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EDUCATION

Columbia College strike said to be longest in higher-ed history for adjunct faculty, as picketing enters 2nd month

By Zareen Syed
Chicago Tribune • Published: Dec 01, 2023 at 5:00 am



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Striking members of the Columbia College Faculty Union picket in front of Columbia's media production center on South State Street on Nov. 30, 2023 to protest against decisions made by the administration (Chris Sweda/Chicago Tribune)

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Gwenn-Ael Lynn, adjunct professor of art history and visual culture at Columbia College Chicago, was bundled up outside 1104 S. Wabash Ave. on Tuesday, holding a large sign with “students, not profit” written in bold letters, while another nonstriking faculty member was teaching his class.

Lynn, a member of the Columbia College Faculty Union, or CFAC, is one of 584 adjunct professors who have been [on the picket lines since Oct. 30](#), protesting the administration’s decision to eliminate hundreds of already-enrolled classes weeks before the semester began while increasing the size of other classes to cut costs.

CFAC says this is the longest adjunct faculty strike in [higher education history](#), and it’s pushing students and staff members to a crossroads with the entire institution.

“What this crisis is showing me is that my conception of higher education varies completely from what has become of Columbia,” Lynn said. “It looks like they’re trying to turn the school into a for-profit school. They definitely think that education is profitable and they are becoming part of the problem rather than the solution.”

A few weeks before the fall semester began, department chairs at Columbia were told to eliminate five to six courses for each of the 58 academic programs, followed by an Aug. 16 all-faculty meeting where Provost Marcella David introduced a “section elimination project.”

CFAC members said this was the first time they’d had heard about it.



“When you do a restructuring at this scale, you have to negotiate with the union, and they didn’t do it,” said Diana Vallera, CFAC president and part-time photography professor, adding that going on strike is not easy.

“You build relationships with the students and it’s hard to be away from them.”

The section elimination project resulted in 53 course sections cut for fall 2023 and 317 course sections eliminated for the spring semester. Department chairs and some full-time faculty members are now teaching most adjunct instructors’ classes, but several classes are just at a standstill without an instructor.

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Fewer classes means more students in each class.

“They went from 14 sections of art history, including one remote, to five,” Lynn said. “And they’re doubling students, so it’s capped at 22 students now and it’s all full. And now, they’re moving to 44 or 45 students.”



Striking members of the Columbia College Faculty Union picket in front of Columbia's media production center on South State Street on Nov. 30, 2023 to protest against decisions made by the administration. (Chris Sweda/Chicago Tribune)

Lambrini Lukidis, a spokesperson for Columbia College, said in an email statement that the college has a responsibility to make difficult decisions to steer the school through a financial challenge.

“The administration is deeply disappointed that the union has chosen to continue to disrupt instruction for students,” Lukidis said. “The changes we have made to class offerings and to some class sizes are a necessary adjustment to enrollment and financial realities, one we have made responsibly in a way to ensure the continued delivery of a successful academic experience.”

Meg Konieczka, a Columbia College senior pursuing an acting major with a minor in stage combat, said she chose the South Loop school partly because of its smaller class sizes, which she said are essential for collaboration.

“I love it so much here because of the connections I’ve made with people. We want to connect with the teacher and we want to connect with the students and work with them, but it takes so much time to do that,” Konieczka said Tuesday. “If there’s 26 students in a class, it’s just not going to happen.”

The college often touts its skilled adjunct faculty members, who are working professionals in their respective fields, to recruit students.

For Konieczka, one of the school’s most significant selling points was John McFarland, an adjunct professor in the Columbia Theatre Department’s stage combat and voice programs.

McFarland is one of six master teachers with the British Academy of Stage & Screen Combat, a London-based organization that trains actors to perform in scenes of a violent nature on stage and film. He's also the first U.S.-based teacher to receive the BASSC master teacher accreditation.

"We built this curriculum so students have international exposure, and when people come into my class, they're not going by Columbia standards," McFarland said. "So someone coming in and giving them a pass/fail doesn't matter because the exam at the end is national and international standards for professional work."

Konieczka said when compared with a lot of other people getting into stunt work, Columbia students have a leg up. McFarland's voice class teaches students how to "scream, grunt, groan, cough" safely and easily, while his combat classes enable students to "fake fight" in a safe, realistic and theatrical fashion with any type of sword, knife, stick or object.

McFarland said a replacement teacher, while CFAC is on strike, does an injustice to his students who signed up to work with him.

On his phone, McFarland played a video of his students last spring soaring through the air on wires and staging an intense fight scene where a student is hurled across the room.

"We look at Marvel movies, we look at DC Comics, we look at what's happening in the professional world," he said. "Then we sit there as a class or individuals and say, 'What would we like to re-create? What are the things that we have the capability of re-creating?' So that when we get out of here, we can walk in and say, 'Yeah, I can fly.'"

Samantha Williams, a senior acting major at Columbia, said the faculty member listed for McFarland's voice for the actor class on Monday never showed up, even after students waited for 20 minutes.

"There is no communication; students are really lost," Williams said. "Replacing the professors on strike is not a solution. I think it's just harming us more. These new people that the administration brought in don't know our work; they don't know what we've done and what we can do."

Williams said five of her six classes haven't been taught since the strike began.

"We got an email about pass/fail from administration, and I do not think that's fair," she said. "Although I'm an acting major and I would like to get my degree with straight A's, I came here for the opportunities, to learn under specific teachers in specific classes. It's diminishing the education Columbia promised we would get."

Amelia Hansing, Columbia sophomore and acting major, said the strike has affected all six of her classes because they're each taught by a part-time faculty member.

"It's been a long time since I've actually been in my classes, but I'm still paying for them," Hansing said. "My Stage Combat 2 class — no one is qualified to teach it, so it's just essentially canceled right now."

Williams said she feels the administration is "putting the solution all on the union" instead of taking accountability for "why we're here in the first place."

“I have one more semester left, which is spring, and if I don’t get the classes I need, I’ll have to do another semester,” Williams said. “And I don’t have the money to take out another loan. I’m already paying all this money for the classes I’m not in now.”

The cost to attend Columbia has been climbing, with tuition and fees estimated at \$17,858 per semester.

According to the college’s website, the academic schedule always contains some room for potential loss of instruction for various reasons, and the college leadership is not in the position to make decisions on the issue of refunds or reimbursements.

Students also have to rethink their course selections for the spring semester with over 300 class sections no longer available and 91 specific course titles eliminated.

According to a table compiled by CFAC, the program most harmed by the cuts will be communications, which will offer 62 sections of journalism, radio, advertising and related classes in spring 2024 compared with 92 sections in spring 2023. Cinema and television arts offered 259 course sections last spring, and have 191 slated for 2024.

Since Oct. 30, CFAC has filed six unfair labor practices against Columbia concerning several vital issues the union faces. On Sept. 5, CFAC filed a claim saying the school announced unilateral changes effective Sept. 1 in the terms and conditions of employment of its union-represented employees — including concerning class size — without notice to, bargaining with or the consent of the union.

The most recent round of negotiations between the school and CFAC was Thursday afternoon, Vallera said. They plan to meet again in the coming days to address their demands for smaller class sizes, better job security for part-time instructors and the restoration of courses pulled from the school’s catalog due to budget cuts.

“We’re frustrated because we hoped we had a shared goal; we hoped to have our faculty back in class for our students because what a mess,” Vallera said, adding that the college keeps making it only about job security.

Lukidis said that throughout months of negotiations with the union, which began in late spring, the college proposed pay increases, new benefits and new avenues for input on decisions for part-time faculty members.

“At the heart of the work stoppage is the fact that the college is asserting its management right to make decisions to address a financial shortfall,” Lukidis said. “The union has refused to end the strike because it insists on a guarantee of employment for nearly all members of this contingent group of faculty and has sought veto power over class sizes and course offerings.”

Vallera also said the administration is deflecting accountability.

“I want to emphasize that it was two weeks before the semester began. They claimed a financial crisis. Then we saw the 990 tax forms come out and they got increases in salaries,” Vallera said.

Columbia College President and CEO Kwang-Wu Kim got a bonus of \$240,000, Vallera said. “Just that bonus would save 40 classes,” she said. “How do you justify doing that? Everybody but you guys is in a financial crisis?”

The college's 2023 IRS 990 tax filing was not available on its website. Its most recent posted tax filing is [from 2021](#).

Andrea Dymond, a theater and directing professor at Columbia, said that even though something like increased class sizes doesn't seem like a big deal on paper, it makes a massive difference in the quality of the education students receive.

"With many classes, especially performance-based classes, or writing classes, you can't just add people," Dymond said Tuesday. "If you add even a few more students, the time I can spend with each of them individually has just gone down by a huge percent. I used to have six minutes I could spend with you, but now I suddenly have four minutes."

Dymond, who said she does a lot of hands-on work helping her students hone their storytelling skills through directing and collaborating with screenwriters, cinematographers and production designers, said experiential learning in small groups makes Columbia different from other schools in the area.

"It's why people go here," she said. "This is a very unique place and it seems that the administration is trying to make it something that it's not."

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