
Today's News

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Gas Prices Afford Adjuncts Tough Choices

By [ALLIE GRASGREEN](#)

The cost of gasoline has made the art of juggling two or more teaching jobs at different institutions all the more difficult for many adjunct faculty members, as extreme price increases at the pumps cut into salaries that often don't cover living expenses to begin with.

These new pressures are particularly evident in California, where drivers now pay an average \$4.59 per gallon—more than in any other state in the nation, according to the American Automobile Association.

For Michael Ward, the drive to one of his two jobs—teaching history three days a week at Ventura College—is no hassle. He lives in Ventura. It's his second job teaching two days a week at California State University at Northridge, which is 50 miles away, that has him thinking about whether he can make the commute worth the cash.

Northridge reimburses faculty members who ride Metrolink, a public rail-transportation system. But Mr. Ward's class begins at 6:30 a.m., 90 minutes before the day's first Metrolink can get him to the campus.

Inconvenient or unusual schedules often make it difficult for part-timers to use carpools and public transit. Mr. Ward, though, accepts this reality because he likes working at Northridge—an institution with welcoming, respected faculty members and administrators, he says.

Mr. Ward says the two institutions at which he teaches tend to be sympathetic about adjuncts' travel complications, but he has heard from colleagues that other institutions, particularly California community colleges, don't devote the attention or concern to part-timers that they would to full-time professors, despite the institutions' heavy reliance on adjuncts.

Forty-eight percent of all faculty members in the United States teach part time, according to figures compiled by the American Association of University Professors in 2005. So the problem that California's adjuncts are facing has the potential to be widespread.

Because part-time, non-tenure-track professors—sometimes called contingent faculty members—don't get cost-of-living raises, "they get slammed by sudden jumps in the cost of consumer goods like gasoline," said Marc Bousquet, an associate professor of cultural studies and writing with new media at Santa Clara University.

Mr. Bousquet, who is co-chair of the AAUP's Committee on Contingent Faculty, adds that "in lots of ways, all faculty are bearing the costs of instruction and research. Especially in the humanities, even tenure-stream faculty increasingly pay the costs of their own travel to archives, costs of photocopying records and documents, and so forth. This trend hits contingent faculty even harder—many of whom do research but with even less grant support."

Mr. Ward also says the issue is bigger than rising prices at the pump. As one of those caught in the squeeze, he believes that, rather than viewing the situation in terms of a simple cost-benefit analysis, institutions should invest in making more part-timers into full-time faculty members who don't have to commute to teach.

"It isn't just a gas issue," he says. "It's an issue of service to the campus, service to the students, service to the community."

Begging for Blocks

Kathy Scott, dean of communication and learning resources at Ventura College, has noticed the demands of adjunct faculty members rising along with gas prices. She said more and more adjuncts in her division have called her "begging" for their classes to be rearranged in blocks so they can commute to the campus fewer days during the week.

Ms. Scott said she must accommodate the concerned adjuncts or risk having to eliminate classes. She has been able to block out schedules thus far, but she doesn't know how much longer she can continue. And considering the increasing frequency of calls she's getting asking her to rearrange classes, Ms. Scott said, she wouldn't be surprised if some instructors quit their jobs before the fall term.

"The notion of the freeway flier has become much more costly for part-timers," said Ms. Scott. "In California community colleges, we have a lot of part timers and areas with high turnover. Now I find myself having the administrative assistants asking people before we're even talking about an interview whether they'd be willing to drive that far. And quite often the answer is no."

A bill approved by the California Legislature last month has the potential to change that, however. Among its provisions, the bill would raise the number of hours per week that part-time faculty members are permitted to teach at California's community colleges. Now adjuncts can teach only 60 percent of the hours required of a full-time faculty member. Under the new legislation, which still needs Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's signature to become law, that figure would rise to 67 percent.

That change might be particularly helpful to Ms. Scott and other administrators in her position. In the past, adjuncts could teach only one five-unit language class per campus. The new bill would permit them to teach two, possibly allowing them to make a living teaching at fewer campuses.

Ms. Scott even took the step of lobbying for the passage of the bill, through a statement that she gave an adjunct professor to deliver to the State Senate. Without a change in the time cap for teaching, she argued, the college would be forced to cancel many classes. As it happened, the Senate passed the bill the night before the adjunct was scheduled to testify, so senators never saw the statement.

Heavy Traffic

In the worst—though not uncommon—cases, part-time faculty members shuttle among multiple cities and campuses in a single day.

Last semester, Rosalyn Kahn, commuted from North Hills, in the San Fernando Valley, to teach a morning class on Mondays and Wednesdays at Santa Monica College, and then waited until it was time to drive to her afternoon class at Carson High School. Her return trip from the afternoon job often meant sitting for two hours in traffic before getting back to North Hills. Total mileage for a day of teaching? About 70 miles in her Honda Accord.

"It's ridiculous," Ms. Kahn said. "It's close to \$5 a gallon, and I can't afford to do that."

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, she taught two classes at Los Angeles City College, one at 9:30 a.m. and one at 7

p.m. She left the house at 7 a.m. to avoid rush-hour traffic and didn't get home until after 10 p.m.

Ms. Kahn has been keeping that sort of schedule for nearly 10 years, but with today's fuel prices and the state of the economy, she's being forced to reconsider, she said. Spending twice as much on gas, compared with when she first started teaching, she has been forced to cut down on her outside expenditures and be very careful about what jobs she picks up. Even though, she adds, "being a part-time faculty, you're kind of at a whim of having whatever they give you, whenever they give it."

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