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# THE ADJUNCT DILEMMA: EXPLOITATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION FROM CSU TO THE NATIONAL STAGE

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## Abstract

This article critically examines the systemic exploitation of adjunct faculty in higher education, focusing first on Cleveland State University (CSU) and then expanding to a nationwide context. Adjuncts, who now make up the majority of college instructors in the United States, are essential to academic operations but are often paid poverty-level wages, denied job security, and excluded from institutional governance. At CSU, adjuncts earn roughly $3,900 per course, even when teaching large classes of 30 or more students that generate tens of thousands of dollars in tuition revenue for the university. This stark disparity illustrates a growing divide between revenue generation and faculty compensation.

The paper further explores how nonprofit institutions, protected under 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status, continue to post financial surpluses while investing heavily in administrative costs, athletics, and facilities—often at the expense of instructional quality and labor equity. Through financial analysis and literature review, the article highlights how these practices exploit adjuncts while compromising student engagement, academic continuity, and educational outcomes.

The broader national analysis shows that this model is not unique to CSU. Across the country, adjuncts often juggle multiple teaching jobs at different institutions, receive no benefits, and work without contracts that guarantee employment stability. These conditions not only erode the professional dignity of educators but also degrade the student experience in higher education. As universities increasingly operate under corporatized frameworks, their reliance on underpaid academic labor raises ethical, economic, and social concerns.

To address this crisis, the article offers a series of policy recommendations, including the provision of living wages, multi-year contracts, access to health and retirement benefits, and meaningful inclusion of adjuncts in governance. These changes are essential to realigning institutional priorities with their stated missions of academic excellence and equity.

## Keywords

Adjunct Faculty, Higher Education, Exploitation, Cleveland State University, Contingent Labor, Nonprofit Colleges, Faculty Compensation, Academic Labor Equity, CSU, University Labor Practices

## Introduction

The American higher education system, once a beacon of progress and intellectual rigor, is experiencing a silent crisis that threatens its ethical and operational foundations. This crisis revolves around the exploitation of adjunct professors—scholars who represent over 70% of the instructional workforce in U.S. colleges and universities (AAUP, 2022). This article examines the stark reality of adjunct labor at Cleveland State University (CSU), a public institution in Ohio, and expands the discussion to the broader national context. While institutions classify themselves as nonprofits, the reality of their financial models tells a different story—one of substantial profitability at the expense of their most vulnerable employees: adjunct faculty.

## The Reality at Cleveland State University (CSU)

At Cleveland State University, adjunct instructors are essential to academic operations. Yet, they are paid modestly—about $3,900 for a three-credit course. Considering that a single class may have 30 students each paying around $1,000, the university generates $30,000 in tuition revenue per course, netting a profit of over $26,000 after paying the instructor (CSU Budget Office, 2023). Despite these margins, adjuncts often receive no health benefits, no office space, and minimal involvement in academic governance. The workload is substantial. Adjuncts are expected to deliver high-quality instruction, provide student support, grade assignments promptly, and sometimes develop entire course curricula—often with limited institutional support. These conditions contrast sharply with the compensation provided, creating a deeply imbalanced labor relationship (Coalition on the Academic Workforce, 2012).

## The National Context: Adjunct Labor Across U.S. Colleges

Nationally, adjunct faculty are not anomalies—they are the norm. According to the American Federation of Teachers (2020), nearly 75% of U.S. college instructors are contingent faculty, with most earning less than a living wage. Many teach at multiple institutions just to make ends meet, driving hundreds of miles each week for classes at different campuses.

This overreliance on adjunct labor is not due to lack of funding. Most public institutions have increased tuition steadily over the past two decades. Simultaneously, administrative bloat—growth in non-teaching staff and executive salaries—has expanded, even as faculty compensation has stagnated (Kezar & Maxey, 2013).

## Nonprofit Status and Profitable Operations

Most U.S. colleges and universities are registered as 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations. This status exempts them from federal income tax and allows them to receive tax-deductible charitable donations. However, being nonprofit in legal status does not mean they operate at a financial loss. In reality, many institutions generate significant surpluses that are reinvested into facilities, athletic programs, and administrative salaries rather than instructional quality.

This discrepancy creates a moral dilemma. While students take on crushing debt and adjuncts earn poverty wages, institutions post budget surpluses and build multimillion-dollar buildings. These dynamics raise ethical concerns about the use of public and donor funds in institutions that purport to prioritize education and equity (Gappa, Austin & Trice, 2007).

## The Economic Equation: Revenue vs. Compensation

The economic structure of higher education relies heavily on instructional labor while minimizing the cost of that labor. Adjuncts teach the bulk of general education courses—those with the highest enrollment and profitability. A typical adjunct may earn between $2,000 to $5,000 per course. Even teaching five courses a semester, which is equivalent to a full-time load, an adjunct might only earn $20,000 to $25,000 per year—well below the national average income (Baldwin & Chronister, 2001).

Meanwhile, the average salary for university presidents has soared, often exceeding $500,000 at public institutions and over $1 million at elite private colleges (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2022). This wage gap between top administrators and instructional faculty illustrates a broader trend: the corporatization of academia, where profit metrics overshadow educational mission.

## Implications for Quality Education and Student Success

The reliance on underpaid adjunct labor has profound implications for educational quality. Adjuncts are often forced to juggle multiple teaching gigs, limiting their availability to students. They may lack access to campus resources, office space, or even email addresses tied to the university—factors that directly impact student support.

Moreover, contingent faculty turnover is high, making it difficult for students to form long-term academic relationships. These conditions undermine retention, mentorship, and student satisfaction—all metrics used to evaluate institutional effectiveness (Kezar, Maxey & Eaton, 2019).

## Moral and Ethical Considerations in Higher Education

The exploitation of adjunct faculty raises serious moral questions. How can institutions claim to prepare future leaders while failing to uphold ethical labor practices? The current model is unsustainable—not only for adjuncts, but for the integrity of higher education itself.

If higher education is to be a vehicle for equity, intellectual inquiry, and civic engagement, it must treat all members of its academic community with fairness and dignity. This includes reevaluating adjunct compensation, offering benefits, and providing pathways to permanent employment.

## Proposed Solutions and Policy Recommendations

Several reforms can address the adjunct crisis:

1. **Living Wages**: Institutions must commit to paying adjuncts a wage that reflects the value of their labor.
2. **Job Security**: Multi-year contracts should replace semester-to-semester hiring.
3. **Benefits**: Adjuncts teaching a full-time load across one or more institutions should qualify for health insurance and retirement plans.
4. **Shared Governance**: Adjunct voices must be included in departmental and institutional decision-making.
5. **Transparency**: Colleges should disclose how tuition revenue is allocated, including the percentage spent on instruction.

National policy could also mandate labor standards for institutions receiving federal funds, similar to how financial aid programs enforce compliance.

## Conclusion

Adjunct professors are the backbone of American higher education. They teach the majority of courses, shape student learning, and uphold academic standards—all while being paid less, supported less, and recognized less than their full-time counterparts. At CSU and beyond, this systemic inequity threatens the future of academia.

As nonprofit institutions continue to profit from adjunct labor, a reckoning is overdue. Structural change must be enacted—not only for the sake of instructors, but for the students and communities who rely on education as a pathway to opportunity. Equity in education begins with equity for educators.

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