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Why I Quit College Teaching and You Should Too

25 February 2018

I quit because these days a new instructor – a doctoral student – would never have an opportunity to develop a website like dowiak.net.

When I was in graduate school, my professors took a neutral view of this website. They never discouraged me from developing dowiak.net, but they always encouraged me to focus on my research (which you can find at wdowiak.me).

Today, doctoral students – are they instructors or are they doctoral students? – would never have an opportunity to develop a website like dowiak.net. Their opportunity to prepare their own notes and learning materials has been replaced by the online learning platforms offered by textbook publishers.

And students may no longer save money by purchasing a used copy of the textbook. Students must now purchase a new copy of the textbook with a new product activation code, so that they can access the publisher's online platform.

In defense of those online learning platforms, they provide detailed information about which questions students answered correctly and incorrectly. That information could help the instructor focus on the topics where students need help.

But making each student buy a product activation code is a very expensive way of gaining the same insight that can usually be gained from simply asking students where they need help.

More troubling is how the online learning platforms emphasize weekly homework assignments at the expense of semester-long research papers. Instructors get an extraordinary level of detail about whether students answered a particular question correctly, but students do not learn [how to write a research paper](#).

And at worst, students are required to [purchase a product activation code](#), so that instructors may be “relieved of the burden” of preparing for class.

I suppose that that is compassionate. The majority of faculty are so poorly paid that they must deliver pizza to support their teaching habit. Cutting class preparation time to zero gives faculty more time to deliver pizza.

At the City University of New York, doctoral students (employed as “adjunct lecturers”) are only paid about \$3600 per three-credit course. And after they successfully defend their dissertations (and are promoted to “adjunct assistant professor”), they will only be paid about \$4100 per three-credit course.

At the full-time rate of 7 three-credit courses per year, an adjunct lecturer is paid \$25,200 per year and an adjunct assistant professor is paid \$28,700 per year. For comparison, someone working 40 hours per week, 50 weeks per year for minimum wage would be paid \$26,000 in 2018 and \$30,000 in 2019.

Adjunct faculty are paid so little that some have slipped into homelessness. Attached is a recent NEA article about a professor who [lives in her car](#).

Faculty working conditions are student learning conditions. So when colleges pay their faculty less than minimum wage, students receive less than minimum education. When faculty must work a second job just to pay the rent, they have little time to prepare for class.

I earned a Doctor of Philosophy. I did not take a Vow of Poverty.

I have no desire to deliver pizza or to live in a car so that I may have the privilege of helping students do their homework assignments at a textbook publisher's online learning platform.

I quit college teaching because faculty are discouraged from developing instructional websites like dowiak.net.

You should too.

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postscript: After writing a first draft of this post, I saw an [op-ed by Molly Worthen](#) who suggests that online learning platforms are popular among college administrators because the software claims to provide data about what skills students are learning. She concludes:

Producing thoughtful, talented graduates is not a matter of focusing on market-ready skills. It's about giving students an opportunity that most of them will never have again in their lives: the chance for serious exploration of complicated intellectual problems, the gift of time in an institution where curiosity and discovery are the source of meaning.

That's how we produce the critical thinkers American employers want to hire. And there's just no app for that.

– Molly Worthen (2018). ["The Misguided Drive to Measure 'Learning Outcomes.'"](#) *New York Times*.

[economics @ doviak.net](#)[micro](#)[macro](#)[stats & math](#)[trade & finance](#)<< [back to the main page](#)

A Few Datasets

Preface

I have created this webpage to provide you with a few datasets that you might use for your course project and to explain what I hope you will learn by conducting an econometric analysis.

- [Preface](#)
- [Organizing Information, Identifying Trends](#)
- [Your Assignment](#)

- [OECD Financial Data](#)
- [OECD Labor Market Data](#)
- [NYC Vision Zero](#)

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Organizing Information, Identifying Trends

I want you to learn econometrics and the best way to learn econometrics is to do it. But more broadly, I hope that conducting an econometric analysis will teach you how to organize information and identify trends.

In the specific case of an econometric analysis, each column in your spreadsheet must represent a variable and each row must represent an observation. So your very first task in an econometric analysis is to properly align that information your spreadsheet.

If you carefully construct your spreadsheet from reliable sources of data (and if you choose a good set of variables to test your null hypothesis), then you should observe some clear trends in your data. Your next task then is to describe those trends, test a series of null hypotheses and report your findings.

Gretl, of course, will help you run regressions and calculate statistics for your analysis. But Gretl is a tool. It is not the tool that is important. It is the quality of your input that is important.

Your spreadsheet is what's important. How you organize information is what's important.

In a more general case, your information might not be the numeric data that we work with in econometrics. It might be names, addresses or whole documents and files. Your data might not even fit into a spreadsheet at all.

But some principles, like functions and variables, will remain the same. And, once again, what will be important is how you organize information. If your information is well-organized, you should observe some clear trends in your data.

To get you started, I have assembled the datasets below. Your task is to identify the most important trends in one of those datasets, test a series of null hypotheses and report your findings.

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Your Assignment

For the project proposal, please submit a written description of:

- the null hypotheses that you wish to test
- the dataset that you plan to test them with

For the final project, please submit a formal paper, in which you describe:

- the null hypotheses that you tested
- the dataset that you tested them with
- summary statistics
- how you manipulated the data
- the regressions that you ran
- your conclusions: should we accept or reject the null hypothesis?
 - if we accept it, why might the explanatory variable not have any effect on the dependent variable?
 - if we reject it, how strong is the effect of the explanatory variable on the dependent variable?

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OECD Financial Data

variable	description	units
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CCRETT01	relative consumer price indices	
CCUS	currency exchange rates	monthly average
IR3TIB	short-term interest rates	percent per annum
IRLT	long-term interest rates	percent per annum
IRSTCI	immediate interest rates, call money, interbank rate	percent per annum
MABM	broad money (M3)	index, seasonally adjusted
MANM	narrow money (M1)	index, seasonally adjusted
SP	share prices	index

OECD Economies

Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States

Non-OECD Economies

Argentina, Brazil, China (People's Republic of), Colombia, Costa Rica, India, Indonesia, Lithuania, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa

Monthly Data

Jan. 1950 to Nov. 2017

download

[CSV file](#)

[Gretl data](#)

description

This dataset contains financial market data from stats.oecd.org covering 35 OECD countries and 11 non-OECD countries. You may use this data to explore the effect that interest rates, exchange rates, inflation rates and the money supply have on share prices.

Specifically, you may test the null hypotheses that:

- a change in interest rates is not associated with a change in share prices

- a change in exchange rates is not associated with a change in share prices
- a change in money supply is not associated with a change in share prices
- a change in inflation rates is not associated with a change in share prices

Then focus on the variables where we rejected the null hypothesis. In those cases, we have accepted the alternative hypothesis that there is a relationship, so now we want to know:

- which variables have the strongest effect on share prices?
- how large is that effect?

For example, if we think that interest rates will rise one percentage point next month, then how much will share prices fall in response to that change?

As you conduct your analysis, you must remember that one of the Gauss-Markov assumptions is that your residuals ("error terms") must not be correlated with each other. Related to this assumption is the concept of "stationary residuals" -- the mean and variance of your residuals must be constant over time.

Taking the difference in value between one time period and the next will usually make a series stationary, so if you difference each variable in your regression model your residuals will usually be stationary. Differencing, therefore, usually ensures that your residuals are stationary.

The alternative is to find a co-integrating relationship among your variables that makes the residuals stationary. In practice however, it is difficult to find such co-integrating relationships, so I encourage you to work with the differenced variables.

But also -- from the perspective of an investor -- the share price itself is not important. What is important to the investor is the change in share price (i.e. the difference in share price).

So from an investment perspective, you want to develop a model that predicts changes in share price. What predicts those changes?

- change in interest rate?
- change in exchange rate?
- change in inflation rate?
- change in money supply?

And how large is the effect of those changes on the change in share price?

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OECD Labor Market Data

variable	description	units
gwagegap	gender wage gap	percentage
minwage	minimum wage in 2014 constant prices	2014 USD PPPs
rgdpcap	GDP per head (expenditure approach) at constant prices, constant PPPs, OECD base year = 2010	US dollar
dln_cpi	CPI inflation rate (no food, no energy)	percentage
uniondens	union density -- percentage of wage and salary earners that are trade union members	percentage
irem25fe	Employment rate, Aged 25-54, Females	percentage
irem25ma	Employment rate, Aged 25-54, Males	percentage
irem25tt	Employment rate, Aged 25-54, All Persons	percentage
irem64fe	Employment rate, Aged 15-64, Females	percentage
irem64ma	Employment rate, Aged 15-64, Males	percentage
irem64tt	Employment rate, Aged 15-64, All Persons	percentage
ifwa25fe	Working age population, Aged 25-54, Females	percentage
ifwa25ma	Working age population, Aged 25-54, Males	percentage
ifwa25tt	Working age population, Aged 25-54, All Persons	percentage
ifwa64fe	Working age population, Aged 15-64, Females	percentage
ifwa64ma	Working age population, Aged 15-64, Males	percentage
ifwa64tt	Working age population, Aged 15-64, All Persons	percentage
eprc_v1	employment protection -- individual and collective dismissals (regular contracts), version 1	0 to 6
eprc_v2	employment protection -- individual and collective dismissals (regular contracts), version 2	0 to 6
eprc_v3	employment protection -- individual and collective dismissals (regular contracts), version 3	0 to 6

epr_v1	employment protection -- individual dismissals (regular contracts), version 1	0 to 6
epr_v3	employment protection -- individual dismissals (regular contracts), version 3	0 to 6
epc	employment protection -- collective dismissals (additional provisions)	0 to 6
ept_v1	employment protection -- temporary employment, version 1	0 to 6
ept_v3	employment protection -- temporary employment, version 3	0 to 6

OECD Economies

Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States

Annual Data

1985 to 2014

download

[Gretl data](#)

description

This dataset contains labor market data from stats.oecd.org covering 34 OECD countries. It is the same dataset that I use in class with the addition of "gender wage gap" -- the percentage difference between male and female wages.

In class, we discuss the effect of labor market regulation on male and female employment rates. You might extend that analysis by exploring the effect of labor market regulation on the gender wage gap.

If you do, you would account for the simultaneity issues that arise in the supply and demand for male/female labor. Then you would find an *instrumental variable* to estimate the effect of labor market regulation on the male/female employment rates and on the gender wage gap.

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NYC Vision Zero

variable	description	units
NODEID	intersection identifier	
GasPrice	average price of gas during month	US dollars
Casualties	sum of "Fatalities" and "Injuries" during month	count
Fatalities	total number of fatalities during month	count
PedFatalit	number of pedestrian fatalities during month	count
BikeFatali	number of bicyclist fatalities during month	count
MVOFatalit	number of motorist fatalities during month	count
Injuries	total number of injuries during month	count
PedInjurie	number of pedestrian injuries during month	count
BikeInjuri	number of bicyclist injuries during month	count
MVOInjurie	number of motorist injuries during month	count
CasualBefore	total "Casualties" from 2009 to 2013	sum
CasualAfter	total "Casualties" from 2014 to 2017	sum
InjurBefore	total "Injuries" from 2009 to 2013	sum
InjurAfter	total "Injuries" from 2014 to 2017	sum
FatalBefore	total "Fatalities" from 2009 to 2013	sum
FatalAfter	total "Fatalities" from 2014 to 2017	sum

Monthly Data

Jan. 2009 to Sept. 2017

download

[nyc-dot_gas_with-zeroes.csv.zip](#) (Zipped CSV file)

[lib_crosstabs.r](#) (R library)

[nyc-dot_crosstabs_v2.r](#) (R script)

description

This [NYC DOT](#) dataset contains information on traffic fatalities and injuries at 30,754

New York City intersections over almost 9 years.

During the most recent 3 years and 9 months of data (from Jan. 2014 to Sept. 2017), New York City set a goal of eliminating traffic fatalities and injuries in an initiative called "Vision Zero." Vision Zero reduced the speed limit throughout the city from 35 to 25 miles per hour and changed traffic rules at many intersections.

You may use this dataset to test the null hypothesis that Vision Zero did not reduce fatalities or injuries. And to conduct such a hypothesis test, you might use regression analysis. But because this dataset is so large (3,229,170 observations) we can also create cross-tabulations that directly examine the empirical distribution.

The one requirement is that you must use a high-memory computer for this analysis. Because this dataset is so large (3,229,170 observations), it took 5 minutes to run this code on my computer with 8 GB of RAM.

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Eryk Wdowiak <ericdoviak@gmail.com>

FW: EC382 fall 2016 semester

1 message

Angela Hernandezspano <Angela.Hernandezspano@qc.cuny.edu>Wed, Mar 16, 2016 at
2:56 PM

To: Suleyman Taspinar <Suleyman.Taspinar@qc.cuny.edu>, Inas R Kelly <Inas.Kelly@qc.cuny.edu>, "tingting0099@gmail.com" <tingting0099@gmail.com>, Shaoying Ma <sma@gradcenter.cuny.edu>, Raymond Myrthil <Raymond.Myrthil@qc.cuny.edu>, "Ericdoviak@gmail.com" <Ericdoviak@gmail.com>, Francois DE Silatchom <Francois.Silatchom@qc.cuny.edu>, Zhen Ma <Zhen.Ma@qc.cuny.edu>, Roumen Vesselinov <Roumen.Vesselinov@qc.cuny.edu>, Andrew Paizis <Andrew.Paizis@qc.cuny.edu>
Cc: David J Gabel <David.Gabel@qc.cuny.edu>

Hello Everyone,

Professor David Gabel asked me to send you this e-mail.

Angie

From: David J Gabel**Sent:** Tuesday, March 15, 2016 1:21 PM**To:** Angela Hernandezspano <Angela.Hernandezspano@qc.cuny.edu>**Subject:** EC382 fall 2016 semester

Angela: Would you please send this note to all fall 2016 EC382 instructors? Thanks, David

Hi, my name is David Gabel and I am member of the Department's curriculum committee. Last year the committee reviewed the different econometric textbooks and concluded that, to the extent possible, all 382 instructors should use Stock and Watson's econometric textbook starting with the fall 2016 semester. Pearson publishes the book and they will sell it on-line for a very reasonable price. The students will pay \$105 for the eText and MyEconLab, and \$60 if they only want to use the homework software (MyeconLab). The curriculum committee strongly supports using MyeconLab for weekly homework assignments.

The wholesale version of the printed textbook will be

- The Custom paperback book + MyEconLab would be \$113 NET (price to bookstore)
- The Custom loose-leaf book + MyEconLab would be \$95 NET (price to bookstore)

The bookstore will mark-up these prices by approximately 22%.

Our Pearson representative is:

Jessica Posillico

Mobile: [631 219 8200](tel:6312198200)

Email: jessica.posillico@pearson.com

You should contact her if you need a desk copy of the book. Jessica is also available for questions, course set up, MyEconLab training and First Day of Class Tutorials for all instructors using MyEconLab.

Please contact me if you have any questions regarding the use of the textbook.

David Gabel

Department of Economics

david.gabel@qc.cuny.edu

[718-997-5452](tel:7189975452)



Eryk Wdowiak <ericdoviak@gmail.com>

Memorandum Adjunct Professional Pool: Standardized Macroeconomics 101

1 message

Mathew Bradbury <Mathew.Bradbury@qc.cuny.edu>
Reply-To: mathew.bradbury@qc.cuny.edu
To: "econfac@googlegroups.com" <econfac@googlegroups.com>
Cc: Jessica Posillico <jessica.posillico@pearson.com>

Tue, Jan 2, 2018 at 12:32 PM

Dear Colleagues,

Happy New Year!!

As I am sure many of you are already aware, the Department has decided to create a standardized course for Macroeconomics 101.

The standardized course is planned to roll out for adoption by all adjunct faculty Spring 2018.

I hope that many of you will see this as an opportunity to be relieved of the burden of at least one course prep.

In addition, the faculty has assigned an auditor who will be tasked with monitoring course progress and provide a final review all grade books for our 101 sections.

I have been tasked with curating the standardized course as well as performing the function of auditor.

In collaboration with Jessica Posillico, our representative from Pearson we have curated chapters from authors Hubbard & O'Brien to create a custom edition unique to Queens

College.

Attached you will find the table of contents which can serve as a guide in constructing your course calendar.

The book is available as an e-text in package with the online interface wherein you will direct your students to find and complete their chapter homework.

It is also available under **ISBN: 9781323683415**

Available in out QC bookstore by "print on demand" orders and is packaged with access code for MyEconLab

We will be working with Jessica Posillico to handle the technical details for the roll out and you should expect an email from her in the coming weeks.

Thank You,

Mathew B. Bradbury Ph.D.

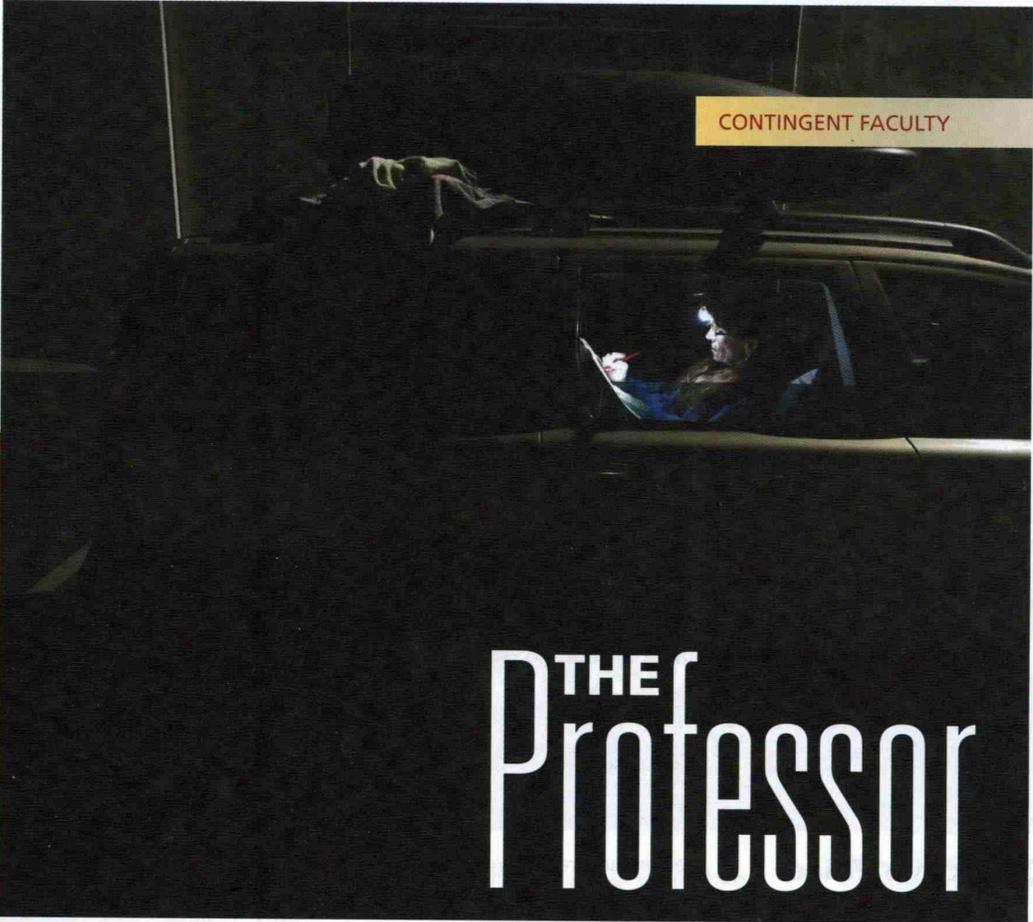
Lecturer Doctoral Schedule

Department of Economics.

Queens College, CUNY



ECO 101 TOC 5-24 (2).pdf
1110K



CONTINGENT FACULTY

THE Professor

WHO LIVES IN HER CAR

On a recent weeknight, writing instructor Ellen Tara James-Penny sits with a student in a parking lot near San José State University for more than an hour, explaining the perils of “hasty generalizations” and other pitfalls in college-level writing. Then, James-Penny and her husband get into their aging Volvo sedan and drive a few blocks to a local church, where she sleeps in their car with one dog and he sleeps in a tent a few feet away with the other. Despite the four college courses she teaches, and the master’s degree she earned a few years ago, James-Penny is homeless. She simply does not earn enough money as an adjunct professor to afford the high cost of rents in Silicon Valley. Unfortunately, she is not alone. Even as tuitions rise, faculty pay does not, and the situation is especially dire for contingent employees.

Of course it's not just Ellen James-Penny who is struggling. "It's adjuncts in general, it's adjuncts across the nation, and it has to stop!" she says. More than 70 percent of U.S. college faculty are adjunct or contingent faculty. Studies put their typical income at about \$2,700 per course, or between \$20,000 and \$25,000 a year for a full-time load of courses. Often, they commute from college to college to build a living wage. Many receive no health care or other benefits. Retirement is a pipe dream, as they commonly earn less than the federal minimum wage and struggle to pay their bills. A quarter rely on public assistance such as Medicaid or food stamps, according to a UC Berkeley study. Indeed, many campus food banks report feeding their adjunct faculty. This past fall, the *Guardian* reported on an instructor who turned to \$200-an-hour sex work to pay her apartment rent after her course load—and income—was cut unexpectedly in half. "I am terrified that a student is going to come walking in," she said.

A Collective Voice

James-Penny has at least one thing going for her: She's a member of one of the largest, most powerful faculty unions in the U.S., the 23,000-member California Faculty Association (CFA). Over the past decades, CFA has successfully bargained for pay raises and job security for "lecturers" in the Cal State system, including three-year appointments for lecturers who have taught at least one semester in a single department for six consecutive years.

This kind of stability is important to faculty, but it's also critical to student success. As Adrianna Kezar, Daniel Maxey, and Elizabeth Holcomb wrote in a 2016 NEA *Thought & Action* article: "A mounting body of evidence shows that institutions' failure to properly support [non-tenure-track] faculty is resulting in numerous negative impacts...It is detrimental to student learning and outcomes. This includes problems for first-year

persistence, retention, transfers from two- to four-year colleges, and graduation rates..."

Investing in adjunct faculty is about investing in students, but often it seems college administrators do not see it that way. A 2014 study from the Institute of Policy Studies found that

"EVEN THOUGH I LOVE TEACHING...I CAN'T KEEP DOING THIS AND LIVE IN A CAR."

— ELLEN JAMES-PENNY

at the 25 public universities with the highest paid presidents, the number of part-time adjuncts grew 22 percent faster between 2005 and 2011 than the average national growth—"a sure sign that those schools are offsetting their administrative bloat with cheaper labor," reports *Atlantic Monthly*.

One striking example: between 2010 and 2012, Ohio State University paid its president about \$6 million. During that time, it also hired 670 administrators, 498 contingent faculty members, and just 45 tenure-track faculty.

How do you make the case for paying adjuncts more? For providing health and retirement benefits, and pathways to tenure? As an individual, it's near impossible.

That's why, in 2009, Errol Magidson picked up the phone and called the Illinois Education Association (IEA). Magidson, an adjunct professor of psychology at St. Xavier University (SXU) in Chicago, also was teaching at Roosevelt University and was a member of the IEA-affiliated Roosevelt Adjunct Faculty Organization. At Roosevelt, because of its union contract, Magidson earned almost twice as much, per class, as he did at SXU. "I said, 'Look, why can't we have a union at St. Xavier?'"

Magidson and IEA formed an organizing committee and, in 2011, a vote was held. In 2016—five years later—the ballots were counted, and the St. Xavier Adjunct Faculty Organization had won. In the intervening years, SXU administrators had dragged the process through the national labor relations board, claiming that the university's Catholic affiliation was incompatible with unionization. (SXU already has two unions on its campuses, including one for full-time faculty.) The board ruled otherwise, but St. Xavier has continued to appeal its decision.

Meanwhile, SXU's adjuncts are paid \$2,500 per class, regardless of how long they've been teaching that class, and are limited to two classes per semester—a cap that means the Catholic university can avoid paying healthcare benefits for its adjuncts, as would be required by federal law for employees who work at least 30 hours a week.

"The people that do the work need to get paid for the work that they do," Jeff Tangel, an adjunct political science professor, told the *Chicago Tribune*. "I get a check every two weeks with



25

The percentage of adjunct faculty who rely on Medicaid, food stamps, and other PUBLIC ASSISTANCE.

\$20,000

The estimated ANNUAL SALARY for adjunct faculty in the U.S.

70

The percentage of U.S. faculty who are NON-TENURE-TRACK.

\$280. Two-hundred eighty-four dollars and fifty-six cents."

In September, the college president told a local newspaper that if adjunct faculty wanted to be paid more, they could go elsewhere. "Does that sound like ethical behavior?" Magidson asks.

Colleges = Corporations

Meanwhile, back on the West Coast, Ellen James-Penny earned \$28,700 last year, according to California's state worker salary database. This year, thanks to salary raises negotiated by her union, she should earn a little more.

But it's not enough money to make the move from automobile to apartment, she says. And so, every morning, she and her husband hustle to pack up his tent, quickly walk their two rescue dogs, and get James-Penny to campus on time—and not looking like somebody who just woke up in a car. Every night, they won-

der where they're going to sleep. Every day, they work to evade parking police, to find healthy food, to wash themselves and their clothes, and, above all, to not look homeless.

It's not easy, it's not cheap, and it's not sustainable, she says. The nights are getting colder, and she's already had meningitis twice. "I tell my students 'I love you dearly, but I'm going to love you from a distance,' and then I get the hand sanitizer out," she says.

Making matters worse, to pay for her master's degree, James-Penny borrowed more than \$140,000 and her monthly student loan payments top \$400. This is not unusual. The number of people who owe more than \$100,000 in student debt quadrupled over the past 10 years, according to Federal Reserve Bank of New York data. About 25 percent of graduate students now owe more than \$100,000 in loans.

Something that would help James-Penny and other adjuncts is U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin's Adjunct Faculty Loan Fairness

Above: SUNY Cortland union members raise awareness of campus equity.

Act, which would make adjuncts eligible for public-service loan forgiveness. (For more, see the NEA Legislative Action Center at nea.org/lac.)

In the meantime, James-Penny doesn't see a way out of her car, not if she continues with the work she loves. "Even though I love teaching, even though I have such passion for it, I can't keep doing this and live in a car," says James-Penny.

The problems, James-Penny notes, go far beyond any one campus. "Colleges are becoming corporations, and their concern is not education," she says.

"What I want ultimately is for our society to value education, and I mean value," she says. "The majority of really good teachers leave the field. They just can't afford it. It's sad."

To reach author Mary Ellen Flannery, contact mflannery@nea.org.

The New York Times | <https://nyti.ms/2sRSoam>

SundayReview | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER

The Misguided Drive to Measure 'Learning Outcomes'

Molly Worthen FEB. 23, 2018

I teach at a big state university, and I often receive emails from software companies offering to help me do a basic part of my job: figure out what my students have learned.

If you thought this task required only low-tech materials like a pile of final exams and a red pen, you're stuck in the 20th century. In 2018, more and more university administrators want campuswide, quantifiable data that reveal what skills students are learning. Their desire has fed a bureaucratic behemoth known as learning outcomes assessment. This elaborate, expensive, supposedly data-driven analysis seeks to translate the subtleties of the classroom into PowerPoint slides packed with statistics — in the hope of deflecting the charge that students pay too much for degrees that mean too little.

It's true that old-fashioned course grades, skewed by grade inflation and inconsistency among schools and disciplines, can't tell us everything about what students have learned. But the ballooning assessment industry — including the tech companies and consulting firms that profit from assessment — is a symptom of higher education's crisis, not a solution to it. It preys especially on less prestigious schools and contributes to the system's deepening divide into a narrow tier of elite institutions primarily serving the rich and a vast landscape of glorified trade schools for everyone else.

Without thoughtful reconsideration, learning assessment will continue to devour a lot of money for meager results. The movement's focus on quantifying classroom experience makes it easy to shift blame for student failure wholly onto universities, ignoring deeper socio-economic reasons that cause many students to struggle with college-level work. Worse, when the effort to reduce learning to a list of job-ready skills goes too far, it misses the point of a university education.

The regional accrediting agencies that certify the quality of education an institution provides — and its fitness to receive federal student financial aid — now require some form of student learning assessment. That means most American colleges and universities have to do it. According to a recent survey, schools deploy an average of four methods for evaluating learning, which include testing software and rubrics to standardize examinations, e-portfolio platforms to display student projects, surveys and other tools.

No intellectual characteristic is too ineffable for assessment. Some schools use lengthy surveys like the California Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory, which claims to test for qualities like “truthseeking” and “analyticity.” The Global Perspective Inventory, administered and sold by Iowa State University, asks students to rate their agreement with statements like “I do not feel threatened emotionally when presented with multiple perspectives” and scores them on metrics like the “intrapersonal affect scale.”

Surveys can't tell you everything. So universities assemble committees of faculty members, arm them with rubrics and assign them piles of student essays culled from across the school (often called “student products,” as if they are tubes of undergraduate Soy lent Green). Assessment has invaded the classroom, too: On many campuses, faculty must include a list of skills-based “learning outcomes” on every syllabus and assess them throughout the semester.

All this assessing requires a lot of labor, time and cash. Yet even its proponents have struggled to produce much evidence — beyond occasional anecdotes — that it improves student learning. “I think assessment practices are ripe for re-examining,” said David Eubanks, assistant vice president for assessment and institutional effectiveness at Furman University in Greenville,

S.C., who has worked in assessment for years and now speaks out about its problems. “It has forced academic departments to use data that’s not very good,” he added. “And the process of getting this data that’s not very good can be very painful.”

The push to quantify undergraduate learning is about a century old, but the movement really took off in the 1980s. The assessment boom coincided — not, I think, by accident — with the decision of state legislatures all over the country to reduce spending on public universities and other social services. That divestment continued, moving more of the cost of higher education onto students. (These students are often graduates of underfunded high schools that can’t prepare them for college in the first place.) It was politically convenient to hold universities accountable for all this, rather than to scrutinize neoliberal austerity measures.

In 2006, the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, convened by Margaret Spellings, the secretary of education at the time, issued a scathing critique of American higher education. “Employers report repeatedly that many new graduates they hire are not prepared to work, lacking the critical thinking, writing and problem-solving skills needed in today’s workplaces,” the Spellings Commission report complained.

Educators scrambled to ensure that students graduate with these skills — and to prove it with data. The obsession with testing that dominates primary education invaded universities, bringing with it a large support staff. Here is the first irony of learning assessment: Faced with outrage over the high cost of higher education, universities responded by encouraging expensive administrative bloat.

Many of the professionals who work in learning assessment are former faculty members who care deeply about access to quality education. Pat Hutchings, a senior scholar at the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (and former English professor), told me that “good assessment begins with real, genuine questions that educators have about their students, and right now for many educators those are questions about equity. We’re doing pretty well with 18- to 22-year-olds from upper-middle-class families, but what about — well, fill in the blank.”

It seems that the pressure to assess student learning outcomes has grown most quickly at poorly funded regional universities that have absorbed a large proportion of financially disadvantaged students, where profound deficits in preparation and resources hamper achievement. Research indicates that the more selective a university, the less likely it is to embrace assessment. Learning outcomes assessment has become one way to answer the question, “If you get unprepared students in your class and they don’t do well, how does that get explained?” Mr. Eubanks at Furman University told me.

When Erik Gilbert, a professor of history at Arkansas State University, reached the end of his World Civilization course last fall, he dutifully imposed the required assessment: an extra question on the final exam that asked students to read a document about Samurai culture and answer questions using knowledge of Japanese history. Yet his course focused on “cross-cultural connections, trade, travel, empire, migration and bigger-scale questions, rather than area studies,” Mr. Gilbert told me. His students had not studied Japanese domestic history. “We do it this way because it satisfies what the assessment office wants, not because it addresses concerns that we as a department have.”

Mr. Gilbert became an outspoken assessment skeptic after years of watching the process fail to capture what happens in his classes — and seeing it miss the real reasons students struggle. “Maybe all your students have full-time jobs, but that’s something you can’t fix, even though that’s really the core problem,” he said. “Instead, you’re expected to find some small problem, like students don’t understand historical chronology, so you might add a reading to address that. You’re supposed to make something up every semester, then write up a narrative” explaining your solution to administrators.

Here is the second irony: Learning assessment has not spurred discussion of the deep structural problems that send so many students to college unprepared to succeed. Instead, it lets politicians and accreditors ignore these problems as long as bureaucratic mechanisms appear to be holding someone — usually faculty — accountable for student performance.

All professors could benefit from serious conversations about what is and is

not working in their classes. But instead they end up preoccupied with feeding the bureaucratic beast. “It’s a bit like the old Soviet Union. You speak two languages,” said Frank Furedi, an emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Kent in Britain, which has a booming assessment culture. “You do a performance for the sake of the auditors, but in reality, you carry on.”

Yet bureaucratic jargon subtly shapes the expectations of students and teachers alike. On the first day of class, my colleagues and I — especially in the humanities, where professors are perpetually anxious about falling enrollment — find ourselves rattling off the skills our courses offer (“Critical thinking! Clear writing!”), hyping our products like Apple Store clerks.

I teach intellectual history. Of course that includes skills: learning to read a historical source, interpret evidence and build an argument. But cultivating historical consciousness is more than that: It means helping students immerse themselves in a body of knowledge, question assumptions about memory and orient themselves toward current events in a new way.

If we describe college courses as mainly delivery mechanisms for skills to please a future employer, if we imply that history, literature and linguistics are more or less interchangeable “content” that convey the same mental tools, we oversimplify the intellectual complexity that makes a university education worthwhile in the first place. We end up using the language of the capitalist marketplace and speak to our students as customers rather than fellow thinkers. They deserve better.

“When kids come from backgrounds where they’re the first in their families to go to college, we have to take them seriously, and not flatter them and give them third-rate ideas,” Mr. Furedi told me. “They need to be challenged and inspired by the idea of our disciplines.” Assessment culture is dumbing down universities, he said: “One of the horrible things is that many universities think that giving access to nontraditional students means turning a university into a high school. That’s not giving them access to higher education.”

Here is the third irony: The value of universities to a capitalist society depends on their ability to resist capitalism, to carve out space for intellectual

endeavors that don't have obvious metrics or market value.

Consider that holy grail of learning outcomes, critical thinking — what the philosopher John Dewey called the ability “to maintain the state of doubt and to carry on systematic and protracted inquiry.” Teaching it is not a cheap or efficient process. It does not come from trying to educate the most students at the lowest possible cost or from emphasizing short, quantifiable, standardized assignments at the expense of meandering, creative and difficult investigation.

Producing thoughtful, talented graduates is not a matter of focusing on market-ready skills. It's about giving students an opportunity that most of them will never have again in their lives: the chance for serious exploration of complicated intellectual problems, the gift of time in an institution where curiosity and discovery are the source of meaning.

That's how we produce the critical thinkers American employers want to hire. And there's just no app for that.

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