

**THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF ADJUNCT FACULTY JUSTICE:  
A CRITIQUE OF BRENNAN AND MAGNESS**

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*Abstract:* In their controversial 2016 paper in this journal, Brennan and Magness argue that fair pay for part-time, adjunct faculty would be unaffordable for most colleges and universities and would harm students as well as many adjunct faculty members. In this critique, I show that their cost estimates fail to take account of the potential benefits of fair pay for adjunct faculty and are based on implausible assumptions. I propose that pay per course for new adjunct faculty members should be tied to pay per course for new full-time non-tenure track instructors or to pay per course for new assistant professors. That framework for adjunct faculty justice yields an aggregate cost range of \$18.5 billion to \$27.9 billion, one-third to one-half lower than the range computed by Brennan and Magness. Its opportunity cost would not be borne by students since students and faculty are complements, not substitutes, in the educational process. Instead it could be financed by reducing spending on non-educational purposes. Current adjunct faculty members would be protected from job displacement in this justice framework. The real obstacle to achieving justice for adjunct faculty is the priorities of university administrators, not budget constraints or opportunity costs.

The increasing reliance of colleges and universities on part-time, non-tenure track “adjunct” faculty members to teach undergraduate courses is by now a widely recognized fact of academic life. From 1983 to 2013, when total undergraduate enrollment grew by 61%, the number of full-time faculty members grew by 68% and the number of adjunct faculty members grew by 199%. Consequently, part-time faculty employment rose from 35% to 49% of total faculty employment over these three decades.<sup>1</sup> While the number of undergraduates per full-time faculty member has remained roughly constant, the likelihood that undergraduate courses are taught by poorly paid, insecure adjunct faculty members has increased markedly.<sup>2</sup>

The reasons for these trends seem obvious. Adjunct faculty members are much cheaper to hire and much easier to fire than tenure track faculty members. They lack academic freedom, institutional influence and professional prerogatives. Employing them is a low cost, low risk way for colleges and universities to staff undergraduate classes and to free up tenure track faculty for research, graduate teaching and administration. It is not surprising that they have done so even as fears have mounted about the consequences for teaching and learning, for university communities and (not least) for the adjuncts themselves.

While the reasons for the spread of adjunct faculty employment seem straightforward, the judgment of it is much more complicated. That is the argument made by Jason Brennan and Phillip Magness (2016a) in their controversial article, “Estimating the Cost of Justice for Adjuncts: A Case Study in University Business Ethics.” Brennan and Magness (henceforth B&M) claim that it would be very expensive to improve adjunct faculty compensation. They argue that converting part-time adjunct positions into a smaller number of full-time positions would reduce total adjunct employment and harm the very people it is trying to help. It would entail a “massive increase in wages and benefits” that would drain resources from other

worthwhile objectives and constituencies. Finally, they claim that fewer adjunct positions will reduce the diversity of course offerings and diminish the number of instructors with real world expertise, thereby damaging educational programs. B&M take “no stance on what adjuncts are owed,” but the thrust of their paper is to show that justice for adjunct faculty is a fool’s errand that harms everyone in the university community, including many adjuncts themselves.

This critique takes issue with every one of these arguments. B&M’s estimates of the costs of better compensation for adjuncts are exaggerated. Their assertions about the trade-offs are simplistic and misleading. Their conclusions about adjunct justice cannot be justified in economic or ethical terms. Nonetheless, the questions that B&M raise are important, and I will use this critique to suggest better ways of answering them.

#### 1. The Benefits of Adjunct Justice

B&M focus on the costs of improving adjunct faculty compensation, both with respect to the alternative uses of those resources and with respect to their feasibility in the context of university budgets. While these questions are worth considering, they are only half of the story. Costs have to be compared to benefits for meaningful conclusions to be drawn about proposals to improve adjunct faculty compensation. These potential benefits include better research and teaching, better relationships between faculty and students, better functioning academic programs and departments, better use of adjunct faculty skills, lower instructor turnover, greater student retention, stronger college and university communities, and better and more extensive relationships with alumni and donors (Kezar and Maxey, 2012 and 2014). These positive spillovers are consistent with a managerial philosophy that values workforce stability, positive morale and harmonious labor-management relationships in order to achieve higher productivity,

better cooperation and communication, reduced absenteeism, fewer workplace conflicts, more successful on-the-job training and improved adaptation to new technologies and new challenges (Hogler 2004).

Adjuncts can be excellent teachers, but their ability to help students is hobbled by their work conditions. Any faculty member who is poorly paid, who is hired at the last minute, who lacks basic supplies and resources and who can be terminated without cause would be unable to develop long-term relationships with his/her students or to mentor and support them. Consequently, undergraduate graduation and persistence rates go down as adjunct faculty employment goes up (Ehrenberg and Zhang, 2006; Bettinger and Long, 2006). Improvements in adjunct faculty pay and work conditions does not just mean spending more on instruction. It is also an investment that strengthens the primary educational mission of colleges and universities.

Economists have long understood that wages represent more than simple labor cost. In efficiency wage models (Katz, 1986), employers set pay above the market clearing level in order to minimize shirking and turnover, to attract higher quality job applicants, to raise morale and to improve cooperation and communication between labor and management. Consequently, higher wages can raise productivity and lower unit labor costs. Employers can choose between a higher wage-higher productivity strategy (the high road) and a lower wage-lower productivity strategy (the low road) since both can be profitable. When turnover is costly, supervision is difficult, employee selection is important and motivation matters, the high road may make the most sense. That is the relevant context for higher education.

The application of efficiency wage models to higher education illustrates a number of possible avenues through which better compensation for adjunct faculty improves institutional

and educational outcomes. Raising adjunct faculty compensation increases the competitiveness of higher education relative to other industries and strengthens academic labor markets. It raises the opportunity cost of job loss and reduces turnover. It builds loyalty and attachment of adjunct faculty for their university communities. It encourages administrators, tenure track faculty members and students to take adjunct faculty members seriously as professionals on a meaningful career path. It gives adjunct faculty members more opportunities for professional development. It incentivizes them to play a more active role in their departments. It reduces inequality between adjunct faculty and tenure track faculty, and encourage both to view each other as colleagues with shared goals. It improves adjunct faculty morale and attitudes that are essential for successful teaching. It makes it more likely that adjunct faculty can conduct research, contribute to curricular development, take on administrative responsibilities, advise and mentor students, and otherwise expand their contributions (and build their CVs) beyond teaching.

These benefits can be difficult to quantify. Furthermore, the costs of raising adjunct compensation would be immediate while the benefits may take time to be realized. It would be understandable if colleges and universities viewed fair pay for adjuncts purely from a cost standpoint, at least in the short-run. However, those like B&M who express concern about the costs of adjunct justice without acknowledging its potential benefits are missing the bigger picture. Justice for adjunct faculty does not just mean increasing adjunct pay; it also means that colleges and universities can expand their roles and take better advantage of their skills. Adjunct faculty members are worth the cost for the same reasons that tenure track faculty members are worth the cost: they are highly skilled professionals who can provide valuable service to their institutions in a variety of ways.

This is not to say that every college and university should immediately provide across-the-board raises to all of their adjunct faculty members, as B&M assume in their various scenarios. It may make more sense to start with a strategy of targeted increases to those adjunct faculty members with the most experience or to those who play a particularly critical curricular role. Increased pay for adjunct faculty could be accompanied by increased expectations for administration or advising. There are bound to be multiple approaches by colleges and universities in different circumstances. Higher wages are not a one-size-fits-all solution. But they represent a direction that colleges and universities could choose to take to strengthen their academic mission and increase their returns from investments in their academic workforce.

## 2. B&M's Cost Calculations

B&M calculate a range of cost estimates based upon five proposals for achieving adjunct faculty justice. Their range of \$15 billion to \$49 billion has been widely reported; unfortunately, it is inaccurate. As they note in a subsequent paper (Brennan and Magness, 2016b:fn 24), adjunct faculty members teach 1,578,336 classes per semester, not per year. Consequently, B&M's cost estimates that utilize this figure are understated by a factor of two. Correcting this error increases their cost range for adjunct faculty justice from \$30 billion to \$56 billion, making adjunct justice even more prohibitively expensive.

B&M derive this range from five proposals for achieving adjunct justice. For these particular proposals to serve as the basis for generalized conclusions about adjunct faculty justice, they would have to be realistic and representative. None of them could be described in these terms. For example, one proposal would shift all current adjuncts into full-time positions paying \$72,000 per year in salary and benefits. This would entail either converting all part-time

instructors into full-time instructors irrespective of their desire to work full-time or the need of the universities that hire them, or giving these part-time instructors an enormous pay raise for their current workload, which could be a single course. Neither of these possibilities makes sense from any point of view. B&M concede that this proposal is unrealistic, and turn to their more “modest and reasonable proposals.” The point of including an immodest and unreasonable proposal remains unexplained.

B&M’s four remaining scenarios are also implausible. Three of them assume that all part-time faculty positions are bundled into a smaller number of full-time positions even though fewer than one-third of all part-time faculty members report that they are currently searching for full-time tenure track positions. Almost one-quarter of part-time faculty members report that they prefer part-time employment (CAW, 2012:Table 14). Less than half of all part-time instructors hold the terminal degree that is the basic requirement for most tenure track positions.<sup>3</sup> There is no reason to assume that all faculty positions should be full-time or tenure track, or that all part-time faculty members would qualify for and seek such positions. Nor is such an assumption needed to compute the costs of increasing adjunct faculty compensation, as I show in the following section.

B&M’s assumptions about compensation in these scenarios are equally unrealistic. In one scenario, all adjunct faculty are paid the salary and benefits earned by tenured full professors. In another, all adjuncts are converted into tenure-track assistant professors and paid accordingly. But as noted above, a significant fraction of adjunct faculty would not qualify for or do not want tenure track positions.<sup>4</sup> It makes little sense to construct scenarios in which all adjunct faculty are transformed into tenure track faculty, let alone paid like tenured full professors.

B&M's remaining scenario is based on a union proposal that would pay adjuncts \$15,000 per course, much more than most tenured faculty are paid (see section 3). This astronomical figure may be aspirational, but it hardly provides grounds for concluding that realistic improvements in adjunct faculty pay would be excessively costly. B&M's pessimistic conclusions follow from their unreasonable assumptions about how adjunct faculty compensation should be improved. More reasonable assumptions would generate different conclusions, as I show below.

### 3. An Alternative Cost Calculation

In this section, I offer an alternative to B&M's scenarios that is both more realistic and more consistent with the institutional context for adjunct faculty justice. I use B&M's parameters as much as possible in order to facilitate the comparison between our estimates of the cost of adjunct justice. All of the figures presented in this section refer to 2015, as explained in the end notes.

My approach is to calculate fair pay for adjunct faculty on a per course basis. This approach has several advantages. First, it leaves current adjunct faculty teaching loads constant in the short-run. Instead of assuming that justice requires that all part-time faculty positions be converted into full-time positions, it allows colleges and universities to determine what fraction of their part-time faculty should remain part-time and what fraction should, over the long-run, be converted into full-time positions. Colleges and universities can achieve justice for their adjunct faculty in a step-by-step manner that protects their current adjunct workforce and creates full-time positions as attrition opens up part-time positions.

Another advantage to assessing fair pay on a per course basis is that it allows for adjustments based on qualifications, experience and discipline. I will focus on overall entry level pay per



course to set the baseline. Calculations based on these figures can give a rough idea of the initial aggregate costs of achieving fair pay for adjunct faculty. But pay adjustments in practice are bound to show considerable variation among institutions, departments and adjunct faculty members themselves. The approach that I suggest below can easily be modified to take account of these factors.

A third advantage to assessing fair pay on a per course basis is that almost all part-time faculty members are paid this way now. Thus I am not proposing any immediate change in pay systems or salary structures. Over the long run, colleges and universities can work on shifting some of these faculty members into salaried positions, especially as attrition opens up possibilities for converting part-time positions into a smaller number of full-time positions. But justice should not be viewed as an all-or-nothing proposition, which then can be dismissed as being too disruptive and too expensive.

Fair pay is a relative concept, so reference groups have to be specified. The obvious comparisons for adjunct faculty are with full-time non-tenure track faculty and with tenure track assistant professors. The former is closest to adjunct faculty in qualifications and responsibilities; the latter emphasizes that tenure track faculty and non-tenure track faculty are colleagues with similar academic missions, at least when it comes to teaching. I will use both of these reference groups to establish a cost range for fair pay for adjunct faculty.

Let us begin with entry-level full-time non-tenure track faculty. This framework assumes that full-time non-tenure track faculty members are fairly paid, and asks how much more their part-time colleagues would have to be paid per course in order to be paid equivalently. Full-time instructors with zero to three years of experience receive an average annual salary of \$52,677

across all colleges and universities (CHE, 2016:p11). If that salary is paid entirely for teaching (no research or administrative responsibilities), and if full-time 100% teaching amounts to eight courses per year,<sup>5</sup> then pay per course would be \$6585. According to B&M, benefits are valued at one-third of salary, so including benefits brings per course compensation for full-time non-tenure track instructors to \$8779 per course. Actual adjunct faculty median pay per course is \$2923 without benefits.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, entry-level adjunct faculty members would have to be paid an additional \$5856 to achieve fair pay relative to this standard. If adjuncts teach 1,578,336 classes per semester (see section 2 above), the aggregate cost of adjunct justice in the first year would amount to \$18.5 billion.

This figure is merely approximate. There are a variety of reasons why it might over-estimate or under-estimate the true difference between adjunct faculty pay and full-time non-tenure track faculty pay. It over-estimates the adjunct faculty pay shortfall because part-time faculty members are less likely to hold the terminal degree than full-time faculty members, as noted in the preceding section. The fact that many part-time faculty members already receive benefits would also reduce equity pay adjustments. It could also be argued that faculty members in two year colleges should not necessarily be paid equivalently to faculty members in four year colleges and universities. Taking all of these considerations into account would reduce the aggregate amount of spending needed to achieve fair pay for adjunct faculty.

On the other hand, more than \$18.5 billion would have to be spent to achieve adjunct faculty justice because that amount only equalizes pay at the entry level. Many part-time faculty members would need additional pay adjustments to reflect their years of experience.<sup>7</sup> It could also be argued that experienced adjunct faculty members have past lost earnings that deserve mitigation. Since these over-estimate and under-estimate biases offset each other, \$18.5 billion

can be interpreted as a roughly accurate estimate of the lower bound of the cost range for adjunct faculty justice.

The alternative framework for determining fair pay for a new adjunct faculty member is to set it relative to the per course pay received by a new assistant professor. This approach emphasizes that non-tenure track faculty members, whether full-time or part-time, are the colleagues of tenure track faculty members and deserve to be paid equivalently to them for each course they teach. Even so, tenure track professors have much better jobs. Tenure is a significant benefit that rewards them for the special risks they bear in research-intensive positions. But in their role as teachers, new assistant professors provide a standard for determining fair pay for their adjunct colleagues who perform the same work.<sup>8</sup>

The average entry-level salary for assistant professors in is \$70,655 (CHE:ibid). If a full-time faculty member whose only responsibility is teaching (i.e., no research or administration) is required to teach eight courses per academic year, she or he would be paid \$8832 per course. Including benefits brings per course compensation for new assistant professors to \$11,776. If adjunct faculty pay per course is \$2923, fair pay for new adjunct faculty members would require an additional \$8853 per course. In this frame of reference, the aggregate cost of adjunct justice would amount to \$27.9 billion per year, qualified by the same over-estimate and under-estimate biases noted above.

A range of \$18.5 billion to \$27.9 billion is one-third to one-half below B&M's range. To put these figures in perspective, total expenditures for all of higher education amount to \$548.6 billion, including total instructional expenditures of \$142.6 billion.<sup>9</sup> The cost of adjunct faculty justice thus amounts to an increase of 3.4% to 5.1% in all higher education spending, and an

increase of 13.0% to 19.6% in instructional spending. Cost increases of that magnitude are significant but hardly inconceivable. They suggest that adjunct faculty justice is an achievable goal for higher education as a whole.

#### 4. The Opportunity Cost of Adjunct Justice

Although adjunct justice may be an achievable goal for higher education as a whole, there are many colleges and universities that may lack the resources to achieve it. Most two year colleges have fewer and smaller revenue streams than most four year colleges and universities. They also have a higher fraction of their total expenditures devoted to instruction. Even among four year colleges and universities, some are in financially precarious positions and are not able to significantly increase adjunct faculty compensation. Surely any reasonable notion of adjunct faculty justice must take account of the institutional capacity to accomplish that goal. Another reason that the aggregate cost of adjunct justice may be less than \$18.5 billion to \$27.9 billion is that institutions that genuinely lack resources should not be held to the same standard as institutions that have the resources to make fair pay a feasible goal in the short-run.

The key qualification here is “genuinely.” Colleges and universities often claim that they are unable to afford certain expenditures when they simply are choosing other expenditures instead. The problem is not their overall financial capacity so much as it is their priorities.

Consider public four year colleges and universities. They often claim that cuts in state support have weakened their budgets and have prevented them from improving adjunct faculty compensation. Perhaps that is the case at some public colleges and universities, but not at most. Total revenues at public four year colleges and universities rose by 32.9% from 2007 to 2014, which include the years of the worst state budget cuts. This is largely because public colleges

and universities raised tuition and fees by 52.6% over this period. They face an inelastic demand for their product – total enrollment grew by 15.3% from 2007 to 2014 despite the tuition increases (USDOE, 2015:Tables 333.10 and 303.25) – which protects their budgets from state cuts. Oddly, B&M do not include the inelastic demand for higher education on their list of “strange” features of academic labor markets.<sup>10</sup> But it cannot be ignored since it gives public colleges and universities greater budgetary capacity and flexibility than is commonly recognized.

The suggestion that public colleges and universities can finance adjunct pay increases with tuition increases brings us to the heart of B&M’s argument. Those of us who wish to help adjunct faculty also wish to help students. Does justice for one create injustice for the other? Is there a trade-off between raising adjunct pay and other worthwhile goals like keeping tuition low?

In 2015-16, revenue from tuition and fees at public four year colleges and universities amounted to \$72.4 billion.<sup>11</sup> If the aggregate cost of adjunct justice is \$27.9 billion per year at the high end, and if one-quarter of that cost is borne by these institutions,<sup>12</sup> and if the entire cost is paid by increasing tuition, then tuition at these colleges and universities would have been 9.6% higher. For example, average in-state tuition and fees at public four year colleges and universities was \$8543 in 2014-15. If the entire cost of adjunct justice was borne by students, then these tuition and fees would have risen to \$9363.

One way to interpret the additional \$820 in average in-state tuition at four year public colleges and universities is that it represents a reasonable payment for services received. Adjunct faculty labor is highly skilled, and “should” be remunerated at a higher rate than unskilled labor. The fact that it is not is not merely due to its oversupply, as B&M claim. It is

also due to changes in the composition of academic labor demand that have reduced the number of tenure track positions (Schuster and Finkelstein, 2006:ch 6). The imbalance between labor supply and labor demand cannot be quickly resolved by human capital investments, which take a long time to reach fruition. PhD students may graduate into a market that is completely different than the one that existed when they entered their programs or the one that they were led to believe existed. But at that point there is no turning back. Human capital is permanent and cannot be resold like physical or financial capital. Excess supply in academic labor markets can persist for many years. To the extent that universities take advantage of these structural conditions to underpay adjuncts, and then pass some of the benefits on to students in the form of lower tuition, students are benefitting at the expense of adjuncts. That is not an argument that most students would accept given the rapid increases in their tuition, but it illustrates that raising adjunct pay can be viewed as the correction of an injustice rather than the shifting of the injustice from one group to another. The opportunity cost of raising adjunct pay does not necessarily mean that adjuncts benefit at the expense of students; it could mean that adjuncts benefit by eliminating an unfair advantage enjoyed by students.

Of course, this argument is bound to be viewed with skepticism by students whose tuition keeps rising while their incomes stagnate. They do not feel as though they are paying too little for their education; they feel as though they are paying too much. So let us turn to another way of looking at B&M's opportunity cost argument against adjunct justice. College and university administrations are often taken to task for excessive spending on administration, sports, status goods and luxurious amenities. Could the funds to raise adjunct pay come out of these frills rather than pushing up tuition?

That obvious option would seem to negate B&M's opportunity cost argument. Fair pay for adjuncts can be financed by reducing excessive spending on non-essentials rather than by harming another worthy constituency like students. But B&M dispute the logic of that option: "Still, even if we suppose that a university can and should reduce the money it spends on unnecessary administrators, football coaches, rock climbing walls and other extraneous projects, it is not obvious that the best or most just thing for a university to do is reallocate that money to provide adjuncts... After all, the university could instead reduce its operating costs and thus make college more affordable... It is not obvious that universities should prioritize helping adjuncts over helping poor or debt-ridden students."

This interpretation of opportunity costs is simplistic and mechanical. It would mean that any kind of spending can be viewed as adversely affecting any other kind of spending. Every dollar spent on adjuncts would come from students, and every dollar spent on students would come from adjuncts. The notion that adjuncts and students are engaged in a common enterprise called education, and that within reasonable limits spending on one supports the other, is completely lost.

The simple concept of opportunity cost presumes that the alternatives to any action can be ranked. Then the opportunity cost of an action is the net benefit of its best foregone alternative. In this simple scenario, the alternatives to an action are substitutes for it. But what if they are complements? Education can be described as a set of complementary activities by teachers and students. For it to function optimally, there has to be a certain amount of spending on both groups. Spending on adjuncts is not a way of taking money away from students; it is a way of supporting students by providing them with stronger faculty and a better educational experience (Kezar and Maxey, 2014).

B&M's interpretation of the opportunity cost of adjunct justice is misleading. Students and adjunct faculty are not in competition with each other; instead, they (taken together) compete with non-educational priorities for scarce university resources. Spending on one component of education does not come at the expense of another component since these components interact with each other and depend upon each other. Instead, the meaningful question is how much universities spend on their core educational mission, including their adjunct faculty, versus how much they spend on administration or sports or something else. That is the true opportunity cost of adjunct justice.

#### 5. Would Adjunct Faculty Justice Benefit the Few at the Expense of the Many?

According to B&M, adjunct faculty justice would harm many adjunct faculty members as well as students because the conversion of part-time positions into a smaller number of full-time positions would cost many adjunct faculty members their jobs and deprive students of their expertise. This argument is similar to the conservative claim that workplace reforms like the minimum wage harm the very people they are meant to help. The fact that the evidence of these harms has proved thin (Brown, 1999) has not made the argument any less potent for anti-reformers like B&M. They insist that "it is not plausible that universities can help all adjuncts or give them all a better deal. Instead, because of budget constraints, they can at best help some and hurt others." But that conclusion rests more on their implausible assumptions than on the budget constraints faced by higher education.

As noted above, one-quarter of part-time faculty members state that they do not want a full-time job (CAW, 2012:Table 14). Even in the best of all possible worlds, colleges and universities will continue to have good reasons to employ some part-time faculty. Justice for



these faculty members means better pay, job stability and work conditions; it does not mean eliminating their jobs in order to create full-time positions.

13.8% of part-time faculty members report that they teach four or more courses per semester so that they already work full-time, even if not at a single institution. Presumably most of them teach part-time at more than one college or university: 22.1% of part-time faculty report that they are teaching at more than one institution (CAW, 2012:Tables 16 and 17). Moving these faculty members into full-time positions at one institution would open up teaching slots at other institutions that could be combined into full-time positions without costing jobs. Thus the trade-offs that B&M are so concerned about do not apply or are mitigated in the case of this portion of the adjunct faculty workforce.

As for the remainder, all reasonable reform proposals include protections for current part-time faculty members. For example, the AAUP (2016:p. 19) supports converting part-time non-tenure track positions into full-time tenure track positions whenever possible, but cautions that “any conversion plan that involves consolidating the number of positions must be carried out carefully and over a time period that allows numbers to be reduced through attrition rather than by terminating the appointments of current faculty members.” B&M’s claim that many adjunct faculty members would be harmed by the efforts to achieve fair pay follow from their unstated assumption that the conversion of part-time positions into a smaller number of full-time positions would be complete and immediate. But if the conversion took place incrementally as part-time positions open up, there is no reason it would harm current adjunct faculty members or would reduce their curricular contributions.

In thinking about the steps that colleges and universities should take to achieve adjunct faculty justice, it is helpful to distinguish between the short-term and the long-term. Colleges and universities can and should immediately take a variety of steps to improve working conditions for their adjunct faculty members, including better pay and benefits, job stability, inclusion and respect. Longer-term measures such as creating more full-time positions and broadening tenure protections should be implemented in a step-by-step fashion in order to avoid harming current part-time faculty members and to give institutions and faculty members (tenure track as well as adjunct) time to adjust. Gradual and carefully crafted implementation measures would mitigate many of B&M's concerns about the potentially harmful impact of adjunct faculty justice on adjunct faculty members themselves.

## 6. Conclusions

The spread of contingency in higher education reflects larger trends in national labor markets. Contingent work has significantly increased since 2005 (Katz and Krueger 2016). While contingency can have benefits like increased flexibility for businesses and workers, it is also associated with low pay, few benefits and job instability. Firms that adopt a low road strategy (see section 1) often convert permanent positions into contingent positions in order to drive down labor costs. These employment trends have contributed to economic inequality and insecurity. Perhaps that is understandable from the standpoint of profit maximizing firms facing global competition. But higher education should be held to a higher set of standards. Its non-profit status and its primary educational mission change the ethical calculus.

B&M get it exactly backwards when they compare colleges and universities to low road businesses. Colleges and universities are educational institutions that explicitly serve a public

purpose, that bind us as citizens and that promote the ideals of an open and meritorious intellectual community. Their ethical obligations flow from the fact that they are schools, not businesses. Colleges and universities should be held to their own values and standards. The contrast between their purported ideals and their actual priorities,<sup>13</sup> as expressed concretely in their mission statements and in their budgets, would be a good starting point for the much-needed conversation about adjunct faculty justice.

The remedies for injustice often raise questions about resource allocation and reallocation. B&M deserve credit for asking these questions about adjunct faculty. Their answers, as flawed as I find them to be, create an opportunity for a constructive dialogue about the costs and benefits of adjunct faculty justice. That conversation has to take place at each college and university. Although the conceptual arguments and empirical findings presented in this paper are national in scope, their application can vary considerably. Every college and university has a special set of circumstances that would have to be considered in order to decide upon the concrete steps needed to achieve adjunct faculty justice. The budgetary limits and trade-offs that B&M emphasize are not compelling in the aggregate, but they may be relevant for particular institutions. Some colleges and universities may be able to find the resources for adjunct faculty justice by reallocating away from non-essentials; others may face more difficult choices. The arguments and evidence presented in this paper should not be taken as an excuse to avoid these issues. Instead, they should be openly confronted as part of a larger conversation about higher education priorities.

Justice for adjunct faculty is one form of justice for workers. All workers deserve fair pay and fair treatment. The government accepts that responsibility in a variety of ways. It outlaws slavery, it sets a floor on wages, it guards workers' health and safety, it protects them

from discrimination, it guarantees labor rights. To the extent that government is a just institution for workers, it is due to its recognition that employers can have too much power over employees. Workers need protections beyond their right to quit and search for a better job, a search that can be fruitless. By the same token, colleges and universities cannot treat adjuncts as a cheap, disposable labor force if they wish to be perceived as just institutions serving a public purpose. Paying these faculty members the bare minimum for insecure teaching positions that lack academic freedom contradicts the ethical and educational imperatives of higher education.

Fair pay for adjunct faculty is an achievable goal. Most colleges and universities should be able to increase adjunct faculty pay without raising tuition or reducing other types of educational spending. The real obstacle is administrative priorities, not budget constraints or opportunity costs. The conversation about adjunct faculty justice has to address those priorities. Adjunct faculty justice is not just about adjuncts. It is about the mission and direction of each college and university, and of higher education as a whole.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Calculated from Tables 303.70 and 315.10 of the 2015 *Digest of Education Statistics* (NCES, 2015). The contrast between full-time and part-time faculty employment understates the contrast between tenure track and non-tenure track employment since an increasing fraction of full-time faculty employment is off the tenure track (Schuster and Finkelstein, 2006:ch7).

<sup>2</sup> For example, the fraction of undergraduate student credit hours taught by non-tenure track faculty members and graduate assistants at my university rose from 49% in 2001-02 to 63% in 2013-14 (Colorado State University Office of Institutional Research). Unfortunately, data like these are difficult to find beyond individual colleges and universities.

<sup>3</sup> Terminal degrees include the PhD (held by 30.4% of part-time faculty members), MFA and MLS (10.1%), and MBA, JD and MD (6.6%). (CAW, 2012:Table 9).

<sup>4</sup> It could be argued that adjunct faculty justice requires long-term changes in the tenure system such that faculty members without the terminal degree could qualify for tenure protections or that tenure could be granted for teaching-intensive positions as well as research-intensive positions. See section 6 for a discussion of the distinction between short-term and long-term measures to achieve adjunct faculty justice.

<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to find figures on teaching loads, and the standard varies widely among different types of colleges and universities. See Harris (2015) for a claim consistent with my experience that full-time teaching with no other responsibilities amounts to four courses per semester. B&M



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assume that full-time instructors whose only responsibility is teaching typically teach three courses per semester, another assumption that exaggerates their cost estimates.

<sup>6</sup>B&M cite the CAW survey (CAW, 2012:Table 19) showing that per course pay for adjunct faculty was \$2700 in 2010. The 2015 equivalent pay of \$2923 assumes that adjunct faculty pay per course has risen by 1.6% per year, consistent with the salary increase of all full-time faculty members from 2010-11 to 2014-15 (NCES, 2015:Table 316.10).

<sup>7</sup> Part-time faculty pay shows almost no returns to experience (CAW, 2012:Table 21).

<sup>8</sup> This framework also implies that full-time non-tenure track faculty members should receive pay adjustments in order to be treated equivalently to their tenure track colleagues. The cost of achieving fair pay for full-time non-tenure track faculty members is not included in this paper in order to maintain comparability to B&M.

<sup>9</sup> Total higher education expenditures were \$517.1 billion in the 2013-14 academic year. (NCES, 2015:Tables 334.10, 334.30, 334.50). They rose by 3% per year from 2010 to 2013 (ibid), so if that trend continues, total higher education would have risen to \$548.6 billion by 2015-16. Instructional spending would have risen from \$142.6 billion to \$151.3 billion.

<sup>10</sup> Even more oddly, B&M do not include the tenure system on their list of special features of the academic job market. Their list includes the non-profit nature of most colleges and universities; the over-supply of PhDs in some fields relative to the number of positions available; the subsidization of higher education by state and federal governments; and “Baumol’s cost

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disease,” meaning that some faculty members have to be paid more than their marginal products because colleges and universities have to compete with private industry to hire them.

<sup>11</sup> This figure is derived from public four year college and university tuition and fee revenue in 2013-14 of \$61.2 billion, adjusted forward by 8.8% per year, the revenue trend between 2007-08 and 2013-14 (USDOE, 2016:Table 333.10).

<sup>12</sup> Public colleges and universities bear one-quarter of the aggregate cost of fair pay for adjunct faculty because they employ about one-quarter of all part-time faculty members (USDOE, 2015:Table 315.40).

<sup>13</sup> For example, this is the mission statement for Colorado State University: “Inspired by its land-grant heritage, Colorado State University is committed to excellence, setting the standard for public research universities in teaching, research, service and extension for the benefit of the citizens of Colorado, the United States and the world.” (CSU 2016). Yet CSU significantly limits its ability to achieve these ambitious goals by transferring \$20 million per year out of academics into athletics, mostly to subsidize football (*USA Today*, NCAA Finances 2014-15). CSU’s non-tenure track faculty members might well ask why the university has so much money for football and so little for them.