

Guest Editorial

Professors in Canada: Experiences of Academic Life— A Special Issue



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The importance of Canada's colleges and universities for economic growth and societal improvement cannot be overstated. There are few social problems that have escaped attention, few areas of knowledge that have been overlooked, and few members of society who have not benefited at some point through the work from postsecondary institutions. Across all these important contributions, professors are central. These individuals produce knowledge through research, pass it on through teaching and research, and broaden its impact through partnerships, patents, and publications. And yet, Canada's professors are not a homogeneous group. Just as institutions across the country differ in mandate and scope, so too professors' individual experiences are shaped and altered by a myriad of individual, institutional, and global factors. Furthermore, definitions of *professor* are increasingly blurred. Part-time contract positions in teaching and research have outsourced the full-time work traditionally attributed to professors (Jones, 2013; Macfarlane, 2011), raising questions about who might appropriately bear the title of professor. In this issue, we use the label "professors" broadly to include academic staff charged with research, teaching, or service in postsecondary institutions. We sought papers that addressed the experiences of professors in Canada's institutions, regardless of the formal job titles held.

There is currently very little pan-Canadian data on professors' work to analyze and clarify the ambiguous aspects and experiences of academic work. In terms of statistics, the University and College Academic Staff System (UCASS) collects data on "full-time teaching staff," counting over 47,000 at publicly funded universities (Statistics Canada, 2021). No comparable data are available regarding professors who teach or research in the technical-vocational or college sector. Tellingly, those who are employed on part-time research and teaching contracts are almost invisible, their numbers fluctuating each year, often with affiliations to more than one institution (Brownlee, 2015; Lopes & Dewan, 2014). This special issue contributes a new body

of literature to the scholarship on professors' work in Canada. Collectively, the papers offer in-depth examinations of several components of academic work in a time of significant flux.

Over the past 30 years, professors at Canada's universities have felt the impact of four significant changes within academia—precarious employment, market-responsive management, internationalization, and research intensification—each of which is reshaping the contours of academic work. Although these four pressures are interrelated in their origin, stemming from a global economic market that prioritizes knowledge production, they affect professors in several distinct ways. Foremost for many is the continued rise in precarious, contract-based work; however, it must be recognized that professors are not the only higher education personnel being hired on short-term contracts. Those in administration, student services, operations, and technology support face similar trends. For university professors, however, the new forms of hiring are a noteworthy challenge to the protections of tenure, which developed historically to protect professors' academic freedom, preventing their termination should they pursue lines of research that challenged those in authority (Ross et al., 2021). In the college sector, the precarity of instructors threatens the longevity of industry partnerships, limits student supports, and has led to strike action in several jurisdictions. This stark contrast between full-time positions and short-term, contract employment has led to two tiers of academics. Contract-based academics have little job security, are positioned outside the departmental community, and face difficulty in earning a living wage. Full-time professors, on the other hand, cope with increasing workloads due to the lack of full-time colleagues with whom to share departmental duties, especially as some full-time colleagues shift their emphases toward higher prestige activities (Newson & Polster, 2019). Notably, the rise in precarious employment has not affected all institutions or jurisdictions in the same ways. Scholarship suggests that Canada still has a relatively strong public university sector, with a steady increase in full-time hiring over the past 30 years (Field & Jones, 2016). Likewise, emerging forms of short-term contracts or teaching-stream positions provide a living wage to postsecondary instructors. These efforts, however, are nascent, and there is little evidence to suggest they will counter the larger forms of global economization.

Scholars link the rise in precarious work to the growth of new public management, the organizational strategy that adopts market principles to manage the operations of institutions such as public colleges and universities (Ryan et al., 2017; Shepherd, 2018). These changes have led to an imperative for higher education institutions to be market responsive, adapting agilely to the demands of the global market for research and teaching. Market responsiveness is responsible both for the excess of doctoral graduates as well as the narrowing of expensive full-time positions in favour of short-term contracts that meet an immediate teaching or research demand (Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2018).

The emphasis on market responsiveness is closely linked to a third shift involving the growth of internationalization or the global dynamic. Colleges and universities are increasingly networked to the global market for students and knowledge (Buckner et al., 2020). Canada is a top destination for international students, allowing postsecondary institutions to rely increasingly on international students' tuition fees to balance their budgets (Guo & Guo, 2017). This competition for international students is intertwined in the global race for rankings, as institutions seek to maintain or increase their position in the global rankings in order to attract international students.

Adding to the pressures associated with precarity, market responsiveness, and internationalization, the growing importance of research is the fourth side of this dynamic square. The so-called *global knowledge economy* is a world-wide market that increasingly prioritizes the circulation of internet goods, education, and inventions (Johnstone & Lee, 2017). National competitiveness has risen in importance for postsecondary institutions, and the pressure to produce research is increasing. Although Canada's federal government does not have official jurisdiction over higher education, it has increased its role in funding research, working through the tri-agencies (i.e., the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) to advance Canada's postsecondary-based knowledge production. The pressure to research extends to professors at technical-vocational institutions or undergraduate institutions with historic mandates for teaching (Polster, 2007).

Each of these pressures is experienced differently by different groups of professors. For those whose job includes the expectation to engage in research, the pressures to publish and to secure external research funding have risen dramatically. For those whose work centres on teaching, the increase in international students requires new forms of mentorship and instruction, and new forms of delivery, all of which are evaluated by students. The past year has also brought a global crisis in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic. Caregivers have struggled to balance work and family life as children are educated from home. Studies suggest women are facing disproportionate challenges during this time (Collins et al., 2020; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021; Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2020). Institutions have stressed the importance of watching out for mental health while funding agencies provide stipends to account for delayed research. In all of this, professors have been forced to shift their teaching, supervision, collaboration, and sometimes their research to remote online formats.

This special issue presents the findings from six important papers on professors' academic lives in Canada. Authors from across Canada are showcased, representing five institutions in three provinces. In the first paper, Grace Karram Stephenson sets the context for academic work in Canada with a historic review of the crises that have faced professors since the 1950s

as represented in the published literature about academe. Following this, Alison Jefferson identifies historic trends in the training and formation of Canada's professors as they reflect back upon their doctoral studies in Canadian institutions. Jefferson's analysis draws attention to the multifaceted nature of academic roles, involving teaching and research, and their unequal emphases in doctoral programs. The next cluster of papers provide finer-grained analyses across the triumvirate of academic responsibilities, focusing respectively on the teaching, research, and service activities of Canada's professors. First, Patricia Danyluk and Amy Burns describe the world of contract and continuing professors as they adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic through online teaching. Next, Sandra Acker and Michelle McGinn provide new insight into the mid-career struggles of professors as the pressure to produce research affects their daily work. Yasmin Dean, Jodi Nickel, Janet Miller, and Ruth Pickett Seltner round out this trio of papers with an analysis of professors who adopt administrative or service roles as department chairs. Finally, Silvia Mirlene Nakano Koga, Alexandre Beaupré-Lavallée, and Olivier Bégin-Caouette offer a longitudinal study of professors' workload estimates and the associated accountability measures for teaching, research, and service activities.

Taken together, the six papers provide rich snapshots of academic life for professors in Canada. As this new scholarship illuminates the evolving work of Canada's academics, we hope subsequent areas of inquiry and understanding will further the impressive work of professors across the country.

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