Precarious Labour in Canadian Anthropology:

A Preliminary Report from the CASCA Labour Committee

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ABSTRACT

In 2023, the Labour Committee of CASCA initiated a research project to document the professional and academic lives of precariously employed faculty in Canada. This project entailed responses to a wide-ranging survey (n=65) and semi-structured interviews with select participants (n=11) to develop a detailed picture of how the experience of precarity affects Canadian anthropologists. Results are organized into several facets of the academic work environment such as teaching, institutional support, and applying for jobs. Overall, our results paint a desultory picture of the experience of working on the academic margins. Academic precarity has a deleterious effect on the discipline, academic institutions, and scholars who work under precarious conditions. Additionally, most respondents felt unsupported, marginalized, and had little hope in transitioning to permanent, full-time teaching and research positions in Canada. Not surprisingly, the lack of institutional support, mental health and anxiety issues, and underemployment were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Over the last thirty years, there has been a marked rise in the use of contingently employed academic workers to carry out the teaching mission of post-secondary education (see for example Council of Canadian Academies 2021; Foster and Bauer 2018; MacDonald 2013). Recent data have shown that up to three-quarters of new faculty appointments at several Canadian universities are contract positions, and only nine universities in Canada hire less than one-third of new faculty on a contract basis (Pasma and Shaker 2018, 23). After a roundtable on academic precarity at the 2017 CASCA annual conference, and following a motion put forward (and overwhelmingly supported) at the annual general meeting, the Labour Committee was formed with a mandate to learn more about the state of precarious employment in Canadian anthropology (Henry 2018).

The original committee established three goals:

1. Collect and publicize to the CASCA membership information on labour practices and precarious employment in Canadian anthropology, particularly in higher education
2. Coordinate with other scholarly and labour organizations working on these issues to develop strategies promoting fair labour practices for anthropologists
3. Advocate for precariously employed anthropologists in Canada

It readily became clear that experiences of precarity are diverse, with some making a comfortable living and others relying on second and third jobs in order to cobble together a livelihood (Béguet et al. 2019; Rose, 2018). Nevertheless, the extent and scope of the problem remained unclear due to a dearth of empirical data on the specific plight of Canadian anthropologists working in precarious positions. This led to the development of a research project, launched this year, entitled “Precarious Labour in Canadian Anthropology” combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies to capture a comprehensive picture of academic precarity in Canada.

METHODOLOGY

The committee members, with support from an undergraduate research assistant, designed a 62-question survey covering many facets of academic life: employment status, financial situation, teaching experiences, the current job market, and the impacts of the pandemic. Follow-up interviews were conducted to add detail and nuance to our findings. The project received ethics clearance through the Saint Mary’s University Research Ethics Board (File# 23-078). With generous support from the CASCA Executive, all research instruments were professionally translated into French, and French-language interviews were conducted by our bilingual research assistant. Interview transcripts were coded and organized by topic.

Once the survey was translated and finalized, invitations to participate were sent out in both official languages through CASCA social media accounts, posted to the CASCA website and sent to Department Chairs at Canadian universities where anthropology is taught.[1] Callouts were also shared with the Network for Unwaged and Precarious Anthropologists and through our own personal networks. Preliminary analysis of our survey results suggests that little has changed since the committee's formation in 2017 and that academic precarity has a deleterious effect on the discipline, on academic institutions, and on the scholars who work in precarious conditions. Here we present our initial findings.

PARTICIPANTS

Eligibility to participate in the research was restricted to Canadian anthropologists not employed on a full-time permanent basis, either in academia or in the private sector. For the purposes of our research, "Canadian" was defined as a person meeting at least one of the following criteria:

- Holds a doctoral degree in anthropology from a Canadian institution
- Currently works in an anthropology department in Canada
- Currently a member of CASCA

Participant eligibility criteria were designed to restrict our data collection to those anthropologists who work in precarious conditions, while also acknowledging that anthropologists may not follow the standard academic career path as tenured professors.

In total, we received 65 completed surveys (58 English, 7 French) and carried out 17 interviews (14 English, 3 French).[2]

- Most respondents hold a doctorate in anthropology and are between the ages of 35 and 44, and almost half (49%) identify with one or more equity-seeking groups
- 55% of respondents identified as female, 40% as male, and 2% as two-spirit, non-binary or third gender. The remainder preferred not to list their gender
- 92% of respondents work in an academic institution, but 33% also worked additional jobs outside of academia (usually part-time) as consultants, project managers, teachers, and in non-degree related employment such as retail associates, office workers, and manual labourers

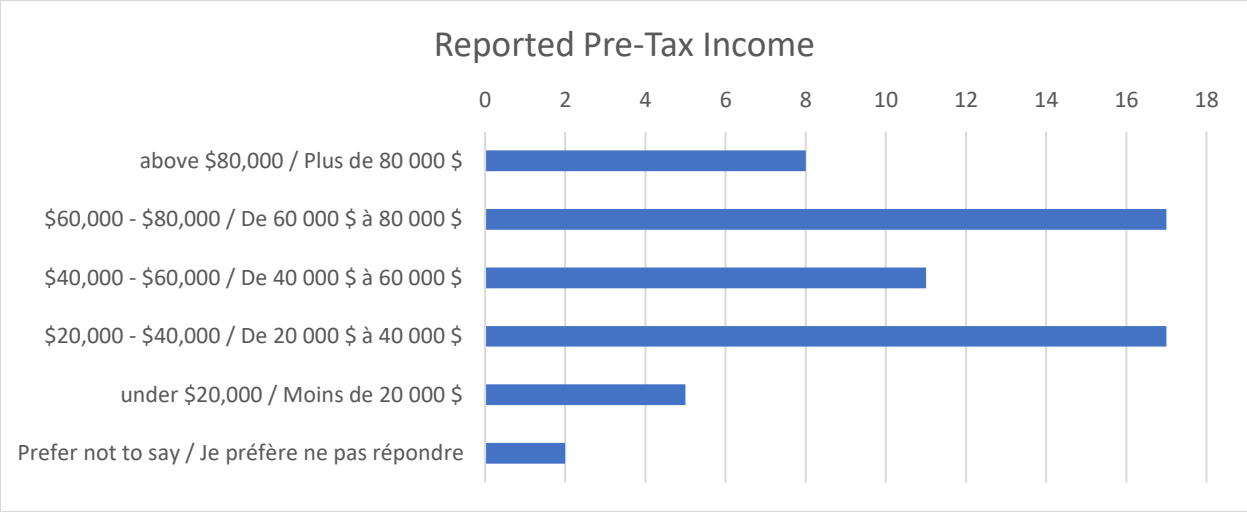
[1]We acknowledge the generous assistance of CASCA Administrator Karli Whitmore in disseminating the invitation to participate to a wide audience.

[2] Despite the apparent paucity of French-language responses, several scholars working at francophone and bilingual institutions (Université de Montréal, Université d'Ottawa) chose to complete the English version of the survey.

- 25% of respondents working within academia reported working at more than one institution
- 57% are unionized (mostly through CUPE, a faculty association, or a student association)
- 20% were working while also studying for a higher degree

EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME

Participants reported a wide range of income levels as is evident from the following chart:



- 40% reported a pre-tax employment income of below $40,000.
- 30% of respondents were the sole income provider in their household. When other income earners were factored in, 22% of households with a precariously employed anthropologist still make less than $40,000 per year in pre-tax income. For reference, Statistics Canada (2023) defines a low-income household as one earning less than $34,200 in after-tax income
- 29% reported an income between $60,000 and $80,000, although almost all of these were either receiving a postdoctoral or research fellowship, or serving under a limited-term faculty appointment; thus very few could be considered to be permanently at this income level.

Remuneration for contract teaching remains abysmally low. As many of our interviewees noted, union contracts for part-time instructors often limit the number of courses an instructor can offer in a year. The rationale for such a provision is to discourage universities from hiring an instructor for a full teaching load but on a per-course salary basis. The impact on contract instructors, however, is to limit the salary they can earn at any one institution. The value of a semester-long teaching contract ranged from $5,850 at the low end to over $18,000 at the high end for contract faculty with seniority. Part-time faculty that participated in our survey

reported teaching anywhere from one to twelve courses each year, with a median of four courses each year across all respondents employed as instructors.

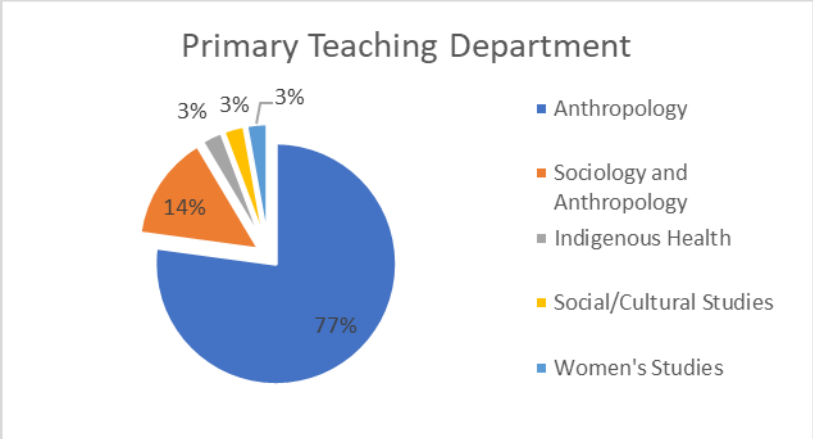
The experience of precarious employment has an extremely demoralizing effect. Our participants frequently described their professional lives as "bleak," "hopeless," and "scary." As one woman with over a decade of experience in contract teaching put it:

> Précarité et charge de travail très dense combinées, ce n'est pas facile tous les jours. Heureusement, nous aimons notre métier, mais sincèrement l'instabilité constante est difficile (toujours toujours des contrats) [Insecurity and a very dense workload combined, it's not easy every day. Fortunately, we love our jobs, but honestly the constant instability is difficult (always, always the contracts)].

A man who had only graduated from his doctoral program a few years ago summarized the mood among his peers as, "It's sad. Very few jobs, very precarious, low, low pay for precarious teachers, non-existent benefits. Grade school teachers with less education, are paid drastically better, with better benefits, stable jobs, more opportunities, and more."

TEACHING AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

63% of our respondents reported teaching at an academic institution in the past year, and for these (n=39) we gathered information on their professional experiences within academia. Collectively, these respondents had 414 years of university teaching experience, with an average of 8.3 years experience for each; although many were just starting out on their teaching careers, we had six respondents that have been teaching for 20+ years! This represents a sizeable pool of experience and expertise that, as many of our respondents argued, frequently goes to waste. As one respondent summarized the situation: "Despite all of my teaching awards, and all of the student accolades I receive each and every semester, I feel more like a ghost in the department than anything."



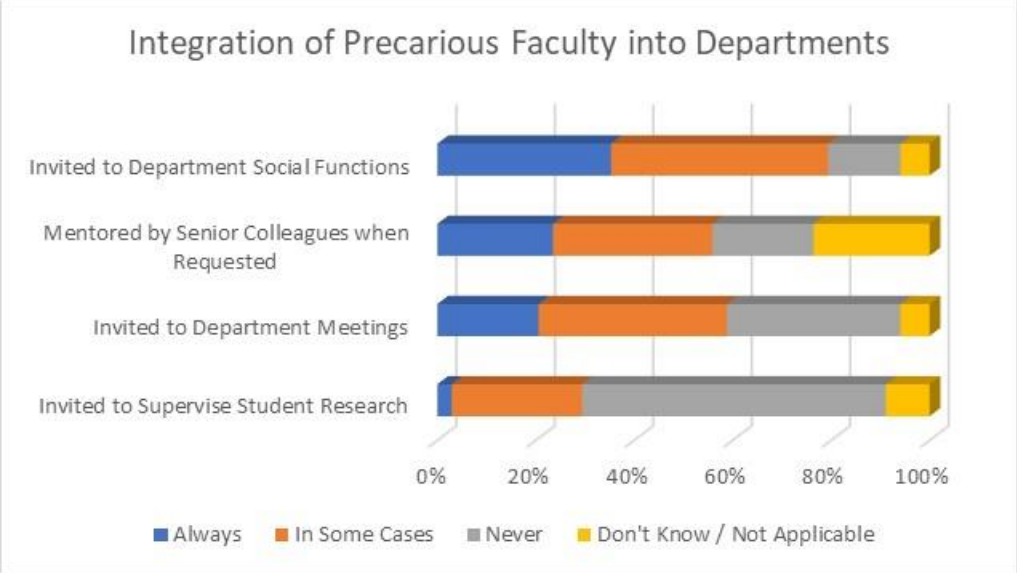
The majority of our respondents (91%) teach primarily in either Anthropology or combined Anthropology and Sociology departments, with the remainder in departments of Indigenous Health, Social/Cultural Studies and Women's Studies. 23% also taught courses in other departments such as Community Studies, Philosophy, Religion, and Public Health. Precarious faculty are primarily contracted to teach undergraduate courses, with only a handful offering courses at the fourth-year undergraduate level or above. The smaller number of first year courses given to contract faculty in our data should be balanced against the significantly higher enrolments, so that contract faculty are often providing the lion's share of teaching at the first- and second-year undergraduate levels.

Since most contract faculty do not have regular course offerings each year, but instead fill in for full-time faculty on leave or fill gaps in the curriculum, many courses are new offerings requiring significant investments of time to teach successfully. We asked respondents to report how many weekly hours of teaching, grading, preparation and other work they spent on each course during the semester. Responses ranged from 10 hours (for courses taught previously) to 35 hours (for new courses), with an average of just over 20 hours per week per course. For contract faculty teaching with full course loads (36% of our respondents reported teaching five

or more courses each year, with the highest teaching 12 separate classes over the course of a year), the time commitments can be staggering. As one stated:

> En fait, tu peux vraiment travailler sans fin pour développer un cours. J'ai une année, j'ai calculé le nombre d'heures que j'avais mises pour construire un cours pour le donner pour l'enseigner, pour corriger et le salaire que j'avais reçu et ça faisait que j'étais payé trois dollars de l'heure. [In fact, you can really work endlessly to develop a course. One year, I calculated the number of hours it took me to construct a course, to offer it, to teach it, to grade, and the salary that I had received and that meant that I was paid three dollars an hour.]

Despite these contributions, however, most contract faculty report feeling isolated within their departments. In response to questions about their integration within their home departments, a minority reported being invited to attend social functions or department meetings. Opportunities for mentorship or to supervise student research were also extremely limited.

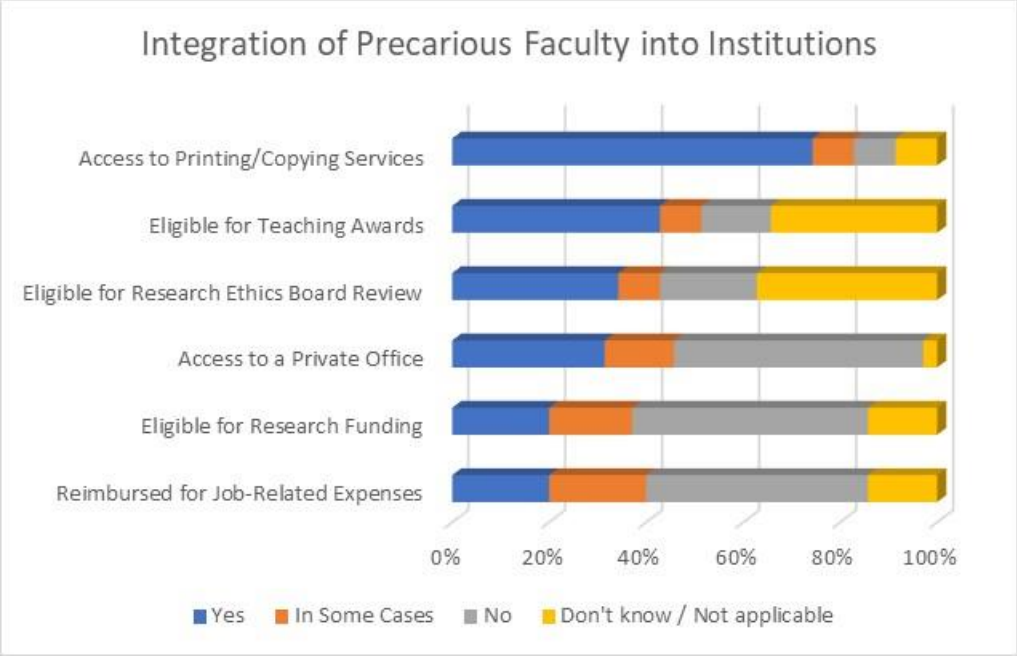


At the institutional level, many components of professional life that full-time faculty take for granted were not available to contract faculty. Again, a minority of contract faculty were able to apply for research funding, teaching awards, or even receive reimbursement for job-related expenses. Only 31% of contract faculty had consistent access to a private office to work in. And even one of the most basic necessities of teaching – being able to print or copy course materials – was either completely unavailable or available only sporadically to 17% of our respondents. Several of those that did receive printing or copying allowances noted severe limits, such as a printing allowance of only 30 pages per class.

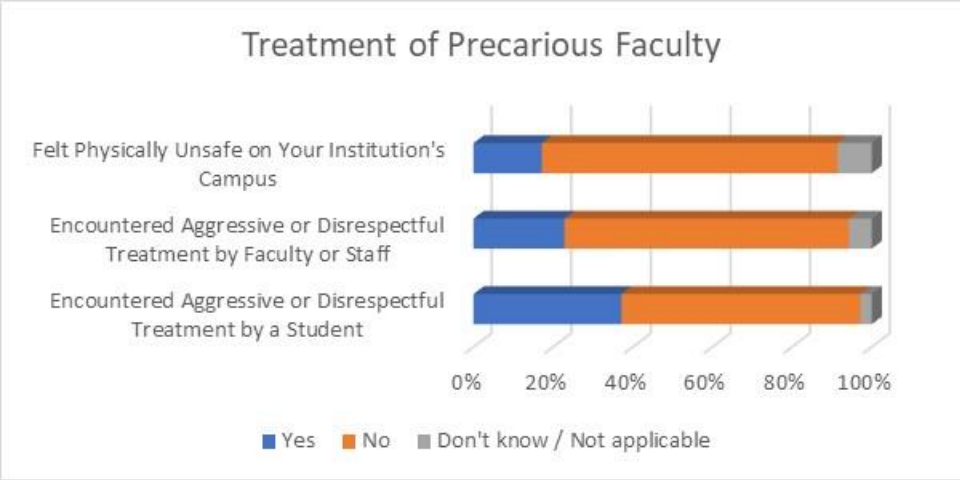
Fears for job security discourage many contract faculty from reporting incidents where the institution fails to fulfill its responsibilities. In our survey responses, nine people reported discrepancies in their wages, and six people reported violations of their teaching contracts; only

two filed a grievance to address these. As one respondent noted, “I don't feel secure enough to file a grievance.”

One further significant element of the findings about the relationship between contract faculty and institutions is the lack of publicization of information about resources available to them. 37% of respondents were unaware of whether they could apply for ethics clearance from their university’s Research Ethics Board (a necessary component of conducting future research), and 34% did not know whether they could apply for university teaching awards (which are offered at almost all universities and colleges). In interviews, several respondents reported many instances of being left in the dark about supports available to them.



We surveyed our respondents on feelings of safety and incidents of harassment by others in the university community. In general, contract faculty do feel relatively safe on campus, but a significant number reported aggressive or disrespectful behaviour by other faculty or staff (23%) and students (37%). These included being accused of taking office supplies, argumentative students, false reports of misconduct and so forth. Since contract faculty are often perceived as “less-than-real faculty,” they receive more than their fair share of disrespectful behaviour.



THE JOB MARKET

The 2008 financial crisis ended a slow upward trend in hiring of new faculty across Canadian universities (Council of Canadian Academies 2021). Along with the elimination of mandatory retirement, the lack of growth in faculty appointments has constrained opportunities for recent graduates to enter tenure stream positions. At the same time, many Canadian universities have expanded graduate programs as a means of increasing revenues, with doctoral enrolments increasing 19% in Canada throughout the 2010s (Statistics Canada 2022). The result has been too many recent PhD graduates applying for too few jobs.

Responses about job prospects were bleak. As one respondent put it:

> I think the current state of employment in Canadian anthropology is abysmal. I am ABD [all-but-dissertation] and I have to say my program did not prepare me for just how few full-time tenure track positions there would be, how long I would have to "pay my dues" as a sessional teaching 5-6 courses for roughly $36,000/year, or how competitive tenure track positions are (500 - more than 1,000 applicants I have been told). I don't know if things have changed, but I wonder if graduate programs are preparing students for the current state of the labour market. Are students made aware and given the skills (grant writing, publishing, networking, various research software, and AI tools) needed to be competitive? Do graduate programs continue to take in the same numbers of incoming students knowing full well what their chances (or lack thereof) are in today's marketplace? Are questions like this even being asked?

Nevertheless, 72% (n=47) of our respondents were actively on the job market, applying for a range of positions both within universities and outside academia, including the public service, curatorial, private research, and administrative positions.[3] For respondents seeking tenure-track jobs, the average number of positions applied to each year is four. Respondents on

[3] 57% of our respondents reported applying for an academic job in the past year, and 43% reported applying for a non-academic job

average spent about 50 hours each year just applying for full-time jobs. As one recent graduate wrote, “I can't afford to spend hours and hours on writing job applications because that is time wasted not earning money that goes toward my rent.”

It was not only the lack of jobs that frustrated our respondents, but many other elements of the job search process. Many were discouraged that their research topics or specializations are rarely favoured in job advertisements, that most job applications require letters of reference and university transcripts in the first round (even for contract positions), and that Canadian credentials are not as highly valued as foreign ones. Several cited instances where nation-wide job searches led to a spousal or internal hire, leaving the sense that they had wasted hours of their time.

PANDEMIC IMPACTS

A cluster of COVID-related questions elicited diverse responses, but the majority reported gross inequalities in treatment ranging from lack of training and supports, inadequate supply of personal protective equipment (PPE), loss of employment, and being the first to be required to return to in-person teaching when universities began to re-open. As one respondent summed it up, “Precariously employed scholars bore the brunt of the pandemic.”

Nowhere is this more evident than financially. Of 38 respondents to our survey who taught during the pandemic, a third had at least one course contract cancelled. This occurred for a variety of reasons, such as low enrolments, limitations on number of online courses, and institutional budget considerations. Although most lost one to two courses, one reported losing five teaching contracts and another reported that all of their courses were cancelled during the spring of 2020.

Those that did teach were often left feeling abandoned by their institutions. 52% received no training or guidance on how to transition to online teaching (and of those that did, only one was paid for their time spent in preparation). Only 23% were consistently invited to attend faculty meetings where online teaching was discussed. One quarter reported not being able to access campus services (such as IT or learning support offices) during the pandemic that could assist with the transition to online teaching.

Many precarious faculty reported unreimbursed expenses, such as paying for an upgrade to high-speed internet or purchasing a Zoom Pro license to ensure online teaching was feasible. Others kept track of the amount of extra work they completed without pay to facilitate an effective transition to online or hybrid courses. “I have approximately 192 hours of unpaid work for 2021, [my university] has refused to pay me for.”

After the return to in-person teaching, there were additional issues with burdens placed on contract faculty. Acquiring face masks and other PPE was not always easy: several reported that their universities supplied them with only one cloth face mask each semester. There was a tendency at some universities for departments to assign in-person classes to contract faculty while allowing full-time faculty the choice of delivery mode. Of our respondents teaching after the pandemic, only one was allowed to continue offering all their courses online; 77% were not given the option for any of their courses.

For those who received a positive COVID test, 47% were not given any kind of leave or accommodation, and a further 20% received leave for some courses but not others. One person reported that, after falling ill with COVID, they were denied the option of cancelling their classes. “This cost me almost twice the time I usually spent preparing for class, because I had to record lecture slides, create interactive course content and monitor student responses throughout the week.”

Despite the challenges, it is important to acknowledge that the pandemic provided some opportunities for contract faculty. The shift to online teaching has made geography less of a limiting factor in applying for some teaching positions, and instructors working at multiple institutions could often do so without worrying about commuting or parking. Many universities did also provide increased funding for teaching assistants and graders to assist with course delivery.

CONCLUSIONS

Mental health, stress, and hopelessness are featured in many of the narratives, and most respondents expressed appreciation for the work the Labour Committee is doing and for the CASCA executive’s support in this research. As one respondent noted:

> I have taught more than 30 courses of anthropology in the same institution, under different contracts (and another ten courses in other departments). I don't have job security, or real recognition. I had supervised students without receiving compensation. My current office can be better described as a closet next to a photocopier… With few exceptions, I don't feel support or solidarity from my tenure track or tenure colleagues, and limited support from my unions. I love teaching but I am very tired.

The anxiety related to overwork, inadequate pay, and lack of institutional and departmental support evident in this response were the norm rather than the exception. While some of these problems are structural and institutional, more must be done to prepare future graduates and support precariously employed colleagues facing these realities.

Going forward, the Labour Committee will release further updates from this research project in the Culture newsletter and is preparing an article for the journal Anthropologica that synthesizes the quantitative and qualitative data collected. Both publications offer an open-source and publicly available forum for discussing and disseminating these results. A virtual roundtable has also been proposed for the 2024 CASCA meetings in Kelowna.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the participants who took the time to complete the survey and those who shared their stories with us in an interview. We would also like to thank the CASCA executive for their support with the translating and dissemination of the survey to the membership and other CASCA networks.

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