

November 12, 2020
New York City Committee on Higher Education

My name is Marc Kagan. I am a graduate student and an Adjunct Lecturer in the History Department at Lehman College. There, I teach two sections of a course I developed on the historical development of racist exclusion in the United States and the fight to live up to the ideal of “equal rights for all.”

I am also the CUNY Graduate Center Grievance Counselor for the Professional Staff Congress. In that capacity, I regularly interact with graduate student-workers who teach at virtually all the campuses in the CUNY system. Some are assigned to teach as a requirement of their Ph.D. fellowships. Virtually all of those, and hundreds more besides – more than a thousand total – also teach as Adjunct Faculty to enable them to afford to live and study in New York City. None live in luxury. A graduate student-worker teaching three classes a semester – remember they are also students, expected to be working toward their degrees – makes approximately \$30,000/year. These are the cutting-edge educated workforce of New York City’s future: STEM, Humanities, and Social Science researchers who will fill our laboratories, schools, colleges, think-tanks, publishing houses, start-ups – if and when they get their degrees. All are imperiled by Adjunct layoffs.

First, hundreds of these graduate student-workers have lost employment as Adjuncts, slicing or, in some cases, eliminating their income stream entirely. For those only working as Adjuncts, and with no fellowship, this has also meant losing their access to health insurance. Many will soon abandon their programs and New York City. This is an investment in lives and in New York’s future prosperity simply gone to waste.

Many more have felt the rebound effects of those layoffs, in the form of increased class sizes or workload. Here are just a few of the reports our union chapter recently shared with Graduate Center administration (names have been removed):

1. **Spring 2020: 45 students —> Fall 2020: 60 students.** It is nearly impossible to engage 60 students in a classroom — let alone a Zoom call — which, at best, accommodates 16 people simultaneously. Students who would otherwise be “reachable” are now washed away by the massive tidal wave of competing names (not faces) vying for education in this dystopian factory-farm-style educational setting. This is income-bias in the extreme. I happen to teach at Fordham, for reference, where class sizes are restricted at a maximum of 32, and only 16 students meet at a time synchronously.
2. **This is my first time teaching. I’ve 75 students.**
3. **I currently have 77 students (it was 78 for a few weeks, before a student dropped the class).** Responding to the larger volume of student emails (including requests to correct grading mistakes by the computer systems) is still pretty time consuming. It also makes it nearly impossible to check in on which students are actually paying attention and understanding the material, and challenging to check in with students during group work (since there are too many groups to spend much time with each one).

4. Last spring, I had approximately 40 students per class. I now have 75 students per class. The main difference is the huge influx of emails that I now get. In addition, my office hours used to have at most 4 students. I now have sometimes 10 or more coming to my office hours.
5. Recitations (50min x 3); Biweekly discussion board (2-5min/student x 105 students); Profile I & II (10min/student x 105 students) (twice during semester, each 10min to grade); Final paper (10min/student x 105 students) (broken into three parts across semester, each 10min to grade)

What we see clearly here is the effect not only on the graduate student-workers – whose progress toward degree is imperiled – but on their students. They receive less supervision, guidance, attention – all at a time when on-line learning has made that attention more critical than ever. In my own experience of six years of college-level teaching and ten years teaching high school before that, the number of students who are falling through the cracks – who are failing my courses – has doubled from previous semesters. But with 105 students, there is simply not enough time in the day to catch and care for those students. I should add that the number of college counselors and writing center instructors – educators whose sole purpose is to provide support – has also been pared to the bone and beyond.

The refrain “our working conditions are students’ learning conditions” is a hard truth. As educators we are caught between the Scylla of failing more students – driving them out of the CUNY system and back to a future of low-paying insecure work – and the Charybdis of passing them through out of compassion – graduating a less skilled, less qualified workforce. These are not happy choices.

We must find a way to return our adjuncts to the classroom – for the good of our students, our laid-off colleagues, and for New York City’s future itself.

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