Changing Workplaces Review Presentation

Introduction

My name is Camille Isaacs, and I currently hold a CLTA (Contractually Limited Term Appointment) as Assistant Professor at OCAD University of Toronto. I also represent OCADFA, which is the faculty association, where I was a director of the board for 2 years. Thank you for the opportunity to present my comments.

Message

I graduated with a PhD in English in 2006, and I have been precariously employed ever since. I spent the first 5 of those years as a sessional, teaching one or two courses a year depending on the convenience and needs of the university. I was paid, on average $6000 per course and I never knew from one year to the next or from one semester to the next whether I would have courses available to me. At its worst, I was holding down jobs in 3 different locations in order to make ends meet. At first, I was dependent on my partner (who did have permanent work) in order to get by and in order to get benefits, because, of course, as a sessional, part-time worker, I was not entitled to benefits. Nor could I contribute to a university pension, nor was I entitled to any professional development funding, which is critical for emerging scholars to establish themselves and to thereby get any permanent position that arises. Many sessional, highly qualified instructors are dependent on their loved ones, who often help sustain them until they can obtain permanent employment.

In 2008 I had a son and went back to work 6 months later in order to not lose my right of first refusal. Many university departments have a policy that if you have taught a course in the past as a sessional, you have the right to take up or refuse that course in

future before it can be offered to anybody else. At this point in my career, I was still only

teaching 1 or 2 courses a year, and I couldn't afford to lose that opportunity. So I went

back to work, while struggling to find someone to look after my son. And because I was

working only minimally prior to having him, I wasn't entitled to any maternity benefits.

In 2009, my relationship ended and I found myself not only a single mother, but

without benefits. Shortly thereafter I started a journey that many sessionals know all too

well – stringing together a series of jobs that equal full-time in hours, if not in salary or

benefits. In addition to teaching 1 course at OCAD, I also took up teaching 3

communication courses at Sheridan College in Oakville. For the record, I live in east

Toronto. Commuting to Oakville for an 8:30 class meant that I had to drop my son off at

a sitter at 7 in the morning (most daycares start at 7:30) in order to get to work on time. I

was also doing some freelance editorial work a few days a week. Although I was

employed 5 days a week, my annual salary at this point was probably around $25,000 a

year. And despite working the equivalent of full-time hours, I still did not qualify for any

benefits, nor any professional development funding. And because I was commuting from

place to place, this also left very little time for my own research, another critical factor to

obtaining permanent employment.

Luckily for me, I was able to secure the CLTA position at OCAD in 2011. This

position came with a significant bump in salary; however, I was still lacking in

permanency because my contract had to be re-negotiated every 1-2 years. As a CLTA, I

was teaching some of the exact same courses I taught as a sessional, yet I was paid

approximately 10 times more. This highlights one of the problems with universities'

reliance on sessional staff and creates an inequality. Sessional instructors are paid about 10 times less than tenure-track faculty, despite teaching the same courses, and having the same level of education. In addition, I found it extremely difficult to plan for the future because I never knew with certainty if my contract would be renewed. And while I finally qualified for benefits at this point, and had the ability to contribute to the university pension, I still did not qualify for professional development funding. This put me at a significant disadvantage because when competing for jobs both within and without the university, my competitors would have access to money for books, travel for conferences, and university-led funding opportunities that I did not have.

As of July 1st of this year, I will have finally achieved what many PhD graduates wish for: a tenure-track position. With it will come a significant bump in salary, increased benefits, and finally, professional development funding. I am fully aware of how rare my situation is. At 9 years post-PhD defence, many would have considered that I was beyond my sell-by date. In fact, this was probably the last year I would have been able to work in academia had I not secured a tenure-track position. At OCAD, and many other institutions, one can only hold a CLTA position for a limited amount of time. Had I not secured this position, OCAD could have let me go in 2 years, and replaced me with another precariously employed person, who would have started his or her own journey. I have heard that the average time to permanent employment for recent PhD graduates is between 6 and 8 years. At 9 years post-defence, I knew, despite my years of experience, that I was quickly becoming unemployable in academia. My situation is also unique in that most non-permanent academics give up on finding a tenure-track job before getting one. They either can no longer afford to live on such low wages, without benefits for

themselves and dependents, or to rely so heavily on family members. When the position I will take up shortly was posted, there were over 80 applicants. The city is full of underemployed PhD graduates – all qualified – who are unable to secure permanent work in their field.

Conclusion

OCAD, like a lot of universities, relies heavily on sessional and other non-permanent staff in order to meet its teaching needs. I believe the current ratio of tenure-track to non-permanent staff at OCAD is around 50%, despite our own memorandum of agreement stating that number should not exceed 30% for non-permanent staff. My own work history shows the inequality that abounds in the system. Why was I, and other sessional faculty, paid 10 times less than permanent faculty for teaching the same courses? This appears to go against any policies of equal pay for work of equal value.

I am now 45 years old, but I was only able to start contributing to a company pension 3 years ago, thereby significantly lowering my overall pension benefits whenever it is that I am able to retire. Even though I have been employed at OCAD for 9 years, my first 6 years do not count towards any pension benefits.

The ad hoc nature of sessional scheduling also makes it extremely difficult for parents of young children to plan for daycare needs. How does one arrange secure, safe childcare when one is given minimal notice prior to teaching a course? To how many different locations will a sessional instructor have to go in order to afford that childcare?

Lately, OCAD -- and other institutions -- has instituted a teaching-intensive stream that purportedly makes up for some of the shortfalls in non-permanent academic hiring. But on closer inspection, this does not appear to be the case. The teaching-

intensive stream is still not permanent – contracts are between 3 and 5 years. And the pay

is still abysmal. These instructors are being paid the equivalent of sessionals ($6000 per

course), but they are now teaching a full-load of six courses. They are still being paid

significantly less than tenure-track faculty for teaching the same courses. And while they

now have benefits, they do not qualify for professional development funding.

I know that I am one of the lucky ones, but I am an anomaly. This is not the case

for the majority of the colleagues with whom I work. They are still struggling to get by

on minimal salary and in uncertain times. While I am grateful for the position I will take

up shortly, I cannot forget the 9 years it took me to get here, nor the colleagues who are

still in that precarious position.

Thank you for your time.