

## **Strengthening the heart of Ontario universities: making sure every academic job is a good job (Behind the Numbers; OCUFA Report)**

<http://behindthenumbers.ca/2015/11/24/strengthening-the-heart-of-ontario-universities-making-sure-every-academic-job-is-a-good-job/>

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Professors and academic librarians are at the heart of Ontario universities.

They teach courses, mentor students, and conduct research that expands our knowledge and drives our economy. So everyone with a stake in our higher education system—students, parents, businesspeople, citizens, and policymakers—should be concerned with one important question: do we have enough professors to do the teaching, mentoring, and research we need from our universities?

When it comes to Ontario, the answer for a long time has been a definitive “No.”

Over the last decade and a half, Ontario’s universities have seen a huge increase in enrolment. Between 2000-01 and 2013-14, the number of students has increased by 71 per cent.

The number of faculty has only increased by 31 per cent over the same period.

As a result, Ontario now has the worst student-to-faculty ratio in Canada, at 29-to-1. The next lowest (Quebec) is 23-to-1, while the average in the rest of Canada is 20-to-1.

To catch up with the national average, [the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations](#) (OCUFA) estimates Ontario would need to hire over 8,500 new professors by 2020.

The reason for Ontario’s poor performance in faculty hiring is not hard to identify. Of all Canada’s provinces, Ontario currently provides the lowest level of public funding to its universities, lagging the rest of the country by about 34 per cent.

Even Ontario’s sky-high tuition fees (the highest in Canada) can’t close the funding gap entirely. The truth is that Ontario’s universities are teaching more students with less money *per* student and proportionately fewer faculty than ever before.

The harmful effects of the faculty hiring gap are profound. Students in Ontario now study in huge classes. [According to research](#) by OCUFA, between 2005 and 2012, the number of first- and second-year classes with more than 100 students increased by 40 per cent. The number of fourth-year classes with more than 100 students tripled over the same period.

These are negative trends for students. More students and fewer professors means less one-on-one engagement, fewer opportunities for mentorship, and diminished chances for undergraduate students to be involved in the research projects of their professors—all of which are key indicators of student satisfaction.

Perhaps the most damaging effect of the faculty hiring gap has been the rise of precarious academic work. A large and growing number of faculty now teach on course-by-course contracts and limited-term appointments. These contract faculty positions are insecure, and many come with low pay and poor access to benefits.

It is difficult to know exactly how many of these individuals are currently teaching in Ontario because universities have been reluctant to publicize this data. But OCUFA has estimated that the number of courses taught by contract faculty has nearly doubled since 2000-01.

At Wilfrid Laurier University, for example, contract faculty now teach 52 per cent of undergraduates.

The chronic underfunding of Ontario's universities is driving this explosive growth in the number of contract faculty. After years of declining investment by the Government of Ontario, universities now lack the financial resources they need to hire more full-time faculty.

A contract faculty member—paid by the course and with no benefits or pension plan—is much cheaper than a tenure-track professor. So, university administrators have turned to precarious academics to fill the faculty hiring gap.

And let's be honest—many administrators like the “flexibility” afforded by contract employment. They can reconfigure their workforces quickly, increasing or cutting the number of contract academics as demand and budgets dictate.

But it has a huge impact on both the individuals stuck in these jobs and the quality of education provided at Ontario universities.

There is no doubt that contract faculty are gifted teachers and researchers, but they often lack the resources they need to provide an excellent learning experience to students. Many do not have offices on campus where they can meet students. Others race between teaching appointments on multiple campuses, making it difficult to be available to students much of the time.

By the very nature of their precarious positions, contract faculty can also disappear from campus from one semester to the next—leaving students without guidance from a trusted teacher, or even without a reference letter needed to pursue their academic and career goals.

Recent research also reveals the harmful effects of precarious work generally. According to the report of the Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario (PEPSO) project, workers in precarious jobs are more than twice as likely to report poor mental health than those in secure jobs. They are also less likely to volunteer or become engaged in their communities, and have a higher likelihood of feeling socially isolated.

The precariously employed are also more likely to delay starting a family and many are unable to invest in the development of their children.

Like shockwaves radiating out from the epicenter of an earthquake, precarious work hurts individuals, their families, and their communities.

The good news is that because the faculty hiring gap and the rise of precarious academic work can both be traced back to underfunding, the government has an opportunity to provide leadership to address these issues. Increased public investment would provide Ontario universities with the financial resources they need to hire more full-time faculty and improve the quality of higher education in Ontario, while lifting many out of precarious work.

It is not a given that universities will direct new funding towards hiring more full-time faculty or converting contract faculty into full-time, tenured professors. University administrators may be reluctant to give up the flexibility and control afforded by a precarious workforce.

The Government of Ontario could nudge universities in the right direction by making strong changes to employment and labour law at the conclusion of the ongoing Changing Workplaces Review. Along with many other organizations, OCUFA has made recommendations on how to raise standards and provide greater protection for faculty employed on a contract basis.

The government could also compel universities to make more data on contract faculty publicly available. With more information about how many contract faculty there are in the system, and what those individuals look like (for example, their age, gender, race, and comparative working conditions), we can better design policy interventions to end precarious academic work.

In its submission to the Ontario University Funding Formula Review, OCUFA recommended creating a new agency to oversee a more robust higher education data system in Ontario. Such an agency could improve our understanding of precarious academic work in Ontario.

OCUFA estimates that hiring the 8,500 new faculty positions needed at Ontario universities would cost around \$865 million, or about \$173 million a year, in new public investment until 2020.

Even a modest bump in the provincial operating grant to universities would support greater hiring of full-time faculty. The challenge of precarious academic work is immense and will take years to correct. We need to begin turning the tide before the problem gets worse.

No organism can survive long with a weakened heart and our universities are no exception. Ontario needs to invest in our universities to boost the number of professors and academic librarians, and to ensure that every academic job is a good job.

If we do that, we secure the quality of Ontario universities—and the success of our students—for years to come.

***Graeme Stewart and Brynne Sinclair-Waters, OCUFA staff, participate in the CCPA-Ontario's provincial budget roundtable.***