**The Horizontal and Vertical Fragmentation of Academic Work:**

**The Academic Profession in Canada and a Proposal for a New International Study**

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**Abstract**

*The horizontal fragmentation of the profession into disciplinary tribes has been accompanied by the increasing role played by student affairs and educational development professionals who are located outside the academic units, but are actively engaged in types of academic work, including supporting teaching and student learning. More recently, there has been an increasing vertical fragmentation of academic work within academic units with the increasing use of contract university teachers and research assistants. In Canada, both horizontal and vertical fragmentation have occurred while universities and strong faculty unions have protected the “traditional” tenure-stream professoriate. The number of full-time (and tenure-stream) faculty has increased since 2000, and these faculty are reasonably well remunerated and report relatively high levels of job satisfaction. Drawing on CAP data and other recent studies, this paper explores some of the contextual factors that have led to the “protection” of the tenure-stream in Canadian universities and concludes by proposing a comparative study of academic career pathways and horizontal and vertical fragmentation of academic work.*

It is frequently argued that the professoriate is in crisis. Underscoring this conclusion is a set of assumptions about the impact of major higher education system reforms on academic work, and in the decline of the traditional academic role as universities increasingly turn to part-time contingent labour and other new categories of academic worker to address increasing demands in the context of financial uncertainties.

The central argument that I will make in this paper is that the Canadian situation does not match this broader narrative. I will begin by discussing the horizontal and vertical fragmentation of academic work before turning to recent studies of academic work in Canada, including the Changing Academic Profession (CAP) project data, to discuss the Canadian experience. I will conclude by proposing a new international study to explore national differences in the definition of academic work, career pathways, and horizontal and vertical fragmentation.

**Horizontal and Vertical Fragmentation of Academic Work**

It has been commonly argued that the rise of mass higher education and the increasing influence and power of the disciplines within the modern university led to the fragmentation of the academic profession (Baldridge, Curtis, Ecker & Riley, 1986; Clark, 1963). The academic discipline became the defining factor in the internal organizational structure of the university, and the academic tribes established their own professional standards. As Becher (1989) noted in his classic study, there were substantial differences between tribes in terms of culture, methodological approaches, and career patterns. The academic professional was fragmented because it had become organized not as a singular profession but as a series of quite distinct, loosely-coupled subunits.

As Clark (1963) noted, the fragmentation of academic work had important implications for universities. He found that while the strong professional identity and standards of the medical professional influenced the culture and standards of hospitals, the fragmentation of the academic profession meant that there was no parallel dominant professorial culture within the university. The multiversity was composed of distinct academic units that were held together by what Kerr (2001) viewed as a benevolent central administration. The professor of chemistry might have much stronger professional loyalties to chemistry as an academic discipline than to the faculty or the university, and decisions about that individual’s status in the field (and tenure and rank in the university) could be more strongly influenced by the work of other scholars of chemistry throughout the world, than the work of scholars of physics residing in the next building on campus.

A second type of fragmentation is associated with the growth of academic support units where individuals perform duties that might have once been primarily associated with academic work. Macfarlane (2011) and others have described these workers as quasi-academics in that they focus on a narrowly defined component of academic work. Educational development offices, for example, focus on teaching and teaching improvement, while student affairs offices focus on supporting student learning and student success. There may also be units that support specific aspects of the research function of the professoriate, such as statistical consulting services, or specialized research facilities. While there is a certain utility to the term “quasi-academics,” it is important to note that some of these specialized categories of workers have, in at least some jurisdictions, evolved into distinct professions with specialized credentials, bodies of knowledge, and professional communities.

Both the rise of discipline differences in the academic profession and the emergence of quasi-academics located in support units can be regarded as forms of horizontal fragmentation. While there may certainly be differences in status between disciplines related to their proximity to the market or their perceived relationship to economic development and the knowledge economy (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997), in organizational terms the academic tribes are located on a common plane. The academic support units are located outside the academic tribes, and generally report directly to the senior administrative leadership; their organizational relationship to academic units is more horizontal rather than hierarchical. A graphic illustration of these relationships is provided in Figure 1.

Figure : Horizontal Fragmentation of the Academic Profession

Another form of fragmentation is associated with the increasing use of contingent, part-time, contractual, and other categories of worker within the academic departments of the university. Many of these appointment types are regarded as quasi-academic in that the individual is expected to perform some component of academic work but not all of the components associated with the traditional professoriate. The contract teacher, for example, may be paid to teach a single undergraduate course rather than have broader responsibilities that include graduate supervision, research and service. Unlike the categories of support workers who are located in special units outside of the traditional academic schools or departments, the relationship between these workers and the professoriate is hierarchical; they are either in positions designed to support the work of the professoriate (such as teaching and research assistants), or they are subject to the curricular and staffing decisions made by the traditional academics who lead the academic unit. A graphic illustration of this vertical fragmentation of the academic profession is provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The Vertical Fragmentation of Academic Work

While one might argue that the academic profession has never been monolithic, the combination of vertical and horizontal fragmentation (see Figure 3) suggests that changes to the academic profession are becoming increasingly complex and multi-dimensional. It is commonly argued that one of the outcomes of the dramatic changes and reforms to higher education that have taken place over the last few decades is an academic profession in crisis. It is argued that university teachers in some jurisdictions have been repositioned as knowledge workers in the context of mass higher education systems, with increasing expectations for research, the introduction of new managerial practices, and expanding enrolment (and class sizes) (for example, see Altbach, 2000; Cavalli & Moscati, 2010; Enders & Musselin, 2008; Finkelstein, 2003; Jones, 2006). The growth of knowledge and specialization within the modern university led to the horizontal fragmentation of academic work, while the continuing expansion and reform of higher education led to the emergence of new specialized support functions (horizontal fragmentation) and the increasing use of contingent and other forms of quasi-academic labour (vertical fragmentation). The end result is a professoriate in decline. In the next section I will review recent research on the Canadian case, and then use observations from this analysis as a foundation for proposing a comparative study on the fragmentation of the academic profession.

Figure 3: Horizontal and Vertical Fragmentation

**The Academic Profession in Canada**

While there is considerable evidence that the academic profession in Canada has become increasingly fragmented along both horizontal and vertical lines, the Changing Academic Profession project and other recent studies do not support the conclusion that the Canadian professoriate is in crisis. Like other systems, the expansion of higher education and concerns about the quality of university teaching and the student experience have led to an increased emphasis on educational development (Gravestock, 2011) and the work of student affairs (for example, see Robinson, 2011). There has also been an increased use of relatively new categories of academic workers associated with both the teaching and research functions of the university (Muzzin, 2009; Rajagopaul, 2002). While there has been vertical and horizontal fragmentation, the situation for traditional full-time, tenure stream faculty appears to be reasonable positive, at least compared to some other jurisdictions.

For example, international data collected for the Changing Academic Professions project in 2007 and 2008 suggests that Canadian university faculty have high levels of job satisfaction. Of the nineteen countries included in this study, Canadian faculty respondents were third (behind Mexico and Korea, and only very slightly ahead of the Netherlands) in terms of the percentage who indicated high or very high levels of job satisfaction, though the percentage of positive responses from Korea, Canada and the Netherlands are so similar that the differences among these countries cannot be seen as statistically meaningful. Perhaps more important, Canadian faculty reported much higher levels of work satisfaction than their counterparts in countries that would frequently be considered comparable. The percentage of faculty reporting high and low levels of satisfaction is presented in Figure 4. Approximately 75% of Canadian faculty respondents to the CAP survey indicated high levels of satisfaction, compared with 64% of faculty from the United States, 55% of faculty from Australia, and 46% from the United Kingdom.

The overall profile of the Canadian professoriate that emerges from the CAP study is quite positive. In addition to high levels of satisfaction (see Weinrib, Jones, Metcalf, Fisher, Gingras, Rubenson, & Snee, in press), faculty report that they feel supported by the institution and that they have influence in local decisions (see Metcalfe, Fisher, Rubenson, Snee, Gingras & Jones, 2011). The responses from junior (assistant) professors were surprisingly similar to the responses from their more senior peers in terms of perceptions of work and job satisfaction (Jones & Weinrib, 2011). Canadian faculty work hard and the self-reported data obtained from faculty on publication activities suggest that, at least compared with faculty surveyed from other countries, they are productive researchers.

Figure 4 High and Low Work Satisfaction (% Respondents) By Country

High satisfaction represents the percentage of respondents indicating high or very high satisfaction. Low satisfaction is presented as a negative and represents the percentage of respondents indicating low or very low satisfaction.

There have also been several recent studies of faculty remuneration that suggest that Canadian faculty are reasonably well paid. One small comparative study suggested that Canadian assistant professors and full professors were among the highest paid in comparison with their international peers (Rumbly, L., Pacheco, I., & Altbach, 2008). A larger, more recent study confirms that Canadian faculty are well remunerated in comparative terms (Jones & Weinrib, in press).

This is not in any sense to suggest that the Canadian context is utopian. Findings from the CAP study reveal that many faculty believe that their working conditions are deteriorating and there are concerns about the future. There are differences in response by gender indicating that female faculty feel more stressed and somewhat less satisfied with their work than their male peers. Faculty members report concerns with research funding, management practices, and other workplace issues. However, these studies clearly suggest that the Canadian professoriate, at least represented by full-time, tenure-stream faculty, are not in crisis.

It is also important to note that the number of full-time university faculty (and tenure-stream faculty) has been increasing in Canada. In some other systems contingent/contractual university teachers are seen as replacing full-time faculty, while in Canada this vertical fragmentation has occurred as an addition to increasing full-time positions. As demonstrated in Figure 5, full-time student enrolment has increased far faster than the growth in full-time appointments, and this gap is increasingly filled by new categories of university teachers.

**Figure 5: Percentage increase in full-time faculty, full-student students, and total students (headcount) in Canadian universities from 2000 to 2008**

**Source: Statistics Canada derived from various years of the *CAUT Almanac*.**

A clear conclusion that arises from this work is that the Canadian higher education system has “protected” the full-time, tenure-stream professoriate while at the same time addressing the increasing demands for postsecondary education in a challenging financial context by employing increasing numbers of other categories of academic workers, including contingent university teachers and teaching assistants. I believe that there are three main reasons why the full-time professoriate in Canada has been protected, at least in comparison to the situation in some other highly developed systems.

The first, and perhaps most important, is unionization. Canadian universities are created under provincial government legislation as private, not-for-profit corporations, and faculty are employees of these private, but provincially-funded, corporations. Beginning with the recession of the 1970s, a number of institution-based faculty associations sought legal recognition under provincial labour laws as labour unions. By the 1980s, the majority of Canadian university faculty were unionized, represented by their university faculty association (Tudivor, 1999).

The collective agreements that were negotiated between faculty associations and university management did not simply deal with salaries and benefits. Many core academic personnel policies became components of collective agreements, including policies on academic appointments, tenure, workload, and procedures for academic promotion. In many respects the collective agreements defined academic work since they described the criteria that would be applied to tenure reviews at the university, as well as describing the principles or approach that would be used to deal with workload issues for faculty. Collective agreements also defined the bargaining unit, and at many universities these agreements focused only on full-time faculty appointments (and usually traditional “tenure-stream” appointments at professorial ranks). Individuals with appointments that met the definition of the collective agreement were inside the union, while those with other types of appointments were outside this union.

Even university faculty associations that did not unionize entered into agreements with their university that resembled collective agreements. These agreements, which could not be changed unilaterally by either party, addressed core academic personnel issues such as tenure and promotion, essentially ensuring that there were transparent standards and processes for tenure, and clear procedures for appointments, promotion, and workload issues.

Strong faculty unionization protected the full-time professoriate. It defined the professoriate, or at least that component of workers covered by the collective agreement, defined academic work through descriptions of duties, workload, and the criteria for tenure. It described working conditions (including, for example, sabbatical entitlements and parental leaves) and it ensured that “tenure” was taken very seriously by university management.

However, as already noted, these collective agreements frequently only covered full-time faculty, and individuals hired on a different basis, or under some other form of arrangement not covered by the definition in these collective agreements, were employed under quite different conditions with very different levels of remuneration. Not surprisingly, at many universities these individuals sought higher salaries, better working conditions, and greater job security and new labour unions represented new categories of academic workers emerged. It is not uncommon at many Canadian universities to find several labour unions representing, for example, full-time faculty, teaching assistants, and part-time university teachers. In addition, there may be other labour unions representing research assistants and technical personnel who support specialized research facilities. As Dobbie and Robinson (2008) have noted, higher education may be the most unionized sector in Canada. Unionization protected full-time faculty, but it also established the boundaries around different categories of academic workers and, not surprisingly, in times of restraint there can be tensions between these different categories. The agreements, therefore, often concretize the terms of the vertical fragmentation of academic work described earlier, positioning some academic workers in hierarchical positions or in management relationships with others.

The second reason why Canadian university faculty have been protected is associated with the limited institutional differentiation within the Canadian university sector. The model of a Canadian university that emerged in the massification of higher education during the 1960s and 1970s was an institution that was relatively comprehensive (almost all Canadian universities had some combination of undergraduate, graduate and professional programs) and had a mandate that included both teaching and research. While differences in the intensity of research activity clearly emerged within the system, as contemporary research rankings illuminate, there was no formal hierarchy of institutional types, and no formal institutional differentiation within the university sector. Funding models essentially treated universities as equals. Applicants to graduate programs were selected on the basis of their undergraduate marks (and other background criteria) but not on the basis of the university that they graduated from because all Canadian universities were viewed as delivering a roughly comparable undergraduate program (see Jones, 1996; Skolnik, 1986). The universities shared similar governance structures, missions, and were members of the same national umbrella organization, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada.

The fact that there was no formal institutional differentiation within the university sector in Canada also meant that there was no formal differentiation in the definition of academic work by institution. Academic work was defined in terms of teaching, research, and service at all universities (see Gravestock, 2011), and while there may have been differences in workload balance by institution, the universities were all members of the same club and there was a general sense that they were playing by the same rules. The same was true, of course, for the faculty associations representing full-time faculty who were members of provincial umbrella associations (where they existed) as well as a national organization, the Canadian Association of University Teachers, and shared information on collective agreements and bargaining strategies. The common university model meant that there were both institutional and union pressures to maintain the status quo, the key role of full-time faculty engaged in all three core functions, rather than replace or revise the model.

It is interesting to note that the increasing differentiation within the university sector emerging as a function of the creation of new universities (such as in British Columbia and Alberta, and current policy discussions in Ontario) has led to an increasing conversation about differentiated faculty roles. Some of these new institutions have been assigned a greater mandate for teaching over research, and there is an assumption that the faculty in these new institutions might have a workload that places greater emphasis on the teaching function.

The third reason that Canadian university faculty have been protected is that, at least in the last 15 years, both federal and provincial governments have placed a much greater emphasis on the importance of university research in the context of strategies emphasizing public investments in knowledge creation and innovation. Federal government investments in research chairs, infrastructure, and research funding have represented major new areas of revenue for the university sector. Once again, governments have tended to treat universities as equals, rather than develop policies that focus research funding on a small number of leading research universities. In reality, the bulk of these grants go to a dozen major universities, but even the smallest institutions have benefited from these initiatives. These policies have served to reinforce the research mission within Canadian higher education, and, in doing so, to reinforce the importance of maintaining a strong balance between research and teaching among the full-time professoriate who, of course, assigned the primary responsibility for fulfilling this strong research mandate.

These three factors assist in explaining why Canadian universities have protected the full-time, “all-around” tenure-stream professoriate rather than, as in some other systems, differentiating the workforce into specialized university teachers and researchers, or reducing the number of full-time faculty and replacing them with contingent labour. The academic profession in Canada has seen increasing horizontal and vertical fragmentation, but these changes have occurred while retaining and protecting the academic core of the tenure stream who continue to engage in teaching, research and service. At the same time, the growing use of contingent labour, and the growing unionization of these new categories of academic worker, has challenging implications for university leaders and institutional governance (Jones, 2011).

**Proposing a New International Study of the Academic Profession**

The Changing Academic Professions project has provided scholars with a wonderful opportunity to compare responses from faculty within quite different national context on a wide range of issues. This has been especially true for countries like Canada; this is the first comparative study of university faculty that has included a Canadian component, and it therefore provides us with our first glimpse of how our faculty compare with their peers in other countries.

However, in addition, to continuing to explore the national differences and trends related to demographic characteristics and perceptions of professors, there is, I believe, a need to explore and compare some very foundational aspects of the academic profession by jurisdiction and the implications of these differences for higher education systems. The proposed study would focus on the following research questions:

1. How is the work of the professoriate defined? Who defines the work of the professoriate (the individual professor, the academic oligarchy, institution leaders, government policies)? Is it generally assumed that professors will undertake teaching and research (and how are these functions understood)? Is the work of the professoriate defined to include other functions, such as stimulating public debate, or service to society?
2. What is the career pathway of the professoriate? The Canadian model assumes that an individual appointed into a tenure-stream position will pass through several levels of advancement based on peer-review of explicit criteria (tenure and promotion). It is generally assumed that most candidates will obtain tenure, and that many will become a full professor – all in the same institution. In other systems there is no equivalent to tenure, it is assumed the promotion is competitive, or that an academic career necessitates moving from institution to institution to advance. What are the “normal” conditions for appointment? What are the assumptions about tenure and job security? What are the assumptions about promotion and advancement within the institution and/or the system?
3. What are the conditions of employment that support academic work? One might assume that there are conditions of employment that can play a dramatic role in furthering academic work, and that other conditions (or the absence of certain conditions) can play a major role in limiting academic work. For example, can professors access paid (or unpaid) sabbaticals, maternity/parental leaves, pension plans, additional remuneration for special accomplishments or additional work, research support from graduate assistants, housing subsidies (or loans), subsidized meals, entertainment allowances, teaching assistants, funds for conference travel, and guaranteed research support? Are professors represented by labour unions? Is there a national salary structure, or is remuneration determined at the institutional level and/or by individual negotiation?
4. Given the answers to the first three questions, which focus on illuminating the professoriate (in terms of defining academic work, understanding the career pathways, and the conditions of employment that support academic work), what other categories of academic workers are emerging as a function of the vertical and horizontal fragmentation of academic work? What are the expectations of these other categories of worker in terms of academic work? What is the relationship between these categories of worker and the professoriate? What are their conditions of employment?

Addressing these questions will not be easy, but many of these questions can be addressed by national experts who are familiar with the structure of academic work. The greatest challenge will be in dealing with higher education systems with considerable institutional diversity within the university sector where there may be few national “norms” and where decisions will need to be made about the most appropriate way of accurately describing the national experience.

One approach would be to focus on the academic work arrangements in one or two flagship research universities in each jurisdiction, and to look at vertical fragmentation in the context of specific academic units (for example, choosing specific academic discipline units) across institutions.

The end result would be a rich set of data that would allow scholars to much more clearly understand the structure of academic work and the working conditions of the professoriate, and the implications of these factors for higher education systems. A comparative analysis of the career structure of the academic profession and changes associated with the horizontal and vertical fragmentation of academic work would make a major contribution to the literature of higher education.

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