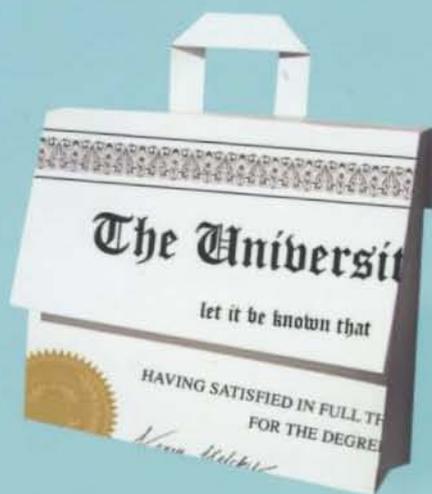


"If you want unvarnished straight talk about the academic job market—and how to navigate it—then heed Karen Kelsky, and heed her now."

—REBECCA SCHUMAN, EDUCATION COLUMNIST FOR SLATE

THE PROFESSOR IS IN



THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO
TURNING YOUR PH.D. INTO A JOB

KAREN KELSKY, PH.D.

PART I

DARK TIMES IN THE ACADEMY

ONE

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The End of an Era

It's a balmy fall evening in Eugene, Oregon. The air is soft, the setting sun glows, and the leaves shimmer in shades of red, yellow, and orange. A murmur of voices blends with the clink of glasses as a crowd of professors, staff, and graduate students gathers on the spacious deck of a senior faculty member's elegant house. It is a retirement party. A longtime professor is bidding good-bye after twenty-five years at the University of Oregon. The ceremony unfolds as the professor and his colleagues regale the assembled crowd with stories of the students he taught, the programs he built, the family he raised, and the pleasures of his years of sabbatical travel. One of the resident faculty eccentrics (decked out in mauve velvet beret and dashing smoking jacket) laughingly recalls the professor's fierce affection for white-water rafting, and the many, many faculty meetings missed as a result.

As they talk, I pause to ponder the event through the eyes of the graduate students in the crowd. It looks beautiful and soothing, a vision of a career and a life lived at a peaceful, gracious pace, filled with teaching and leisure, colleagues and family. I wonder if they know that the life being feted here this evening is already a relic of the past. I suspect they do not. I suspect that they come to this party, and others like it, mingle in the lovely faculty home, drink the wine, eat the food, hear the stories, and believe that this, too, will someday be theirs.

Nobody will tell them that they are wrong.

The American academy is in crisis. Decades of shrinking funding and shifting administrative priorities have left public universities strapped for cash and unable to sustain their basic educational mission. As state legislatures have slashed funding to their state university systems, what money remains increasingly goes to pay for bloated administrative ranks, and the expensive dorms and recreational facilities that can be used to attract students and justify skyrocketing tuition dollars. A few facts and figures tell the story.

States spent 28 percent less per student on higher education in 2013 than they did in 2008. Eleven states have cut funding by more than one-third per student, and two states—Arizona and New Hampshire—have cut their higher education spending per student in half. Graph 1, from a 2014 report by the Center on Policy and Budget Priorities, illustrates.¹

To compensate for declining state funding, public colleges and universities across the country have drastically raised tuition. Tuition growth has outpaced inflation for the past thirty years. Annual inflation-adjusted tuition at four-year public colleges grew by \$1,850, or 27 percent, between 2008 and 2014, with states such as Arizona and California increasing tuition at four-year schools more than 70 percent. Graph 2 from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities demonstrates.

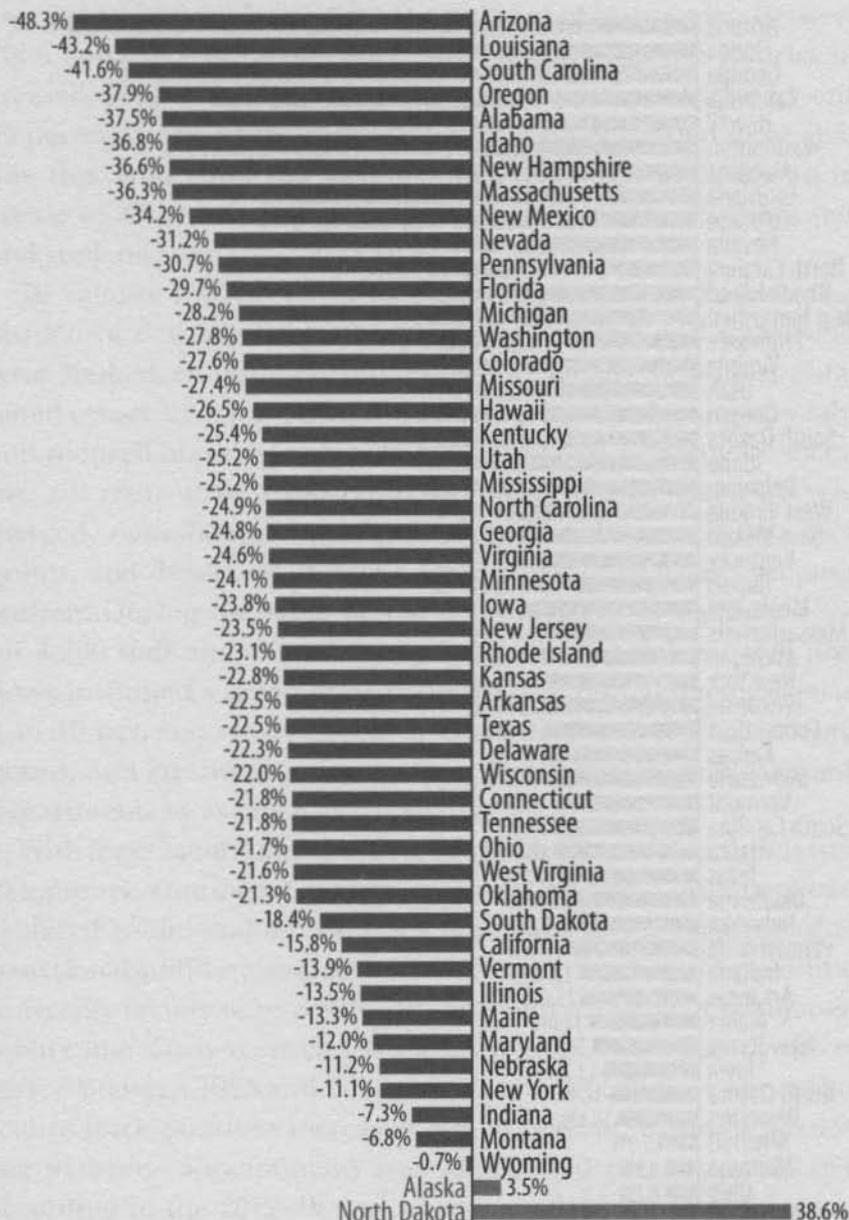
According to the *Wall Street Journal*, in 1975, a University of Minnesota undergraduate could cover tuition by working six hours a week year-round at a minimum-wage job. Today, a student would have to work thirty-two hours a week—close to full-time—to cover the cost.²

The result of these hikes to tuition is escalating student debt. The Institute for College Access and Success reported that 71 percent of the class of 2012 had debt at graduation, and the average debt of \$29,400 was up 25 percent compared to 2008 figures.³ Currently student debt in America totals approximately \$1 trillion, and default rates on these loans have climbed for six straight years.

Astoundingly, in the midst of this crisis, universities have chosen to vastly increase hires at the highest end of the pay scale—university administrators such as deans, provosts, and the like. According to

Graph 1: State Funding for Higher Education Remains Far Below Pre-Recession Levels in Most States

Percent change in state spending per student, inflation adjusted, FY08-FY14*

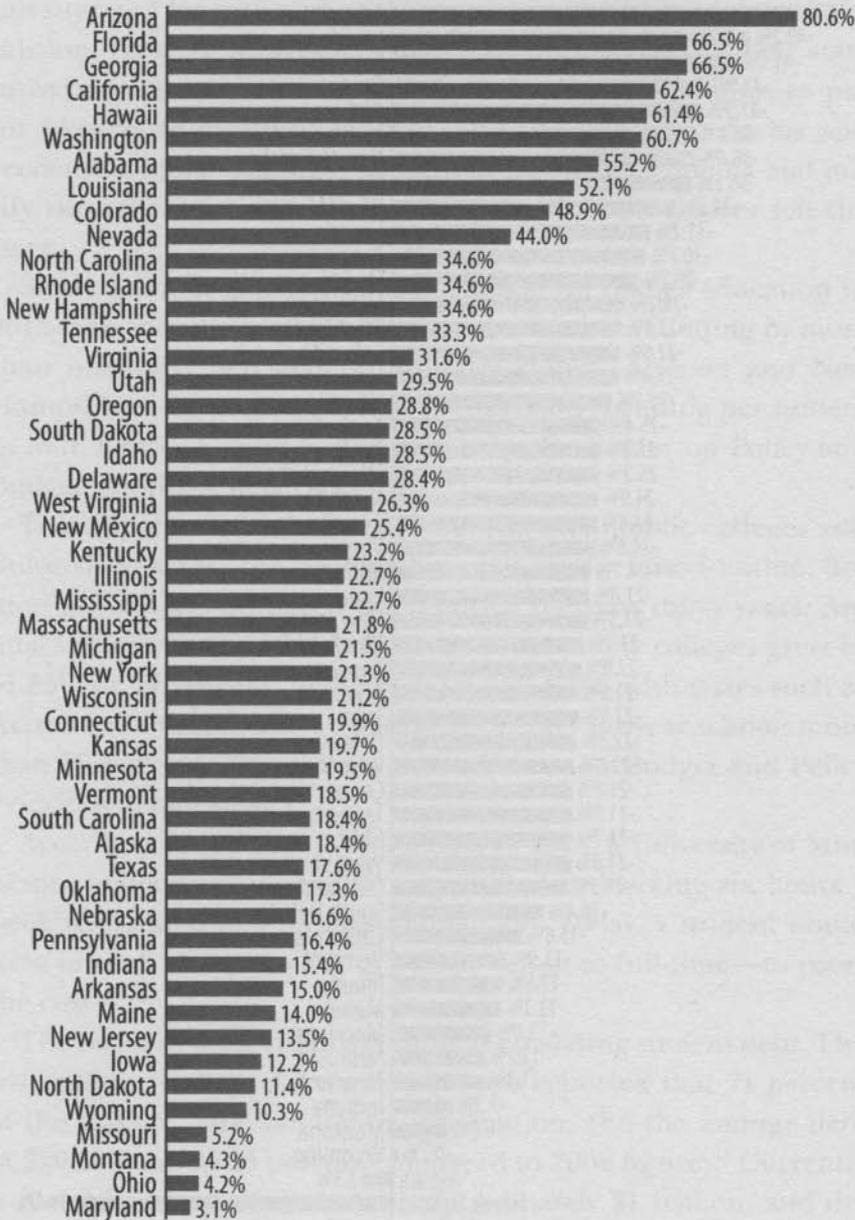


*FY=Fiscal year

Source: CBPP calculations using data from Illinois State University's annual Grapevine Report and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. Illinois funding data is provided by the Fiscal Policy Center at Voices for Illinois Children. Because enrollment data is only available through the 2013 school year, enrollment for the 2013-14 school year is estimated using data from past years.

Graph 2: Tuition Has Increased Sharply at Public Colleges and Universities

Percent change in average tuition at public, four-year colleges, inflation adjusted, FY08-FY14*



*FY=Fiscal year

Source: College Board, "Trends in College Pricing," 2013

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities | cbpp.org

the U.S. Department of Education, between 2001 and 2011, the number of administrators hired by colleges and universities increased 50 percent faster than the number of instructors. Between 2008 and 2012, university spending on administrator salaries increased 61 percent, while spending on students increased only 39 percent.⁴ The University of Minnesota system added more than one thousand administrators between 2001 and 2012, for an increase of 37 percent, two times the growth of both teaching staff and student body.⁵

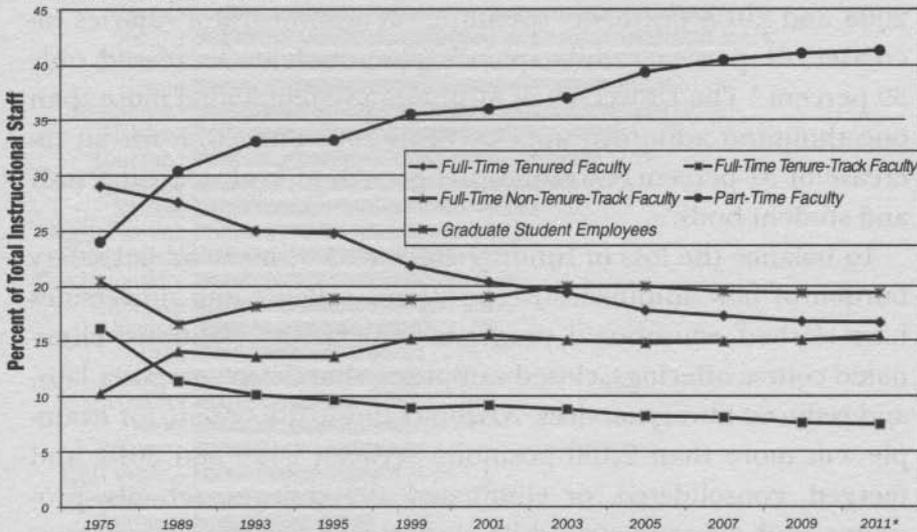
To balance the loss of funding combined with the added salary burden of new administrative positions, colleges and universities have slashed educational programs, cut faculty positions, eliminated course offerings, closed campuses, shut down computer labs, and reduced library services. Arizona's university system, for example, cut more than 2,100 positions between 2008 and 2013, and merged, consolidated, or eliminated 182 colleges, schools, programs, and departments, while closing eight extension campuses entirely. During the same period the University of California laid off 4,200 staff and eliminated or left unfilled another 9,500 positions; instituted a system-wide furlough program, reducing salaries 4 to 10 percent; consolidated or eliminated more than 180 programs; and cut funding for campus administrative and academic departments by as much as 35 percent.⁶

With fewer faculty and more students, who is teaching the classes? Temporary, contingent faculty known as adjuncts. Adjuncts have replaced traditional tenure track professors as the majority of instructional staff on campuses: in 2013 approximately 75 percent of university faculty were contingent and only 25 percent permanent tenure line. Forty years ago, these proportions were exactly the reverse.⁷ Between 1975 and 2011, the number of full-time tenured or tenure track positions increased just 23 percent, to about 310,000, but part-time appointments rose almost 300 percent to 762,000, according to the 2012-13 annual report of the American Association of University Professors.⁸ Graph 3 from the AAUP shows the shift.

Adjuncts, who are also sometimes called instructors, lecturers, teaching professors, teaching postdocs, or visiting assistant

Graph 3: Trends in Instructional Staff Employment Status, 1975-2011

All Institutions, National Totals



Notes: Figures for 2011 are estimated. Figures from 2005 have been corrected from those published in 2012. Figures are for degree-granting institutions only, but the precise category of institutions included has changed over time. Graduate student employee figure for 1975 is from 1976. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: US Department of Education, IPEDS Fall Staff Survey.

professors, often have Ph.D.'s and scholarly records equivalent to those on the tenure track, and teach the same classes. However, they are paid a fraction of the salary. Where a tenure line faculty member in 2014 could expect to earn an average salary (encompassing all ranks) of close to \$102,000 at doctoral institutions, and \$75,317 at liberal arts colleges, an adjunct was likely to be paid a mere \$1,800 to \$2,700 per course for a maximum annual salary of around \$23,000 per year.⁹ When the hours of required work are factored in, adjuncts' hourly take-home pay of about \$9 is less than that earned by a typical Walmart worker. Seventy-nine percent of adjuncts do not receive health insurance at work, and 86 percent do not receive retirement benefits.¹⁰ Adjuncts at institutions of every rank often qualify for welfare and food stamps. The number of people with advanced degrees receiving public assistance more than doubled between 2007 and 2010, from 111,458 to 272,684. *Washington Post* writer Coleman McCarthy wrote of the "hordes of adjuncts" who "slog like migrant workers from campus to campus."

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“Teaching four fall and four spring courses at \$2,700 each,” he continued, “generates an annual salary of \$21,600, below the national poverty line for a family of four.”¹¹ As the *Los Angeles Times* recently observed, “The lives of many adjunct professors are ones of Dickensian misery.”¹²

Added to this financial struggle is the escalating student debt borne by those with advanced degrees. Graduate student debt is the fastest growing type of student debt, and graduate students now owe an average of \$57,600. One in four graduate students owes almost \$100,000.¹³

Adjuncts also lack access to the basic resources and tools of university teaching, such as an office, a phone line, a library card, or even photocopying privileges. They are typically told of their teaching assignment just days or weeks before the first day of class, and must scramble to prepare. When adjuncts arrive on campus, 94 percent receive no campus or department orientation.¹⁴ Despite their qualifications, skills, and dedication, adjuncts cannot manage, with their impoverished resources and precarious employment status, to provide a quality of student experience equivalent to that provided by professors with job security and full access to university resources.

As tenure track faculty member turned adjunct Alice Ueber (a pseudonym) wrote in her *Chronicle of Higher Education* column “I Used to Be a Good Teacher”: “I’m not suggesting that adjuncts are poorer teachers than tenure-track professors (except in the fiscal sense), only that the very limited institutional support so many of us receive undermines our teaching; at least it has mine. No matter how dedicated I am to my teaching or how hard I work, I simply can’t do for students as an adjunct what I could when I was an integral part of a department and a university.”

She elaborated on how adjunct teaching falls short, hampered by isolation and exclusion. While adjunct professors usually bring great passion and dedication to their work, the lack of institutional inclusion means that they have little knowledge of, or impact on, the integrated curriculum that is supposed to govern the content and sequence of courses in a major. “I teach in a vacuum,” she explained. “While I’m assigned classes and (sometimes) given course

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outlines or sample syllabi, after that initial exchange of information, I teach my courses in almost total isolation. In my previous job, one of the first things I learned was how the sequence of required courses in the major fit together to create a foundation, continuity, and a discipline-specific education for our majors. That I ever possessed such knowledge now seems like such a luxury to me."¹⁵

In order to survive, adjuncts usually must cobble together a set of courses at several different universities, driving frantically across the city or state to assemble a piecemeal income from three or four different campuses. Called "freeway flyers," they have no time or space to conduct the research necessary to keep their courses vibrant and demanding, to meet with students, or to publish the kind of work that is required to get a permanent position and leave behind adjuncting once and for all.

Students (and their tuition-paying parents), of course, have no ability to discern the difference between a tenure line and an adjunct professor. To students and parents, they are both "professors." The adjunctification of the university has flourished as an open secret, hollowing out the university education even as the costs of that education have skyrocketed.

The cost of adjunctification for undergraduate students may be hidden, but the costs for those earning Ph.D.'s are anything but. Adjunctification has openly decimated the career prospects of new Ph.D.'s, particularly in the traditional humanities and social sciences, where nonacademic uses of advanced degrees are still relatively unusual. Thousands of Ph.D.'s emerge onto the tenure track job market each year, expecting to find permanent and secure tenure line work at a university commensurate with their years of advanced training, only to discover that there is almost no such work to be had.

In some corners of a field such as English, a single job opening can draw nine hundred to one thousand applications. In less overcrowded fields, the number may be closer to three hundred to five hundred. In all fields, candidates grow increasingly desperate. They stay on the job market for years, eking out a living by adjuncting. They quickly become enmeshed in a self-destructive adjunct

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cycle—adjuncting to make ends meet while searching for a tenure track job, but unable to research and publish enough to compete for a tenure track job due to the time demands of adjuncting.

The tenure track job market in recent years has been likened to a lottery system, a Ponzi scheme, the Hunger Games, and a drug gang.¹⁶ In response to this state of affairs, increasing numbers of adjuncts are organizing in advocacy groups such as New Faculty Majority, Adjunct Action, and Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL).¹⁷ Because agitation for better working conditions can lead to the immediate dismissal of individual adjuncts, they have also begun to unionize. Adjuncts and other contingent faculty have successfully unionized at American University and Georgetown, among other institutions, and have been incorporated into faculty unions at the University of Oregon and a few other places.¹⁸ Progress, however, has been slow, for reasons I'll discuss in chapter 2.¹⁹ In all cases, the universities have fought these efforts. Northeastern University retained one of the country's most aggressive antiunion law firms to fight adjuncts' unionization efforts there.²⁰

Despite these upheavals, most ranking graduate programs still consider any Ph.D. who doesn't land a tenure track job a failure or an aberration. "Doctoral education in the humanities socializes idealistic, naïve, and psychologically vulnerable people into a profession with a very clear set of values," critic and columnist William Pannacker wrote. "It teaches them that life outside of academe means failure, which explains the large numbers of graduates who labor for decades as adjuncts, just so they can stay on the periphery of academe."²¹

Graduate students absorb this value system and judge themselves harshly. Adjuncts and those who can't find tenure track positions suffer not just from debt and poverty, but debilitating feelings of shame and failure. As Robert Oprisko observed, "A substantial and deeply meaningful of your core identity is tied to your profession [and] losing your position represents the death of your identity, the annihilation of your self. Your identity is contingent not on publishing or getting high marks in teaching. . . . It is contingent on

being employed, which is beyond your power to control.”²² Rebecca Schuman calls not getting a tenure track job a “cataclysmic, total failure.”²³

Many tenured faculty advisors in the departments that produce all of these Ph.D.’s maintain a studied silence on the question of, in Oprisko’s words, “being employed.” Rare is the advisor or department that acknowledges the employment needs of their Ph.D.’s. or provides hands-on training in the tactical professionalization graduate students need to either compete for scarce positions, or retool themselves for nonacademic work.

That is where this book comes in.

The Professor Is In: The Essential Guide to Turning Your Ph.D. into a Job reveals the unspoken norms and expectations of the job market so that graduate students, Ph.D.’s, and adjuncts can grasp exactly what is required in the tenure track job search, and accurately weigh both their chances of success and the risks of continuing to try.

With this book I hope to empower you, whether you’re a current or future Ph.D. job seeker, to understand how the job market works, make informed choices about your career, and protect your financial security and mental health.