http://www.columbiamissourian.com/news/higher_education/part-time-professors-academia-s-working-poor-juggle-duties-expectations/article_e9e78b7e-eb9c-11e5-ae8b-9716bb4e2564.html

FEATURED

Part-time professors: Academia's 'working poor' juggle duties, expectations

RUTH SERVEN *Mar 18, 2016*

MIKALA COMPTON/MISSOURIAN

Robin Anderson instructs Kayla Jestis during voice lessons in Anderson's home studio. Anderson is an adjunct professor for MU and Columbia College, as well as a voice instructor. Anderson has been preparing Jestis, a Southern Boone High School student, for the district solo and ensemble competition.

COLUMBIA — Asked to describe herself, Robin Anderson paused to think.

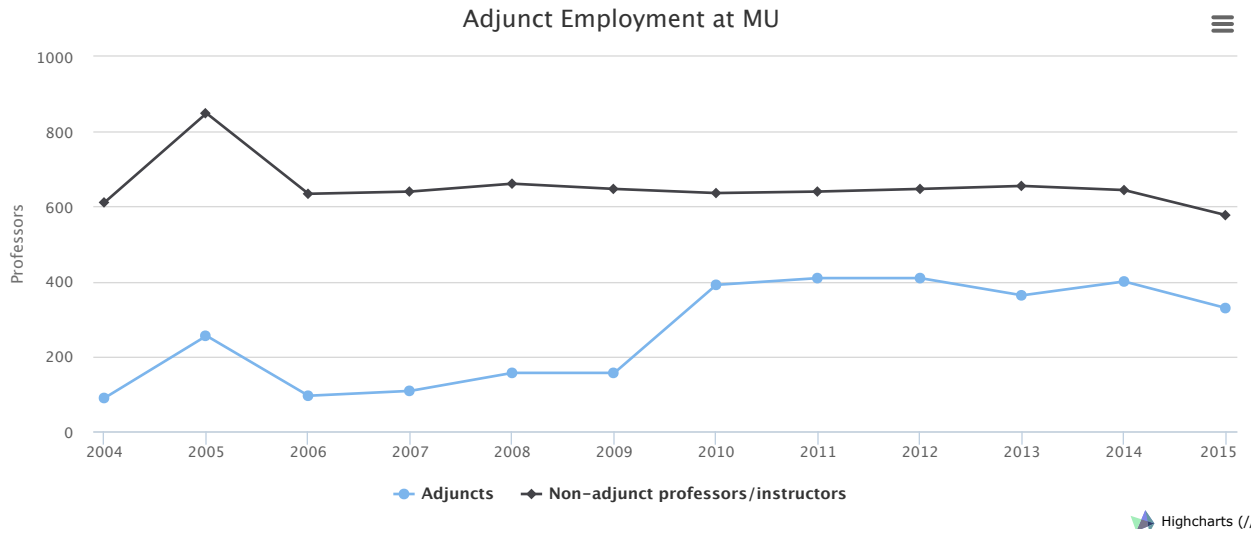
She's 29 and married. She's blond.

"I'm a music teacher," she said and laughed. "I got tired of the way people reacted when I say I'm a musician."

She's a music teacher who drives to the Columbia College campus in Jefferson City to teach music appreciation classes as an adjunct professor. She's a music teacher who also leads the MU School of Music's entrepreneurship and community music programs.

She's a music teacher without health benefits who faced double knee surgery. She's a music teacher who has created her own music career while working as an adjunct professor for several mid-Missouri schools.

Adjunct instructors are part-time professors who are not eligible for tenure. They make up about 40 percent of faculty in American higher education, according to a 2014 report by the U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce, based on a survey of 845 contingent faculty and professors.



Contingent, at-will employees are an answer to a prayer for universities facing tighter budgets. But contingent faculty often have no guaranteed benefits, job security or wages. According to the House committee report, they are the "working poor" of the university.

Contingent faculty, which include graduate student assistants, non-tenure-track professors and adjuncts, are typically hired on semester-by-semester or annual contracts. This type of professor has skyrocketed since the 1970s, from 20 percent to 75 percent of academia, and has taken on much of the teaching load for undergraduate and general education classes.

Adjuncts are often the most vulnerable type of contingent professor. Many schools limit their part-time professors to two or three classes a semester, forcing adjuncts to cobble together multiple part-time jobs and stunting their chances to do the research and writing necessary to land a full-time, tenure-track job.

Low pay, stalled careers

At Westminster College in Fulton, Jennifer Spitulnik teaches two introductory writing classes. She says the English Department gives her the resources she needs to teach the classes. But because she has part-time status, she also works another part-time job at SyndicateMizzou, a research promotion unit at MU, to make ends meet.

To her, adjunct teaching feels like an expensive hobby. "The payment is $2,600 per three-credit course, for the entire semester, which is nothing," Spitulnik said. "It's basically gas money."

Compensation for a three-credit class varies widely, depending on the institution and individual departments' budgets. A typical adjunct in the College of Education at MU may make $4,500 per class while an adjunct in the School of Journalism may make $3,000. Teaching a humanities class at MU pays about $2,500.

Because adjuncts are not typically paid for travel time or office hours, they might not have the incentive to interact with students or other faculty outside class.

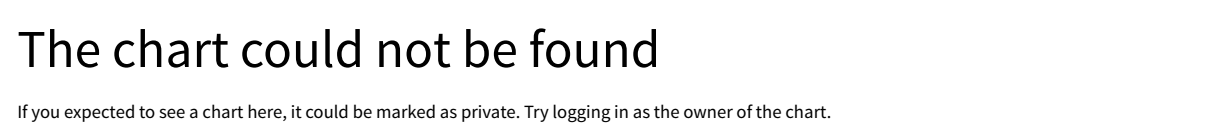
Spitulnik said she struggles to be available for office hours and faculty meetings because it's time taken away from her other job and her family. A 2007 study by Paul Umbach in the Review of Higher Education found that part-time faculty interact with students less frequently, use active and collaborative techniques less often, spend less time preparing for their classes and have lower academic expectations than their tenured and tenure-track peers.

Spitulnik worked in arts administration in Washington, D.C., before she began graduate school at MU in 2009. She said she and her adviser didn't realize the impact the recession would have on the job market. No one knew there would be few academic jobs available when she finished her doctorate in May.

She said she applied to 90 jobs last year and is beginning the search again.

Making ends meet

Last year, one in five part-time faculty members nationally lived below the line — pegged at $24,250 for a family of four — and one in four families of part-time faculty were enrolled in one or more public assistance programs, according to information provided by the Service Employees International Union, which is working to unionize faculty nationwide.



Jeni Hart, associate division director of the MU College of Education Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, said it's becoming even harder for adjuncts to make ends meet and keep their careers alive.

"The job market is becoming more and more diffused because of the Affordable Care Act," she said. "You may have someone who used to be able to get five classes at one institution, and that doesn't happen anymore."

The Affordable Care Act required universities to offer health care to most full-time employees. Many universities now limit their part-time professors to below three-quarters time — two or three three-credit classes a semester, for example — to avoid paying benefits. That forces adjuncts to pick up other part-time jobs to make sufficient income.

The union estimated that an adjunct living in St. Louis would need to teach up to six classes a year to pay for groceries for a family, one to three classes a year to cover the cost of child care, and eight to 13 classes to afford rent and utilities.

In response to these conditions, part-time professors at St. Louis-area schools have been organizing over the past two years. Adjuncts at Washington University and St. Louis Community College voted to form unions. St. Louis University and St. Charles Community College adjuncts are organizing, and a unionization vote failed at Webster University.

Stacie Manuel, the organizing coordinator for higher education in Missouri for the local chapter of the Service Employees International Union, which is affiliated with the new Washington University union, said the union wants to provide an example of fair compensation for contingent faculty and eventually raise standards for those professors across the state.

Nationally, the Service Employees International Union has organized more than 10,000 tenured and contingent faculty at more than 40 different schools since 2013. Unionization appears to increase adjunct compensation; when an institution has union representation, median pay per class rises by about $500, according to a national survey by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce.

But adjuncts are a disparate, transient group and hard to organize. Currently, there are no plans to unionize adjuncts at universities in central Missouri.

Teaching quality

Adjuncts also have little reason to risk their jobs by organizing unions when there are questions about the quality of their teaching and their impact on student retention.

Studies have shown conflicting information on the impact of adjuncts' teaching. A 1986 study by researcher Maureen Jackson showed that students generally rated adjuncts lower than full-time faculty on class evaluations. But a 2009 study by Canadian researchers Florian Hoffman and Philip Oreopoulos found no average differences in students' dropout rates, grades or course selections by an instructor's tenure or hourly or salary status.

Michael O'Brien, dean of the MU College of Arts and Science, said he and department chairs read student evaluations for every professor and that he would compare the quality of the part-time instructors' teaching to that of any other professor. Arts and Science is the largest school at MU, offering more than 30 majors. Departments employ 83 part-time faculty members, with an average annual rate of compensation of $17,400, according to the college.

Steve Rice hires the instructors who teach sections of his introductory multimedia class at the Missouri School of Journalism. He said he looks for people who are proficient in at least one area of multimedia, often professionals and graduate students. In general, even though an instructor may receive a poor evaluation from time to time, Rice said he can't tell the difference among instructors from their student evaluations.

Hart, from the MU College of Education, said student evaluations are often imperfect measures of teacher quality, and when adjuncts do get lower evaluations or peer grades, it may be due to systemic bias. Because adjunct positions often have higher numbers of women and people of color, Hart said, systemic bias may influence evaluations and decisions to rehire professors.

Carl Kenney, an adjunct professor in the Journalism School and a columnist for the Columbia Missourian, said adjuncts face high expectations and a considerable work load.

"The work load is pretty heavy, and you have to bring credibility to the classroom and honor all your obligations," Kenney said. "But a lot of those obligations aren't honored by the university in a way that allows us to function."

As a black professor, Kenney said students of color expect the same support and solidarity from him as they do from full-time faculty.

Many adjuncts are professionals who moonlight as teachers. Ted Craig worked as a field geologist for the Missouri Department of Transportation and for Camden County's Planning and Zoning Commission.

While working, he picked up classes for Missouri University of Science and Technology, Webster University and MU. He said he remembers fondly the Army officers from Ft. Leonard Wood who were in his geology and geological engineering courses.

Now he teaches geology and earth science classes at Moberly Area Community College's Columbia campus. Moberly employs 90 adjuncts at the Parkade Center campus. Eight of those adjuncts are actually full-time professors who just pick up an additional class or two.

This semester, Moberly is employing 200 adjuncts on its seven campus locations, according to Paula Glover, vice president for instruction.

Craig said he is limited in the number of classes he can teach each semester, because Moberly cut work loads in 2013 to avoid issues with the Affordable Care Act. Although he'd like to be able to teach more classes, he said he's satisfied with the way the school has handled the new regulations.

"So I don't feel I'm being mistreated," he said, "and I have a positive view."

Benefits and insurance

The Affordable Care Act has had a big impact on adjuncts. Health insurance is a recurring desire for many part-time professors, and they make a range of decisions in order to get the medical care they need.

Blanca Kelty has been teaching Spanish classes for 16 years, since she was a graduate student at MU. She teaches introductory Spanish at MU, Columbia College and the Waldorf-inspired City Garden School, but she still hopes for a permanent job with benefits.

Last semester, Kelty taught three, three-hour Spanish classes at MU and was told that if she could teach three in the spring, she would receive benefits. She counted on gaining the income and the health insurance, but when the semester began, she found that low enrollment meant she would be hired for only two classes.

She pays for health insurance through Missouri's marketplace. But she's still traveling to the country of Mexico next month for an endoscopy because the procedure costs a third of the price as at an American hospital, and she can visit family in Mexico City. But as she gets older, she really wants health insurance that can cover procedures closer to home.

On the other hand, Pippa Letsky, an Italian instructor, started receiving benefits in 2013 for teaching two, five-hour Italian classes. That workload raised her above three-quarters time and made her eligible to receive benefits, but her contract must be renewed each semester.

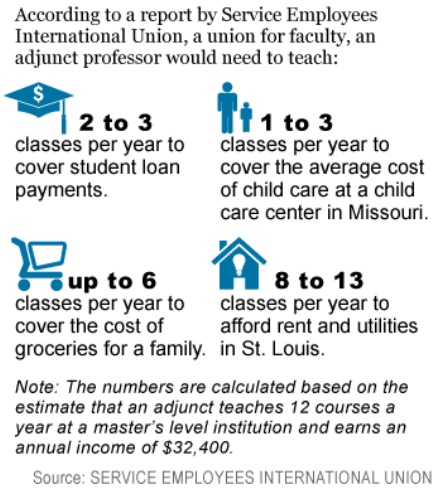
She also works as a copy editor and a musician.

She said receiving benefits reduced her take-home pay from MU. But she doesn't use the insurance to pay for a regular doctor or medication. Instead, she visits a chiropractor four times a year and uses herbal medicine.

"I'm not a part of the machine," Letsky said. "I like not being part of the machine. I like being a freelancer. It suits my personality better."

Anderson also pays for a government-sponsored insurance program. But when the unexpected happens, it can be impossible to cover costs and manage responsibilities.

Running took a toll on her, and the plates of her kneecaps began to shift out of place. For much of the fall, she was in and out of the doctor's office and had to cancel classes and private lessons. When she couldn't walk down stairs anymore, she began spending hours trying to understand the costs of



A report by Service Employees International Union outlined the number of classes that an adjunct professor would need to teach to afford certain expenses.

JASMINE YE HAN

getting knee surgery.

She had one surgery in October. Then, realizing that her insurance would run out at the end of the year and that she would be faced with another deductible, she scrambled to schedule the second surgery before January.

If she were offered a full-time job with benefits, she wonders whether she would take it. The flexibility of adjunct teaching creates challenges but also has some benefits. Teaching is just once piece of her whole career.

For now, Anderson is always thinking and planning six months out, in case the music appreciation class drops or one of her private students graduates high school. But someday, she wants to open her own music venue in Columbia.

“It’s like the ultimate do-it-yourself musician goal," she said, "which is to create your own opportunities.”

Supervising editors are John Fennell and Elizabeth Brixey.

Tags Adjuncts | University Of Missouri | Washington University | St. Louis University | Westminster College

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