

Adjunct Pay: More Experience Means Less Money

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Everyone in academia knows that adjunct work pays badly. But there's a disturbing fact about adjunct work at CUNY that's much less well-known: once you adjust for inflation, the pay can actually decrease as the adjunct gains more experience. And even 20-year veterans see almost no real-dollar premium for their many years in the classroom.

I stumbled on this realization last fall while cleaning out my file cabinet. In a dusty file, I found all my appointment letters for my adjunct teaching at CUNY. The first letter was for the fall 1986 term, when my rate per contact teaching hour was \$38.01, then the bottom of the adjunct lecturer salary schedule. The rate seemed pretty generous to me at the time. I was still in graduate school in 1986, and although I had done some tutoring, I had never taught my own class before.

I received my MA in 1987 and continued working as an adjunct through 1996. My pay rate in my last semester was \$53.98 per contact hour, the top of the adjunct lecturer schedule at that time.

Paging through my old appointment letters this past November made me curious to see how I would have fared financially if I had remained an adjunct. So I looked at the new salary schedules in the PSC-CUNY contract that had just gone into effect. I saw that if I were still working as an adjunct, my pay rate would be \$68.54, the highest step on the adjunct lecturer schedule now.

At first glance \$68.54 seemed like a substantial increase over my initial \$38.01 rate in 1986. But you can't do a valid comparison of two amounts of money that span a

20-year period without adjusting for inflation. Fortunately, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics keeps monthly data on inflation both for the U.S. and for the New York City metropolitan area. I went to metro New York Consumer Price Index on the BLS website, did a few calculations from the raw numbers, and found that \$38.01 in September 1986 had a real-dollar value of \$74.12 in November 2006. In other words, if I were still an adjunct, my pay rate after 20 years of teaching experience would be 8% less in real dollars than it was in my first year at CUNY, when I was a complete novice who was still in school.

To be fair, back in 1986 there were no paid office hours for adjuncts. But since September 2002, all adjuncts with at least six hours on one campus have been paid for an extra hour per week for office hours and/or professional development. When I was an adjunct, I generally taught nine hours on one campus and six hours on a second campus, and if I had the same schedule now, I'd get two additional paid hours. Added to a 15-hour teaching load, these two extra hours would give me a 13% pay boost, and I'd climb out of the red in relation to my initial rate. Instead I'd now be making 5% more than I was back in the fall 1986 term.

What accounts for this pay stagnation? One key factor is across-the-board increases that have often been less than the inflation rate. There have been five PSC-CUNY contracts over the past two decades. Only one of the five provided across-the-board increases that exceeded the inflation rate in the metropolitan New York area:

CONTRACT DURATION	COMPOUNDED ACROSS-THE-BOARD INCREASES	INFLATION IN THE METRO NYC AREA
09/01/87 – 08/31/90	14.00%	17.75%
09/01/90 – 01/31/96	13.08%	17.71%
02/01/96 – 07/31/00	9.26%	10.92%
08/01/00 – 10/31/02	7.12%	5.96%
11/01/02 – 09/19/07	8.48% up to the last day of the contract. On 9/19/07, adjuncts will receive a 1% increase, un compounded, and full-timers will receive an \$800 addition to base salaries	15.16% from 11/1/02 – 02/28/07

Sources: PSC-CUNY contracts; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

All members of CUNY’s instructional staff are harmed by below-inflation across-the-board increases. However, adjuncts often suffer substantially greater financial damage than full-timers. Understanding why requires an understanding of CUNY’s complex salary schedule system.

Most full-time titles in the PSC contract have salary schedules with 13 to 16 steps. When full-timers are hired, they negotiate placement on one of these steps. After a year and a half on the job, they typically receive their first step increase, which takes them to the next rung on their salary ladder. They then receive annual step increases until they reach the third-to-last step. At this point they typically must wait five years until getting the pay rate on the second-to-last step; once on the penultimate rung, they typically wait two years until reaching the top step.

When full-timers are promoted to a higher-level title, they are placed on a rung on a new salary schedule with higher pay rates, and promoted full-timers climb their new

salary schedules until they reach the top step. Once full-timers reach the top of the salary schedule for their title, they receive no further step increases.

By contrast, adjuncts have salary schedules with just four or five steps, and go up one step only after three consecutive years on the job. Like full-timers, adjuncts receive no further step increases once they have reached the top of the salary schedule for their job title, and like full-timers, they can get promoted to a higher-level title with a more generous salary schedule.

Each time there is a new contract, every step on every salary schedule—for both full-timers and adjuncts—is increased by the amount of the across-the-board increases. So a surface glance may make it appear that both groups suffer equally when the across-the-board pay hikes fall below the inflation rate.

But unlike new full-timers, new adjuncts are rarely able to negotiate placement on a step beyond the bottom one for their titles. And unlike full-timers in professorial lines, adjuncts aren't expected or encouraged to do the academic research that leads to promotions. Adjuncts who would like to do research frequently lack the time and resources to do so. Full-time assistant professors often earn promotions to the associate professor rank; it's not common for an adjunct assistant professor to become an adjunct associate professor.

Even if you eliminate the issue of step placement and promotions, adjuncts take a harder hit from below-inflation raises because they receive step increases only once every three years. These tri-annual step increases aren't frequent enough to compensate for inflation's bite. But full-timers, who receive step increases annually for a significant

period of time, are partially cushioned when inflation erodes the value of each step on the salary ladder.

Imagine two assistant professors, one adjunct and one full-time, both hired in September 2002. Step one for a full-time assistant professor in September 2002 was \$35,031; step one for an adjunct assistant professor hired at the same time was \$60.79. According to the tables from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, inflation between September 2002 and February 2007, the latest month for which figures are available, has been 15.16%. Adjust the starting pay rates for inflation and compare them with what each assistant professor is earning today. The numbers are quite stark:

	FULL-TIME ASSISTANT PROFESSOR HIRED IN 2002 ON STEP ONE	ADJUNCT ASSISTANT PROFESSOR HIRED IN 2002 ON STEP ONE
September 2002 pay rate, converted to current dollars	\$40,342 per year	\$70.01 per contact hour
Spring 2007 pay rate	\$45,533 per year	\$68.59 per contact hour
% difference	+12.87%	-2.07%

Because it's extremely unusual for a full-time assistant professor to start at step one, the comparison above is an artificial one. Initial placement for new full-timers varies quite a bit, and those in the humanities tend to be placed on lower steps than those in the sciences. While looking through the Chancellor's Reports that document the initial salaries of full-timers, I found that step six was a relatively common placement for full-timers in the humanities. Therefore it seems fair to compare an adjunct initially placed on step one with an adjunct initially placed on step six:

	Initial Pay Rate, September 2002	Initial Pay Rate in Current Dollars	Current Pay Rate	% Change in Real Dollars
Full-time assistant professor hired on step six	\$43,506 per year	\$50,102 per year	\$55,224 per year	+10.22%
Adjunct assistant professor hired on step one	\$60.79 per hour	\$70.01 per hour	\$68.59 per hour	-2.07%

I don't begrudge the full-timer the 10.22% real-dollar raise. As this faculty member now has 4.5 years of experience, the increase amounts to just 2.27% per year. That's very modest, and so is the current pay rate of \$55,224, which doesn't go very far in a city as expensive as ours and is far less than the salaries of most highly educated New York professionals. Moreover, when you adjust for inflation, my sample assistant professor earns less than someone on the same step did four and half years ago. He also earns less than a current New York City public school teacher with 4.5 years of experience and an MA plus 30 credits.

However, this assistant professor is not earning less in real dollars than he himself was earning in September 2002. Between then and now he has received four step increases, which have enabled his real-dollar pay rate to climb at a slow pace.

The full-timer's financial situation is troubling but the adjunct's situation is utterly untenable. After 4.5 years of experience, this teacher with a doctorate is actually earning less in real dollars than she was when she was hired. She has only received one step increase during her time at CUNY, and it was not large enough to put a noticeable dent in her below-inflation across-the-board raises.

Similar dichotomies exist between full-timers and adjuncts at all ranks. Crunch the numbers for an adjunct and a full-timer at the same rank who were hired at the same time at any point over the last 20 years. Today the full-timer will probably be earning less in real dollars than a full-timer at the same rank and step was 10, 15, and 20 years ago. She is also likely to earn less right now than a New York City public school teacher with the same years of teaching experience and lesser academic credentials. But her pay today will be considerably higher than her own starting salary in real dollars. The adjunct, however, will either be earning less or about the same in real dollars as he was when he first came to CUNY — even if he has been in the system for 20 years.

CUNY management may want the university's public face to be the full-time faculty members whose photographs grace the advertisements in CUNY's *Look At Who's Teaching at CUNY* public relations blitz. But according to CUNY's own statistics, in the Fall 2006 term the faculty consisted of 6,251 full-timers and 8,894 adjuncts. These adjuncts — 58.7% of the faculty — teach the bulk of the introductory courses and a sizable chunk of the upper-level undergraduate courses.

CUNY employs such a large number of adjuncts because adjuncts cost much less than full-timers. As time goes on, adjuncts become even more of a bargain relative to full-timers with the same number of years in the system. For a fiscally-conservative long-term planner, adjuncts are a dream come true. But adjuncts can anticipate more of a financial nightmare: their future prospects are for wage stagnation at best and downward mobility at worst.