RESTRATIFICATION IN ACADEMIA: THE STRUGGLE FOR PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

The academic workplace is a space of tension as work and professional goals clash with organizational logic. Neo-liberal managerial philosophy of casualization, efficiency, and work intensification amplifies the inequalities in the division of labour created by two-tiered hiring practices within the academic profession. This article adds to the growing body of literature that examines the effects of precarity within a profession. It explores professional restratification of academia through in-depth interviews in which professors, employed at two Ontario universities, discuss perceptions of their own roles and professional identity within the academic workplace. Findings suggest everyday experiences in academia reflect agentic perspectives and behaviours of both contract and tenured professors as they endeavour to sustain their professional identities.
Keywords*:* restratification, precarity, contract faculty, new public management, institutional logics, professional identity

Résumé

L'environnement de travail universitaire est un espace sous tension en raison du choc entre objectifs professionnels et logique institutionnelle. La philosophie de gestion néolibérale de précarisation, efficacité et intensification du travail amplifie les inégalités dans la division du travail créées par des pratiques d'embauche à deux vitesses. Cet article s'ajoute à un corpus littéraire grandissant qui examine les effets de la précarité dans une profession. Il explore la restratification professionnelle du milieu universitaire à travers des entrevues de fond avec des professeurs de deux universités en Ontario qui discutent de leur perception de leurs propres rôles et identités professionnelles dans l'environnement universitaire. Les résultats suggèrent que les expériences quotidiennes dans le milieu universitaire reflètent des perspectives et des comportements agentiques des professeurs titulaires et contractuels alors qu'ils s'efforcent de soutenir leurs identités professionnelles.
Mots-clés *:* restratification, précarité, corps enseignant contractuel, nouvelle gestion publique, logiques institutionnelles, identité professionnelle

INTRODUCTION

Universities are a $45-billion enterprise (Universities Canada, 2025). Regarded as centres of learning, research, and business, these "multiversities" are shaped by internal and external pressures to perform (Kerr, 1963). These pressures, driven by neo-liberal economic and political ideologies, push universities to focus on efficiency, competition, and profitability. As a consequence, universities find themselves in a state of "almost permanent restructuring" (Ross & Savage, 2021, p. 502), constantly adjusting to retain a competitive edge through corporatization and marketization. In this work environment, professors navigate a professional identity shaped by cost-effective hiring practices and often characterized by uncertainty and instability.

Flexible employment practices reflect an unbundling of traditional academic roles as teaching responsibilities shift to contract staff, who comprised 58% of Ontario's academic workforce and delivered 50% of undergraduate courses in 2018, according to the Council of Ontario Universities (COU). Canadian universities provide limited transparency regarding their flexible employment practices. It is reasonable to suggest employment of contract faculty has increased over the years in Ontario and Canada, but also that it is unlikely to be as high as the United Kingdom (79%), United States (68%), and Australia (70%), where neo-liberalism has been embraced more strongly (Colby, 2023; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2024; Smithers et al., 2020).

The decline in tenured positions and simultaneous rise in contract faculty are often attributed to government funding cuts. However, Pasma and Shaker (2018) argue this shift results from administrative decisions as faculty appointments vary across institutions and departments, noting the increase in casual and limited-term faculty positions do not correspond to changes in market demand within disciplines or individual career preferences. Similarly, Romard and Robinson (2023) highlight that while general administrative costs in Ontario universities increased by 14.4% between 2001 and 2020, spending on teaching and research per student declined by 9.6%. They attribute this downward trend to increased student-professor ratios, reduction in tenured faculty, and greater reliance on contract staff.

Two-tiered hiring practices, while cost-effective, create workplace tensions and inequalities. Tenured and tenure-track (T/TT) professors have job security and good salaries, but are increasingly expected to secure external research funding to ease institutional financial pressures. Their contract counterparts face precarious, low-paid teaching positions. When hired on a per-course basis, contract faculty typically receive less than 50% of what T/TT professors are paid for conducting the same class (Ellis-Hale & Copplestone, 2019). This wage disparity is unprecedented among high-skilled professionals (Kezar et al., 2019). Two-tiered hiring practices in academia illustrate what some professions scholars call restratification: divisions and inequalities within professions that affect identity, collegiality, and unity (Freidson, 1986; Waring, 2014). Drawing on interviews conducted between 2016 and 2018 with Ontario faculty, this study explores how the division of labour and the rise of contract faculty affect a united sense of common professional goals and identity within the professoriate. Although the data is a few years old, neo-liberal trends of cost-cutting measures, including two-tiered hiring practices, have amplified since the interviews were conducted, suggesting the findings are as pertinent as ever.

BACKGROUND

Each Canadian university is a not-for-profit autonomous corporation with the ability to define its own budget in terms of labour costs and investments (Field et al., 2014). Yet, most institutions adopt a similar new public management (NPM) approach to higher education in response to declining government funding. Federal and provincial government funding, once 83% of operating revenue in 1982 is now below 50% (Canadian Union of Public Employees, 2025). Coined in the 1990s, NPM describes a neo-liberal managerial philosophy that emphasizes efficiency, profitability, quantifiable outputs, cost-cutting, and bureaucratic control (Hood & Jackson, 1991).

New public management is more of a "movement" than a specific management style (Hood, 2000). It reproduces the lean management philosophy of the private sector and applies it to university administration and management (Hyndman & Lapsley, 2016; Lewis, 2007; Ross & Savage, 2021). The market-driven approach to higher education reflects Ritzer's (1998) McDonaldization thesis, which suggests that universities, like fast-food chains, focus on standardizing and simplifying services through technology, reducing personal decision-making opportunities for employees. The focus on efficiency comes at the expense of the holistic nature of academic work, leading to an unbundling of skills, a diminishing sense of autonomy, and deprofessionalization (Besbris & Petre, 2020; Lewis, 2007).

The unbundling of the traditional three pillars of teaching, research, and service results in tasks once associated with professors increasingly assigned to what MacFarlane (2011) terms "para-academics" hired on temporary contracts, including lecturers, student advisors, and research managers. Such workplace reforms, often paired with budget cuts, lead to a "dilution of professional identity, loss of autonomy, and weakening of professional authority" (Besbris & Petre, 2020, p. 1525). As control becomes more impersonal and embedded in the corporate cultural structure and workplace social norms, employees are less likely to rebel (Ritzer, 1998). Workers are also likely to experience intensification of work and elongated workweeks. Not surprisingly, from the employees' perspective, work becomes less intellectually and emotionally rewarding (Braverman, 1974).

Investment priorities in Canadian universities often favour administration, capital projects, and financial reserves, while faculty and students receive less focus (Ellis-Hale & Copplestone, 2019; Kezar et al., 2019). Universities tend to prioritize research, which boosts institutional income and prestige, but undervalues teaching (Romard & Robinson, 2023). The under-investment in tenure-track hires is a reflection of the overall shrinking proportion of funds allocated to academic faculty, resulting in university administration costs out-pacing academic rank salaries (Foster & Birdsell Bauer, 2018; Romard & Robinson, 2023).

Differences across academic strata are also influenced by a "market flooded" with PhD holders competing for limited tenure-track positions (McGinn, 2023). The number of Canadian students graduating with PhDs doubled between 2002 and 2017, yet the number of assistant professor positions declined by 15% (Council of Canadian Academies, 2021). Consequently, most PhD graduates, regardless of gender or discipline, face part-time or temporary academic employment even though many seek full-time, permanent positions in academia (Foster & Birdsell Bauer, 2018). While many PhD graduates find work in government and other sectors, the overproduction of PhD graduates diminishes the social and economic rewards traditionally tied to academia. The willingness to settle for less, however, may result in professional ostracization by more successful peers (Freidson, 2001).

The conflict between managerial and professional values disrupts academic identity, as professors navigate conflicting organizational logics. Academics historically embraced professionalism as an organizational form that emphasized a commitment to knowledge advancement, collegial governance, peer review, and autonomy in exercising expertise both individually and collectively (Argento et al., 2020; Bucher & Stelling, 1969; Freidson, 1986). However, the restructuring of academic work diminishes a sense of professionalism and creates divisions within the workforce, particularly between tenured and contract faculty (Bévort & Suddaby, 2016; Noordegraaf, 2007). Working conditions, such as job security and opportunities for advancement, impact professional identity differently across academic strata.

Professional identity is defined as a (somewhat fluid) sense of self as a professional that shapes behaviour (Alvesson et al., 2008). It is demonstrated through a sense of belonging and commitment to a profession, alongside shared beliefs about how professional duties should be performed (Barbour & Lammers, 2015). While institutional logics also influence perceptions of the proper way to approach work, professional

identity ultimately guides how individuals react (Barbour & Lammers, 2015; Pifer & Baker, 2016). Tenured and contract faculty follow distinctly divergent professional paths, creating divisions in professional identity, a fractured sense of collegiality, and a weakened academic community (Freidson, 1986; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Waring, 2014).

A growing body of literature explores what happens to professional identity when managerial and professional logics collide. According to Noordegraaf (2007), professionals might respond by adopting a hybrid identity, developing attachment and beliefs relevant to both; for example, a commitment to efficiency and service quality. Research has shown, however, that such hybrid identities can be fragile as the conflicting organizational logics push and pull workers in different directions, leading some to emphasize one identity over another (Bévort & Suddaby, 2016; Pache & Santos, 2013). Less research has explored variations in identity across dimensions of security and precarity. Despite similarities in training and work tasks, professional identities might vary as a result of differing working conditions and opportunities.

Within the academic workplace, clear divisions exist between contract and T/TT professors due to their differing working conditions. Tenured and tenure-track professors have permanency of appointment and enjoy economic security with little fear of job loss due to the quality of their teaching, focus of research, or lack of popularity for particular ideas or viewpoints. They also participate in administrative duties and have a voice in decision making. Tenured and tenure-track professors are guaranteed a certain number of courses per year, averaging 3.2 courses annually in Ontario (COU, 2018). In contrast, contract faculty lack course guarantees but must teach twice as many courses in order to earn a living wage. They often receive little course development time, resulting in work outside of their contract prior to term, as well as potential student and grading issues after the contract is complete. Not guaranteed financial remuneration to attend departmental meetings or participate in committees, contract faculty have few opportunities for administrative input.

Another key differentiator between T/TT and contract faculty concerns office space. Professions scholars have argued physical workplace design encourages focus and effective performance, as well as reflecting and even enhancing professional status (Macdonald, 1989). Permanent private offices signal legitimacy and a sense of belonging. In this sense, office space also signals professionalism, with its hallmarks of autonomy, expertise, and service toward others (Macdonald, 1989; Siebert et al., 2018). Neo-liberal reforms often result in the reconfiguration of professional spaces to reduce access to private spaces, signalling deprofessionalization (Baldry & Barnes, 2012; Siebert et al., 2018). Contract faculty are particularly impacted because they seldom have private offices.

To summarize, research has documented the changing academic workplace, with a particular focus on contract faculty and their working conditions (Field & Jones, 2016; Foster & Birdsell Bauer, 2018; Rajagopal, 2002). More work remains to be done to understand the experiences of faculty across hiring positions, as well as the impact of restratification on professional identity. To address this gap, our research is guided by the following research questions: (1) In what ways is restratification experienced among T/TT and contract professors, or do they identify as members of a single profession with common goals and identity? (2) How does the rank of contract and T/TT shape professors' professional sense of belonging and attachment?

DATA AND METHODS

Findings are drawn from 31 semi-structured interviews with contract and T/TT professors at two southwestern Ontario universities to obtain a fulsome view of professors' working conditions and how, in turn, these working conditions impact professors' sense of belonging and identity within academia. Conducted between 2016 and 2018, the interviews encouraged participant self-reflection about their own position and role within the academic workplace. Originally part of two research projects on how two-tiered hiring practices affect the student learning environment, the interviews were broad, capturing many dimensions of professors' work experi-

ences. Data from these interviews also provide a historical view of precarity in academia. Many of the documented challenges continue to play a role in shaping the academic workplace, such as persistent government underfunding and declining federal research funding. These factors have led to a workplace characterized by an increased reliance on contract faculty, a greater emphasis on securing research funding, and a rise in administrative duties as professors retire without being replaced (Usher & Balfour, 2023).

All participants are referred to as "professors," regardless of hiring position or official job title. This stance is in keeping with Freidson's (2001) advice to "treat 'a' profession as all those who have received the same qualifying vocational training" (p. 142). To be included in the studies, professors had to be teaching undergraduates in the faculties of art, humanities, and social sciences. These faculties were chosen because they tend to hire the majority of contract professors (Foster & Birdsell Bauer, 2018). While characteristics unique to the specific universities may affect the experiences of the professors, the two institutions share similarities. Both are research-oriented and classified as comprehensive universities, offering a wide range of undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees. Ethics board approval was received from each school.

The sampling frame was created from publicly available emails listed on the university websites. Webpages, however, were not always current, making it difficult to determine whether professors no longer worked at their universities or were on sabbaticals. At one university, 231 professors' names were listed. Only 21 of the 73 contract faculty had email addresses listed. The 52 unpublished email addresses were recreated based on the university's formula of the first initial followed by the last name with @universityname.ca. A total of 148 professors were listed on the second university's webpages, including 11 contract faculty listed without emails. There was no apparent pattern to email addresses, and no further attempts were made to contact them. It is likely this recruitment strategy undercounted part-time faculty who, given the temporary nature of their positions, may not have been listed on the public websites.

A total of 11 contract (seven women and four men), one woman limited-term assistant, seven tenure-track assistant (four women and three men), and 12 tenured (six women and six men) professors agreed to be interviewed (see Table 1). The gender ratio reflects how women are more likely to participate in studies than men and is not necessarily reflective of gender equality in the academic workplace. At the time of the interviews, women were overrepresented among contract professors, but underrepresented in T/TT positions. A Statistics Canada (2023) report indicated that had slightly improved, with women now making up the majority (51%) of assistant professors but still underrepresented among tenured professors (44% among associate professors, and 31% among full professors).

The recruitment and interviewing process was the same for all participants. Professors were emailed an invitation to participate. Upon their acceptance, an interview was conducted at the professors' preferred location (i.e., office, café, or booked office space). The semi-structured interviews ranged from 46 minutes to 131 minutes, with the average being about 60 minutes. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed by the first author, who also conducted the initial coding and analysis.

Transcripts were analyzed without the use of software, utilizing a thematic approach in which it is acknowledged that researchers play an active role in exploring, identifying, and interpreting patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic coding facilitated the discovery of relationships and causes and effects, as well as commonalities in participants' perceptions of their academic workplace. As the two authors worked together to refine and re-categorize themes and sub-themes, the story of the data became clearer in that contract and tenured professors experience the workplace differently. As themes emerged, subsequent analyses were conducted aimed at unpacking themes relating to restratification and professional identity, which, according to Barbour and Lammers (2015), include a sense of belonging, attachment, and beliefs about working. Evidence of restratification became particularly evident, as did the identity challenges experienced by contract faculty.

Table 1
Professors' Hiring Status, Gender, and Length of Employment

Position	Gender	How Long at University
University A		
Contract professor1A	Woman	5 years
Contract professor2A	Man	7 years
Contract professor3A	Woman	8 years
Contract professor4A	Woman	22 years
Assistant professor1A (tenure track)	Woman	6 years
Assistant professor2A (tenure track)	Woman	5 years
Assistant professor3 (tenure track)	Man	2 years
Assistant professor4 (tenure track)	Man	1 year
Assistant professor5A (tenure track)	Woman	5 years
Tenured professor1A	Woman	10 years
Tenured professor2A	Man	12 years
Tenured professor3A	Woman	9 years
Tenured professor4A	Man	12 years
Tenured professor5A	Woman	Unknown
University B		
Contract professor1B	Woman	6 years
Contract professor2B	Man	7 years
Contract professor3B	Man	Unknown
Contract professor4B	Woman	19 years
Contract professor5B	Man	Unknown
Contract professor6B	Woman	20 years
Contract professor7B	Woman	16 years
Two-year contract assistant professor1B	Woman	2 years
Assistant professor1B (tenure track)	Man	6 years
Assistant professor2B (tenure track)	Woman	6 years
Tenured professor1B	Woman	30 years
Tenured professor2B	Woman	11 years
Tenured professor3B	Man	18 years
Tenured professor4B	Man	6 years
Tenured professor5B	Man	13 years
Tenured professor6B	Woman	Unknown
Tenured professor 7B	Man	18 years

FINDINGS

Fragmentation and Restratification

In the interviews, contract and T/TT professors discussed workplace tensions and professional belonging. While they similarly experienced a culture of overwork where increased workloads and heightened performance expectations were the norm, professors did not view themselves as a unified scholarly community. It became evident that their workplace was fragmented by hiring status.

Tenured and tenure-track faculty formed connections with each other, often through casual conversations over coffee or in the hallway. In fostering a sense of social and professional belonging, these informal interactions helped build a collective professional identity through the sharing of tacit knowledge, work habits, and social support. Contract faculty, however, were often excluded. Assistant professor1A explained:

> Just the fact we are all here, all the time and interfacing in all these different ways, means we are more likely to be collegial and supportive of each other than build those relationships with sessionals...I don't think that level of collegiality exists [with contract faculty]. It's not because you don't want to. A lot of it is structural.

One structural barrier is spatial in nature. The majority of T/TT faculty have offices within a designated department section of a building, while contract faculty typically share office space in this area, limiting their time there, or are assigned office space separate from the department. In either case, contract faculty have fewer opportunities to meet with colleagues and students. Having a private office reaffirmed T/TT professors' sense of identity, status, and belonging:

> I have an office. It is important. It is not overrated. Having your name on the door, signifies you are someone who is not transitory. You are the real deal. (two-year contract assistant professor1B)

In contrast, contract professor6B discussed the message a lack of private office sends:

> I don't get the same context to meet students that full-time professors do. I think that sends a message to not only the students, but also to me. It says I am not part of this university. It says you are not considered. You are not valued. You are simply a number. There is nothing in those meeting spaces that says I belong. I can bring in a box of Kleenex...it may or may not be there the next time I am in the office...I have a student who, sitting across from me, is upset, and I have to say, I am sorry, let me go get you some Kleenex... then I go up and down the halls looking for someone who will lend me their box of Kleenex. It diminishes what we do.

Contract faculty often teach across multiple departments and universities, further limiting their time in any one space and decreasing attachment. As contract professor1B noted, "You are not part of the system... As a contract worker, you just fly into work, and fly back out again." Some contract professors described themselves as "invisibles" and "ghosts."

For T/TT faculty, a sense of belonging and attachment were enhanced through participation in department governance. These faculty members attended department meetings where they discussed department and university goals and policies, set curricula, planned programming, and participated in hiring, among other administrative activities. Assistant professor1B explained how sitting on departmental and institutional committees also helped to build professional networks. In contrast, contract faculty were rarely involved in such meetings, as participation in governance is not part of their contracts. Accordingly, involvement meant negative earnings, because participation was voluntary. Contract professor5B stated:

> Every year they ask for a representative. I look at it and think, I can't do it. I do recognize how constraining the power dynamics can be in subtle ways that temper what you can and cannot refuse.

Contract professor6B expressed dismay at being asked to work for free:

> Nobody around that table says we should take part of our department budget and recognize contract faculty, who sit on these committees [for free], with an honorarium. Not one person does that. I don't think they want to recognize the exploitation of contract faculty, because if they did, shouldn't they be doing something about it?

Despite being hired to only teach, some contract faculty perceived their exclusion from committees as a professional slight. Tenured professor5A acknowledged the situation is delicate because "you don't want to ask something…that is beyond their pay." Contract faculty often have years of experience teaching; however, their insights and experiences were seldom heard. Tenured professor1A referred to this as "a lost resource."

Rather than seeing themselves as part of the same profession, contract professors voiced feelings of estrangement and a lack of belonging. They reported feeling disconnected:

> I find myself unknowledgeable about what goes on in each department. Students ask me about other classes, and I have no idea. (contract professor2B)

Excluded from meetings, lacking office space, and not kept up to date on department initiatives, contract professors reported they found themselves unable to advise students about department courses.

Tenured and tenure-track professors were more likely to report a sense of belonging in their departments and support in their various activities. For example, assistant professor2A said, "I feel like I belong," explaining how the department actively supported their teaching, research, and collaborations. In contrast, contract professor1A described feelings of professional isolation:

> I am working on a book. I just don't have the energy, sometimes, with constantly teaching these courses… And, I don't get paid to do research…I don't have a travel budget, which many tenured colleagues have… There is no real sense of collegiality… Faculty are not that interested in taking the time to walk [you] through a course…. There is no university support.

While many T/TT professors said they guest-lectured and collaborated in research projects with colleagues, only tenured professor1A said they included and financially compensated a contract professor in the development of a course. Only one contract professor said they were included in research and course collaborations in their department. Professors acknowledged contract and T/TT professors spent little time together, which diminished professional opportunities for contract faculty.

At times, contract faculty expressed a lack of attachment, admitting to feelings of "apathy" about becoming more involved, since their contracts were short-term and the university "has not committed to me." Several contract professors, however, challenged this perspective, arguing the perception of contract professors as temporary was unfair and often untrue:

> There is a constant claim it is temporary, a stop gap measure, but that is nonsense… Sessional work most definitely, across the board, subsidizes the teaching [of tenured professors]. It is wrong to call us part-time because I have taught here full-time for years. For me, a full-time load is double what the tenured faculty teach. (contract professor4B)

Even though they must reapply every year for employment, the claim of "temporary" is questionable. At the time of the interviews, nine of the contract professors had been teaching at their university for five years or more, and four reported teaching for 15 years or more. In the 2024–25 academic year, five were still teaching on a contract basis in the same departments at their university.

Contract faculty expressed how they feel like they subsidize the lighter loads of their T/TT counterparts, and are clearly disadvantaged:

> They look at us as failed academics who were not good enough to get tenured. I may not have been good enough to get tenure, but you hire me every year. (contract professor2B)

> They [T/TT professors] have offices. They can vote. I can't be on Senate. I can't be on board of governors. I can't do that stuff. I am prevented [by university policies]. I am not asked to be on curriculum [committee]. You [tenured professors] get to make these decisions. You get to push these boundaries in a way that is protected. I don't even have academic freedom...I cannot necessarily say what I want at a department meeting because you hire me. (contract professor6B)

The comments highlight tensions in the relationship between contract and T/TT professors within the two-tiered employment system, where some faculty enjoy lighter teaching loads and greater research opportunities, while others face precarious positions focused solely on teaching. All the participants, except one contract professor, said they were conducting research, with the majority describing how research brings them joy and adds to the quality of their teaching. Contract faculty, however, are not paid to research and, therefore, are often self-funded. At the same time, T/TT professors are also encouraged to find outside funding sources for their research. In acknowledging the pressure to research, assistant professor3A said:

> It is all about perceptions.... You are competing against people who seem to have higher potential. It's all about imaginings; perceived outputs.

Tenured professor3B added, "if you offer state-of-the-art classes then professors have to be doing state-of-the-art work themselves."

Tenured and tenure-track professors expressed work-related dissatisfaction, linking it to a culture of overwork. They discussed how emphasis on quantifiable performance (i.e., publications, grant funding) creates pressures, leading to frustration and a sense of dissonance. Tenured professor1A admitted the "university would like if I had more funding" for research. In expressing frustration over countless hours spent on unsuccessful grant applications, tenured professor2A described the pressure

> to be productive, especially on the research side and the administrative side is such that we cannot afford time with our students.... You cannot believe the administrative burden we now experience.

Administrative burdens have also increased because of the decline of T/TT faculty whose contracts contain service components. As reliance on contract instructors increases, T/TT faculty are expected to handle more service and administrative work. Assistant professor1B joked the administrative workload reflected how they had replaced three people because of tenured professors retiring and not being replaced. Tenured professor4B reported:

> In our department we have had five retirements in as many years and no hires to replace those people. The jobs, poof, are gone...it's just business.

Overwork can lead to increased stress levels and poor well-being (Moeller & Chung-Yan, 2013).

Tenured professor2A acknowledged the pressure to secure research grants, publish, and meet administrative demands may interfere with commitments to students:

> You get worn down by the challenges... the struggles to generate output... The expectation in terms of publications and research grants and administration... It's just not tenable for us to be stereotypical connected wonderful teachers.

At times, this created tension with contract professors, who prioritized students and teaching over other commitments. Most professors noted that students make use of time before and after lecture to address questions and concerns. A woman contract professor1A discussed how this also becomes unpaid labour:

> I have 10 students at my desk. But I never turn them away...I am supposed to finish at 9:50. I leave at quarter after.

A man tenured professor1A also indicated the acceptability of the use of time before lecture or after lecture, but added the caveat: "I am okay with that [questions after class] unless I have to be somewhere." These responses highlight conflicting beliefs about work, suggesting that differences in attitudes may stem from contrasting professional identities held by T/TT and contract professors, but also between gender. Contract professor3A used humour to address the time constraints she faces:

> I am a mother of two. And I do research. It's not as if I don't have anything to do [except teach]. I tell my husband I need a wife.

Institutional norms reinforce a gendered division of labour, often resulting in women professors balancing work with family duties, compounding the pressures they face (CohenMiller et al., 2022).

Both contract and T/TT professors reported insufficient time resources to practise their profession effectively. The system continues because professors have a "willingness to exploit their free time for work" (Flaherty, 2014). Unpaid overtime becomes normative, reflecting the organizational expectations that reside in the assumption of workload efficiency. Both contract and T/TT faculty experience elongated workweeks. Tenured professorB4 succinctly states, "work has infiltrated life." However, it is unclear whether academic professionals recognized their shared experience in this regard, as each remained focused on the challenges posed by their respective contracts.

Professional Identity and Job Titles

Job titles varied widely across universities. Contract faculty might hold formal job titles such as instructor, lecturer, or assistant professor, while T/TT faculty typically hold ranks of assistant, associate or full professor. Job titles shape workplace identities and symbolize both social and professional standing (Braverman, 1974). Denial of a stable worker identity through job title inconsistencies leads to feelings of the "four A's - anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation" (Standing, 2011, p. 19).

Regardless of hiring position, most participants referred to themselves as "professor"; however, the disclosure of professional status was a personal choice not necessarily linked to gender or hiring rank. Not all professors openly reveal their professional status to students:

> I would not [volunteer my credentials] because I am embarrassed. I feel like I did not make the cut. It is not something that I publicize...I would think it is not uncommon for people in my position to keep that part quiet. (two-year contract assistant professor1B)

> I will tell students my story and give them a little background. Sometimes it is to establish credibility. (tenured professor3B)

> I will casually call myself professor and when people call me that, I won't correct them. It is a job title; everyone is called professor. (contract professor4B)

Contract faculty acknowledged the nature of their hiring status is eventually revealed as students request meetings and academic references or question what courses they will teach the following semester. Similarly, T/TT professors said their working conditions are also revealed through their research activities and presence on campus. The majority of professors agreed the onus was on students to be aware of who is standing at the front of the lecture hall. Many students, however, lack knowledge of the culture behind the organization of the roles, tasks, and institutional identity of their professors.

Confusion surrounding job titles is exacerbated when different terms are used to refer to the same contract professors in different contexts. For example, at one university, contract professors were called "contract academic staff," but on the faculty webpage were listed as "instructor." The university refused union requests to

change the title to "contract academic faculty." This decision was distressing and disappointing to both contract and tenured professors:

> We should be called contract academic faculty. There is respect to self and your work. (contract professor1B)

> Names matter. People who name, have the power. How things are classified and named is important. (tenured professor6B)

> I think instructor is a way to navigate that you are not a professor. The normal jargon is that for someone who teaches in a university, they are a professor. But I am not an assistant nor associate professor or a full professor. I am not any of those things. (contract professor2B)

Contract instructors have a particularly difficult time navigating this environment that they perceive as categorizing them as "less than." Most are called professor by students, but not necessarily by their employers and colleagues. Even establishing an email signature can be a challenge. Four contract professors avoided listing their job titles, preferring to emphasize their PhD and their university and department affiliation, perhaps implying they hold a tenured position. As contract professor6B explained, "We propagate the illusion as a form of proper armour for our experience." Here, in line with Goffman (1956), a front-stage positive public impression was actively cultivated while the precarious backstage reality was obscured.

All but one of the contract faculty had a PhD. They met traditional requirements for entry into academia but could only find precarious employment. This created an identity disjuncture. On the one hand, contract faculty identified as academics, but on the other, it became clear a distinction was made at the university between them and their T/TT counterparts in terms of professional titles, voice, and working conditions. Professors expressed frustration with a university system that denies secure employment and a secure professional identity:

> They could create jobs. They could create salaried lines and hire people. They could do that tomorrow. They just don't want to. It's ideology. It's all about how to spin it.... The issue around contract faculty really emanates from above. It is structural and systemic. (tenured professor4B)

> Being a sessional and not having tenured position where you know exactly next year where and what you will be doing... that's terrible. It grinds on your nerves over the years. It makes you unhappy. It makes you put on weight. It makes you depressed. It makes people unhappy.... It would be absolutely no problem for the university to offer us permanent positions because there is, on an ongoing basis, a need for lecturers. (contract professor3A)

For these professors, it was the university that was denying contract faculty professional opportunities. While many shared this viewpoint, it was also the case that some linked their precarity to personal failure. Contract professor2B disclosed that being a member of the precariat in academia is associated with "you're not good enough to get tenure." In such a context, the ability to construct a positive professional identity was compromised. The nature of contract employment discouraged a sense of belonging, as well as positive beliefs and attitudes toward work, negatively impacting professional identity. One union sought to recognize the role contract faculty play in the learning environment by introducing a "Century Club" for contract professors who had taught 100 courses. This was, at best, a "bittersweet honour" that, while challenging the notion that their work was merely temporary, nonetheless did not confer much status or a positive identity.

Overall, interviews revealed that, despite workplace stresses and strains, T/TT professors felt a sense of belonging and attachment that their contract contemporaries did not. The former were better able to construct identities as professionals. Their job titles, office space, and

inclusion in department committees signalled that they belonged and attained a desired level of professionalism. In contrast, contract faculty struggled with identity, with variable job titles, lack of voice in department affairs, and lack of space to do their job. Although they sought to embrace a professional identity, the realities of their employment made this a challenge. Structural pressures on both groups of workers enhanced tensions that ultimately spilled over into the lecture hall and interactions at work. This resulted in cynicism, especially for contract professionals:

> Students trust that who is at the front of the classroom has their best interests at heart. But they are wrong. The system does not support them. The system does not even support its own teachers. (contract professor3A)

> I am a just-in-time faculty member: literally, the status of my labour. I am brought in on demand in relation to the wider economy of education. (contract professor5B)

Interestingly, the latter comment reflects how contract faculty may be moving away from the professional identification with their T/TT counterparts toward a greater alignment of other groups of workers outside of academia, such as the service industry.

DISCUSSION

The re-organizing of academic work to unbundle teaching from research and service bifurcates the professoriate. Currie and Newson (1998) describe how flexible labour practices result in a divided university faculty: one group receives higher pay and benefits while the other experiences insecure positions and low pay. The interviews, conducted in 2016 and 2018, provide clear evidence of restratification and tensions with the academic workplace.

Tenured and tenure-track faculty continue to face dwindling numbers as tenured professors retire, but are not replaced, as universities increasingly rely on contract faculty.Despite a 10% increase in student enrolment between 2017 and 2025 (Statistics Canada, 2025a), the proportion of assistant professors among full-time faculty rose just 0.8% while the number of associate and full professors declined 2.5% (Statistics Canada, 2025b). It is unclear whether the full-time assistant professor positions are contract or the first step toward tenure associated with job security and professional autonomy. Statistics Canada (2025b) further shows that the proportion of full-time faculty ranks below assistant professors, such as lecturers, instructors, and other teaching staff increased 1.7%. No current numbers are available on part-time contract.

Managerial logics clash with a professional logic that valorizes autonomy, collegiality, and the pursuit of knowledge (Argento et al., 2020). While workers can choose to prioritize one logic over the other or develop hybrid identities, it is clear that both T/TT professors and contract professors value professionalism. For T/TT professors this appears to be tied to collegiality, research, teaching, and status, as well as resentment over the increased demands of administrative work. At the same time, contract faculty struggle to maintain a professional identity; their limited voice in department affairs, substandard office space, and varying job titles negatively impact their sense of belonging and attachment.

It is possible that this sense of professional belonging has been further negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, but there is limited evidence to clarify whether this is indeed the case. It is interesting to note, the professorial responses were similar at the two universities, reflecting how the universities share comparable workplaces shaped by similar institutional responses to political and economic internal and external forces.

Noordegraaf (2007) argues that, when faced with conflicting institutional logics, professionals may adopt a stable identity blending managerial and professional logics. This identity, “organizing professionalism,” encapsulates managerialism into professionalism. We find there are hints of organizing professionalism in the professors’ comments. Many T/TT professors appear to have adapted understandings

of professionalism to prioritize research funding and research productivity. Perhaps it is the resulting under-prioritization of teaching that leads contract faculty to the perception that their contributions to the universities are devalued. Some contract professors are more critical of such narratives, but their efforts to earn a living from teaching in university settings require them to continually reinvent themselves to obtain work, becoming efficient instructors who strive to meet university needs while carving out an identity in circumstances where this is difficult. Despite these signs of organizing professionalism, however, it is not the case that all tensions between managerialism and professionalism have been resolved for these professors.

The separation of traditional faculty roles associated with teaching, research, and service has affected all segments within the academic workplace. Further, two-tiered hiring practices leave little or no space for contract faculty to achieve the milestones of success, respectability, and social standing traditionally associated with the position of tenured professor. As new practices of work become normalized and institutionalized, tenured professors also find themselves working long hours to demonstrate productivity and generate quantifiable results.

Restratification generates tension among academic workers, disrupting and reshaping professional identities. It limits professors' ability to find common cause and work together to resist the impact of managerialism on their lives and careers. The result is little space for contestation. Professors are not alone in experiencing the blurring of organizational and professional boundaries. Studies have shown that engineers as well as health care workers are also experiencing the emergence of managerial-professional hybrid workers and professional restratification (Adams, 2020; Ferguson et al., 2021).

Ultimately, contract and T/TT faculty endure the neo-liberal "do more with less" philosophy, resulting in increased workloads and elongated work weeks. The neo-liberalism transformation of the academic workplace proves it can be transformed again. Higher education is the most unionized sector in Canada (Dobbie & Robinson, 2008). Beyond the scope of this article is the role that unions play. Future research, however, could take on the challenge of examining what role unions play in creating or exacerbating cross-group solidarity, which would re-affirm the professional identity of professors.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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