

UMass Lowell adjunct faculty criticize lower pay and benefits



Winslow Townson for The Boston Globe

“We’re getting screwed, royally screwed,” said UMass Lowell adjunct professor Debbie White.

By [Katie Johnston](#) Globe Staff December 26, 2016

The adjunct faculty at the University of Massachusetts Lowell want what their counterparts at other UMass campuses have: higher pay, benefits, and job security.

The UMass Lowell adjuncts, who are contract workers but belong to a union, staged a protest during a retirement dinner for a provost in April, joining forces with adjuncts from other campuses and chanting “parity now!” as they picketed in front of the UMass Club in Boston. Earlier this month, they marched across campus to deliver a petition to the chancellor demanding that all UMass faculty be treated equally.

The faculty are demanding attention as contract negotiations have dragged on through 37 bargaining sessions over nearly two years. The administration offered a 2.5 percent pay raise per year, but no health insurance or pension.

Adjunct faculty, who are not on a tenure track, aren’t expected to publish research, and often work part time, make a minimum of \$4,400 per course at UMass Lowell, compared to \$6,500 at UMass Amherst. The lowest-paid adjuncts in Boston, where tuition is lower than at Lowell, make \$5,000.

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The Lowell adjuncts have no access to health care or retirement benefits, which their cohorts get at the UMass campuses in Boston, Amherst, and Dartmouth. The Lowell instructors have little job security, unlike in Amherst and Boston, where adjuncts can work their way into a permanent post.

“It is outrageous that we’re doing the same job for what’s supposed to be one system, and we’re getting screwed, royally screwed,” said Debbie White, who has been teaching five ethics classes a semester for several years and shells out \$12,000 a year to pay for health insurance for herself and her son. White also teaches at Middlesex Community College and works as a freelance articles editor for the Harvard Business Review to make ends meet.

Spokesman Christine Gillette said in a statement that adjuncts at UMass Lowell have fewer duties than many lecturers in Boston and Amherst and aren’t required to hold office hours, mentor students, or serve on committees. Still, almost all Lowell adjuncts have office hours and support students outside of class, the union said.

The UMass Lowell administration said that its adjunct rates are highly competitive for the market.

“We have offered to increase members’ pay beyond what our research shows are already competitive rates for this market,” Gillette said in a statement. “The length of the negotiations have resulted in at least one salary increase not going into effect and other salary increases are now in jeopardy.”

One key difference is the way the unions are set up at each school. Unlike adjunct faculty at the other three campuses, who belong to the same unions as tenured faculty, the adjuncts in Lowell are in a separate union.

Attention was drawn to the discrepancies between campuses after adjuncts from across the UMass system started meeting earlier this year, part of a growing movement among adjuncts to demand more rights. Adjuncts have recently organized at a number of universities, including Northeastern, Tufts, Brandeis, Bentley, Lesley, and Boston University.

Colleges around the country are increasingly relying on a contingent workforce of adjuncts. Nearly 40 percent of faculty members nationwide are adjunct instructors, according to the New Faculty Majority, an Akron, Ohio-based coalition that promotes equality for adjuncts.

In Lowell, the number of adjuncts is roughly equivalent to the number of full-time faculty. According to the administration, the adjuncts teach a quarter of the school’s classes, although the union says it’s closer to half.

“The way adjuncts are treated is just part of the whole corporatization of education,” said Tess George, a union spokeswoman who teaches critical thinking and public speaking at UMass Lowell. “You bring in a lot of people who are precarious, who are contingent, you make them part time, you don’t make them feel like part of the community. . . . Do you not get how damaging this is for the educational experience?”

Rob Talbot, who teaches writing at UMass Lowell, has been able to set aside money for retirement, but when his teenage son needed medical treatment a few years ago, he had to raid his savings to pay bills his wife's insurance wouldn't cover. Talbot is scheduled to teach three writing courses at UMass Lowell next semester, though "that's not nailed down," he said, noting that he once lost a course with a week's notice.

"With the instability and the fluctuating number of courses, it's a constant struggle to keep up," Talbot said.

John Hess has been teaching English and American studies at UMass Boston for 28 years, and along with his health care and pension plan, he is guaranteed four classes a semester. Hess, who is a full-time, non-tenure-track faculty member but technically an adjunct, is "appalled" by the situation in Lowell.

"The longer they can play games like this, campus to campus, the better the administration thinks it is for them, and they think they're saving money," he said. "But it's better for the university system to have a stable workforce that's committed to the university. It's better for the students, as well."

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