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Why MA policymakers should support the Adjunct Pilot Program (APP)

Executive Summary

The chronic mistreatment of adjunct faculty on college campuses in Massachusetts and across the country is a well-known policy problem. But solving it has both financial and logistical challenges – especially under the current fiscal precarity the Commonwealth is facing. Fortunately, the Adjunct Pilot Program (APP; [H. 1434](#)) would temporarily test out several key solutions to adjunct faculty’s mistreatment. At the same time, it would act as a stepping stone for more comprehensive reforms (1).

Once implemented, the APP would directly improve adjunct professors’ quality of life through various benefits, namely healthcare coverage, promotion opportunities and improved resources like office spaces. In turn, it would improve students’ educational outcomes. In addition, as a result of any flaws in either the execution or the policies themselves, the Adjunct Pilot Program would spotlight necessary edits to existing proposals.

Meanwhile, through its potential successes, the Adjunct Pilot Program would generate support for future adjunct faculty reforms. Finally, the APP would only cost \$2 million per year. This makes it especially viable for passage under the current period of federal funding cuts.

Diving Deeper

Introduction

Adjunct faculty are professors who work on a temporary, per-semester basis, and thus lack basic benefits such as healthcare, job security and a livable salary. The resulting economic precarity adjunct faculty face has severe consequences not only for their own well-being but also for the Commonwealth as a whole: the chronic exploitation of adjunct faculty has well-documented negative effects on students’ learning outcomes (2; 3; 4; 5; 6). In a state where higher education is so central to economic progress, the exploitation of adjunct faculty is a crisis that not only wastes the talents of promising academics but also shortchanges students of the education they need to succeed.

In order to solve the problem of adjunct faculty's subpar working conditions (and, in turn, improve students' learning conditions), Massachusetts policymakers must pass legislation that guarantees adjunct faculty basic treatment such as long-term teaching contracts, a livable salary, and improved benefits such as healthcare and retirement coverage. The provision of resources such as office space and opportunities for promotion and career development is also key.

Unfortunately, any comprehensive legislation addressing these problems would be extremely fiscally demanding, which makes it especially unlikely given the severity of recent funding cuts from the federal government (7; 8; 9; 10). Despite these constraints, progress is still possible.

The Adjunct Pilot Program would do a three-year trial run for several key policies designed to improve adjunct faculty's working conditions. Namely, it would test out the provision of healthcare, expanded promotion opportunities, and access to departmental resources such as shared office space and technology support. In order to ensure a smooth execution of this pilot program as well as report recommendations for future policies, a 13-member oversight committee with a diverse range of stakeholders would monitor the program until its designated end date.

Background

To get a better understanding of the challenges facing adjunct faculty, let us examine the ongoing lack of job security, benefits, and resources that Massachusetts adjunct faculty face. Adjunct faculty are a relatively modern phenomenon: a majority of academia a half century ago was full-time, tenured professors.

But universities have relied increasingly on adjunct faculty because they are cheaper than full-time, tenured professors, and in turn more exploitable. While the percentage of professors who were full-time tenured faculty was 78.3 percent in 1969, during the 2019-2020 academic year only 31 percent of faculty had tenure or were eligible for tenure (2).

Adjunct faculty typically lack basic benefits such as healthcare, retirement plans, full-time compensation, livable salaries, job security. The average pay per class was \$3500 in the 2018-2019 academic year (2). Likewise, a 2019 study found that two thirds of adjunct faculty make under \$50,000 even when combined with other jobs (11). Indeed, one quarter of adjuncts earn less than \$25,000 per year (12).

According to an Association of American University Professors report, only one third of part-time faculty members received any contributions to their retirement plans or to health insurance from their employers (2). As Fitchburg State University Professor Michael Stassen noted in his testimony about the mistreatment of adjunct faculty, Massachusetts public

universities actually deprive adjunct faculty of social security by converting their social security earnings into a government pension, only to deny adjuncts access due to their part-time status (13). In another survey, 80 percent said the average employment contract lasts for one semester or less (14).

As a result of these conditions, the same survey found that only 16 percent of faculty said they felt they were treated as equals by their universities, and 25 percent said they're treated equally by colleagues (14). Other challenges such as the lack of office space, the lack of access to institutional resources, and the lack of career advancement opportunities and professional development prevent these bright academics from reaching their full potential.

The only group that suffers more than adjunct professors themselves are their students. The Delphi Project of the University of Southern California's Pullias Center found overreliance on adjuncts has a whole host of negative effects on student learning since adjuncts are too stressed and overwhelmed to dedicate enough time and energy to their students (4).

Policy Alternatives

A meaningful improvement to adjunct faculty's working conditions requires guaranteeing livable wages, long-term, full-time teaching assignments (i.e., job security), healthcare and retirement benefits, access to departmental resources and workspaces, and career advancement opportunities.

A primary reason universities do not provide adjunct faculty adequate compensation to begin with is because of chronic underfunding – particularly at state colleges and community colleges – which has forced them to rely on underpaid and overworked adjunct professors in order to stay afloat financially (3; 15). As a result, the success of any comprehensive adjunct faculty reform legislation – namely the Adjunct Faculty Reform Act ([*S.930/H.3948*](#)) and the Adjunct Faculty Bill of Rights ([*H.1429/ S.940*](#)) – would require major funding increases for Massachusetts' public universities.

This kind of major investment is much less feasible under the current political climate: the current federal administration's targeted funding cuts to Massachusetts include billions of dollars previously allotted for university research funding, public safety, healthcare, housing and education (7; 8; 9; 10). At the same time, at the highly affordable maximum cost of \$2 million dollars per year, the Adjunct Pilot Program would test out several much-needed reforms over the next three years.

The Case for the Adjunct Pilot Program (APP)

The Adjunct Pilot Program ([*H. 1434*](#)) is a uniquely promising piece of legislation because it would test out several major long-overdue reforms for Massachusetts universities' adjunct faculty (1).

The Adjunct Pilot Program would give adjunct faculty improvements in three key areas: career advancement, better working conditions, and benefits.

Through the bill's career advancement framework, adjunct faculty would have expanded opportunities to get promoted and be truly rewarded for all of the work they do. As for better working conditions, adjunct faculty could use department resources and workspaces, which would help adjunct faculty be more productive and be the best teachers possible to their students. Finally, the Pilot Program would guarantee adjunct faculty healthcare coverage, a necessity the majority of adjunct faculty have been denied (2).

By testing out the implementation of key reforms such as healthcare benefits, career advancement and improved resources, this bill would pave the way for the passage of a future adjunct faculty bill that is much more comprehensive. All the while, it would show policymakers what works and what does not so they can make improvements to existing legislation.

The program would also only be tested at three universities, with one from the community college system, one from the state university system, and one from the University of Massachusetts system. In order to ensure the selection process is competitive, the program will have institutions provide matching funds of at least 25 percent.

To make sure policymakers can learn from the Adjunct Pilot Program and make adjustments to more comprehensive legislation, the bill provides for the establishment of a 13-member oversight committee with stakeholders from all parts of the higher education community: from adjunct professors to students to teachers' unions to the Department of Higher Education.

The provision of healthcare coverage is the most obvious benefit of this proposed program. According to a 2023 national survey of American Federation of Teachers (AFT) adjunct faculty, only 45 percent of AFT adjuncts received health insurance from their university employers (16). The Adjunct Pilot Program stipulates that any adjunct faculty that teaches 50 percent of a full-time load is eligible for healthcare coverage (1).

The creation of a two-tier promotion system for adjuncts as well as improved access to workspaces are also key. According to that same AFT survey, only 22.5 of the adjuncts surveyed had continuing employment beyond a single-semester contract (16). Moreover, two thirds wanted to work full-time but were only offered part-time work (16).

Adjunct faculty also typically lack access to adequate workspaces, let alone shared office spaces, which are necessary for preparing teaching materials, meeting with students, and other potential duties of adjuncting (17). This legislation would remedy this with guaranteed shared office space for student meetings, as well as access to other essential departmental resources.

Conclusion

While adjunct faculty in Massachusetts universities would still face a variety of challenges even with the passage of this legislation, the Pilot Program's policies would be a powerful stepping stone towards implementing more comprehensive reforms to give adjunct faculty the dignity they deserve and, in turn, give students the education they deserve.

The Adjunct Faculty Reform Act (AFRA; [S.930/H.3948](#)) would expand on the Adjunct Pilot Program's sampling of improvements and offer guaranteed minimum pay, long-term teaching contracts, class assignments in advance, access to research grants, and inclusion in faculty governance and meetings (18). Implementing the Adjunct Pilot Program as a testing ground for AFRA's main policies would not only allow for prudent revisions of AFRA's finer details but would also give important lessons for the administrative and logistical aspects of the legislation.

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