

**Is this in my contract?:
How part-time contract faculty face barriers
to reporting academic integrity breaches**

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Abstract

A holistic approach to academic integrity in higher education requires a concerted and integrated effort of all stakeholders across campus, yet the tiered faculty system of most institutions may be at odds with comprehensive approaches. This paper explores how part-time contract faculty (also known as “sessionals” in Canada) face barriers to reporting student breaches of academic integrity. Drawing on scholarly literature, as well as my experiences as a sessional instructor, I explore this topic. In particular, I note that the time commitment and emotional investment involved in reporting transgressions according to institutional protocol can be especially burdensome for part-time instructors. I conclude with recommendations to better support sessional instructors to foster academic integrity.

Key words: academic integrity, Canada, contract faculty, part-time faculty, contingent academic staff, sessionals, academic misconduct, academic dishonesty, higher education

Background

A culture of integrity in higher education can only thrive with an integrated network of support across campus. It is the combined responsibility of administrators, students, and all tiers of faculty; however, it is frontline instructors who often bear the burden of preventing, recognizing, and responding to breaches of institutional academic integrity policies (TEQSA, 2017).

Essentially there are three tiers of academic faculty: tenured/tenure-track who are considered permanent employees; instructor-track (often called non-tenure track), who may be permanent or limited term employees, often with renewing contracts of 2-3 years; part-time instructors (often called sessionals in Canada and contingents or adjuncts in the US) who work on a semester-to-semester basis, usually part-time. In the US, 73% of university instructors are off the tenure track (American Association of University Professors, 2018), meaning they are working in instructor-stream roles or part-time gigs. Canadian universities are also increasingly reliant on contract teaching staff (Brownlee, 2015; Shaker & Pasma, 2018). Data from 15 Ontario universities showed that part-time appointments increased at double the rate compared to tenure-track appointments between 2000-2010. A recent report by Shaker and Pasma (2018) revealed that more than

half of academic appointments in Canada are not tenure-track, and of those, 80% are sessional.

Sessional teaching is challenging. Classes are often assigned with little notice (Kezar, 2013), course loads are unpredictable, and remuneration is typically meagre requiring contract staff to supplement their incomes by working at multiple institutions or other jobs. Furthermore, contract staff may feel as though they exist on the margins of academia and feel less commitment to their institute (Akroyd & Engle, 2014; Bertram Gallant, 2018); they are often under-represented on committees, excluded from invitations to events, and uninformed about campus and departmental procedures and resources. These conditions and characteristics of sessional employment in academia impact contract instructors' capacity or willingness to join in efforts to foster a culture of academic integrity in their own classes and across campus (Ryesky, 2007).

In the meantime, concerns about academic integrity are well-founded, and research shows that academic dishonesty is prevalent across Canada (Christensen Hughes & McCabe, 2006), with reports of over 50% to 90% of students reporting having engaged in academically dishonest behaviours (Baetz, Zivcakova, Wood, Nosco, Pasquale & Archer, 2011; Hage, 2010; Jurdi, Hage, & Chow, 2012). This paper provides my perspective as a sessional contract instructor on encouraging a culture of academic integrity and the barriers to responding to transgressions.

A Brief Review of the Literature

When instructors suspect a breach of academic integrity, many choose to ignore it. Jendrek (1989) found that only 20% of instructors who suspected plagiarism had occurred chose to follow institutional policies and reporting procedures. Similarly, a 2014 investigation by Patel-Bhakta, Muzzin, DeWald, Campbell & Buschang (2014) found that over 75% of instructors failed to report suspected academic dishonesty. Investigating how different tiers of instructors respond to academic misconduct, Blau, Szewczuk, Fitzgerald, Paris, & Guglielmo (2018) established that sessional instructors were the least likely to report academic misconduct, at only 20% compared to tenure track (33%) and non-tenure track (51%). Although it may seem surprising that so many transgressions go unreported, there are many contributors to this inaction (Eaton, Rothschuh, Fernández Conde, Guglielmin, Otoo, Wilson & Burns, 2018).

Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, Whitley & Washburn (2010) administered surveys to 127 US faculty about why they may remain silent about breaches of academic integrity. The top reasons respondents gave to justify non-intervention were insufficient evidence, anxiety/stress, the burden of formal hearing procedures, time constraints to compile evidence and deal with the situation. These factors appear to be consistent over time, as more recent work (Thomas, 2018) has also cited opportunity constraints and psychological discomfort as barriers to official reporting.

Another recent paper (Bertram Gallant, 2018) highlighted the complexities of maintaining a culture of academic integrity in community colleges when so many of the instructors are employed on a short-term contractual basis. She noted that contract instructors are disadvantaged when dealing with academic integrity for three main reasons: greater time limitations, fewer opportunities for professional development, and an “emotional and ethical detachment” (p. 50) from the institution. In a 2007 paper, Ryesky, used an extended (and, in my view, problematic) war metaphor made similar arguments, underscoring the difficulties of rallying the “part-time soldiers” to take up arms in the battle for integrity. In their research on the same topic, Apgar, Bronson, Gravois Lee (2009) revealed attitudinal differences between part-time and full-time instructors, with the former believing that fewer students engage in academically dishonest practices and believing that the institution’s policies are being consistently implemented. This may indicate a naivete about the scope of the problem and a disconnect with the campus culture.

Practitioner Perspective

I have been a sessional instructor for over ten years at a research-intensive university in Western Canada which also granted all three of my degrees. Consequently, although I am a part-time employee, I do not experience a disconnect from the university to the same extent as many contract instructors might (Bertram Gallant, 2018). I also have worked on several research projects focused on academic integrity, which have greatly informed my understanding of the extent of the problem.

I most often teach at a graduate level, where I incorporate discussions of academic integrity into my courses. The university’s relevant policies are required reading in a writing course I teach, and there are discussion questions about it. Students also have access to an optional online academic integrity tutorial, which I regularly tout. I design learning tasks to encourage academic integrity, with formative peer and instructor feedback an important component of major assignments. Even with all these safeguards in place, academic misconduct and plagiarism occur not infrequently.

The first time I suspected plagiarism in graduate level course, I did not know the procedures for dealing with it. I reviewed my contract and onboarding letter with details about sessional employment and resources, but there was no mention of academic integrity. I had also been supplied with a course outline template which mentioned the university policies, but nothing of protocol for dealing with transgressions. I searched online, but again only found the official policies. Eventually, through discussions with colleagues, I obtained a document outlining procedures. Had I not had connections with other faculty members, I would not have known how to proceed.

According to faculty procedures at my university, when an instructor has concerns about a student’s work, the first step is to gather as much preliminary evidence as possible. In most cases this requires at least one or two hours to review the assignment, Google parts of it,

and record textual similarities. Once the evidence has been gathered, the instructor reaches out the head of the department and shares the documentation. In my experience, and at my particular institution, this can go a number of ways.

The department head or equivalent reviews the evidence to determine if indeed misconduct has occurred. According to procedure, at this point, if the head is in agreement, the student will be notified, the faculty of graduate studies will be informed, and the student may receive a failing grade on the assignment for a first offence. The student will also have an opportunity to appeal the decision.

I have observed anecdotally that the policy has not always been followed, although the head has always agreed with me that a transgression has indeed occurred. I have been asked to inform the student (copying the head) that they must resubmit a rewritten assignment. In such cases this typically becomes a “deferral of term work” situation, meaning that the student is given an incomplete grade until the work is resubmitted and reassessed after the end of the semester and beyond a sessional instructor’s contract. Although time commitments can vary, it is reasonable to say that between emailing the head and the student, providing help and support to the student, re-evaluating the assignment, and completing the paperwork for the grade change takes at least an additional five to ten hours, often up to a month after the official end of a teaching contract and final pay period.

I have also experienced cases where the head has chosen to follow the formal procedures. When this occurs, the protocol is that the instructor provides the initial evidence, as well as a clear statement outlining why plagiarism has occurred. To make a solid case, the instructor needs to carefully document evidence, connect it with the institutional policy, and in cases of contract cheating, refer to literature demonstrating shared characteristics of the student work and commissioned papers. This more careful documenting of evidence and creation of a case file has taken me up to four hours. This often takes place after the completion of the teaching contract.

At this stage the case may be forwarded to even higher ranks within the faculty to determine if there is sufficient evidence to proceed. In my experience, at this point I was asked to have face-to-face discussions with the students to share my concerns and advise them of the situation. Such a conversation can last anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour depending on the situation and the student’s concerns. I then had to reconfirm with the senior faculty member that I still wanted to proceed. In my experience, the cases were then forwarded to the faculty of graduate studies. At that point the instructor officially does not have further involvement. However, in my experience, students may continue to reach out with questions and concerns as I am their usual point of contact, and the procedures can seem opaque to them as they await official decisions while their work is under review. It is common that students who have been found to have engaged in academic misconduct have to submit a reflective paper to demonstrate understanding of the matter and make plans to complete future work with integrity; I have also been in communication with students to

provide them with specific details about their work to assist them in these tasks. Regardless of how the case progresses, the investment of time is not negligible, and much of it occurs outside the formal reporting procedures.

The time commitment can be onerous for all instructors, but it can be especially burdensome for sessional instructors who often do this work outside the contractual period of employment and after remuneration has ended. Sessional instructors are typically hired one semester at a time to teach a half credit course equivalent, which entails three contact hours each week or an equivalent time commitment for online classes. Beyond contact time, instructors are responsible for marking and preparations. Arguably the extra time commitments to deal with academic misconduct – as opposed to choosing to overlook it – are beyond the scope of the terms of employment. This is surely a deterrent to developing a cultural of integrity.

In addition to the investment of time, there is the emotional and psychological cost. In any case of suspected plagiarism, I have struggled with deciding whether to escalate the matter. The range of emotions is wide as I weigh the concerns for the university, the student, and myself. I have spent time, often awake at night, contemplating tough questions. I wonder if reporting plagiarism is the most compassionate and helpful response – *will this “punitive approach” benefit my learners?* I feel guilt that students have plagiarised in my class despite my measures to prevent it and investment in their learning – *did I do something wrong?* I worry that students may retaliate – *am I safe from harassment?* I worry about perceptions that my teaching is inadequate and that students feel they can plagiarize in my class – *does this make me look bad?* In cases of reports prior to the end of the semester, I worry about my student evaluations which may impact future employment. I also worry that I will be labeled a “squeaky wheel”, and as a low status employee it will affect my chances of getting future contracts – *will I have a job next semester?*

Based on my perspective as a practitioner, there are two main factors that may deter an instructor from formally addressing and reporting incidents of plagiarism: time constraints and emotional costs. These two inhibitors to reporting are amplified for contract instructors who already experience time pressures and anxiety about the precarious nature of their work. I believe that my situation is a best-case scenario for sessional instructors: I have many courses under my belt and connections to the institution. I also had very supportive senior faculty members that have acted with diligence and concern when handling these cases. Despite these advantages, there are still many barriers that I have faced with regard to reporting violations.

Implications and Conclusions

I have provided a brief overview of the reasons that faculty, and especially sessional instructors, may be hesitant to appropriately deal with academic transgressions. I have shared my perspective as a practitioner in this situation and compared my experiences with what has been reported in the research literature, noting that my experiences do not

wholly reflect what has been reported about why sessionals fail to report academic misconduct. As a sessional who has reported a number of cases of academic misconduct, I believe that these barriers can be addressed through the provision of clear reporting procedures, faculty support, and professional development.

Many institutions already have accessible and transparent academic integrity policies for students and faculty (Eaton, 2017). It is vital that the procedures for enacting these policies also be available to all faculty, but especially sessional instructors who may have fewer connections to the campus culture and need more guidance. Having an accessible set of procedures, in addition to clear policies, will also assure students that cases are handled justly.

Institutions also must recognize the time it takes to develop a culture of integrity. Instructors need time and knowledge to develop and update activities and formative assessments that deter dishonesty. When faced with questionable student work, instructors greatly benefit from faculty support and recognition of the added time of enacting policy. There is no easy solution here; sessional employees and the institution are bound by contractual obligations, yet much of the work of addressing academic integrity breaches occurs outside the dates of the contract.

The emotional toll of reporting suspicions of plagiarism is also a concern. Sessional instructors, who often struggle with a precarious job situation and balance multiple short-term gigs, last-minute teaching assignments, and reduced and variable remuneration for their teaching, are often already experiencing undue stress (Shaker & Pasma, 2018). It is important that institutions recognize the emotional and psychological demands of reporting academic misconduct and provide instructors with resources for managing these additional stresses.

There are, however, a few potential options to deal with these issues. As suggested by Bertram Gallant (2018), it is essential to reward and remunerate instructors for their work towards developing a culture of integrity. This includes providing and paying for instructors to participate in professional development on assessment and course design. It also includes pay and recognition for the extra work entailed by reporting. Sessional instructors that undergo performance reviews should be able to cite their actions as examples of good performance and commitment to the institution. Universities can only promote a culture of academic integrity across campus with the involvement and cooperation of those on the front lines of teaching, a growing number of whom are sessional instructors. As the origin of the word “integrity” implies, it is only through a complete and integrated effort across all levels of higher education that a culture of integrity can thrive.

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