Higher Education’s Invisible Class – The Emotional and Physical Toll on Individuals and Their Families

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A Partial Summary of the Results of the NYSC AAUP Survey
“The Status of Adjunct/Contingent Faculty in NYS”
(2/19/2021) (N = 621)
“Living the Good Life…”

• Given what you know and have experienced, why do you continue to teach as adjunct/contingent faculty?
  – What purpose is it serving for you? For others?

• What are the short- and long-term impacts on your life?
  – Your family's life?
  – Your emotional health?
  – Your physical health?
  – And even on your spirit and/or spiritual health?
One of the Experiences of Being Invisible Is Insecurity

(Q24) (n = 618)

- Employment insecurity – 65.21%
- Housing insecurity – 10.68%
- Food insecurity – 6.47%
- Medical care insecurity – 33.17%
- Life insurance insecurity – 21.04%
- Additional responses revealed – “money insecurity,” “disability insecurity,” and “lack of necessary equipment insecurity.”
Still Others Reported Experiencing...

- “Bullying (nondiscriminatory harassment) from colleagues and administration. Lack of respect from senior colleagues. Lack of feeling valued by or connection with the institution.”
- “Alienation.”
- “Degradation and disrespect by department chairs and full-time colleagues who don’t see my PhD as equal to theirs.”
- Feeling “taken advantage of.”
- “Wage theft for unpaid work.”
- A lack of “racial and ethnic equity.”
- “Demoralization at work; despite excellence in teaching and scholarship. Contingent faculty (are) also easy prey for abusive higher-ranking colleagues at my institution.”
• “If I had to rely only on my teaching income, I would check all of the above.”
• “If my husband didn’t have a full-time job, we would be experiencing food and housing insecurity as well.”
• “If I were suddenly single, I would not be able to afford my rent, utilities, etc.”
• “I am always worried about losing my family’s health insurance. If my husband didn’t own a home, I’d be housing insecure.”
• “Between semesters I often experience food insecurity.”
• “If I wasn’t living with family, I would also check off housing insecurity.”
• “If not for my spouse, I would probably be homeless…”
“If I didn’t hold a second or third job in addition to teaching, I would experience housing insecurity as well.”
“I can’t afford to move or have a family.”
I experience “Visa sponsorship insecurity/possibility of deportation due to loss of job.”
The “Constant fear of not having enough work causes me to work much more than is healthy.”
I experience “retirement insecurity.”
“Since becoming an adjunct I have no security in my life because insecure employment has made me an insecure human being.”
“I have set aside funds for my cremation; it is the least expensive option that I can afford and not be a burden to anyone.”
When Asked “What is true for you?”
(Q25) (n = 605)

- 3.8% said they get food from a local food pantry or other free source
- 6.61% said they worry about being evicted
- 2.15% are on public assistance
- 5.62% worry about having enough food for themselves or their family
- 12.89% avoid getting health care because they can’t afford it
  - 4.96% said the same for their families
Even More Concerning...

- 29.42% said they don’t sleep well/enough at night because of the demands of their work
  - 24.79% said their family life suffers as a result
- “Precarious employment means I often need to choose between my job and caring for my children.” (Q25)
- “Being an adjunct professor makes a married life and parenting impossible. My own marriage was ruined in part by the inadequacy and insecurity of my employment; as a result, my wife sought to take full custody of my son, and to break his relationship with me, his father.” (Q25)
“I suffer psychologically and professionally because of the debilities imposed upon me by the systemic inequality of adjuncts within the profession.”

“I am getting evicted from college faculty housing, as are several of my colleagues.”

“No money coming in... I applied for unemployment but haven’t gotten it.”

“(I am) afraid to get dental care because of cost.”

“We are dependent for medical insurance from my wife’s job, and she has been ill and may lose her job and that critical insurance.”
Many Report High “Anxiety” Levels

- “I am worried about having enough just to pay rent, bills, etc.”
- “I have constant anxiety about losing my job.”
- “My mental health, career, self-esteem, and my time to spend applying for full time jobs suffer immensely because of my contingent status.”
- “The uncertainty of my teaching is stressful.”
- “I am stressed with teaching so many classes…I take as many…as I can get because I need the money and do not know if I will have enough…next semester.”
Almost 10% of respondents (9.75%) said they need access to mental health care services but can’t afford it and 3.64% said the same for an immediate family member. (Q25)

Hopefully, there are those who need the services and ALSO have access.
And Constant Fear...

- “I live in fear of termination from term to term based on politics and the whims of full-time educators.”
- “I am constantly worried about course cancellation or not being offered enough courses to pay for my expenses (rent, transportation, etc.).”
- “Each semester I fear that I will not have courses -- in which case I will not be able to pay any of my bills and I will lose access to my insurance.”
- “I am a tremendous financial burden on my spouse, who is terrified of his own risk of job loss because he is essentially the only wage earner.”
- “My mental health suffered in the summer (at a time when I was not on contract or being paid) because of demands from work.”
- “I do have mental health services, but they are my largest single expense after rent.”
Impact on the Next Generation of Students...and Faculty

• “I can’t afford college costs for my child.”

• “I am worried to lose my job or not having benefits because I can't pay my daughter's tuition.”

• “I have struggled to complete my PhD because of the work demands & can't pay my tuition.”
“Forgotten...Abused...Disrespected...Dismissed”

- “I am clearly forgotten about and not valued at my institution, despite the fact that I have been there many years and am more experienced and qualified than many of the FT faculty.”
- “Adelphi Admin and the AAUP is abusive of Adjuncts.”
- “I am concerned that I will face professional consequences for organizing with my colleagues to unionize our institution's full-time contingent faculty.”
- “Sometimes disrespected by students, which is painful and insulting. They have no idea what we are paid and when I've asked them, they think we have all have full time jobs and are paid with benefits. They have no idea what we go through to teach them and try to earn a little money.”
- “I feel as an adjunct I am very often treated dismissively by the Department Chair who plays favorites in terms of scheduling.”
Is this What “All ONE Faculty” Looks Like?

• “I'm becoming frustrated with the unreliability of adjunct teaching. I've been an Adjunct Assistant Professor at CUNY since 2006, without promotion (despite my efforts including filing applications for a promotion. Some semesters, I'm left with no class to teach, and I hold a PhD and three Master's Degrees.”

• “My work life suffered because the faculty has an inflated sense of entitlement and bombards me with endless emails complaining about the Cush life that they have.”

• “An adjunct faculty position demands a lot of time spend not only preparing the classes but reading and grading papers as well as supervising students and communicating with them. This time is never accounted for in any contract.

• “I worry that I will not be eligible for full-time employment because I have adjuncted so long despite having a PHD, great student and faculty evaluations, publications and conference presentations.”
Covid-19 has revealed serious social and economic inequities in our society and higher education and mental health needs and services are an important part of the picture. – for students and faculty.
• The CDC reported that symptoms of anxiety disorder and depressive disorder have increased considerably as a result of the pandemic.

• In addition to increased caregiving responsibilities, social isolation, and concerns regarding morbidity and mortality, faculty members have reported experiencing chronic stress due to the pressure of transitioning to remote teaching and concerns about job security.
An article in Inside Higher Ed reveals that “The early days of the pandemic took a toll on faculty members, but for many, peak stress is now, according to a new study of faculty mental health from Course Hero. Researchers for the study website surveyed hundreds of faculty members on and off the tenure track, across institution types, this fall. The findings suggest that faculty worries about the pandemic have morphed into chronic stress -- with serious implications for professors’ mental health, their students and the profession as COVID-19 drags on” (Flaherty, 2020).
• Flaherty also notes that “Perhaps most significantly, more than 40 percent of survey respondents considered leaving their jobs as a result of COVID-19’s impact. Early-career faculty members were most likely to be considered leaving, at 48 percent.”

• “Another significant source of stress, for two-thirds of professors surveyed, was meeting the emotional and mental health needs of students, who are also struggling” (Flaherty, 2020; CDC).
“My course load has been reduced to 25% of pre-covid. I am worried constantly about finding other work.”

“I am always worried about losing my health insurance due to budget cuts during the pandemic.”

“Maintaining sanity while grieving the loss of family members and COVID.”
Where Can We Go?  
Who Can We Turn To?

• Given the financial strains facing our public and private institutions across the state, resources for mental health counselling for students, faculty, and staff are being cut precisely when they are most needed.
  – For example, while there is still technically an on-campus Counselling Center at Dutchess Community College (DCC), there are no counselors as all part- and full-time counselor positions were completely eliminated, and services outsourced to a call center.

• Adequate provision of mental health services on our campuses requires a range of services be provided by an adequately trained and staffed counselling center. The International Accreditation of Counseling Services standards indicate a standard of 1:1000 counselors for students and specify that “the professional (Masters-level and above) staff of the Center should have status comparable to faculty at the institution.”
One of the NYSC AAUP Legislative “Talking Points” – Support Mental Health Funding and Programs

THIS HIGHLIGHTS THE NEED TO FULLY FUND TAP AND EOP/HEOP AS ANY FURTHER CUTS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING ARE LIKELY TO RESULT IN CUTS TO STUDENT SERVICES SUCH AS MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELLING. THE NYSC AAUP SUPPORTS THE PSC’S CALL TO INCREASE THE RATIO OF CAMPUS-BASED FULL-TIME MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELORS TO FTE STUDENTS TO MEET NATIONAL STANDARDS AND RAISE REVENUE TO CLOSE THE ESTIMATED $16 BILLION BUDGET DEFICIT AND PREVENT HARMFUL CUTS TO EDUCATION AND STUDENT SERVICES.

“Recent research shows that student mental health was a top priority for college presidents even before the pandemic (Chessman and Taylor, 2019). National assessment data (American College Health Association) from Fall 2019 show rising levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidality—suicidal ideation, suicide plans, and suicide attempts. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, reporting on the pandemic’s effect on mental health, found that about one-quarter of 18- to 24-year-olds surveyed had ‘seriously considered suicide’ in the last 30 days (Czeisler et al., 2020). Covid-19 has (also) amplified the substance abuse crisis in our nation. Nationally, and locally, deaths due to opiate overdoses have significantly increased (Ali, 2020). Many students in our diverse community have been hardest hit due to systemic disparities in health care, economic security, education, and employment opportunities" (Rybacki and Tully, 2020).
QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION

THANK YOU FOR ATTENDING

Be well and take care
Shared by one of our adjunct colleagues...

- “Of all the collective bargaining proposals that should be made to the public and private Universities – we should strive to remove all teaching caps on adjunct faculty.
- While this would equate to ‘more pay for more work’ rather than ‘better pay for the same amount of work,’ I am personally frustrated by the limitations placed on how many classes we are limited to. In practice, a University limiting an adjunct to no more than 5 classes per calendar year … forces a part-time faculty member to seek additional employment at another University, further stretching out our most precious resource: time.
- While older part-time faculty may not wish to take advantage of this, younger adjuncts (like myself) have been ‘hand-cuffed’ into class limitations throughout our career. I have often had department chairman offer me additional classes, only to have the ‘extra’ classes taken away once the Human Resources department realized I was given ‘more than the limit’ of classes.
- I agree that we should bargain for more pay and better benefits, but at the very least we should have the Universities step out of the way, and let motivated faculty teach AS MANY COURSES as we can.
- The only major objection I envision from the Universities is some nonsense related to adjuncts working the equivalent of a full-time employee and then qualifying for health insurance.
- Well, provide adjuncts with a waiver to sign indicating we will NOT look for free health insurance (which no longer exists anyway) if we work the equivalent of a full-time employee and that problem would be solved.”