
COLLEGE ADJUNCTS AS THE 21ST CENTURY “ONE-DIMENSIONAL MAN”

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Professor Pitt's⁴⁹ article on the state of the university offers the reader an insight into the inner workings of American research universities. He laments that professors lack institutional loyalty, partly because universities have become business organizations, concerned with, or forced to be concerned with funding, and partly because of the professional ambitions of professors. With this essay I seek to expand the scope of Pitt's discussion, to include the exploitation of adjunct teachers by universities nationwide. This is indeed a very serious problem in higher education today. With this article, I hope to broaden the dialogue of universities' practices and raise awareness of the situation many graduates face in securing a position within the university today.

Right from the outset, I want to state emphatically that I am not begrudging anyone's salary in higher education. Quite the contrary! Some of the top salaried professors at top research universities have C.V.s that span nearly twenty pages. They have published numerous books and articles, and for that they should be remunerated. Hard work goes into creating those monographs and scholarly articles, not to mention the times spent away from the comforts of their own homes. They should by all means be recognized and rewarded for those efforts. The purpose of this article is not to diminish their work. What I would like to address, however, is the lack of advocacy on the part of tenured faculty for those teachers who are hired as adjunct professors/teachers in an effort to save colleges and universities money. It borders on intellectual hypocrisy to instruct students about social justice, fair business practices,

⁴⁸ *Collegiate Times Databases*. "Virginia Tech Public Salaries." Retrieved from:
<http://www.collegiatetimes.com/databases/salaries/virginia-tech-2010>.

and equality, while keeping silent on the exploitation of adjunct faculty that takes place in their “own back yards.”

Some have raised awareness regarding the injustice adjunct professionals face. Among those is Debra Louis (2009), an adjunct professor at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College and Eastern Kentucky University. Her article, “Adjunct: Solutions for a Mistreated Majority,” was published in *The Chronicle for Higher Education*. She conducted a limited survey of adjunct faculty and discovered among other facts, that (1) two-third of the respondents were women who had children and depended on their earnings to support their families – this dispels the notion that adjunct faculty are fresh-out-of-college-teachers, (2) more than two-thirds had held adjunct positions for more than five years, and half more than ten years, (3) some were misled by department chairs, who suggested that their temporary position might lead to a permanent position. To remedy this situation, Louis proposes several solutions. While the colleges and universities need to create an environment that is equitable for adjunct faculty, the burden, according to Louis falls on state governments. She believes that the states need to pass legislation that requires public universities to adjust adjuncts’ pay to those mandated for salaried faculty members. Lawmakers should also ensure that adjuncts are entitled to sabbatical leave, and provide funds for colleges and universities to pay the non-tenure tracked faculty adequately. Louis closes her article by stating, while some progress is being made in some institutions of higher learning, “others are holding fast to dysfunctional perceptions that continue to shortchange and marginalize their adjunct personnel” (Louis, 2009).

Today’s universities find themselves in a funding crisis of unparalleled proportion. Frank Donoghue (2008) argues in his book *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*, that universities today face severe financial pressures. Large portions of federal research funding go to a small number of research

⁴⁹ Joseph C. Pitt. “On the Idea of a University.”

institutions⁵⁰. Donoghue’s point of view seems to compliment Pitt’s argument, that the universities today have shifted from “preservation of old knowledge while creating new knowledge” to simply functioning as a business (Pitt, 5). Donoghue (2008) further argues that “the laws of supply and demand do not determine (or even influence) the hiring of Ph.D.s, because for the last thirty years the most cost-efficient higher-education teachers have been adjuncts⁵¹ without Ph.D.s. Universities do not prefer to hire the best or the most experienced teachers, but rather the cheapest” (34). Not only are they ‘cheap labor’, according to Donoghue, adjunct faculty are also disempowered and exist at the whim of the administration, which holds all the power over curricula (109). They receive no health insurance, retirement benefits or any other fringe benefits, and most of all they have no voice. They have become the twenty-first century Marcusian “One Dimensional Man.” Marcuse (1964) asserts that, “a comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress” (Marcuse 1964, 3). Some twenty-first century universities in a sense have become the *apparatus* through which this *unfreedom* is perpetuated, and unfortunately many of the adjunct faculty have become the casualties of the system.

While this disparity in pay between adjuncts and tenured professors applies to most colleges and universities today, sadly Virginia Tech is no exception. It, too, experiences enormous financial pressures and has to resort to staffing its class rooms with graduate or teaching assistants and/or adjunct faculty. To illustrate the disparity between the salaries tenured faculty receive as compared to adjuncts’ or graduate assistants’ compensation more graphically, I have created the chart below. The data for this graph compares the average incomes of professors from departments that are affiliated with the ASPECT (Alliance of Social, Political, Ethical, and Cultural Thought) program—an interdisciplinary Ph.D. program at Virginia Tech—to that of adjunct

⁵⁰ “A staggering 5 percent (more than one billion dollars) of the federal research money goes to a single institution, The Johns Hopkins University” (Donoghue 2008, 124).

professors and graduate assistants. Each year *The Collegiate Times* publishes the salaries of administrators and teachers of a number of public universities, and that data was used to create the illustration below. When comparing these salaries with those of adjunct professors, who on the average earn \$3,000 per course and teach between four to five courses per year, the results are staggering. Adjuncts' compensations vis-à-vis the *lowest paid* tenure tracked professors amount to about one third at best. Virginia Tech, I am sad to admit, unfortunately reflects the practices of many American universities today.

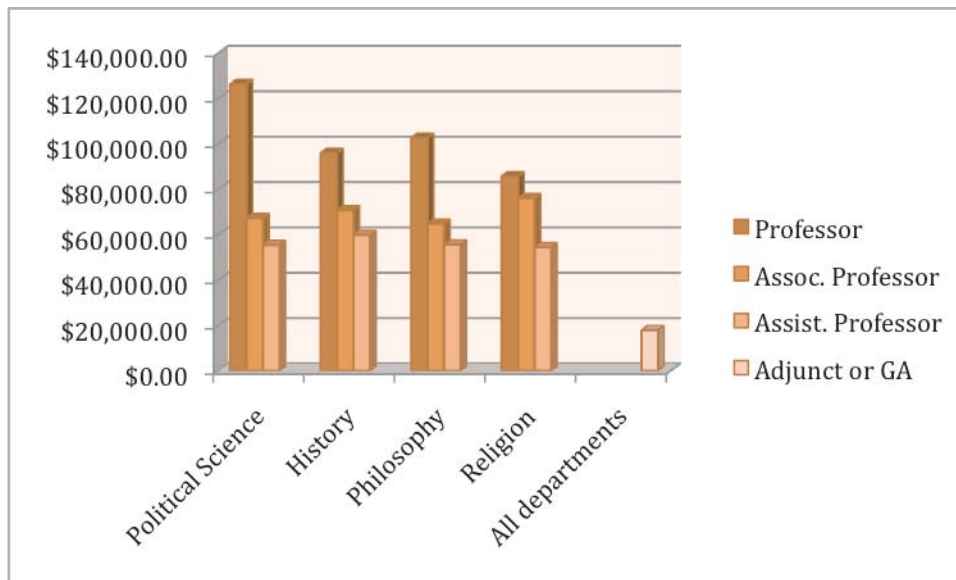


Figure 1: Average Salaries of VT Professors in ASPECT affiliated departments.

Source: Collegiate Times: Databases Public University Salaries. Retrieved from: <http://www.collegiatetimes.com/databases/salaries/virginia-tech-2010>.

In conclusion, I reiterate that professors who teach within the ASPECT program, or any other programs in the United States, deserve the compensation they receive. They have worked hard to achieve this kind of financial recognition. Denying them those rewards is not the purpose of this brief reflection. Having said that, however, I would like to propose the idea of advocacy on behalf of those, who do not have a voice

⁵¹ “Thirty-five percent of college teaching positions are filled by tenured faculty, while sixty-five percent is made up of adjunct faculty” (Donoghue 2008, 56).

