Community Faculty: Exploited?

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As a student at Metropolitan State University, chances are high that you’ve taken one or a few classes taught by what Metro calls “community faculty.” Many institutions of higher education call these professors “adjunct faculty.” These professors are hired for part-time work and do not have tenure, unlike fully-ranked professors. These are an overwhelming number of professionals who give merit to the small but growing national movement to call out universities and bring attention to the very large number of adjunct professors employed nationwide. Adjunct faculty nation-wide staged a walkout on Feb. 25, 2015, asking for better wages and working conditions.

It is unclear exactly how many of Metro’s classes are taught by community faculty. When contacted, not one college department within Metro could give a definite number of adjunct professors employed; however, it was estimated that roughly 75 percent of Metro faculty is made up of community faculty. According to National Public Radio, 76 percent of college professors nationwide are part-time adjunct faculty.

Well-trained and qualified to teach courses at Metro, community faculty members are offered no benefits, no job security, and very little union representation. According to Dr. Anne Winkler, a community faculty member at Metro for the past eight years, “the MNSCU faculty union (the Inter-Faculty Organization) does not put the needs of its most exploited members first. The union should not accept that the majority of the faculty it represents has no health care. Our hours are minimized to make sure that we do not.”

Community faculty members are paid per course, unless it is an online course, and receive a very meager flat rate. Dr. Winkler, for example, receives a mere $5,200 per offline course (online courses are paid depending upon the number of students enrolled; a number capped at 20), and, according to Metro’s website, “Community Faculty members may only teach up to 10 credits per academic year.” For Winkler, this is an insufficient amount. “The only way I can do this work is because I am married to someone with a real union job, working for the Minneapolis Public Schools, which provides a living salary and family health benefits.”

The assumption, according to Winkler, is that community faculty have full-time jobs elsewhere; however, one must stop to wonder how much time and energy a professor can dedicate to a course and its students if they are, in fact, employed elsewhere. Is the essential mentoring that’s needed outside of class hours compromised? Do letters of recommendation become problematic, both in terms of having access to faculty who know the adjunct professor (as community faculty do not have offices on campus) and in terms of the worth of those letters to the outside world when a faculty member does not work full time? How much do the students suffer when faculty members feel undervalued by Metro? And what about those professors who love to educate but do not encourage their students to follow in their footsteps because of a disappointing career outlook? With the recent tuition increase, it might be pertinent to know why the number of adjunct faculty keeps growing if such is not in the best interest of Metro students.