

## CHAPTER 8 SESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT

Teaching is one of the most rewarding parts of the job of a professional historian, and working as a sessional gives you plenty of teaching experience! Many people in tenure-track jobs started off as contract faculty. Others spend their entire careers as a sessional instructor. “Sessional positions are not McJobs,” writes Sharon Wall, a former sessional who now has a tenure-track job. “They can be a great way to learn about teaching, about oneself and about what one really values in an academic job. But they are also ways that universities are coping with reduced government funding of post-secondary education. The students and the sessionals are the poorer for it.”

Sessional labour has become an increasingly important part of the Canadian and American university scene, for a workforce made up of sessional instructors is much cheaper than one comprised of tenure-track faculty with benefits and sabbatical leaves. Unions are working hard to improve conditions for sessional instructors and have made some gains in terms of job security and preference in hiring for tenure-track jobs. But it is a tough battle. Contract faculty are some of the most exploited academic workers on campus; indeed, one person may be teaching at several schools. Many sessionals are not unionized. They are often poorly paid, have limited benefits and job security, and receive little or no support for their own research. These conditions persist because so many people have so few options and are desperate for a university job.

That said, the working conditions of sessionals vary widely. If you have a limited term contract as a visiting assistant professor, you may have approximately the same teaching load and salary as your tenure-track colleagues. You may have your own office and even be eligible for internal grant monies. At most institutions, you will be expected to take part in the life of the department by attending department meetings and social events, although you will probably not be asked to serve on committees or participate in job searches. A limited term contract can last from eight months to three years or even longer; in some cases it can lead to a tenure-track job.

Most sessional instructors are hired on a course by course basis. At most institutions, teaching by the course pays only slightly more than TAing, yet it is far more work. In order to earn a living wage, many people must cobble together courses from a variety of institutions. Of course, this is possible only in larger cities or regions where there are a number of colleges and universities. You will probably share an office with other sessional instructors, and you may feel quite alienated from the department. Sessional instructors often teach at night, or once a week, and it can be very difficult to build relationships with tenure-track faculty and even with other sessionals. Tenure-track faculty see a large number of sessionals come and go, and may make no effort to see how you are doing. They might not even know you exist. Because medical benefits are likely to be minimal, you might find yourself in an extremely difficult situation if you get sick or pregnant but you do have some basic rights. Caring for children, elderly parents, and sick or disabled family members can be tremendously challenging when you're working

long hours and traveling a great deal. Also, unless your union has arranged some sort of job protection or seniority, you are very much at the whim of the department as to whether or not you will be hired to teach again next year. You might have taught the same course at the same institution for years, but if a tenure-track faculty is hired to teach this course, you will lose out.

Since departmental expectations for – and the working conditions of – contract faculty are so variable, it is important to learn the rules of the institution. Make sure you are aware of the exact requirements – and opportunities – of your job. Some departments offer a handbook for sessionals, while in others you will have to ask the chair for advice. Do not hesitate to bring up your concerns – for example, safety considerations if you work at night. If you are unionized, contact your union if you are unsure of your rights.

### **Applying for a Sessional Job**

Sessional jobs are often advertised in the same places as tenure-track jobs: H-Net, *University Affairs*, and the CAUT Bulletin. Be aware, however, that some sessional jobs are advertised only on university websites – or not advertised at all. If you are interested in finding sessional employment, begin your job search early and look widely. Tell your supervisor and graduate director, and send your cv to departments where you would like to teach. Colleges often have sessional positions as well, so include them as part of your job search. Tell friends and colleagues in tenure-track positions that you would be interested in teaching at their institution. Courses often come up at the last minute, due to illness, parental leave, and other factors. You want to be prepared.

If the job is a full-time but limited term contract, the job interview may be fairly extensive. You might be expected to do a job talk, either in person, by video-conference, or over the phone. If you are being hired to teach a course or two, you will likely have a short interview with the chair or associate chair, perhaps on the phone. Many sessionals are hired to teach the course of a faculty member who is sick or on leave. Sometimes, the department will have a fairly firm idea of what they want you to cover in the course. In other cases, you may have a lot of freedom in designing your own course. Make sure that you understand what the department wants.

### **Being Evaluated**

As a sessional instructor, you will receive teaching evaluations from the students, much like any other faculty member. At some institutions, your teaching will also be reviewed by a faculty member who comes to one of your classes and submits a report to the department. This can be an intimidating experience, but it can also be useful. Most of us could benefit from having our teaching observed by others. Ask for feedback and take the advice seriously, but also be aware that teaching styles differ and you do not have to do everything they suggest. At the same time, if you receive a positive evaluation, ask the department chair or supervising professor to put a note in your file and write a reference letter you can use when you apply for a tenure-track job.

You can also ask for copies of your students' teaching evaluations; they will be useful for future job applications.

### **Moving Out of Sessional Teaching**

Some departments give preference to sessional instructors when it comes to tenure-track hiring, but you should never count on this. Most searches will be openly advertised and there are advantages and disadvantages to being an internal candidate. On the one hand, your colleagues will have a fairly good idea of whether they want you to stay on as a permanent colleague (so no matter how frustrated or marginalized you feel, your job performance matters!). On the other hand, faculty members are often excited by the possibility of hiring someone they don't yet know; they want an emerging "star" or someone they think can cover more gaps in the curriculum. To land that tenure-track job, you must compete in an open search. Here your publication record will matter. Being an effective teacher is probably not enough to get you hired; indeed, teaching too much to pay the bills can delay your research and actually reduce your chances of being hired. While it is extremely disappointing to be turned down by an institution where you have devoted your time and energy and developed relationships with colleagues, try not to take it personally. A variety of considerations go into hiring decisions, and unfortunately rejection is very common.

If you are teaching a full-course load, it can be very difficult to find the time to publish and apply for jobs. However, if you want to land a tenure-track job, you must build up your cv, and show that you have made concrete progress toward turning your dissertation into a book. If you can afford it, it is wise to teach a little less and work on your publications. Search committees want to see some teaching experience and good teaching reviews, but years of sessional teaching will do you little good on the academic job market. Alternatively, if you decide that what you really love is teaching and you are not as interested in research, you might seek out employment in a CEGEP in Quebec, or colleges in other provinces, like British Columbia which has an extensive college system.

If you wind up as a long-term sessional instructor, either because of the lack of professional alternatives or your own personal circumstances, remember that as an educator, you can make a huge difference in your students' lives by nourishing their intellects and encouraging them to engage with the past – and present. Take pleasure in the joys of teaching history.