

# Higher Ed Staff Personal Economies: We Can't Eat Prestige

by Janine Bonk, Jane Crouch, Marie Kilian, and Loraine Lowell

*Editor's note: According to National Center for Education Statistics data, faculty wages in higher education have barely kept up with cost-of-living increases over the last several years. For support staff who work at the nation's colleges and universities, the situation is even bleaker. Wages are flat and, in some cases, have actually declined when accounting for inflation. That's why NEA, in its national salary initiative, is pushing for an "appropriate living wage" as starting pay for all higher ed and K-12 support staff. It won't be easy—grassroots research, organizing, and mobilizing never is—but the time is overdue for staff to say, "We're worth it." The Associated COLT Staff of the Universities of Maine (ACSUM) is the bargaining agent for the University of Maine System clerical, office, laboratory, and technical unit (COLT). To better understand conditions faced by its members, ACSUM conducted two surveys, the first in 2002 and the second in 2005. This article examines the results of the latter survey.*

Whether it is tracking college expenditures, keeping student records, maintaining computer systems, making sure facilities comply with regulations, or a host of other tasks, non-faculty personnel play key roles in today's higher education institutions. Colleges and universities would grind to a halt without their armies of support staff. The survey we discuss in this paper is specific to clerical, office, laboratory, and technical employees in the University of Maine System (UMS), but the dire economic situation of higher education staff in Maine will look familiar to staff working at higher education institutions across the nation.

In 2002, the Associated COLT Staff of the Universities of Maine (ACSUM) designed a personal economies survey as part of its ongoing efforts to deal effectively and responsibly with issues of importance to members of the bargaining

---

*Janine Bonk has worked at the Farmington campus of the University of Maine System since October 1994. Jane Crouch has worked as a secretary at the University of Maine Bureau of Labor Education since 1998. Marie Kilian has been a library assistant at the University of Southern Maine for the past five years. Loraine Lowell has worked at the University of Southern Maine as a library assistant for almost 20 years. All four are members of the Associated COLT Staff of the Universities of Maine, an affiliate of the Maine Education Association/NEA.*

unit. Distributed to ACSUM employees in 2002 and again in 2005, the survey had two goals: to gain insight into the economic conditions of the employees that it represents, and to accurately state the impact of the university system's compensation practices on the more than 1,000 bargaining unit members.<sup>1</sup> The survey focused especially on the issues of education, dental and health care, housing, family demographics, economic well-being, and the use of social services.<sup>2</sup>

The 2002 survey had a 55 percent response rate. The 2005 survey posed the same questions, plus a question about transportation. Again, the response rate

---

*The university system's economic practices often created significant economic hardship for unit members and their families.*

of the 2005 follow-up survey was large enough to be statistically valid, with more than 52 percent responding.

While university employment is often considered prestigious, our *2002 Personal Economies: Living on the Edge With Nothing Left to Give* established that the university system's economic practices often created significant economic hardship for unit members and their families. The 2005 data show that no real headway has been made in the past few years. In fact, in some areas, ACSUM employees face worsened personal economies. Not only do ACSUM wages continue to fall behind state, regional, and national per capita averages, but the gap is escalating. Consider these data:

- The average salary for ACSUM bargaining unit members in 2005 was \$22,594. This average only went up by a measly \$16 since 2002, despite significant increases in health care costs, heating fuel, gasoline, and food.<sup>3</sup> Just to keep pace with inflation, the average 2005 annual wage for these employees should be \$25,174, according to American Institute for Economic Research calculations.<sup>4</sup>

- When compared with other workers in Maine, ACSUM employees were paid 8 percent less than the state per capita average in 2002.<sup>5</sup> By 2005, this gap had increased to 22 percent below the state average income of \$29,973.

- When compared with nearby states (Massachusetts and New Hampshire), the current average wage of UMS's full-time, 12-month employees is 63 percent below the regional per capita income.

Nationwide, colleges and universities are the largest employers of administrative assistants (AAs).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, not surprisingly, ACSUM's 434 AAs make up nearly half of the bargaining unit. To determine where UMS COLT wages stand in the local market with regard to their competitive skills, we have used the higher end wages among UMS's more highly skilled AAs, those with the job title Administrative Assistant II, for our analysis.

The Bangor, Maine, market shows a high demand for AAs, reflected by an 11 percent rise in their median wage from 2003 to 2004 (See Table 1). During those same years, AA wages rose by 9 percent in Maine overall and by 7 percent for the Portland Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), compared with 3 percent for the United States as a whole. The average hourly wage for administrative assistants at colleges and universities nationally was \$17.25, or \$35,870 annually, for 2004<sup>7</sup> (See Table 2). ACSUM AAs, by comparison, earn an average of \$12.89 per hour, or \$26,635 a year.

Table 1:  
Clerical, Technical, and Administrative Skills in the Regional Market, 2004

<b>Desktop Publishers</b>	<b>Median Wage 2004</b>	<b>Percent Change from 2003</b>
Maine	\$13.55	6%
Portland MSA	13.42	-1 %
Bangor MSA	16.55	--
New Hampshire	15.48	8 %
Massachusetts	19.60	7 %
United States	15.15	0 %

<b>Graphic Designers</b>	<b>Median Wage 2004</b>	<b>Percent Change from 2003</b>
Maine	\$15.92	2 %
Portland MSA	17.09	1 %
Bangor MSA	14.65	-1 %
New Hampshire	17.45	4 %
Massachusetts	21.59	5 %
United States	18.28	4 %

<b>Computer Support Specialists</b>	<b>Median Wage 2004</b>	<b>Percent Change from 2003</b>
Maine	\$16.20	1 %
Portland MSA	18.11	4 %
Bangor MSA	15.67	7 %
New Hampshire	19.26	8 %
Massachusetts	24.26	2 %
United States	19.44	3 %

<b>Technical Writers</b>	<b>Median Wage 2004</b>	<b>Percent Change from 2003</b>
Maine	\$20.46	2 %
Portland MSA	--	--
Bangor MSA	--	--
New Hampshire	28.34	3 %
Massachusetts	31.02	2 %
United States	25.71	4 %

<b>Administrative Assistants</b>	<b>Median Wage 2004</b>	<b>Percent Change from 2003</b>
Maine	\$15.85	9 %
Portland MSA	15.55	7 %
Bangor MSA	16.02	11 %
New Hampshire	16.23	6 %
Massachusetts	19.46	4 %
United States	16.81	3 %

<b>Secretaries</b>	<b>Median Wage 2004</b>	<b>Percent Change from 2003</b>
Maine	\$11.83	5 %
Portland MSA	12.56	7 %
Bangor MSA	11.62	4 %
New Hampshire	12.59	4 %
Massachusetts	15.30	4 %
United States	12.55	3 %

Research courtesy of University of Maine Bureau of Labor Education,  
<http://dll.umaine.edu/ble>.

**Sources:** Table compiled from: U.S. Department of Labor,  
 Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Survey (OES):  
[www.bls.gov/oes/2004/may/oesrcst.htm](http://www.bls.gov/oes/2004/may/oesrcst.htm);  
[www.bls.gov/oes/2003/may/oesrcst.htm](http://www.bls.gov/oes/2003/may/oesrcst.htm).

The data in these tables make clear that UMS is not competitive in the regional market. As clerical duties become more sophisticated and more critical to the success of an enterprise, an accelerated exodus of skilled, well-educated employees could pose problems for UMS in the near future.

Young people with good skills have little incentive to stay in Maine, especially with much better pay so close by. In addition, UMS closes an avenue of professional success for Maine women by basing the clerical wage scale on throwback discriminatory attitudes toward women's work. These facts add up to a loss of quality personnel. Many of today's most successful students are women. Because the

Table 2: COLT Comparisons

	Median	Average	Median	Average
COLT Full-Time 12 month	\$11.39	\$11.85	\$23,691	\$24,646
COLT Full-Time Secretary	\$10.00	\$10.58	\$20,800	\$22,003
COLT Full-Time 12 month Administrative Assistant I	\$11.30	\$11.77	\$23,504	\$24,475
COLT Full-Time 12 month Administrative Assistant II	\$12.13	\$12.89	\$25,230	\$26,635
AA, Colleges and Universities, U.S., 2004	\$16.48	\$17.25	\$34,278	\$35,870
Maine Per Capita, 2004		\$14.41		\$29,973
New England Per Capita, 2004		\$19.36		\$40,269
United States Per Capita, 2004		\$15.89		\$33,041

ACSUM-represented unit is 86 percent female, one must infer that wage deficiencies for this unit are a gender-equity issue.

Brain drain is a serious problem because it is likely to suppress entrepreneurial energy in the region. Good ideas have to be executed well; competent support staff is essential to any enterprise. In the Corporation for Enterprise Development's 2006 Development Report Card for the States, Maine received a D for entrepreneurial energy, ranking 37th.<sup>8</sup> This ranking is a red flag for problems caused by brain drain. As a Milken Institute researcher observes, "[a] region's most important source of competitive advantage is the knowledge embedded in its people. The knowledge, skills, experience and innovative potential of talented individuals have greater value than capital equipment."<sup>9</sup>

Yet UMS persists in marginalizing and undervaluing its largely female, and increasingly skilled, support workers. Surely, we should expect the kind of progressive leadership from the University of Maine System that it publicly promotes. According to its compensation philosophy statement:

The University of Maine System values faculty and staff as the most vital resource for advancing its missions and programs. The University of Maine System seeks to attract and retain well-qualified, productive employees through a total compensation philosophy. Within fiscal resources and in compliance with all applicable rules and laws, the goal is to provide compensation that is competitive with similar positions in the relevant labor markets and is internally equitable.<sup>10</sup>

ACSUM's 2005 survey asked participants: While working for the University, have you ever:

- been without housing and had to move in with family or friends?
- been without housing (homeless) and therefore forced to use a shelter?
- had to use emergency municipal services (city funds for food/fuel/utilities)?
- had to use a food pantry?

- been eligible for federal food stamps?
- been eligible for Medicaid?
- been eligible for TANF (formerly called AFDC)?
- received fuel assistance?
- accepted financial help from family or friends for basic needs (housing, utilities, transportation, and/or food)?

The dramatic overall increase in the affirmative response rate to these questions underscores the worsening personal economies that a substantial number of COLT

---

*Distressingly, for those who rent, costs continue to increase; thus ACSUM unit members face an even more difficult time maintaining a residence.*

employees face. In 2002, 20 percent of the respondents reported receiving some form of subsidy, whether public assistance or help from family or friends.

While that response rate was considered alarming in the 2002 edition of *Personal Economies*, the 2005 response rate to this question almost doubled, with 38 percent of the respondents answering “yes” to one or more of the same questions only three years later. One in 10 ACSUM unit employees has moved in with family or friends because they were without housing. Thirty-two percent have accepted financial assistance from family or friends for basic necessities, including housing, utilities, transportation, and/or food. Seven percent of ACSUM unit members have received fuel assistance. Eight percent have been eligible for food stamps, and 6 percent have turned to a food pantry to survive. As one respondent noted, “It is very hard to make it on this income. I qualify for subsidized day care, but still it’s expensive. We have qualified for food stamps. Though my partner finally earns a living wage, I do not.”

Distressingly, for those who rent, costs continue to increase; thus ACSUM unit members face an even more difficult time maintaining a residence. The current hourly rate to afford fair-market rent on a two-bedroom apartment is \$13.31 statewide. The median hourly rate of a full-time ACSUM employee is \$11.35. The lack of affordable housing, coupled with low wages, will continue to make it difficult, if not impossible, for the university system to recruit and retain young adults entering the employment market for the first time.

The Maine Economic Growth Council reports that in 2004, the multiple-job rate for Maine residents was nearly 8 percent, compared to the national rate of slightly over 5 percent. Maine has the 12th highest multiple-job rate in the United States.<sup>11</sup> As of its 2006 report, the Council has flagged multiple-job holdings for the

general population as an issue that needs attention:

[P]eople who have to hold multiple jobs in order to make a living have less time for families, community involvement, and education. The relatively high rate of people in Maine who hold multiple jobs suggests that many jobs are not paying enough, and may be related to the number of livable wage jobs available in the state. Low-paying jobs cannot sustain a healthy economy. While some workers may choose second jobs to earn money for non-essentials, it is believed that many work multiple jobs in order to pay for basic needs.<sup>12</sup>

In the 2005 Personal Economies Survey, 19 percent of ACSUM unit members

---

*In the 2005 Personal Economies Survey, 19 percent of ACSUM unit members report holding a second or third job to make ends meet.*

report holding a second or third job to make ends meet, a decrease of 1 percent since 2002. However, 30 percent of respondents live in a household where at least one adult has a second job. Almost three times more ACSUM-represented employees work a second job than does the general Maine population. Thus, ACSUM employees continue to fare worse than workers at both the state and national levels.

ACSUM employees' enrollment in the university system health care plan has increased overall since 2002. Thirty-five percent are enrolled in the program as single coverage; 25 percent are enrolled as "single plus one"; and 27 percent are enrolled in family coverage. The percentage of those not enrolled in the health care program has decreased from 23 percent in 2002 to 13 percent in 2005. These trends may reflect the rapidly increasing health care costs in the United States, as individuals and their families can rarely risk not enrolling in a health care program. The percentage of ACSUM unit members who report that their children are covered by Maine's program to protect low-income children has increased from 2 percent in 2002 to 5 percent in 2005.

Dental health continues to be problematic for ACSUM employees. Notes one participant:

I am the person politicians and educational policy experts say all Mainers should strive to become. [I am] college-educated, computer literate, an experienced employee in a highly skilled line of work. Despite this, as a University of Maine System employee, [I am] perched precariously close to subsistence living. Though I have a second job, my combined wage does not lift me above 150 percent of poverty. I get my dental care at the local clinic and my glasses from the Lions Club because my health insurance does not cover these essential services. What is wrong with this picture?"

This survey participant is not alone: 64 percent of respondents reported they

were not enrolled in the university system's dental insurance plan. The number enrolled in the family dental plan has remained steady at 4 percent; 20 percent participate in the single coverage plan, a dip of 2 percent since 2002; and 9 percent are enrolled in the single-plus-one plan, an increase of 1 percent. These figures are not significantly different and show that the university system's dental insurance plan is still out of reach for most ACSUM employees.

For the University of Maine System, as for other employers around the state, rising health insurance costs continue to drive increases in operating budgets. Unlike other employers, the UMS response has been simply to try to shift increas-

---

*Unlike other employers, the UMS response to rising health insurance costs has been simply to try to shift increases disproportionately to those least able to pay.*

es disproportionately to those least able to pay.

Consistent with overall state averages, 74 percent of ACSUM unit respondents consider themselves homeowners, an increase of 1 percent since 2002. Survey participants continue to consider themselves "homeowners" in the broadest sense of the term, with "homes" including cabins, trailers on rented lots, inherited family homes, and homes with very high mortgage payments for two-income families. The distance employees must travel to work also reflects the economic constraints placed on COLT unit members. Almost 13 percent of survey respondents report that their weekly commute is more than 200 miles. The average weekly commute for all respondents is 111 miles, and the average year of their vehicle is 1999. According to an online calculator provided by AAA, the cost of fuel and maintenance for the average commute is \$275.60 per month, or \$3,307.20 per year.<sup>13</sup>

The increased cost of home heating fuel and gasoline have only tightened the margin for survival. Getting to work costs more than it did a year ago. And heating one's home has increased by at least 30 percent for those using oil and up to 70 percent for those using natural gas. "It is getting extremely difficult to make ends meet," one survey respondent wrote. "Gas, heating oil, and groceries have all increased to the point where other bills are often put on hold. Can't afford a phone, and the possibility of our car needing repairs looms over everything. No car, no work. We're pretty much drowning."

Given the unexpected and dramatic increase in heating costs, it is fortunate that housing costs have remained stable over the course of three years, with the average mortgage rate remaining the same. For those owning homes, the statewide average mortgage continues to be \$587. The average mortgage for those reporting

from the University of Maine increased from \$497 to \$520, while the average rate from the University of Southern Maine decreased from \$817 to \$715. However, employees living in southern Maine continue to be the hardest pressed, with a quarter of the respondents reporting that more than 50 percent of their monthly income goes to mortgage payments.

For those who rent, the statewide monthly average rental cost for all employees was \$551, but this is likely due to the fact that many of the respondents share rental costs. The fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Maine is \$692. To afford this level of rent and utilities without paying more than 30 percent of income on housing, a household must earn \$2,307 monthly, or \$27,683 annually. Assuming a 40-hour work week, 52 weeks per year, this level of income translates into a housing wage of \$13.31.<sup>14</sup> The housing wage for ACSUM members has worsened by nearly \$2.00 an hour since the 2002 survey.

Education should be seen as an investment in the future civic, cultural, and material well-being of our society. Instead, an ill-fitting business model approach to education is now being used to educate our recent high school graduates, as well as older adults returning to college. Any social contract with employees is being severed, not only in Maine as we found with the surveys we conducted, but around the country as well. College and university administrators do not believe they are under any moral obligation to pay support staff the kind of wages they deserve. Instead of valuing a well-educated group of employees, they pinch the wrong pennies, pile on extra work, and cut staffing levels.

No policymaker should be comfortable with the concept of the working poor. It is especially egregious that the University of Maine System should condone this situation. These testimonies from COLT workers, along with the wage discrepancies outlined in this paper, are evidence of shameful neglect on the part of UMS management. It is incumbent on UMS—and other state higher education systems—to show leadership in the area of the livable wage. Until they do so, the reputation of educational institutions will become little more than hollow boasting. We've heard enough about glitzy new buildings, consultants hired and fired, new vice presidents, and sports programs with huge budgets. They don't put food on our tables. We can't eat prestige. 

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The 2002 data were analyzed and reported in a white paper titled *Personal Economies: Living on the Edge With Nothing Left to Give*, available online at <http://earth.prohosting.com/acsum/personaleconomies.pdf>.
- <sup>2</sup> A survey was mailed to the 1,029 unit members at that time (based on COLT unit data provided by the University of Maine System Office, a regular bimonthly report required by the Contract of Agreement), along with a brief explanatory letter and a return envelope. The mailing was based on the April 2005 UMS report on bargaining unit size. Of the 1,029 surveys sent out, 542 were returned by both ACSUM members and non-members. All responses were confidential, and unit members were instructed not to sign the forms or to indicate their identities.

Questions were both quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative information was compiled using electronic data scanning software, while the qualitative data input was done by three COLT volunteers. The categories or units of the System were Cooperative Extension (CE); University of Maine (UM); University of Maine at Augusta (UMA); University of Maine at Farmington (UMF); University of Maine at Fort Kent (UMFK); University of Maine at Machias (UMM); University of Maine at Presque Isle (UMPI); University of Southern Maine (USM); and System Wide Services/University Networking for Educational Technology (SWS/UNET). In 2002, the survey was mailed to 1,104 unit members.

- <sup>3</sup> ACSUM Executive Board. *Personal Economies: Living on the Edge With Nothing Left to Give*, 2002, <http://earth.prohosting.com/acsum/personaleconomies.pdf>, p. 7.
- <sup>4</sup> American Institute for Economic Research calculator, [www.aier.org/colcalc.html](http://www.aier.org/colcalc.html). The AIER calculator, which was used in *Personal Economies II*, computed a more conservative rate of inflation than InflationData.com, [www.inflationdata.com/inflation/](http://www.inflationdata.com/inflation/). The InflationData calculator compared data by month/year and computed an inflation rate of 10.94 percent from November 2001 to December 2005.
- <sup>5</sup> ACSUM Executive Board. *Personal Economies: Living on the Edge With Nothing Left to Give*, 2002, <http://earth.prohosting.com/acsum/personaleconomies.pdf>, p. 7.
- <sup>6</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Labor. [www.bls.gov/oes/2004/may/oesrcst.htm](http://www.bls.gov/oes/2004/may/oesrcst.htm).
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> Corporation for Enterprise Development. *2006 Development Report Card For The States*. [www.cfed.org/focus.m?parentid=34&siteid=1581&id=1581](http://www.cfed.org/focus.m?parentid=34&siteid=1581&id=1581).
- <sup>9</sup> The Milken Institute, *Best Performing Cities: Where America's Jobs are Created and Sustained*, p. 9, [www.milkeninstitute.org/pdf/best\\_performing\\_cities\\_2004.pdf](http://www.milkeninstitute.org/pdf/best_performing_cities_2004.pdf).
- <sup>10</sup> University of Maine System. [www.maine.edu/umscompolicy.html](http://www.maine.edu/umscompolicy.html).
- <sup>11</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Labor. [www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2005/12/rgtrends.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2005/12/rgtrends.pdf).
- <sup>12</sup> Maine Development Foundation. *Measures of Growth In Focus: 2006 Performance Measures and Benchmarks to Achieve a Vibrant and Sustainable Economy for Maine*. [www.mdf.org/megc/measures/megc2006.pdf](http://www.mdf.org/megc/measures/megc2006.pdf), p. 6.
- <sup>13</sup> Pierce Transit. *Your Driving Costs*. [www.piercetransit.org/rideshare/costs.htm](http://www.piercetransit.org/rideshare/costs.htm). The Pierce Transit calculator is based on one driver operating a 2004 Ford Taurus. When doing the calculation for this paper, the current average price of regular gas used was the AAA average of \$2.25, found at [www.fuelgaugereport.com](http://www.fuelgaugereport.com). The miles per gallon used was 25.
- <sup>14</sup> National Low Income Housing Coalition. *Out of Reach 2005*. [www.nlihc.org/oor2005/](http://www.nlihc.org/oor2005/).

Special thanks to ACSUM members Kathleen Brown, Rosanna Libby, and John Plant for their help with *Personal Economies II*. An extra-special thanks to former ACSUM member Phyllis vonHerrlich, who co-authored the first “*Personal Economies*” and ran data analysis on the second; she continues to contribute because she believes passionately in advancing women’s issues.