. Schools **have millions** (or in some cases "mere" hundreds of thousands) to pay administrators. Yet schools can't find the money to hire more full-time professors. If one follows the money, it's clear that colleges view education as tertiary. The rigor of a university's courses doesn't attract the awe of doe-eyed high school seniors. Lavish dorms and other luxuries do.

Despite such execrable circumstances, professors trek onward and try to educate students as best they can. But how good can education provided by overworked, underpaid adjuncts be? The professors Salon spoke to had varying opinions.

Benay Blend has taught for over 30 years. For 10 of those years, she worked in a bookstore for \$7.50 an hour because she needed the extra income.

"I don't want to fall into the trap that the media use that using adjunct labor means poor education," Blend said. "I have a PhD. I've published probably more than full-time people where I teach. I've been teaching for 30 years. I'm a good teacher."

"On the whole, teaching quality by adjuncts is excellent," said Kane Faucher, a six-year adjunct. "But many are not available for mentoring and consultation because they have to string together so many courses just to reach or possibly exceed the poverty line. This means our resources are stretched too thinly as a matter of financial survival, and there are many adjuncts who do not even have access to a proper office, which means they work out of coffee shops and cars."

The anonymous adjunct professor from Indiana expressed a similar sentiment.

"I definitely don't want to go down the road of 'Adjunct professors, because of the way we're handled, are not able to be effective teachers.' I think some of us are more effective teachers than people who get paid a lot more than we do. Some of us aren't for really good reasons which have to do with not having the resources. I mean if you're working at three different colleges, how can you possibly be there?"

Ann Kottner, an adjunct professor and activist, agreed.

"I really don't want to go down the road of 'Adjunct professors, because of the way we're handled, are not able to be effective teachers.' I think some of us are more effective teachers than people who get paid a lot more than we do. Some of us aren't for really good reasons which have to do with not having the resources. I mean if you're working at three different colleges, how can you possibly be there?"

The situation reached such a flashpoint that Kottner and several colleagues (some of which spoke to Salon for this article) **penned a petition** to the US Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division. The petition calls for "an investigation into the labor practices of our colleges and universities in the employment of contingent faculty." Ana Foryes Tamayo **has a petition as well**, this one to the US Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan. They both have over 8,000 signatories.

When asked about the petition's impact, Kottner said it was "just one tactic in the whole



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sheath of a rising adjunct response to contingency.” Other tools included unionization, which is difficult in many states. Kottner said the most powerful force was information. “I think our biggest weapon now is basically making the public aware of what their tuition dollars are not paying for, and that is professor salaries and professor security.”

When asked if there was any hope about the future, no consensus was reached among the adjuncts Salon spoke with. Some believed things would never change. Others thought the tide would turn if enough people knew how far the professoriat had fallen.

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