How Much is Too Much?: Obligation, Ambition, and Coercion in the Sessional Contract

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During my most recent sessional appointment, I attended a party where I was asked by another partygoer what I did for a living. When I told her that I was a university professor, she asked if I was a "real" professor or just one of those people on contract. Her question demonstrates one of the fundamental problems with sessional appointments: they generate a sentiment, often shared among sessional appointees and their colleagues, students, and communities that contract work is of lesser value than that completed by tenure-track or tenured ("real") professors. It is not news to an entire generation of academics that sessional employment in academia is accompanied by this type of alienation. At a time when tenure-track appointments in Canadian English departments have all but dried up, finding even per-course appointments has become increasingly difficult within the competitive market of recent doctoral and postdoctoral graduates. Each academic year, hundreds of well-published and highly professional intellectuals find themselves, paradoxically, both underemployed and overworked. The constant pressure to perform as researchers, pedagogues, and department members has created a labour scenario that favours university administrations. Not only is there an increasingly deep talent pool of qualified applicants to fill limited-term appointments, the

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competitive nature of the market exerts pressure upon those appointees to excel within each contract in ways that often exceed contractual obligations. Dependent upon the employment provided by sessional appointments, and often under-represented by unions, many sessional appointees feel obligated to work beyond the limits of contractual expectations in the full knowledge that doing so is a form of exploitation that impinges upon the research time necessary to obtain the portfolio required for remaining competitive within the job market and that can lead to exhaustion and burnout within the first few years of an academic career. What is perhaps most troubling about this form of exploitation is that it becomes naturalized within departments. The subtlety with which sessionals are often asked to perform duties outside of their contracts can place them in an awkward position where denying such requests may make them appear as unco-operative or even misanthropic members of a department. With re-appointment at stake, co-operating with such requests may be a means of endearing oneself to departments and administrations. This complicates the scenario further, for in a competitive job market playing the role of a collegial and responsible department member, or a "real professor," is a vital means of distinguishing oneself from the pile of CVs that inevitably stack up once a limited-term or tenure-track appointment is advertised.

It is this subtle form of coercion that I found most troubling during my own work as a sessional appointee. Outside of pervasive anxieties about job security, the desolate market, and research commitments, my work as a sessional was generally rewarding and for the most part colleagues were kind and helpful. However, it is precisely this sense of comfort within departments that unintentionally led to situations where I felt compelled to work beyond my contractual obligations. For instance, I took on extra committee work, designed new courses, worked on program revisions and departmental reviews, responded to hundreds of emails, and sat through countless meetings at which my attendance was not obligatory but was certainly expected. Taking on these roles was a personal choice, and if I had ever been given grief for refusing the work I would have been able to take up the issue with my union representative.

However, simply saying no to requests for additional work is a difficult thing to do. Always in the back of my mind was a lingering fear that if I said no, my chances of winning another contract competition within that institution would suffer. While a union representative may have helped me deal with a specific grievance about a current contract, he or she could do nothing to help me win the next one. In a competitive field where finding qualified applicants is rarely a difficulty for English departments,

it is easy to feel that each day at work is a new job interview. Therefore, when asked if I would mind following through on departmental review suggestions, or taking on an extra honours student, or doing any other similar tasks, I felt like saying no was not an option. It is likely that if I did decline such a request, my colleagues would have been understanding and would not have held it against me when the issue of contract renewal came up. However, I still worried about it, and in a market where appointments are precious commodities I felt like saying no was not a risk I could reasonably take.

This is not to say that I did not enjoy taking on additional departmental responsibilities. In many cases, they were valuable for professional development, and, perhaps more importantly, they allowed me to feel like an integral member of the department and the university community, which I gather is not always the case for sessional employees, many of whom complain about being alienated from departmental cores. I was gratified that colleagues trusted me with extra responsibilities, and I enjoyed working on creative projects, readings, and other student-focused initiatives. For the most part, the primary source of coercion for taking on these projects was my own personal ambition. Nevertheless, it is often difficult to dissociate the sense of anxiety that surrounds declining extra initiatives from a legitimate interest in the projects. Perhaps more importantly, with each new obligation came less time to devote to the research that is integral to ultimately obtaining a tenure-track appointment. Therefore, becoming overly invested in a contractual appointment often overshadowed personal obligations to research, scholarship, grant applications, job applications, and the other professional concerns important for emerging scholars. In many cases, we find ourselves working with colleagues who have been tenured for several years and who may have lost touch with the intense research expectations that are the norm for new academics. Frequently, demands are made of us by colleagues who do not fully understand why a commitment to the interests of our departments may not be foremost on our minds. Not acquiescing to demands can give such colleagues the impression that we are not congenial or are even lazy. Since these are often senior members in our departments, giving them such an impression can damage our future job prospects.

In short, the conflict between contractual obligations and departmental expectations is one that can be treacherous to negotiate. While it is easy to say that sticking to the letter of the contract is our right if we are lucky enough to be unionized employees, it is also easy to feel that doing so might have negative repercussions on our futures at specific institutions.

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It is the constant pressure to prove ourselves in the eyes of the institution that truly separates sessional academics from "real" professors; until a greater understanding of, and respect for, the precarious role of the sessional within the institution is gained at the departmental and divisional level, this situation will persist to the detriment of emerging scholars and institutional integrity alike. While there is no easy solution to a problem that is based more on subtle psychological coercion than explicit exploitation, a key to alleviating the anxiety it causes lies in the responsibility of tenure-track and tenured members of departments. By propagating a spirit of collegial solidarity wherein full-time departmental members remind sessionals of their contractual rights and obligations and help sessionals stand up for those rights at administrative meetings, they will make sessional instructors feel confident about the integrity of their roles within specific departments.