

ABOVE THE LAW

LAW SCHOOLS

Law Schools Should Hire More Adjunct Professors

Part-time adjunct professors are often more likely to teach law students the skills they need to succeed after graduation.

By JORDAN ROTHMAN

This website and a number of other legal news outlets have criticized legal academia over the years. Indeed, most lawyers understand that many law professors have little practical training, and do not prepare law students for life after graduation. In addition, most legal scholarship has no practical impact on the legal profession.

I have a great deal of respect for full-time law school faculty, and many law professors have provided me with positive feedback since I started writing for Above the Law. Furthermore, a number of full-time faculty at the law schools I attended had a profound impact on my life. Nevertheless, it is difficult to argue that many full-time law school professors adequately prepare students for life after law school.

On the other hand, part-time adjunct professors are often more likely to teach law students the skills they need to succeed after graduation, since these professors usually have “day jobs” within the legal profession. In addition, adjunct professors are often paid modest sums of money to teach law school classes. It seems that one of the ways for law schools to help prepare students after graduation, and to decrease costs, would be to hire more adjunct professors.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of adjunct professors is that they usually have much more practical experience than full-time law school faculty. This can be extremely helpful to law students, since adjunct professors are much more likely to import practical knowledge on students than tenured faculty. Many full-time law professors only spent a small portion of their careers a long time ago as practicing attorneys. As a result, they usually have no idea how the rules they are teaching could have an impact on practitioners applying the principles in the field. Indeed, I remember one time, I asked one of my full-time professors if you had to attach an entire deposition transcript [to a summary judgment motion](#) or if you could pick and choose excerpts to attach. This professor had no idea what the answer was, since he had not been a practicing attorney

for decades, even though a practicing attorney would be able to easily answer this question.

Adjunct professors, on the other hand, usually have much more hands-on legal experience, and likely could answer such practical questions. Indeed, I had one practicing attorney as a wills and trusts professor, and I still remember many of the “pro tips” he provided to our class. [Every time I draft a self-proving affidavit](#), I remember his stern words to our class about the potential malpractice of not preparing this document. In addition, my legal ethics teacher was an adjunct, and I remember her telling us about some of the situations she found herself in while practicing law. Of course, some tenured law school professors also practice law, but this is rare, and being a practicing attorney is extremely helpful when teaching prospective lawyers.

Furthermore, it seems that hiring more adjunct professors would help law schools reduce costs. Adjunct professors make substantially less money than full-time professors, and indeed, one adjunct professor explained to me that her pay was barely enough to cover her parking, tolls, and gas to come to the law school twice a week to teach that class. Adjunct professors usually teach because of the prestige associated with being a law school professor, and so they have a cool story to tell at cocktail parties and the like. However, tenured professors typically make substantial sums of money. Given the student debt crisis in this country, law schools should try their best to minimize costs, and hiring more adjunct professors could be one way to achieve this objective.

Of course, there needs to be some full-time professors at law schools. Tenured professors are usually more reliable than adjunct professors, although every time I hear a story about a full-time professor reusing exam questions, I second-guess this proposition! Also, adjunct professors typically have a difficult time working during the day, so unless a law school has a number of night classes (like my alma mater) it might be difficult to have too many adjunct professors. However, two of the biggest problems with law school is that it costs too much money to obtain a legal degree and that law students do not learn how to be practicing attorneys. Hiring more adjuncts could solve both problems at once.

In the end, law schools have little incentive to hire more adjuncts, even though these institutions could realize a number of benefits. Law schools are run by legal scholars, who usually take care of their own. In addition, a number of law school rankings focus on student-to-faculty ratios, and adjunct professors do not typically count for this metric. So long as law schools chase prestige, they will likely never increase the amount of adjunct professors they have on campus and decrease the number of full-time positions.

I am sure I will receive a lot of emails from law professors about this article, and with the summer recess, professors likely have even more time than usual to send me emails! I welcome any feedback from members of legal academia about this article or others, and frankly, some of the most thoughtful opinions I receive come from law professors. In any case, if law schools were truly intent on bettering the student

experience, they would increase the number of adjunct professors teaching at their schools. Law schools should help prepare students to become practicing attorneys and should cost as little as possible. Hiring more adjunct professors could help law schools achieve both of these goals.

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