

 [PRINT THIS PAGE](#)

Mark James Miller: American Higher Education a System Built on Sand

http://www.noozhawk.com/noozhawk/article/mark_james_miller_american_higher_education_system_20140825

By Mark James Miller



The American system of higher education is widely regarded as the world's best. More than half of the top 100 universities in the world are American. In 2013, [Fareed Zakaria](#) proclaimed in [Time magazine](#) that American higher education is "the envy of the world."

But beneath the congratulatory façade lies a darker reality: The American college and university system is built on a foundation of sand. It contains within its ivory towers a fatal flaw: The over-reliance on and exploitation of what is euphemistically known as "contingent" faculty. These men and women are part-time, nontenured instructors who are just as qualified as their full-time counterparts but are typically employed semester to semester, paid on average one-half to one-third of what a tenured professor earns for teaching the very same classes, with no health benefits, no offices to work in, and they're expected to meet their students, prepare their classes, and grade their students' work on their own time.

In 1960, 75 percent of the instructors in American colleges and universities were full time. They had regular salaries, medical insurance, retirement, sick leave, offices, sabbaticals — in short, all the perks normally associated with a full-time job in academia. In 2014, that figure has reversed itself. Now, 76 percent of the teachers in American higher education today are "contingent" faculty.

Some are graduate students tasked with teaching undergraduate courses, and some are full-time faculty who have yet to receive tenure. But the vast majority are "part-time" or "adjunct" instructors — fully qualified to teach at the college level, but typically employed semester by semester, never knowing if

they will have work in the same place next term or if they will be forced to scramble at the last minute to try to line up another teaching job.

The credits a student earns when taking a class from an “adjunct” are of the same value as those received from a full-time professor. The students do not pay more to take a class from a tenured teacher, nor do they pay less when they sit in a classroom taught by an adjunct. The part-time instructor is expected to provide the same quality education the student would receive from a full-time teacher, and few will deny that they do exactly that.

And yet these part-time instructors are paid the academic equivalent of minimum wage, for they are compensated strictly by the classroom hours they teach. Two hours of grading and prep time are normal for each hour spent in the classroom, and if the course is one that requires a more than average amount of writing, such as English composition, even more uncompensated hours can be added to the equation. While prep time and office hours are factored into the salary the tenured instructor receives, the adjunct must do this for free.

Added to this is the fear of the class being canceled due to low student enrollment, or taken by a full-time instructor to meet their contractual obligation or because they want to teach “overload” and earn extra money. A part-timer may spend many hours preparing a class for the semester — a syllabus, lesson plans, assignment lists, course outline, quizzes, tests — only to learn, a few days before the class begins, that it has been canceled or will be taught by someone else. At most colleges, they receive no pay for all the prep work they have done.

Then there is the lack of respect and appreciation for their efforts. Part-timers often labor in obscurity, coming to a campus to teach a class and then leaving, alienated from the campus community that is often virtually unaware of their existence.

But part-time teachers — as well as part-time counselors, librarians, coaches and others — have become essential to American higher education. Colleges and universities “build their budgets on the backs of part-time faculty,” as an administrator once cynically confessed to me. Each year the budget is planned with the expectation that at least half of the courses offered will be taught by poorly paid part-time instructors, whose average pay is \$2,700 per course. They are the basis upon which the system is founded. If no part-timers were available, half of the classes would go untaught. Likewise, if colleges went back to the 75-to-25 ratio of 1960, they would quickly go bankrupt.

This exploitation of contingent faculty strikes at the very heart of American higher education. What sort of system allows and enables this kind of exploitation, and watches it go on year after year, decade after decade, and does nothing to alleviate it? What sort of system stands idly by while thousands of talented people, with a great deal to offer their students and the educational community, are used like interchangeable parts, expected to toil in anonymity, called on when they are needed and told to go away when needed no longer?

In August 2013, an 83-year-old adjunct professor at a university in Maryland died penniless and homeless. The university where she had taught for 25 years had cut her classes, leaving her unemployed. She had cancer, huge medical bills and no health insurance. She earned \$10,000 per year; the president of her university earns \$700,000. When asked to comment on her death, the university's response was "We treat our part-timers the same as other universities."

What kind of system treats its teachers this way? What kind of institution pays its president \$700,000 a year but takes no responsibility when a loyal employee dies in such abominable circumstances? What kind of system proclaims itself to be the world's best but turns a blind eye to stories such as this? How long can such a system go on, and how long can it continue to excel?

These and other related questions need to be addressed soon if American higher education expects to go on being the world's finest. No system built on this kind of exploitation can continue to thrive. Eventually there will be a reckoning, and in the end it will be the students and the nation as a whole that will pay the price.

— *Mark James Miller is a teacher and writer, and has been a part-time English instructor at [Allan Hancock College](#) in Santa Maria since 1995. He is president of the [Part-Time Faculty Association of Allan Hancock College](#), [California Federation of Teachers](#) Local 6185, and is an executive board member of the [Tri-Counties Central Labor Council](#). The opinions expressed are his own.*