

State U. vs. Target: Who Gets the Better Grade for Employee Treatment?

by Claire Boeck

The miserable pay of adjuncts and the transformation of colleges and universities into business are no longer foreign concepts in the public realm. What is a surprise, though, is that large companies, such as Target and Starbucks, take better care of their employees than those in higher education. I am not focusing this article on the social and academic consequences of the corporate culture that has been adopted by colleges and universities, but on the contrast between the way these institutions treat their employees and the much more humane way some large corporations treat theirs. This is especially troubling because the college or university should foster critical thinking, ethical responsibilities, and a meritocratic structure. The educational institutions of America are falling behind large corporations in upholding a moral standard.

POOR PAY, NO BENEFITS

Recent articles such as “Death of an Adjunct” and “The Ph.D. Now Comes with Food Stamps” have raised awareness of the adjunct’s plight.¹ This is a national issue that transcends the type of institution or region. Henry Giroux, citing data gathered by the Junct Rebellion, states, “in the United States out of 1.5 million faculty members, one million are ‘adjuncts who are earning, on average, \$20,000 a year gross, with no benefits or healthcare, no unemployment insurance when they are out of work.’”²

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It would be ludicrous to argue that adjuncts are the only workers who are underpaid; the May 2014 strike involving fast-food employees in 30 countries demonstrates that many feel underpaid and want to make the public aware of their economic struggle.³ However, a career as an adjunct is considerably different from many of these other jobs due to the high levels of education required of adjuncts, either a master's degree or Ph.D, and also their decreased career mobility. Even though 56.5 percent of adjuncts have been teaching for over five years, and 10.6 percent for more than 20, they are still part-time and do not have job security.⁴ Meanwhile, fast-food workers do have a career ladder. "This industry

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is the embodiment of the American dream for many workers.... Eighty percent of restaurant owners started at the bottom and 90 percent of managers started in entry-level jobs. There's an obvious ladder to move up," said Justin Winslow, the Michigan Restaurant Association's head of government affairs, to a *USA Today* reporter.⁵ While it might be a slow climb, some major corporations actually promote and reward successful employees. Not so in academia, where people remain as adjuncts for decades or leave the teaching profession altogether to search for higher paying jobs.

Work part-time at financially successful multinational and national corporations such as Target, Starbucks, Land's End, Whole Foods, Home Depot, UPS, and Costco, and you will be offered health benefits, stock options, and tuition reimbursement.⁶ Work part-time at a college or university and face new wage cuts as many of those institutions seek to circumvent the federal Affordable Health Care Act by slashing adjuncts' and tutors' hours. "We're not allowed to go over 29 hours, and that includes time spent prepping, grading, e-mailing, meeting with students, attending required meetings," Stark State College English adjunct Allison Armentrout told the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. "What is happening—and I'm finding this even with just two classes—because of the grading load, I've been put in a position twice this semester where I've just had to lie about the number of hours I actually worked. I don't want to have to make a choice between having a job or not."⁷ The irony of Armentrout's additional statement, "There will be a lot more professors working at McDonald's," is that there is at least a ladder to climb at McDonald's. Starbucks offers comprehensive health care and paid vacation time for employees who work more than 20 hours a week.⁸ Even Walmart, the dubious star of the documentary *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Prices* and the critical book *The United States of Wal-Mart* "is a more honest employer of part-

time employees than are most colleges and universities,” A.G. Monaco, a senior human resources administrator at the University of Akron, told *Inside Higher Ed*.⁹

When the numbers are compared, it is clear where the stronger earning opportunities can be found. The average annual salary for an adjunct in the U.S. is between \$20,000 and \$25,000, while sales workers earn slightly more (\$25,370), and baristas and counter food-servers just a bit less (\$19,650).¹⁰ These incomes look fairly similar, but student loan debt must also be taken into account. Consider that 40.2 percent of adjuncts having master’s degrees and 30.4 percent doctorates, and that the median debt load for people who borrow for graduate school

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was \$57,600 in 2012.¹¹ Many individuals also have undergraduate student loans: the average debt is now approaching \$30,000.¹² Another point of comparison is healthcare. The Coalition on the Academic Workforce 2012 survey found that 4.3 percent of adjuncts receive employer-provided healthcare benefits, a significantly smaller rate than the 13 percent of fast-food workers who get that care.¹³ While neither number is encouraging, the fast-food industry still puts higher education to shame.

MERITOCRACY IS PART OF THE MISSION

What makes this all the more disturbing is that higher education is an instrument of meritocracy, providing the opportunity to create a more level playing field and a means to avoid working hourly jobs at companies such as those listed above. Through words and legislation, Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama have reinforced colleges’ and universities’ role in promoting social mobility.¹⁴ In his town hall talk at Binghamton University, for example, Obama declared, “I think the essence of the American dream is that anybody who is willing to work hard is able to get that good education and achieve their dreams.”¹⁵ A college degree makes well-paying careers a possibility for people from troubled or poor backgrounds, and this is the way Americans want it; we want an educational system that helps “translate the American Dream into practice” and that works to eliminate traditional obstacles to success, such as race, ethnicity, and religion.¹⁶ The reality that institutions of higher education advertise and facilitate this process for their students but not for their educators is cruel, unusual, and antithetical to the purpose of education in America. According to Giroux, “Higher education represents one of the most important sites over which the battle for democracy

is being waged. It is the site where the promise of a better future emerges out of those visions and pedagogical practices that combine hope, agency, politics, and moral responsibility as part of a broader emancipatory discourse.”¹⁷

Institutions of higher education should be paragons of merit equality and justice, dedicated to improving society as a whole. Their work is considered a “public good, rather than just another consumer industry,” writes a *Slate Magazine* editor, and their graduates are supposed to be ethical, humanitarian citizens, but the poor treatment of their own adjuncts demonstrates that institutions of higher education themselves are insufficient role models for ethical behavior.¹⁸ Even if these

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ideas and values do not originate within higher education, these institutions have historically upheld them. “In a sense, higher education imports equity and social justice agendas from the wider society,” write John Brennan and Rajani Naidoo, “and, in common with other large organizations, looks at ways of improving its performance in these respects.”¹⁹ Compared to the commendable policies large corporations are implementing, higher education has so far ignored society’s demand for more equitable pay, benefits, and overall fair treatment of part-time employees.

On the issues of pay, benefits, promotions, and more, corporations are proving it is actually possible to be financially successful and treat employees right. Those that treat their workers ethically set an example for the business world. Higher education should find this embarrassing, troubling, and hopefully also enlightening. Colleges and universities offer advanced courses in ethics, yet when it comes to fair treatment of their employees they fail Ethics 101. We must all demand they put these lessons into practice. 

ENDNOTES

1. See, for examples, Kovalik, “Death of an Adjunct,” and Patton, “The Ph.D. Now Comes with Food Stamps.”
2. Giroux, “Public Intellectuals Against the Neoliberal University.” The Junct Rebellion is an organization dedicated to raising awareness about adjunct labor and how it affects the future of higher education and students. For more information, see <http://junctrebellion.wordpress.com/about/>.
3. Alcindor et al., “Fast Food Workers Rally for Higher Wages.”
4. Coalition on the Academic Workforce, “A Portrait of Part-Time Faculty Members,” p. 25.
5. Strauss, “Fast-Food Workers Strike for Higher Pay.”
6. Kim, “Seven Companies Offering Health Care Benefits to Part-Time Workers.”
7. Dunn, “Colleges Are Slashing Adjuncts’ Work Hours to Skirt New Rules on Health-Insurance Eligibility.”

8. Kim, *op cit.*
9. Greenwald, Wal-Mart, *The High Cost of Low Price*, Dicker, *The United States of Wal-Mart, and Jaschik*, “Call to Arms for Adjuncts ... from an Administrator.”
10. Sanchez, “The Sad Death of an Adjunct Professor Sparks a Labor Debate ” and Bureau of Labor Statistics, “May 2013 National Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates.”
11. Coalition on the Academic Workforce, “A Portrait of Part-Time Faculty Members,” p. 23 and Clark, “Debt is Piling Up Faster for Most Graduate Students – but Not MBAs.”
12. The Project on Student Debt.
13. Coalition on the Academic Workforce, “A Portrait of Part-Time Faculty Members,” p. 46 and Johnston, “Public Aid Crucial to Fast-Food Workers.”
14. Haveman and Smeeding, “ The Role of Higher Education in Social Mobility,” p. 126.
15. Spector, “Obama: College Costs Impeding on ‘American Dream.’”
16. Brennan and Naidoo, “Higher Education and the Achievement (and/or Prevention) of Equity and Social Justice,” pp. 288, 293 and Alvarado, “Dispelling the Meritocracy Myth: Lessons for Higher Education and Student Affairs Educators.”
17. Giroux, “Public Intellectuals Against the Neoliberal University.”
18. Anderson, “Death of a Professor.”
19. Brennan and Naidoo, *op cit.*, p. 287.

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