

Let's Talk Precarity (or Not): Labour, Communities, and Conversation (Panel)

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Precarious labour structures such as contracts and on-call work are increasingly common in both academia and librarianship. Recent reports from the Canadian Association of University Teachers and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives have measured the extent and impact of contract employment in academia. They indicate that individuals working precariously experience effects such as a sense of disconnection, poor mental and physical health outcomes, financial instability, and high levels of stress and uncertainty. Institutional effects can include declining quality of service, lower workplace morale, and increasing administrative load for managers and continuing staff. While these reports provide valuable data on the working conditions of contract academic staff, both determined librarians to be out of scope despite acknowledging that librarians are often part of faculty associations or bargaining units.

Our ongoing research study on precarity in libraries aims to address this gap in knowledge and provide new information on precarious work in Canadian libraries. Since November 2017, we have been collecting and coding postings from the Partnership Job Board into a dataset that lets us explore patterns in job postings and identify the prevalence of precarious positions. We have also sought to capture the effects and perceptions of precarious work through semi-structured interviews with BC library workers, and we are planning an online survey that will build on findings from these other components.

In this session, we will discuss findings from our job postings dataset with a particular focus on postings in academic libraries, and we will situate this information within the broader contexts of our other findings and of precarity in academia. We will also explore the following questions: How can academic librarians organize and advocate for the concerns of library workers in the context of precarity in higher education? How can we challenge the silence around this topic and make space for conversations about precarity and its effects? How can those with tenure or secure employment support and advocate for precariously employed colleagues? How can we build solidarity with precarious workers, within the library, in our institutions, and with workers across institutions? In doing so, we hope to inform attendees about the negative effects of precarious work and assemble a range of strategies to mitigate them.