

Sample FACE Editorial

Face Facts: An Investment in Higher Education Makes Sense

by James K. Dowd

For the past 16 years, Dr. Laura Escutia has worked as a part-time English instructor in the state's community college system. Her part-time status is neither her choice nor a reflection of her work hours and professional skills. Escutia, who has a doctorate in English from the University of Washington, teaches the equivalent of a full-time course load. She also earns some of the highest evaluations on campus for her classes. Because she is categorized as a part-time worker, however, Escutia is paid almost 30 percent less than she would earn as a full-time faculty member. While she serves on numerous college committees, she has to meet with students during her free time and without access to any office space. Her salary barely covers her rent and—lacking healthcare coverage—she lives in fear that one of her children will get sick.

Escutia's story is becoming a norm in our system of higher education, which is why this week has been established as Campus Equity Week to call attention to the growing use and exploitation of part-time faculty. Today, more than 70 percent of college and university instructors are part-time or temporary employees. It's a troubling benchmark. After two decades of replacing full-time faculty positions with temporary or part-time slots, higher education is now one of the most extreme examples of a workforce with decreasing job security and benefits.

Even for institutions that want to do the right thing, the problem is compounded by dwindling state support for public colleges and universities, and by the eroding purchasing power of federal student aid grants. Meanwhile, sharp increases in tuition have put a greater share of the cost burden on students and families. And, because faculty members are routinely denied the resources and professional autonomy they need to do their best work, the quality of academic services is also being put at risk. It all amounts to a perfect storm brewing right here in our state.

Fortunately, a thoughtful means of averting the crisis already exists. The American Federation of Teachers has launched a new campaign, the Faculty and College Excellence (FACE) Campaign. As part of this campaign, legislation has been introduced around the country to invest in full-time tenure-track faculty positions on college and university campuses, and to provide the equity in compensation, respect and professional support all professors need in order to serve their students. Anyone who cares about our students and our colleges should support these measures. After all, treating higher education faculty members unfairly puts instruction and student learning in serious jeopardy. That is not something our state can afford.

The author is president of the Golden Federation of Teachers (GFT). The GFT represents more than 9,000 faculty members—including 3,000 part-time and adjunct professors.