

LABOR

Undercompensated in Academia



I grew up in an academic household, and academia was a goal of mine from an early age. Both my parents are musicians teaching in academia, and while I also loved to perform, I had decided in college that I would probably follow in my parents' footsteps and pursue teaching on a university level.

Like many good plans, that didn't exactly pan out. I taught a lot in colleges and universities as an adjunct, driving from place to place, working what is considered a full course load—if you're a tenured teacher, which I wasn't. I taught four to five courses a semester, at two or three different institutions, and I enjoyed it. I love imparting knowledge to students, especially when they want to learn what I have to offer, and as a dance teacher, my students usually wanted to be there.

When I left, it was a conscious choice, brought on by many factors. For one, I grew tired of running around, spending more money than I was making on gasoline, and feeling a little like I was phoning in the work. A tenure position would be wonderful, I thought, because I wouldn't have to worry so much about driving all over the city, and there would be a bit more stabilization too. The problem, however, was that I needed to move to where the job was, and since I didn't want to do that, I felt like I was waiting for someone to die in order to get a shot at such a position. Since I liked where I lived and didn't want to move, there really weren't many options.

I worked as an acquisitions editor for a scholarly publisher, helping academics prepare their research manuscripts for publication, which afforded me a good view of the other side of academia. I'm still involved in the academic world now, primarily through a wonderful music society that my father co-founded in the early 1970s, the Society for American Music. I recently finished serving on their board, I still attend meetings regularly, and I'm one of only a few of their members who isn't in academia (though they are expanding their efforts at professional diversity).

I've always been pro-education, and I get angry and frustrated with the anti-education rhetoric that flies so freely around political debates, especially during election periods. Wisconsin's Governor (and presidential hopeful) Scott Walker has single-handedly done more to promote distrust, disrespect, and unjust resentment for educators in his state and around the

by [Renée Camus](#)
 March 26th, 2015

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country. But even as a pro-education person with experience in academia, I realized at a recent SAM meeting that my concept (like many people's) of how even tenured university professors make their money, and the work they're expected to do for that money, is completely off-kilter. I spoke to some of my SAM colleagues about what their days were like and what was expected of them, and realized just how much they do that they are simply not compensated for.

One of the primary misconceptions education adversaries have is that teachers "don't work hard" because they get out of school at 3 p.m. and have summers off. This is ludicrous. They assume this because they only count the hours teachers are in school. Besides the fact that some teachers start their day at 7 a.m.—which would equal a full eight-hour day if they left at 3—it's impossible to measure a teacher's work solely on the hours they are physically at their institution. The majority of a professor's work is done outside the classroom.

A teacher has to be fully prepared for the semester, and for each class. This means putting together lesson plans; gathering materials like music or video samples, readings, and texts; and creating in-class and homework assignments to assess the students' work. And every assignment given must be timely read and graded by the professor. Students can't learn from their errors if their assignments are not returned quickly. Some classes hold 15 to 30 students, adding up to many assignments. One professor I spoke to manages a lecture class of 600 students, plus an army of teaching assistants.

Universities stay fresh by offering new courses, sometimes taught by professors whose main research area is outside the topic. For example, a musicologist studying 19th-century music could be asked to create a new course in pop music. That requires lots more hours of planning and development, not to mention familiarization with the material.

Even if teachers are in class for shorter periods, they are "on" for the entire time. No coffee, water cooler, or Facebook breaks during class time. Teachers have to actively engage their students, impart knowledge, and participate for every moment of that class period. A three-hour session can be exhausting. Yes, they build a short break into the three hours for the students, but teachers often spend that time answering questions or meeting one-on-one with students.

If teaching were the only job expected of the professors, that would be one thing. But it's almost secondary. Those I spoke to, like Nancy Newman of SUNY Albany, said that research and service are required at most public institutions, often at a 40-40-20 percent division, respectively.

Service generally means committee work, public lectures, evaluating grant or scholarship applications, administrative work, overseeing the department or its students, and more. The work is in service to the specific school or department (ie: the school of music), to the university or college, and to the state. Teachers are also expected to contribute to their field, in addition to promoting their own work.

This extra work is essentially on a volunteer basis. "That service is part of the expectation of the salary I draw," explains Newman.

Service also includes writing evaluations and reports: of students, of colleagues or peers, even of themselves. Faculty members write annual self-evaluations, detailing their research findings, documentation, publications, student and peer evaluations, service and committee work, and their post conference feedback. They essentially reapply for their job every year they hold it. This also includes activity and achievement reports for professor emeritus status, when the time comes. In other words, they even have to apply to retire.

Christopher Wilkinson of West Virginia University says it's "the only five day a week job where you work seven days a week," while Dianna Eiland of Fairfax County Public Schools calls it the "Red Queen Hypothesis": "You're running and running, just to stay in place."

But what about those "lengthy" summer vacations? "Summer is when you do research," says Wilkinson.

Yes, professors need to uphold their research, making new discoveries and publishing articles, reviews, and ideally books, in order to achieve tenure. Publish or perish, as they say.

But publishing doesn't make money. Teachers are not paid for researching or writing; articles are unpaid; and book sales are generally in the hundreds, so the low royalties don't add up. In fact, there's a dichotomy between academics, who are expected to become experts in one niche area, and the struggling publishing industry, which wants broad, general interest books that will sell thousands of copies. I saw this first hand at the publishing company.

In some places, in North America for example, research is valued even higher than teaching. "Teaching can only hurt you," says James Deaville of Carleton University in Canada. "They



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expect that your teaching is adequate or fine. It's all about the research."

Part of your research means attending conferences, like SAM. "Academic conferences are a form of continued education," says Wilkinson. "They are essential to maintaining and enlarging your understanding of the subject, which impacts your teaching." Professors are expected to keep up with new ideas in research, and find original pedagogical techniques, keeping it fresh for both students and themselves.

The common expression is that teachers, like artists, are not in it for the money. The intangible rewards hopefully outweigh the tangible, like forging your own path in the topic of your choice and sharing your passion with others. Minnesota adjunct teacher Jonas Westover justified his career decision this way: "I was so amazed when I found out I could study musicology. I love music and I love history. I can do anything I want!"

How fortunate for others that these teachers are willing to give so much for so little.

Next time: How are we addressing these problems?

Renée Camus is a writer, dancer, and pop culture junkie living in Burbank, California, with her animator husband and three beautiful cats. She has written articles and television recaps for Los Angeles magazine, Reel Life with Jane, and Moviefone, and writes about pop and geek culture on her blog at Geek Adjacent.

Photo: [Timothy Krause](#)

academia adjuncts labor Renée Camus tenure this teacher's work

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eatmoredumplings

two thumbs up, excellent article.

Posted on March 26, 2015 at 3:07 pm

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Renee Camus@facebook

@eatmoredumplings Thanks so much!

Posted on March 31, 2015 at 1:10 pm

REPLY »



Country Shank

I completely get what you're saying – many tenure track faculty members are underpaid (though not all), and pretty much all adjuncts are scandalously underpaid. But...there's a flipside that rarely gets explored. Those \$3.45 an hour (if that) adjunct jobs? It's rarely hard to fill them with well-qualified people. Those over-worked, underappreciated humanities tenured faculty positions? It's pretty much never hard to fill them with extremely qualified people – Indeed, in something like musicology, there's probably 10-20 'perfect' candidates for each opening, not to mention the other 150 who will apply. Until more people begin to do what the author did – get out of the system – and until institutions can't find qualified people for what they pay, very little will change. To pursue a life of the mind is an amazing opportunity, and we need to get real about the supply and demand of those who are willing to take a shot at getting to pursue it.

Posted on March 26, 2015 at 4:06 pm

REPLY » 1



Renee Camus@facebook

@Country Shank Thanks so much for your comment. You're right, there are definitely more people who want and are qualified to do this work than positions available, and they're willing to take less than they deserve to do it. That is definitely part of the problem. But we can't punish the people who choose to follow their heart in their chosen profession simply because there are too many of them who want to do it. I did get out of academia, but it's not always better in other professions (like writing, and pretty much all the creative arts), I'm sorry to say. And when things in the world at large (or at least the American world) are so unbalanced, where sports players make millions of dollars while artists and musicians struggle, where corporations run government and education has to take a back seat, it doesn't help to blame the people trying to support the underdog system. My hope in this article (at least partially) is to try to show to people who may not know just how much artists and educators work, and try to change the system that way. Don't know if it'll do much good, but we can at least try. :)

Posted on March 31, 2015 at 1:21 pm

REPLY »



MemphisBlues

Given the costs of going to college, I'm trying to understand why someone would pay \$20-40,000 annually for 4-5 years to learn to play a musical instrument. Surely there must be less expensive options.

Posted on March 26, 2015 at 4:30 pm

REPLY »



Renee Camus@facebook

@MemphisBlues Thanks for commenting. It's true, college is extremely expensive, but you learn so much more than "just" playing an instrument (which of course there's nothing wrong with). And many professional performers opt not to go to college and instead try to get work performing. If they do go to college, they're unlikely to go past a bachelors. But many institutions require you to get an advanced degree (ie: at least a masters) if you want to teach there. I needed to have a masters in order to be an adjunct, teaching dance at community colleges (unless that's changed in the past 3-4 years).

And that old expression, "those who can't, teach" is utter crap too. Artists have to make

money any way they can and teaching is a good (and fun) way to add, at least a little, to their income.

Posted on March 31, 2015 at 1:28 pm

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