ALBANY — As colleges and universities consider their options for reopening in the fall, one group is particularly on edge: adjunct professors and other non-tenure track instructors.

Many often don’t know what their fall teaching schedules will look like — or if they will teach at all — until just weeks before students arrive. But because of the significant financial strain on colleges and the uncertainty over reopening plans, adjuncts are in a far more precarious place this year.
“It’s existentially dire for contingent faculty at this moment,” said James Miranda, a part-time lecturer in Ithaca College’s writing department who also splits time teaching at SUNY Cortland. “There’s real anxiety. The inequities have really been laid bare and accelerated.”

Thousands of non-tenure track professors teach lower-level and general education classes while also helping to fill in gaps elsewhere in the course catalog. They also tend to be the lowest-paid and most expendable faculty members.

“We’re reaching the point where there’s rising apprehension, not because the university indicated layoffs, but just the heightened uncertainty.” said Joshua Jordan, an advanced lecturer in French at Fordham University’s Lincoln Center campus. “A lot of these members are on public assistance programs, and the pandemic has only exacerbated these situations.”

College administrators have been crafting individualized reopening strategies; reassuring wary parents, students and staff; and engaging in uncomfortable belt-tightening. But contingent faculty and labor leaders say too often they’re being left in the dark.

“I’m hearing statewide there’s very little communication. A lot of ‘we don’t know so we can’t tell you,’” said Anne Fearman, an adjunct at SUNY Fredonia for nearly two decades who serves on the contingent employment committee of the faculty union for United University Professions. “I understand how difficult this situation is for [administration] and chairs, but you wouldn’t do this to a full-time faculty.”

One issue is that colleges have been holding out to get a clearer sense of what their enrollment will look like, particularly for their incoming class.

A substantial drop-off could diminish the demand for certain classes, reducing the work available to adjuncts and contingent faculty. On the other hand, social distancing protocols may require some class formats, such as large lectures with hundreds of students, to be cut by half or more, necessitating more class sections.
The experiences differ across the state, though adjuncts and other contingent instructors say the situation today is largely an extension of where relations stood pre-coronavirus. Universities in strong financial positions and with good relationships with their non-tenure track professors seem to be doing better than those with preexisting tensions, which in some cases have gotten worse.

Laurel Morton, the head of Adjuncts United at Syracuse University and an instructor at its school of design, said there has not been widespread non-renewals or layoffs of members at her campus. Signals about the fall thus far have been promising, Morton added.

She said adjuncts are expecting to learn the scheduling situation in a few weeks, which would be "a little earlier" than usual.

Still, Morton and others said some people have lost out on summer courses they normally would have taught, or have had other sources of income evaporate since the economy screeched to a halt in mid-spring.

Contingent faculty have been critical of Ithaca College’s leadership during the ongoing crisis as overly “top-down” and hostile to them.

“The situation for contingent faculty right now is really dire," said Tom Schneller, a music school lecturer and union leader on campus. “There’s been discontent with this perceived leadership style way before Covid struck, so this is a situation where a lot of this discontent is crystalized.”

The union, organized under SEIU Local 200United, is preparing to take the college to arbitration over a number of disputes that have recently arisen.

A college spokesperson said the administration has taken a number of steps to include members of the campus community during the planning process and denied that the school is placing the burden on contingent faculty. The college typically hires roughly 200 to 220 part-time and full-time contingent faculty, though administrators are still determining how many will be needed this year. The union has agreed to extend to July 15 the timeline to send out teaching contracts as a result of coronavirus-related budget delays.

“We certainly recognize the unfortunate uncertainty brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic,” Ithaca College spokesperson Dave Maley said in a statement. “This uncertainty affects every student, faculty, and staff member at Ithaca College (as it does with all colleges and universities). The college will continue to invite participation from every member of the campus community — including contingent faculty — throughout the process of developing and then implementing our fall opening plans.”

Beyond the four-year schools, community colleges — where adjuncts make up an even larger proportion of the teaching staff — present their own challenges. Community college budgets are funded in large part by student tuition and money from their respective county governments,
which themselves have been reeling by the drop-off in tax revenue. Steep cuts could be in the
offing unless assistance comes from the state or federal government.

Additionally, enrollment has been on the decline for years as the economy improved, and since
community colleges have a policy of open enrollment, it’s especially unclear how many students
will show up this fall.

“It all has to do with enrollment,” said Stefan Krompier, president of the Adjunct Faculty
Association at Nassau Community College. “The number of jobs that are going to be available
are related to that.”

Krompier also said he fears adjuncts, especially those teaching at community colleges, will bear
the brunt if schools do not reopen safely or if precautions go unheeded by students or others.
That will force many adjuncts into making an impossible choice between their health and a
paycheck they can’t afford to pass up, he said.

“They’re going to have to make the choice of putting themselves at risk, or stay home and not get
paid,” Krompier said.

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