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Bargaining Faculty Salaries in Hard Times

California Faculty Association¹

Introduction

Like faculty at many institutions throughout the country, those on the 23 campuses of the California State University (CSU) suffered significant economic hardship during the recession years.

Just before the recession hit, however, the economic future of CSU faculty looked bright. In spring of 2007, the faculty and administration had agreed to an exceptionally good economic settlement for faculty that included salary increases of 20% for all faculty over the next four years, as well as 10% in step increases for significant numbers of faculty, and \$14 million in raises for other salary programs.

But, by the following year, the recession had hit; tax revenues in the state had plummeted; and the state faced massive budget shortfalls. Ultimately, the CSU budget was slashed by a full one-third.

To prevent huge layoffs of faculty, all faculty voted in a 2009 referendum called by the California Faculty Association (CFA) to accept a furlough that effectively reduced all faculty salaries for a year by 10%. After that, the raises that had been negotiated in 2007 for the out years (AY '08-'09, '09-'10) were wiped out one-by-one due to budget cuts. Bargaining in the next few years was a dismal process that produced little economic relief.

By 2015 faculty had seen no significant salary increases since 2008. As we prepared for reopener bargaining in 2015, leaders of the CFA, which represents the 27,000 instructional faculty, counselors, librarians, and coaches in the CSU, knew that faculty were suffering economically as a result of the furlough and the salary stagnation that had followed. And we knew that faculty were angry, demoralized, and insistent that we negotiate a decent agreement.

¹ The California Faculty Association (CFA), represents the 27,000 instructional faculty, counselors, librarians, and coaches who work on the 23 campuses of the California State University system. This paper is a collaborative work by members of the California Faculty Association, all of whom are faculty of the California State University system. Inquiries may be directed to Susan Meisenhelder at smeisenhelder@calfac.org.

We also knew that we had some special challenges in bargaining meaningful salary increases in what were still considered to be hard times.

The CSU budget had still not fully recovered from recession cuts, and students had faced a series of huge tuition increases over several years to partially make up the shortfall. Reports of hard times for workers throughout the state were still common in the news; and stories about the withering of the middle-class were widespread.

To top it off, the administration was already arguing that there simply wasn't enough money to pay faculty the kind of raises most faculty thought were fair after so many hard years. The only "solution," they argued, would be to raise tuition even more to pay for them.

We knew we had to make a strong case to system administrators, to the elected leaders of the state, to the media, to students, and to the broader public if we were to make any headway in restoring faculty salaries. We made that case in a series of four papers titled "Race to the Bottom" that we released during 2015.²

The road to settlement during this round of negotiations between the CFA and the CSU administration was no straight path, but reframing how we talked about faculty salaries was, we believe, a critical early step that set us off in the right direction.

While every bargaining situation is different in important ways, we believe the approach we took may help other faculty unions communicate more effectively about faculty salaries at the bargaining table and with the public.

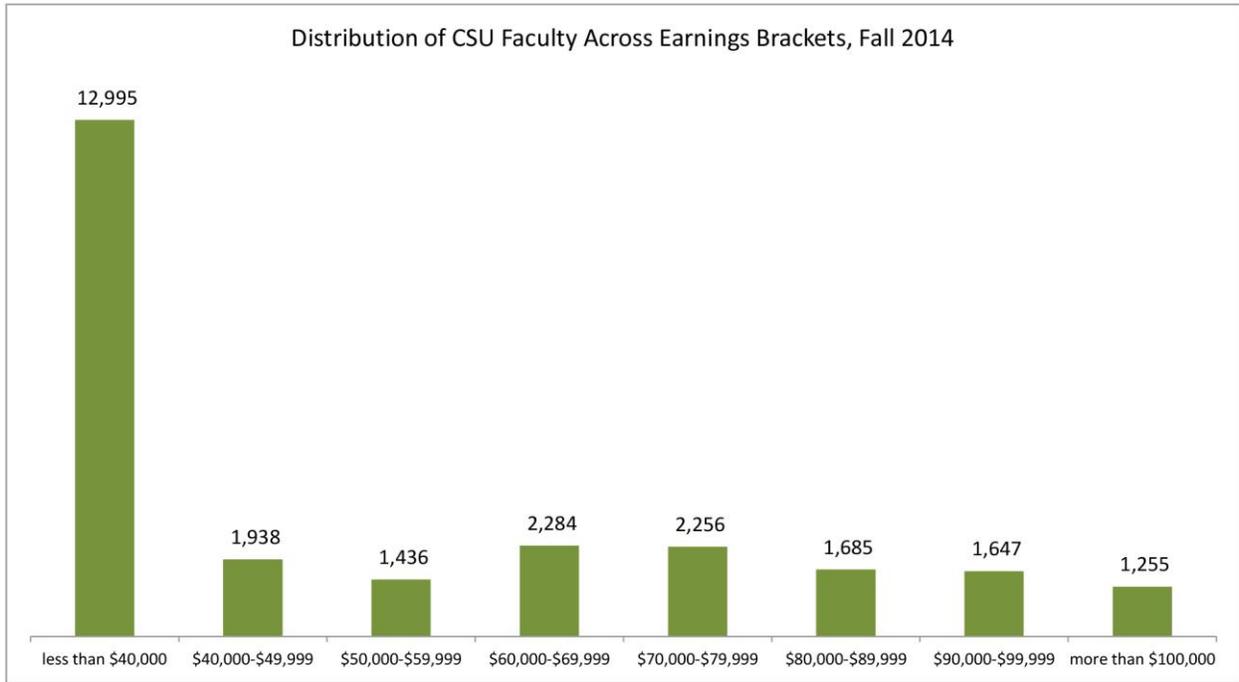
The Realities of CSU Faculty Salaries

We started by examining the widespread assumption that faculty—as professionals like doctors and lawyers, after all—make handsome salaries. This assumption was often reinforced by the administration's focus on the faculty salary schedule and the average base salary figures for faculty at the various tenure-line ranks.

The salary schedule certainly looked respectable. Rarely mentioned, however, were two key facts: thousands of poorly paid faculty weren't on that schedule because they were on contingent appointments; and very few faculty were in the upper levels of what looked like a handsome full-professor salary range.

² All facts, graphics, and faculty testimonials in this work are drawn from the "Race to the Bottom" paper series published by CFA. Links to the papers as well as related news articles and campaign activities can be found in References.

To get at the economic realities of faculty’s lives, we decided, instead, to focus on what faculty were actually earning.



Since about half of all instructional faculty are on part-time contracts and the average appointment is for roughly half-time, we were not surprised to find that the **earnings** of CSU faculty were far less than “base salary” numbers often quoted for CSU faculty. In fact, in 2014 CSU faculty were, on average, taking home \$45,000 per year in pay before taxes and other deductions. More than 50 percent of CSU faculty were making less than \$38,000 in gross earnings per year. The histogram below shows the distribution of CSU faculty earnings and graphically challenges the common but false assumptions about what professors earn.

While many part-time faculty in the CSU do work other jobs, many do not and have to pay full-time bills with part-time salaries. Even if all faculty had been working on full-time contracts, the average salary for CSU faculty would only have been \$63,000 in the fall of 2014. Half of all CSU faculty would still have had a salary of \$55,000 per year or less.

We then compared these numbers to the average salaries in California for other jobs, none of which requires an advanced degree:

- Firefighter \$125,000
- Police Officer \$97,500
- Nurse \$87,480
- Car sales Rep \$79,000
- Accountant \$75,870

- K-12 Teacher \$73,396
- Truck Driver \$55,000

Looking at faculty pay from this perspective got people's attention.

What Had Happened to CSU Faculty Salaries Over Time?

Our next step was to look at what had happened to faculty salaries over time. What we found was that, like that of so many other Americans, CSU faculty salaries over the ten-year period between 2004 and 2014 had not only failed to improve but had not even kept pace with inflation.

On average faculty lost ground to inflation on every one of the 23 campuses in the CSU, ranging from a loss of purchasing power of \$7, 114 at San Diego State to more than \$13,796 at Chico State. The percentage cuts were also sobering--CSU faculty members teaching at Chico, for instance, had experienced the equivalent of a 15.5% pay **cut** over the past 10 years.

Putting Faculty Loss of Purchasing Power in Context

While this data went a long way toward explaining why faculty were feeling so financially strapped after years of no raises, one early response was that faculty were simply experiencing what everyone was. In California particularly, the argument went, such a situation—however unfortunate—was unavoidable, given the budget cuts the state had experienced.

We knew we had to tackle this misconception. One way we did so was to look at what had happened to system-wide expenditures on faculty between 2004 and 2014. What we found surprised even us: In good times and bad, when state funding was up and when it was down, when tuition was raised and when it wasn't, overall expenditures on faculty salaries had remained essentially flat.

There was simply no causal relationship between the CSU's net operating budget and expenditures on faculty salaries.

Comparisons to Faculty Salaries in Other California Education Segments

To examine the degree to which budget woes were at the root of faculty salary stagnation, we looked at what had happened to other employees' salaries over the same decade. If budgets were the reason for faculty salary problems, we should see similar patterns with other California employees. But we didn't.

When we compared changes in CSU faculty salaries to those in the University of California (UC) and the Community Colleges between 2004 and 2014, the CSU stood out—and not in a good way. In fact, of all segments of public education in California, the CSU was the only one where faculty salaries have been consistently losing ground.

For example, the UC had been hit with cuts similar in magnitude to the CSU between 2004 and 2014. If California-specific economic and budgetary conditions determined growth or decline in faculty salaries, one would expect UC faculty salaries to mirror the decline of those in the CSU in real dollars. But that was not the case.

In fact, every single UC campus saw a “real dollar” increase in its average faculty salary between 2004 and 2014, ranging from \$2,226 at UC Riverside to \$17,890 at UC San Francisco. In stark contrast, faculty at all CSU campuses experienced a loss in average salary purchasing power over the same period.

Data we collected showed that community college districts and K-12 districts had also done a much better job improving faculty salaries in many cases and protecting them from the erosion caused by inflation in others.

Comparison to CSU Manager/Supervisor Salaries

Changes in CSU managerial salaries over the last decade were also instructive. Just as managerial positions had increased in the CSU during this time, so did the average managerial salary—and at a faster rate than the average faculty salary. While the average full-time faculty salary increased by only 10% over the last decade before adjusting for inflation, the average salary for managers and supervisors increased by 24%.

These differential changes resulted in a widening gap between the salaries of faculty and administrators between 2004 and 2014. By the year 2014, the average full-time salary for a CSU manager/supervisor was \$106,149 per year while the average full-time salary for a CSU faculty member was \$64,479.

The standout campus was Humboldt, where the average faculty salary had only increased by a shocking 1% while the average manager/supervisor salary had increased by 42%.

Comparison to Campus Presidents’ Salaries

It was not news in 2015 that CSU Presidents had received some very hefty raises over the previous decade. The issue had been covered regularly in the news media; it had been the subject

of considerable public outrage from elected leaders; and it had been the impetus of numerous student demonstrations.

What was news—and surprising news—was the cumulative effect of those individual salary bumps and the widening gap between Presidential salary increases and those of faculty.

In what was now a familiar pattern, CSU presidential raises were significantly larger than increases in the average CSU faculty salary. System-wide, the average faculty salary only increased by 10% while the average campus president salary rose by 36%. The gap between campus president's pay and average faculty salary widened on every one of the 23 CSU campuses.

Changes in percentage are instructive, but they can actually understate the magnitude of the widening gap in actual salaries between campus presidents and CSU faculty between 2004 and 2014.

System-wide, the gap between average faculty salary and average campus president's salary widened by over \$30,000 in real dollars, more than many faculty were taking home as they were quick to tell us. The gap was most dramatic at Fullerton, where the chasm grew by over \$68,000.

These numbers helped us show that a decent raise for faculty was neither selfish nor unreasonable—other faculty in the state and, in fact, other staff in the university were seeing their salaries increase or at least hold steady against inflation.

What Salary Stagnation Meant for Faculty's Lives

The number-crunching on actual earnings, losses in purchasing power, and comparisons with other groups that we did in our first two papers laid an important foundation for discussions about the need for raises for CSU faculty. But a critically important piece also involved relating real-life stories from faculty about what their specific economic situations meant for their lives.

To get a feel for the actual experiences of faculty we sent out a survey to all faculty for whom we had email addresses. We also distributed it through every electronic forum used by faculty that we could access. The result was that over 5,500 faculty members responded during the period of February 6 to March 16, 2015.

Faculty were asked questions about their economic situations and were also given the opportunity to add written comments about their personal experiences. One indicator of the intensity of faculty feeling about salaries at this time was the fact that over 2600 actually took the

time to make extended comments; more than 800 were willing to have their comments made public and to be contacted for further interviews.

Both the quantitative and the qualitative data from this survey revealed significant economic precariousness in the lives of many CSU faculty. From these responses (and from the salary data provided in our first paper), it was undeniable that significant numbers of faculty teaching in the CSU at that time were among California's "working poor." Many others were financially hanging on by a thread.

The survey results also underscored an important fact: contrary to the popular image of the college professor, the economic position of many CSU faculty was anything but securely middle class.

Since most people think about their finances in terms of their take-home pay per month and must pay their bills out of what they take home after taxes and other deductions, our questions were framed in that context. The responses were in line with what the macro-level data had shown in our first paper:

- 95% of lecturers (mostly contingent faculty) reported taking home less than \$4,000 per month. 43% of them are taking home less than \$2,000 per month.
- 72% of Assistant Professors are taking home less than \$4,000 per month.
- 52% of Associate professors are taking home less than \$4,000 per month.
- Even at the top, 88% of full professors are taking home less than \$6,000 per month.

With take-home pay in these ranges, housing was bound to be a major challenge. According to a recent report, the median house in California were listing at a price of \$425,000. The median rent at that time was close to \$1,900 per month. Some areas of the state were even worse: California, it was reported, had 6 of the 7 least affordable housing markets for middle class homebuyers and 10 of the 20 least affordable rental markets in the U.S.

Given these facts, the survey results on housing were no surprise:

- 43% of the responding CSU faculty said their income level had been an impediment to purchasing a home.
- 60% reported that they couldn't afford housing in the community where their campus was located. In their comments, faculty described the ways the resulting long commutes had affected both their personal lives and their time available to spend with students.

Paying for a college education—their own and their children's--was clearly another challenge. In our survey one third (34%) of the responding faculty reported having student loans for their own education. And the amounts are significant with nearly one-quarter of those respondents with student debt reporting student debt of more than \$75,000.

Paying for their children's education emerged as another worry confronting CSU faculty. A full 86% of those parents with children reported that they had been unable to save or otherwise prepare for their children's college expenses. Many expressed concern and even dismay that they might not be able to provide for their own children the education they were providing for others. As one faculty member put it,

I am married to a CSU full professor, and it's ironic that, in order to do our jobs well— be on campus to meet with students, effectively evaluate their work, etc. and to encourage them to persist in college, we have, in essence, sacrificed saving for our own children's education. We've prioritized doing our jobs well, but we haven't pursued as many outside 'moonlighting' jobs as we could have to save for our own kids' education.

The resourcefulness of faculty in their persistent efforts to meet these and other financial challenges came through in both the quantitative and the qualitative data.

For instance, 72% of all respondents reported having taken on additional work to make ends meet. Of those who had, 77% had worked off campus in employment ranging from extra teaching and consulting to jobs totally unrelated to academic credentials.¹

Living further from campus than they would like was another common strategy: 60% of our respondents reported not being able to afford to live in their own campus community. The move further from campus cut housing costs; but, as they reported in their narratives, added to stress, ate away at their personal time, and reduced the time they are available for students.

More than a fourth (27%) of the responding faculty have roommates or live with extended family to make ends meet. Other unexpected ways to cobble together housing included house-sitting, couch-surfing, living in the dorms, and renting rooms in other people's houses. However, as faculty reported, sometimes even the most inventive strategies were not enough; and the numbers just didn't add up.

In addition to relying on extended family, a shockingly high number of faculty respondents (13% overall and 1 in 5 lecturers) reported having received income-based government assistance while working in the CSU.

As responses to the survey made crystal clear, harsh economic realities had meant that the financial security which once made it possible for CSU faculty to focus on their students and their teaching had, for many, been replaced by a stressful scramble for economic survival accompanied by feelings of sadness, frustration, demoralization, and anger.

Although the numbers that emerged from our study were shocking, they did not capture the anguish expressed by faculty in their written comments. In story after story, faculty reported

details of a life very different from the California middle-class dream. A few examples here stand in for countless others we received:

I am a single mother and receive no child support or alimony. The only way I am able to survive in this career and take care of my children is through the reliance on SIGNIFICANT financial support from my retired parents!

It's impossible to save and not have to use money to repair the car or other emergencies. Been barely existing, not living, for 7-years now.

On a daily basis I have to make choices based on my income. For example, in wintertime I often do not use heating in my home, with temperatures dropping down to less than 55 degrees indoors. My vehicle is 17 years old and does not have safety features I would like to have. I live in an unsafe neighborhood because I can't afford to buy in a safer part of the town.

My salary situation has meant that (1) I cannot own a car; (2) I have had to live with roommates found on Craigslist in order to afford my rent— at the age of 45! (3) I have no savings, and approximately \$25,000 in credit card debt; and (4) during my period as probationary faculty— when I was still in my 30s —I could not even consider the possibility of having a child, as my salary would barely cover the cost of housing and day care, omitting any other expenses.

The difficulties were especially severe for the many CSU contingent faculty who were not working full time. The many pained stories such as those below that faculty told exploded the myth that most contingent faculty were “moonlighting” from their day jobs or teaching simply for pleasure.

My husband and I live in a one bedroom apartment with our young daughter. We are both working extremely hard as adjunct employees. We qualify for WIC [Women, Infants, and Children’s Supplemental Nutrition Program] and that is how we have been able to feed our child. Our situation feels hopeless.

Work three jobs just to make ends meet. Have no time for family or friends, or exercise. All money goes to bills and student loans. No savings or emergency funds.

Even though I am 54-years-old, my father contributes to my rent because he thinks that the students benefit from having me as an instructor. I teach 12 units at [CSU campus], 2 classes at a different school, and take on consulting contracts...as available. My car has 140k miles on it and is in constant need of repair. I have teenagers and no savings. The last 5-7 days of the month, I use my mother's credit card for gas and food and then pay it off after payday.

While many faculty expressed embarrassment at their situations and remained anonymous, a surprising number were willing to talk publicly about their situations. After many presentations by them to the Board of Trustees and countless interviews with the press, it was difficult to deny that many CSU faculty were locked out of the middle-class and that many more lived in fear of becoming so.

The Price Students Pay for Low Faculty Salaries

As CSU faculty knew well, the economic problems they were facing did not just affect them and their families. Students, too, were affected by the financial struggles of faculty and the agonizing choices faculty were often forced to make.

This topic was the subject of our fourth paper. Our aim was to show that with salaries as with other issues, faculty working conditions are, indeed, student learning conditions,

Most obviously, faculty who are stressed and worried (as so many respondents reported) are, at best, distracted. Those who are suffering from depression, also reported with disturbing frequency, and other health problems because of financial strain will clearly struggle to give their best to students. Faculty who are dealing with an inability to pay bills, unmanageable credit card and student loan debt, unaffordable second mortgages, foreclosures, and bankruptcies, needless to say, have divided attention.

Even outside help for faculty comes with a price for students. The significant numbers of faculty who reported struggling through with the help of low-income government assistance, are obviously spending significant time dealing with those bureaucracies that could be devoted to students instead.

Survey respondents expressed all of these concerns and more.

While the faculty survey had not included explicit questions about how faculty financial struggles affect students, an overwhelming number of faculty emphasized that fact in their personal comments. Echoing the comments of numerous faculty, one respondent summed up her/his story of inadequate salary, financial worries and struggle to cope by simply stating, “Does this situation affect our students? Absolutely.”

The ways in which this happens are many. For instance, the inability of faculty to afford housing reasonably close to campus has a direct effect on students. As many of the 60% of respondents who reported this fact commented, the resulting long commutes affect their families and their students:

I live with my in-laws over an hour commute each way, each day to get to campus... If I was closer to campus, I think it would greatly benefit the students. I have missed several events that I would have liked to participated in but really could not because of the long commutes I need to make to pick up children at day care among other personal obligations.

My husband and I are both faculty at [CSU campus], but cannot afford to purchase a home near campus... This affects not only us but our students (I can only meet with students on days when I have classes because of the commute involved—if I lived closer, I would have more flexible availability to make appointments).

I wish I could be on campus more for my students and participate more in my campus community, but we can't afford rent in my campus area at the same time we are saving for a house and to have a baby.

When faculty are forced to take on extra work to make ends meet, they and their families obviously suffer, and they described the exhaustion as well as lack of personal and family time they experienced. But faculty also wrote with candor and sadness about how outside work limits the “extra” time and energy they would like to devote to students:

The cost of living (i.e., housing, education, and medical) continues to rise against my static [CSU campus] salary, so I take on extra work wherever I can find it (on and off campus) and am thereby exhausted and stressed. I would much prefer to focus on my students and campus environment. Instead, I have largely withdrawn from college activities....

My first love is teaching and working with students to complete their educational goals, but because of the salary I receive from CSU I must work at multiple jobs which distracts from my ability to devote my full attention to student success.

In essence, as many survey respondents noted, low salaries meant that many faculty were being forced to choose between their students and the economic well-being of their families.

Conclusion

When agreement on salary terms was finally reached in the spring of 2015, faculty received a much better deal than was originally offered by the administration. While the administration had originally proposed a 4% raise over 2 years, the final agreement was for a 10.8% raise paid out over slightly more than one year with an additional 2.65% step increase for those eligible faculty.

We believe the ways we reframed the discussion of faculty salaries—crunching numbers differently, putting a human face on the faculty salary schedule, and exposing the price students

pay for low faculty salaries--were critical in reaching this agreement. While we are realistic about the challenges we will face in future bargaining, we do believe this reframing has had a positive effect beyond this one round of bargaining. For instance, after the settlement was reached, we were able to reach an agreement that provided fairer opportunities for contingent faculty to receive promotions. Bargaining over this historically very contentious issue went much more smoothly, we believe, because of a better common understanding of what faculty were facing.

While every bargaining situation is different with various salary problems that need addressing, nearly all faculty unions have to grapple with the myth of the well-paid professor. While that assumption may have had some basis in reality when all faculty were tenure track and the cost of living was less, it is a dangerous misconception today. The common approach that still hangs on of talking about “base salaries” and averages based on full-time, tenure-track salaries props up that myth and erases the economic realities of the majority of the professoriate. To save the profession as a viable career, we must begin to talk about faculty salaries in more accurate terms.

Talking about the effects of faculty economic struggles on students will also be important going forward. Faculty pay is not just a narrow “worker” issue. As we tried to show and as we believe is true everywhere, faculty working conditions are, indeed, student learning conditions. If institutions are serious about student success, addressing faculty salaries to ensure they allow reasonable economic stability for the faculty workforce must be part of the agenda. A first step can be for unions to change the conversation.

We in CFA have come to believe that if we are to do the extremely important job of protecting and promoting quality public higher education as well as our more traditional union work of building faculty salaries, we must begin from an empirically current and correct picture of the situation of faculty today. If we do this effectively, then our negotiations and our other political work are more likely to be successful in improving that situation for faculty and the students they teach.

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³ All sources for data in this paper, as well as additional charts and survey questions, can be found in these papers. News reports and contract campaign materials related to the papers can be viewed by inserting “Race to the Bottom” into the search feature on the website, www.calfac.org.