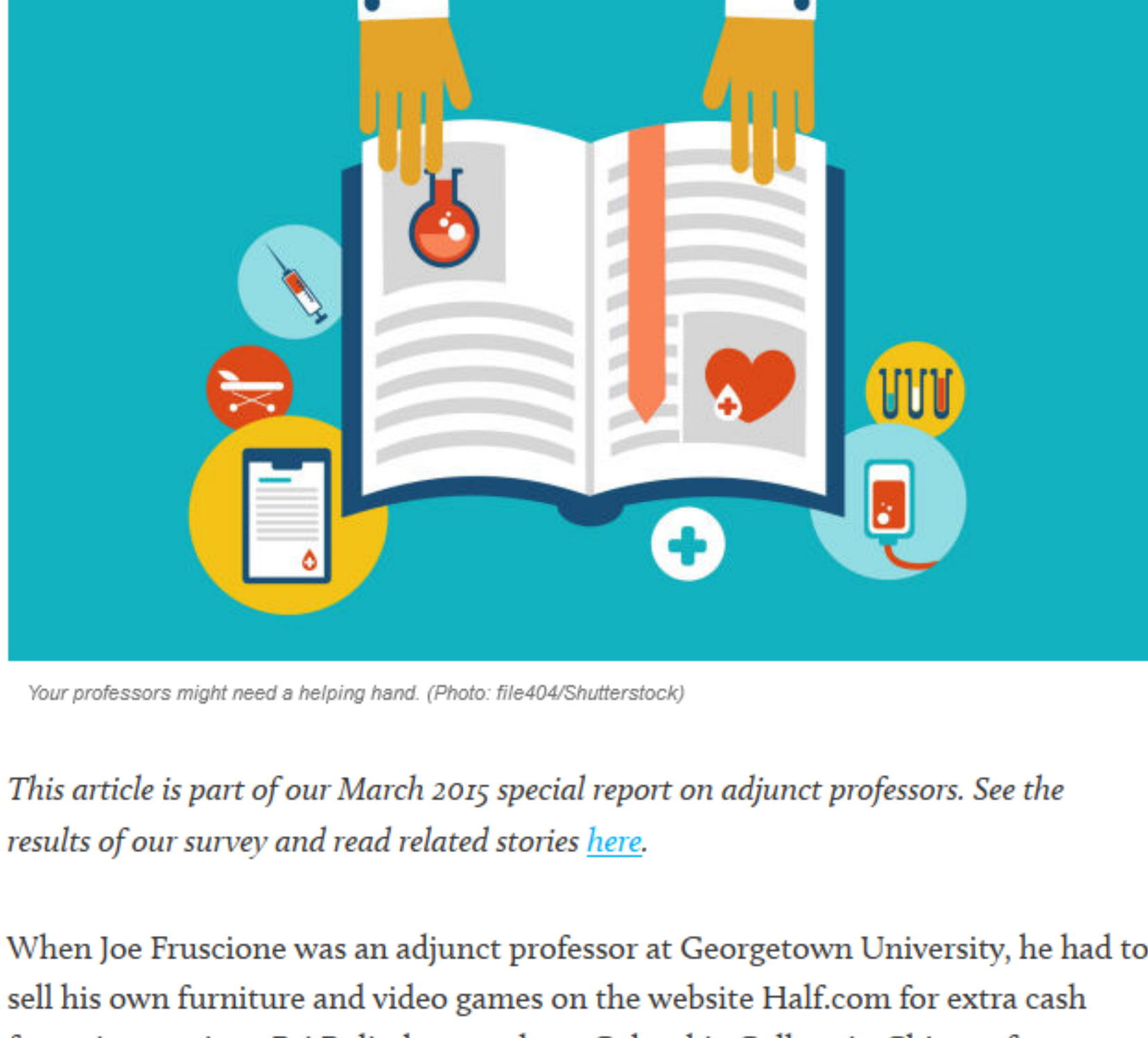


BOOKS & CULTURE

The Professor Charity Case

PrecariCorps wants to draw attention to the plight of adjunct professors. But in the meantime, it's raising money to keep adjuncts well-fed and out of debt.

ALISSA QUART · 10 HOURS AGO



Your professors might need a helping hand. (Photo: file404/Shutterstock)

When Joe Fruscione was an adjunct professor at Georgetown University, he had to sell his own furniture and video games on the website Half.com for extra cash from time to time. Bri Bolin has taught at Columbia College in Chicago for many years, yet she often has to buy her groceries with food stamps.

Fruscione and Bolin are not alone. Today, [75 percent of the academic workforce](#) is contingent, meaning those teachers are part-time, adjunct, or non-tenure track. In contrast, roughly 40 years ago, this calculus was reversed: 25 percent of academics were adjuncts and 75 percent were on the better-fed tenure track. This means that, today, many exquisitely trained and educated people are financially desperate. The situation is so bad that Bolin, along with Fruscione and another teacher—Kat Jacobsen, who goes by the *nom de adjunct* Kat Skills—decided they should create a non-profit devoted to helping impoverished professors. To conjure the financially precarious situation of themselves and their comrades, they called it PrecariCorps.

After I wrote a story about Bri Bolin, a handful of strangers sent checks and anonymous gift cards to her—via email, her faculty mailbox, and her home address—including a single \$5,000 donation.

And how precarious are adjuncts?

"I was scrambling, tutoring, and nervous," Fruscione says of his life before he met and married a woman who had a well-paying job. "I was lower-middle-class at best, with little savings, IRA, or retirement. I couldn't have adopted a child on an adjunct salary, as my wife and I are now doing. I wouldn't have passed the requirements."

It got so bad that, finally, he quit and changed professions, even though he had a Ph.D. from the highly regarded George Washington University and taught there—and at Georgetown—for many years.

Bri Bolin, who is clearly still struggling, had a little bit of a break recently. After I wrote a [story](#) about her in *ELLE* magazine in December, a handful of strangers sent checks and anonymous gift cards to her—via email, her faculty mailbox, and her home address—including a single \$5,000 donation. Someone even donated a tricycle to her son Finn, who is disabled (he can't walk easily but he can ride). Bolin shared some of the money, she told me, with two even needier adjunct friends she met through online activism, both also mothers.

All of this generosity convinced Bolin that she had to create something a little more formal. Jacobsen wanted to be able to pay her electric bills or go to a conference or buy a textbook—they both thought other adjuncts should be able to do so too. They had started having conversations about creating some kind of group like this with Fruscione, who they met via Facebook academic activist groups, in 2014.

Together, they conceived of PrecariCorps, and set up a [website](#). Its slogan: "Agents for Higher Ed: Seeking to provide temporary, welcome relief from the economic, emotional, and physiological stressors that all too often define the life of an adjunct educator." Through the site, anyone can make a donation. (They are working on getting non-profit status, so donations are not yet tax deductible.) And they are creating an application process that will filter requests for aid and weigh their merit. The trio has received 22 small donations so far and four requests for funding. (They say that they draw no salaries for themselves.) Soon they will distribute funds to select adjunct professors who are living on the economic edges.

As much as the three hoped to help others, they also created PrecariCorps to draw attention to their profession's plight. Adjuncts are, after all, veritable poster children for the erosion of the middle class. These days, professors may be [more likely than their students](#) to be living in basement apartments and subsisting on ramen and Tabasco.

There is no shortage of professors out there for PrecariCorps to help. I spoke to an adjunct mom who waits at a local family restaurant on the weekends (and hopes none of her students sit down at her tables). There has been a medievalist on Medicaid. Famously, there was Mary-Faith Cerasoli, the "homeless professor," who lived in her car. I got in touch with Cerasoli last year when she went on a hunger strike to draw attention to faculty poverty. (She went off strike after six days, when she got a call from New York Governor Cuomo's office.) For me, the situation has a personal dimension: It is only a generation since my mother worked at a community college—she started out untenured and ultimately earned tenure at a four-year college—yet throughout the process retained a middle-class standard of living.

The logic: Established, financially stable slices of a once middle-class profession will partly subsidize their destitute sisters and brothers.

Just last month PrecariCorps received a request for funds from an adjunct whose university was so delayed in paying him he started accumulating financial penalties from his bank from overdrafts.

PrecariCorps is scrappy and fledgling, like a DIY benevolent association. But it is also part of a larger movement defending adjuncts, including sizable groups—one founded by the Service Employees International Union, which includes hospital workers and janitors. Among them are the Congress of Contingent Academic Labor, the New Faculty Majority, and a group called Adjunct Action. In February, during National Adjunct Walkout Day, thousands of adjuncts, general faculty, and students walked out of their classes on both coasts in a plea for fair wages and better working conditions. After all, adjuncts tend to do the same teaching work as tenured professors and usually have the same credentials.

When confronted with adjuncts' lot, universities and their administrators often claim that they are in a bind. They point to budgetary realities; the shortfall that necessitates only having adjunct positions available if they are to avoid tuition increases. They note that the public has demanded greater accountability: America's students and their parents are angry that education costs have gone up exponentially.

But why has it risen so fast? In 2013, a raft of articles and studies found that tuition at colleges and universities was rising faster than inflation—and pinned the blame on the fact that public universities had been [hiring twice as many administrators as teachers](#), creating sprawling bureaucracies.

In an attempt to right this skewed situation for contingent teachers, the adjuncts' rights movement has been pushing for state legislatures to impose binding contracts on state colleges and universities to provide health and retirement benefits to adjunct faculty who work part-time hours or more. These organizations have made some inroads: This year in Colorado for instance, a [bill](#) that sought to end the "two-tier faculty system in Colorado's community colleges" circulated around the Colorado State Legislature. That bill would make Colorado the first state to render illegal what is now sometimes called "adjunctification," a neologism that sounds like a chronic dermatological condition. But it hasn't passed yet.

PrecariCorps offers a fundraising strategy. Bolin, Fruscione, and Jacobsen plan to get serious about their fundraising. They tell me they are going to start attending academic conferences with knit hats in hand, beseeching the most comfortable of the tenure-track faculty (of course they know plenty of assistant professors are not rolling in green) for donations. The logic: Established, financially stable slices of a once middle-class profession will partly subsidize their destitute sisters and brothers.

Ultimately the group hopes that colleges will be forced to change their deficient labor practices. In the meantime, they urge the academic system's elite—the tenured—to be coaxed into solidarity and into opening their Italian leather wallets to support the worker-bee Ph.D.s who prop up the comfortable tenured world. Will it work? Only time—that thing adjuncts are paid so little for—will tell.

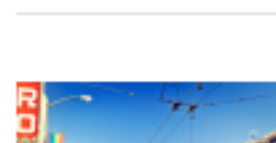
This story was supported by the [Economic Hardship Reporting Project](#), a journalism non-profit devoted to stories about inequality. Quart is the project's co-editor with Barbara Ehrenreich.

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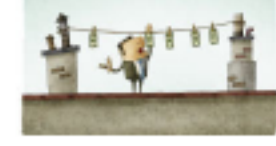
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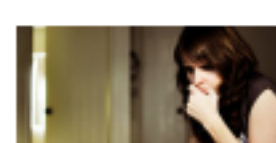
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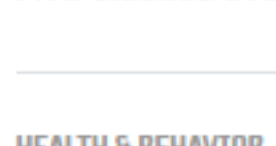
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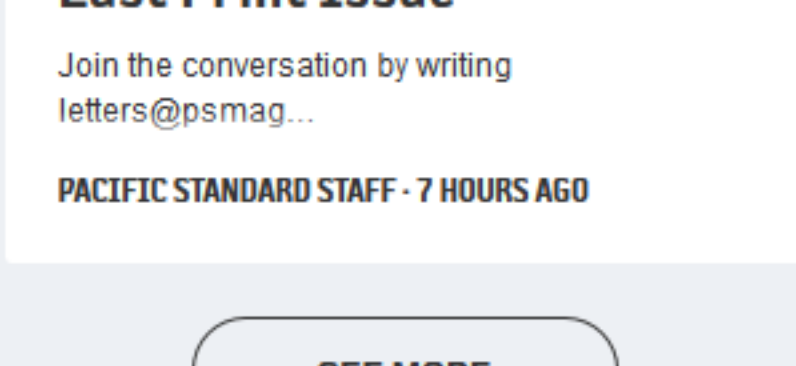
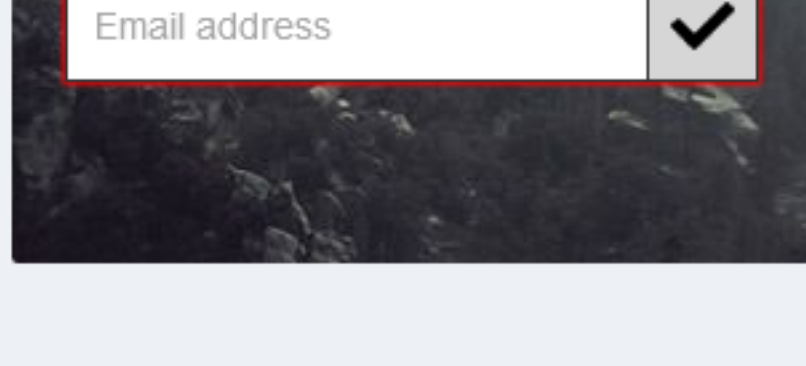


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