

## Teetering:



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Imagine making the choice between getting a badly-needed root canal or paying your rent. Imagine having to refuse a child help towards the chance towards a post-secondary education. Imagine driving an unsafe vehicle and, when it inevitably becomes undriveable, being turned down on financing for another. Imagine logging into your work email to read a plea from your employer to support a student food bank when you're having trouble putting food on your own table. Imagine never knowing if you'll have work in either the near or distant future, or if you'll ever be able to retire. Imagine rushing to prepare classes or meet with students on unpaid time before you desperately rush to your second or third part-time job. Imagine investing into years of education and experience in your field, only to feel that you're not seen as a professional who is worth any kind of commitment or support.

For thousands of contractual college and university faculty workers in Canada, including our own colleagues at Niagara College, these scenarios require little imagination—they are the real implications of working what has become a precarious job.

Precarious workers, or “the precariat,” as some have termed it, can be loosely defined as those workers who exist on a contract-to-contract basis. In the Ontario college system, precarious workers include those faculty members who are employed on a part-time, partial load, or sessional basis. Initially seen as a class of workers who would cover unforeseen gaps such as medical leaves, contract faculty, as of 2013, make up 70% of the workers instructing students in the Ontario college system<sup>1</sup>. Precarious work is no longer a “stop-gap” and temporary type of employment; indeed, precarious employment may well be the condition under which a faculty member lives out their entire career.

We've all heard the horror stories—precarious academic workers living in homeless shelters<sup>2</sup> or the Duquesne Uni-

versity professor who, after 25 years of service with a salary under \$10, 000 a year, died at age 83, destitute and without benefits<sup>3</sup>—but we perhaps rarely reflect on the bigger picture of what reliance on precarious workers is doing to our colleagues, students, and college system as a whole.

Certainly, most would agree that the lack of job security, lower wages and fewer (or no) benefits have definitely put the precarious faculty member in a position that is largely untenable. With the same qualifications and education as full-time faculty members, it is difficult to accept that precarious workers are required to work under such vastly different conditions as their full-time colleagues. In recognition of the untenable conditions individual precarious workers face, there have been calls to reevaluate this disparity in the name of fairness. It is time to ensure that all faculty members receive adequate compensation and benefits for the very important work that they do.

Apart from the impact on individual precarious workers, it is also important to recognize that precarious work disadvantages students. In order to fulfill our commitment to quality education, it is crucial to have faculty members engaged in all aspects of their work. Currently, faculty members in part-time or partial load categories are only compensated for their work in the classroom and are unpaid for curriculum design, class planning, and evaluation. Practically speaking, this means that while a full-time faculty member receives a credit of 1.33 and 1.80 on their SWF for evaluation and preparation hours respectively, their part-time or partial load colleague receives 0 paid hours for these activities<sup>4</sup>. These activities are critical to ensuring that our students receive the excellent education they assume they will receive when they register and pay tuition.

Additionally, without paid time for routine out-of-class assistance, part-time and partial load faculty members are often

1 [http://www.local244.ca/media/sept\\_28\\_day\\_of\\_action\\_petition.pdf](http://www.local244.ca/media/sept_28_day_of_action_petition.pdf)

2 <http://www.chronicle.com/blogs/onhiring/adjunct-emergency-fund/29317> and <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/making-sense/homeless-professor-protests-conditions-adjuncts/>

3 <http://www.post-gazette.com/Op-Ed/2013/09/18/Death-of-an-adjunct/stories/201309180224>

4 <http://www.contractfacultyforward.ca/faqs>

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pressed for time to meet with students who require additional support or accommodations. Many would concur that we are doing a disservice to our students by not providing them with access to faculty members who are compensated to plan for, evaluate, and support students.

The college system as a whole also loses when it relies on precarious workers. In discussing the recent proposals to increase salaries for executive management at the colleges, the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development acknowledged the desire to “attract and retain top talent”<sup>5</sup>. While the raises proposed have garnered some negative attention, it certainly has not been suggested that the colleges’ management teams move to a contract system like precarious faculty.

If compensation and job security are so essential to retaining a solid and effective management base, what message is being sent to faculty, students, and the residents of Ontario about teaching staff? Should our college system not be aiming to recruit and retain the best talent available for the classroom, too? Faculty members—both full-time and precarious—are heavily invested in ensuring that Ontario’s college system provides students and Ontarians in general with quality education, and this requires an investment into those at the front-lines who are preparing students for their futures outside of the classroom. Our students deserve the

best, and we are underserving them by providing them with faculty members who are not treated and compensated as the exceptional professionals they are. Likewise, precarious work discourages employee retention—how many exceptional educators have we lost to other sectors simply because they cannot support themselves on the salary paid?

Thankfully, there is movement afoot to support and reevaluate the role of precarious faculty workers. Sheridan College’s Local 244 arranged a petition to call for the end of precarious college work<sup>6</sup>, the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations held a conference in February, 2016, entitled “Confronting Precarious Academic Work”<sup>7</sup>, and a Contract Faculty Day of Action has been established on September 28th<sup>8</sup>. Likewise, the working conditions of partial-load faculty have come to the attention of CAAT-A’s Bargaining Team, who recently surveyed members on their opinions about partial-load conditions in a pre-bargaining survey.

Each member also has a role to play here—engage with precarious workers, and listen to their concerns. Hopefully, with the help of our members, we can begin to transform the system into one that values all teaching faculty and supports true quality education.

*Interested in further information about precarious faculty?*

*Check out these links:*

- Contract Faculty Forward <http://www.contractfacultyforward.ca/>
- We Teach Ontario <http://weteachontario.ca/>
- University Affairs <http://www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/speculative-diction/confronting-conditions-contract-faculty/>
- Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) <https://www.caut.ca/news/2015/10/07/fed-up-with-precarious-work-academic-staff-speak-out-for-fair-and-full-employment>
- TV Ontario—The Plight of Hidden Academics—The Agenda with Steve Paikin <http://tvo.org/video/programs/the-agenda-with-steve-paikin/the-plight-of-hidden-academics>

5 <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/education/some-ontario-college-executives-could-be-eligible-for-raises-of-more-than-100000/article33652927/>

6 [http://www.local244.ca/media/sept\\_28\\_day\\_of\\_action\\_petition.pdf](http://www.local244.ca/media/sept_28_day_of_action_petition.pdf)

7 <http://ocufa.on.ca/conferences/confronting-precarious-academic-work/>

8 [http://www.contractfacultyforward.ca/sept\\_28\\_day\\_of\\_action](http://www.contractfacultyforward.ca/sept_28_day_of_action)