

# If Tenured Want to Survive, Pay Your Adjuncts

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In their own self-interest, departments and faculty should strongly advocate to pay their adjunct faculty as high a per class wage as possible.

I say this after finding out that for teaching one section of introductory fiction writing at College of Charleston, this semester, I will be paid \$2650.

I learned this after I taught my first day of class, which should evidence that money is not my personal motive for continuing to teach. I am in the fortunate position of not relying on this work to make my living, and continuing to teach is a way for me to stay connected to work I find meaningful.<sup>[1]</sup>

My plea for a higher wage is not about money for me, personally, but because of what adjunctification does to the perceived economic “value” of college teaching.

I have eighteen years of experience in the college classroom. I’ve published five books, dozens of stories, hundreds of articles and humor pieces, have a column in a major newspaper, and am a contributing blogger right here.

Which is to say, I’m qualified for the job.

Heck, I’m going to dispense with humility and declare I’m more than qualified. I’m really really good. Don’t take my word for it. The student and department evaluations for my teaching this very course two years ago say so.

That semester, I was paid around \$6000 for this same course.<sup>[2]</sup>

Full-time visiting, \$6000. Part-time adjunct, \$2650.

Doing the math, I figure I’ll work about 215-220 hours on the course this semester, 13 hours per week for 16 weeks, plus additional hours prior to semester’s start and during finals.

That’s \$12 an hour.<sup>[3]</sup>

Philosophically, spiritually, morally, I very much believe in the “value” of education. If society collapsed, I would probably be one of the people trying to preserve what remained of our physical books and store of knowledge. I would run a one-room schoolhouse where my pupils are armed with pitchforks and slingshots to fend off the marauding zombie hordes.

But my department has put a monetary value on the labor of teaching fiction writing at around \$12/hour. This is what my work is “worth” economically. I’m willing to bet if my section were put up with an open call for applicants, there would be a significant number of people applying for it, even at this wage.

For sure, there are people who teach this same course who earn much more, but we have established in supply and demand terms that they are significantly overpaid. You could triple my pay and still be well below what a tenured faculty member is paid to teach this one course.

Many have turned at least a half-blind eye to the devaluation of the labor of teaching as long as it has been confined to general education courses, largely staffed by non-tenurable faculty.

But in a world where public support of public higher ed continues to decline, where the professoriate is viewed by large swaths of the country as something between a political opponent and a fifth column traitor, where a U.S. senator in all seriousness proposes that a [Ken Burns documentary can substitute for college credit](#) in the interests of breaking up the “higher education cartel,” you better believe that they’re coming for everyone and “tenure” is a pretty poor shield.

I often hear about the importance of “protecting tenured lines.” I understand the rationale. These are the good jobs, the “real” jobs, and it seems sensible to try to secure as many of them as possible.

But in departments with significant reliance on adjunct labor, those “real” positions are almost always at the expense of the untenurable. And yet the courses staffed by contingent faculty are no less real. They convey the same credit, cost the same tuition dollars.

And let’s be clear. Over time, non-tenureable jobs are going to become the only jobs. Even if the current generation of tenured faculty survives, when it comes to higher education, there will be nothing remaining for the next generation.

Departments that attempt to preserve the privileges of the tenured without considering the resulting effects on adjuncts and what their policies signal about the economic value of academic labor are signing their own death warrants. Disciplines (like English) where the number of majors has declined and the department largely exists to service gen ed writing courses have even started digging their own graves.

Forget it. Some are dead and just don't know it.

Don't think about tenured or adjunct. Think about the work. In the eyes of the state and administrative bureaucrats and the laws of economics, you are all laborers. Do not kid yourselves otherwise.

Decide what people should be paid for their labor – start by looking at what tenured faculty are paid for their teaching - and endeavor to achieve equity for adjuncts. Preserving the value of your labor is your best hope for survival.

Hard? Yes.

Impossible? We all better hope not.

[1] Depending on who is reading, I hesitate to say I would do it for free, but I very well might do it for free, or rather, I could envision a time when I would donate my salary back to the institution where I’m teaching. It’s also good for me to get out of the house, interact with other humans and do work that requires a shower before 4pm.

[2] 1/6th my salary, as I taught six courses per year.

[3] Parking will also cost me at least \$5 per day, so at 34 visits per semester, deduct \$170 from that total. It’s probably closer to \$11/hr net.