

THE TEACHING POOR

ADJUNCTS AND INSTRUCTORS AT THE UO ARE UNDERPAID AND UNRECOGNIZED

BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN



The university 'can't get together a respectful offer to those who teach thousands and thousands of students and run research labs.'

— MICHAEL DREILING, UNITED ACADEMICS

“I didn’t choose to teach low-income, first-generation college students because the work was lucrative, but because it was meaningful,” Michael Copperman writes in a letter to the University of Oregon English Department, where he teaches composition to at-risk students of color.

When Copperman took his full-time position nine years ago, he writes, “I made barely \$25,000 a year.”

The UO, like schools across the country, has long relied on part-time and non-career-track faculty, in addition to its full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty, to teach its students, but these adjunct, contingent and non-career faculty — the names are varied and confusing — often make far less money, with little to no opportunity for advancement or job security.

Twenty-two percent of part-time faculty in Oregon are below the poverty line, according to a study by Faculty Forward, a Service Employees Union International-affiliated group. That’s higher than the 16.2 percent of Oregonians in general that the U.S. Census says are below poverty.

In addition, Faculty Forward says that 12 percent of Oregon’s faculty working 30 hours or less are near poverty. Combined, that’s 34 percent of the part-time faculty teaching students at Oregon’s colleges and universities who are living near or below poverty.

Most part-time faculty will tell you that while their schedule says they are working 30 hours, they put much more time into their teaching. And full-time instructors, like Copperman, find themselves overworked and underpaid, despite their dedication.

Now, after union negotiations and collective bargaining between the United Academics faculty union and the UO, Copperman says he got a raise, but “I teach nine classes and pick up another summer class so as to not run out of money in August.”

Karen Creighton, a long-time adjunct instructor in the UO Department of Physical Education and Recreation, says teaching “for 15 years and to be termed adjunct or temporary didn’t feel good.” She says that, until recently, she and her fellow adjuncts in PE, who also taught part-time, didn’t qualify for benefits, though they did get nine-month contracts, unlike colleagues in other departments who teach term-to-term.

Adjuncts and non-career faculty are underpaid and unrecognized nationwide. At the University of Oregon,

United Academics, which is made up of faculty from instructors to tenured professors, has sought to change the status of adjuncts and give those adjuncts and other non-permanent faculty a leg up.

Recent changes to the collective bargaining agreement (CBA) seek to improve wages and job stability for teachers across campus who have long taught key courses, often for low wages and little recognition.

CAREER POVERTY

A recent study by the University of California-Berkeley Labor Center drew attention to just how desperately poor contingent faculty have become nationwide. It found 25 percent of part-time faculty and their families are enrolled in a public assistance program.

According to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), “contingent” faculty includes both part- and full-time non-tenure-track faculty with the common characteristic “that their institutions make little or no long-term commitment to them.”

In contrast, faculty members on the tenure track have an expectation of continued employment, and if they get tenure their long-term job is almost assured — tenure is intended to protect academic freedom. The AAUP says that, “Non-tenure-track positions of all types now account for 76 percent of all instructional staff appointments in American higher education.”

At the UO, United Academics President Michael Dreiling says adjunct teaching means you often have people teaching year after year without benefits or advancement.

In the esoteric world of academia, there are a lot of different words for faculty members; many students don’t know the difference between an assistant professor who has not yet earned tenure or an associate or full professor with all the job security tenure provides. The UO, like colleges and universities across the country, has a number of names for its non-tenure-oriented teaching staff, from adjuncts who teach term-to-term to full-time instructors to post-docs to lecturers.

Many students also don’t know that some of their favorite instructors are just that, “instructors” with no job security year to year or even from one three-month term to the next. Even the UO keeps that unclear on its admissions website, listing 86 percent of its seminars and 79 percent of its

lectures as taught by faculty — but not what kind of faculty.

According to data provided by Tobin Klinger, UO’s senior director of Public Affairs Communications, in 2013 the school had 719 tenured and tenure-track faculty, 704 non-tenure-track faculty (NTTF) and 503 adjunct/visiting faculty.

Erin Moberg, a graduate teaching fellow in Romance Languages and Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation (GTFF) union vice president for political education, says, “I didn’t know much about adjunct rights and issues” until the GTFF began its own bargaining. “I think that speaks to that the administration silences the role of adjuncts,” she says.

When the GTFF went on strike last fall, Moberg says some adjuncts said they would not picket out of fear for their jobs.

Ironically, Moberg says, “adjuncts and students form the longest and closest relationships.” She says that in language instruction, a student might have the same instructor for two or more years and “students speak highly of adjuncts compared to faculty who might be working on their own projects.”

Moberg, a doctoral candidate, soon might face the question of whether she is willing to be an adjunct or non-tenure-track instructor after she graduates, and she says she may not be willing to uproot herself and leave everything behind for a short-term position. But looking into other career opportunities “does mean letting go of the goal of this degree, which is a privilege, but also has been my whole life.”

As with adjuncts, Moberg says grad students can suffer from contract uncertainty, and the GTFF union put language in place during bargaining that would keep graduate teaching fellows from losing teaching positions at the last minute. Instead, she says, some departments are waiting until two weeks before the term to give GTFs their teaching contracts, leaving the GTFs uncertain of their teaching and financial stability.

That instability, whether for adjuncts or for grad students, is bad for undergrads, according to AAUP and research in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, which shows that increased use of adjuncts is associated with lower student outcomes, not because the adjuncts are bad teachers but because of high workloads and often little time or even space to meet students outside of class. Some adjuncts teach at multiple schools to make ends meet.