

Improving the Working Conditions of Adjunct Faculty ...



Is Critical to Providing Students with the Support They Need to Succeed

The low wages and poor working conditions of adjunct faculty can often produce negative consequences for students, according to studies from across the country.

Adjunct faculty in almost all cases can only teach their courses and provide no additional supports to students. The data show that without access to mentoring, advising and academic assistance outside of the classroom, students are less likely to be able to stay in school and graduate. That's bad for the students – and bad for our economy and our society.

The problem is acute in Massachusetts, as adjunct faculty members teach about two-thirds of the courses at community colleges and just under half of the courses at state universities.

Compared to full-time faculty, adjunct faculty members are:

- Paid much less to teach, even though they are as qualified as their full-time counterparts.
- Not paid for their scholarly work.
- Not paid for mentoring and advising students.
- Not eligible for employer-sponsored health insurance.
- Not allowed to participate in the defined-benefit state pension plan.
- Often not given access to office space.

These poor working conditions typically require adjunct faculty members to string together many work assignments every semester, often across multiple campuses. Careful studies have found that excessive reliance on part-time faculty is associated with reduced student retention,ⁱ lower rates of degree completion at two-yearⁱⁱ and four-yearⁱⁱⁱ institutions, and faculty having less time to interact with students and prepare for class instruction.^{iv}

This national evidence suggests that the Commonwealth's policy of relying heavily on underpaid adjunct faculty with poor working conditions is likely connected to our community colleges' inability to meet the needs of many students, particularly those facing significant obstacles to success. In the Boston Foundation's recent report, "Pathways to Economic Mobility: Identifying the Labor Market Value of Community College in Massachusetts," the authors point out both the substantial increase in earnings that a community college degree can provide and the negative results of not providing students with the supports they need to succeed. Of those in their study,^v only about 10 percent of Black and Latinx and low-income students received an associate's degree.^{vi} The lack of degree completion is detrimental to the life opportunities for those individuals; the state must provide the supports that students need to graduate, which in turn will benefit our Commonwealth's economy and the quality of life in communities throughout the state.

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There are a number of policies that would remove the barriers to success that too many students face. For instance, ensuring enough financial aid so that a college degree feels affordable, by enabling students to pay for tuition and living expenses without having to work long hours at paying jobs and lose their focus on classes. Another example is that maintaining the supports provided by the Commonwealth's **SUCCESS** program – such as peer mentoring, academic skills workshops, transportation stipends, dependent care supports, and targeted academic, career, transfer and scholarship advice – will enhance the rate of degree completion at our public colleges and universities.

These direct student supports must be paired with an investment in faculty. Evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that students are more likely to succeed if they are taught by faculty members whose pay and working conditions allow them to take time to advise, help and support their students not only in the classroom, but also when they need assistance outside of class.

Currently, adjunct faculty in Massachusetts community colleges make about \$4,000 per course and sometimes less. At that rate of pay, it is virtually impossible to do the kind of work that full-time tenure-track faculty do to meet the needs of students outside of class as well as to engage in scholarship and service. When two-thirds of our faculty are in that situation, it should not be surprising that our community colleges struggle to meet the needs of students – particularly those who face the most significant obstacles to success.

To meet the needs of our diverse students, whose success is crucial to the future of our state economy, we should commit to hiring more full-time tenure-track faculty and to making sure that adjunct faculty have the wages, health and pension benefits, and working conditions that allow them to provide all students with the support they need to succeed.

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- i Harrington, C., & Schibik, T. (2004). "Caveat Emptor: Is there a Relationship Between Part-Time Faculty Utilization and Student Learning Retention?" ; Jaeger, A. J. & Eagan, M. K. (2010). Examining retention and contingent faculty use in a state system of public higher education." *Educational Policy* 20(10), pp. 1-31.
 - ii Jacoby, Daniel. (2006). "The Effects of Part-Time Faculty Employment on Community College Graduation Rates." *Journal of Higher Education*, 77(6), 1081-1103.
 - iii Ehrenberg, R.L. & Zhang, L. (2004). "Do Tenured and Non-Tenure Track Faculty Matter?" National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 10695.
 - iv Umbach, P. (2007). How effective are they? Exploring the impact of contingent faculty on undergraduate education. *The Review of Higher Education*, 30(2), 91-123.
 - v The study does not include students who go on to enroll in four year colleges.
 - vi Pathways to Economic Mobility: Identifying the Labor Market Value of Community College in Massachusetts Alicia Sasser Modestino, Ph.D., Northeastern University Benjamin Forman of MassINC.

[This fact sheet draws on information from [**Faculty Matter: Selected Research on Connections between Faculty-Student Interaction and Student Success**](#), which includes citations to most of the studies above.]