

“Out of the Shadows”, Cross Referencing MRFA’s Census with CAUT’s National Survey of Contract Academic Staff – Guy Obrecht. November 2018

Karen Foster and Louise Birdsell Bauer’s recent study, “Out of the Shadows”, attempted to uncover some of the working conditions of Contract Academic Staff across the country. The title of their study speaks to the fact that there is a lack of nation-wide data on the use of precariously employed contract faculty and therefore a lack of understanding of the nature of their conditions and the level of their use across institutions. With a lack of data to support or contradict them, people are able to maintain ideas that trivialize the use of contract faculty. These ideas hang on to narratives like “contract faculty are young academics beginning a career”, or “they are otherwise employed professionals who teach for fun”, or “they don’t want to bother of service and scholarship”. Studies like Foster and Birdsell Bauer’s are beginning to point to evidence that challenges the gloss of such narratives.

The authors claim that the study is not generalizable because of the relatively low rate of participation (2600 respondents in a country where there are around 37 000 in total). High turnover rates and lack of up to date contact information made it hard to reach out to contract faculty, who are often working in the shadows. The authors also considered the idea that the most dissatisfied faculty are more likely to participate in the survey. Considering these potential biases, I took the liberty to compare some of the results to the contract faculty responses in MRFA’s census. What I found was a high degree of correlation between them, therefore suggesting that the survey might be more representative than they think.

In terms of demographics, both surveys reveal that the majority are between the ages of 36 and 65, have similar distributions of credentials and have mostly been teaching for more than 5 years (table 1). This data is important because it challenges the idea that contract faculty are young academics garnering experience or retirees sharing a lifetime of experience. In fact, most of the contract faculty are looking for full time employment (66% of MRFA respondents and 60% of CAUTs) and in both surveys, 72 percent of the respondents rely on their contracts for their livelihood, and many (35-40%) teach the equivalent of a full course load (which varies across Universities).

Table 1: Demographics

Demographics	MRFA census %	CAUT survey %
Age 36-65	81	77
PhDs	32	38
MAAs	45	42
Teaching over 5 years	61	59

A second myth that the data counters is that contract faculty don’t do research or service. The results show that in Canada, 67 percent of contract faculty are currently maintaining scholarship in peer reviewed publications and 79 percent agree that they would do more if they were not funding it themselves. At the MRFA, we found that 42 percent do service and an additional 31 percent would if it were funded. In terms of service, 43 percent of contract faculty at MRFA do service

compared with 75 percent of the national respondents (much of the service in the national statistic was departmental [40%]).

Another area where the MRFA aligns with the survey is around job security. The number of respondents working on sessional contracts was 70 percent, similar to the 71 percent in the MRFA census. Sessional contracts are ground zero for precarity: the contractor has to reapply for their position each semester. Not surprisingly, the number one ranked issue for CAUT's respondents was job security, the same ranking it had in our negotiations survey (when contract faculty was looked at as a group).

The effects of precarious employment are particularly troubling. Almost half of the respondents felt that their mental health had been impacted by their work (42%) and most of those (87%) felt that the impact was negative. We didn't ask a similar question around mental health in the MRFA census, but when ranking the statement "workload pressures cause me to worry about my physical and/or mental health and wellbeing", 71 percent of contract faculty strongly agree or agree. These rates are far above the national average in the area of mental health which should be a cause of concern, especially in the context of mental illness normally being underreported and more prevalent in academia.

The researchers did a qualitative analysis of the responses and found a lot of instances that they refer to as shame and humiliation. Common themes of feeling othered and being patronized by their working conditions came up: feeling like second-class people, being stigmatized, disenfranchised and generally disrespected. While not everywhere, our census has some of this kind of sentiment in it as well: feeling second class, experiencing subtle harassment, or feeling overlooked.

A related point regarding self identity emerged in the responses to the question of how they describe their work to others. Many respondents remarked that the liminal nature of their contracts made answering this question fraught with personal anxiety. Answers often included the precarity of their employment in the response. For example, some would say "I teach part time at University X" or "I teach on the side". Identifying as a part-time teacher is a far cry from the many elements that go into the rich vocation of being a full time professor where teaching is informed by original and unique research that counts as only one part of an academic career. We don't have a similar question on the MRFA census but my guess is, that especially in the context of a teaching focussed university, we would hear similar characterizations of a contract faculty career.

One of the surprising finds of the CAUT survey was that despite the apparent feelings of mental and social strain associated with precarious work, most respondents actually felt that their work had had a positive impact on their career. Leaving aside the possible problems with the question, this seems counter intuitive except when you consider the fact that respondents often reported a genuine love of teaching and a confidence in their competence as teachers. In our census there are several references to this kind of confidence in and love of teaching as well, which helps to explain why we pursue research without funding, why we engage with service, and why we continue reapplying to teach.