WORKING
CONDITIONS FOR
PROFESSORS
IN QUEBEC
UNIVERSITIES

01. THE JUGGLING ACT: Thriving or surviving?

FÉDÉRATION
QUÉBÉCOISE DES
PROFESSEURES
ET PROFESSEURS
D'UNIVERSITÉ

CONTENT

THE JUGGLING ACT:
Thriving or surviving?

This publication is an initiative of the Fédération québécoise des professeures et professeurs d'université (FQPPU). It is the first in a series of four brief reports resulting from an action research project undertaken by the FQPPU's Committee on Working Conditions for Professors. This research was made possible by the ongoing support of the FQPPU and its staff, and in collaboration with the executive committees of the unions and associations of professors. We appreciate their help and want to thank all of the professors who participated in the focus groups and shared their experiences and thoughts; their accounts greatly contributed to the analysis.

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Future reports will be available there as well.

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FÉDÉRATION QUÉBÉCOISE DES PROFESSEURES ET PROFESSEURS D'UNIVERSITÉ

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Introduction

Universities have undergone drastic changes over the past few decades, as has the work of professors. Quebec university professors are still deeply committed to teaching, research, and service. Many, however, worry about the trend to commercialize knowledge and the resulting working conditions for professors, which insidiously reduce autonomy, lead to work overload, and warp the rules of collegiality through the introduction of competition.

In order to better understand what can improve or compromise health and commitment to a university career, and to supplement the quantitative data already available on the issue, the FQPPU funded an action research project that included professors from ten Quebec universities. In total, 145 professors from different professions and disciplines, at various career stages, participated in the study[1].

The focus groups illuminated certain aspects of professorial work that are deeply ingrained in universities, but also uncovered hidden, more difficult aspects of such work. The stories and the exchanges in the focus groups, as well as the analysis, lead to a broader understanding of professors' working conditions, including how they developed and what the pitfalls are. The interview excerpts (in italics) are freely included, while respecting anonymity. They were chosen for their authenticity, because they go beyond the anecdotal and reflect widely shared perceptions and experiences.

The dissemination of these research results in brief reports constitutes an invitation to other professors who may want to be heard. These reports, intended to mobilize universities to protect what is important and to contribute to solutions, are aimed at supporting the rebuilding of individual and collective capacity for thought, dialogue, and, above all, action.

With this in mind, the FQPPU and its committee on working conditions for professors would like to join forces with union executives to support professors who are prepared to lead initiatives in their workplace and make real commitments to changing some aspects of their work.

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1 Details about the methodology of this action research project can be found in the Methodological Appendix.

THE JUGGLING ACT

This is the first in a series of brief reports dealing with different aspects of the daily work of professors. While the other reports will relate to collegiality and management, research, and teaching, this one focuses on professors' work as a whole, including the working conditions that are valued and the difficulties associated with juggling various professional demands in addition to one's personal life. Which working conditions matter most to professors? What is leading so many of them to experience work overload, high levels of stress, and low job satisfaction? What are the consequences of this overload on individuals, their work, and their health?

THE BEST JOB IN THE WORLD...

Autonomy and Freedom

Professors feel that freedom and autonomy in their work are of the utmost importance. One of the working conditions that matters most to professors is being able to choose their research subjects and methods, as well as their collaborators. They also enjoy having autonomy with regards to choosing what material to teach and how to teach it.

Freedom with regards to professional organization, schedule and work location flexibility, as well as the ability to adjust their work, leads professors to feel as though they have some control.

I find that this profession is pretty incredible. There is freedom of action and of choosing what you want to research. There aren't many places where you can be a salaried employee and be autonomous. I think that this job has some aspects that are truly unique.

We have quite a bit of freedom in how we work and how we organize our work. This is a really positive thing. Not only do we have academic freedom, but we have the freedom to organize our schedules and to participate in projects that interest us, and we don't have a boss who is constantly looking over our shoulders. I met with someone because I was thinking of leaving the university, but I realized that these were very good working conditions. It's not easy to find better elsewhere.

Freedom and the Pushing of Intellectual Boundaries

Individuals who decide to become professors tend to be very curious and interested in developing and furthering knowledge. They feel highly satisfied when they are able to make discoveries, question conventional wisdom, innovate, and stay on the cutting edge of knowledge in their field.

The question that needs to be asked is why we are university professors. What makes us different? I think that we need to exchange ideas, try to expand our profession, and drive research forward. We take ideas, discuss them, transform them and bring them back. I find this very dynamic, and I think that it's what makes us different.

Being a professor also consists of becoming engrossed in resolving complex problems, analyzing data, testing theories, and learning about a new subject matter for a course. Looking in depth at an issue and reading a text for the sake of enriching ideas are also part of what enhances professors' pleasure and motivation.

Rewarding experiences? When I am able to prepare lectures and write. Even when I am not sure if it will be useful, I find it stimulating. I tell myself that I am alive, I am creative, and I am able to achieve what I want in all kinds of different ways.

Professors are also motivated by opportunities to debate, to innovate, and to choose their areas of research. An intellectually-stimulating environment can be a privilege. It can result in different ways of seeing, thinking about,

and resolving issues, and can lead to a variety of meetings and collaborations. Furthermore, professors learn alongside their students by supervising their research and helping them resolve various problems. Other aspects of the profession that professors enjoy are trips abroad, sabbaticals, opportunities to connect with colleagues from other universities, and chances to participate in events with the top researchers in the field.

I have colleagues who I think are extraordinary. I have worked in many places across Canada and internationally. But here, it's nearly the best. It's hard to imagine better… It's constructive, always going further. And so, I thrive in this kind of environment.

During the interviews, professors noted that they liked being able to set aside specific times for creative work, as well as for developing new ideas or innovative projects. The quality of intellectual life and innovation also depend on the ability to refine work until it is satisfactory. Unfortunately, it is getting harder and harder to set aside this time in a regular work schedule.

I often have to work weekends, but I organize myself so that I can do quality-based work, such as writing. Writing makes me happy—it's one of the best things that I can do with my time. It was a holiday Monday, and I needed to do some yard work, but I was quite happy when it started raining. That, for me, was not stressful. Usually when I work outside of my regular hours, it's to do quality-based work.

Institutional Recognition

The most valued recognition for professors is that which comes from their colleagues, partners, and students, who appreciate the quality, relevance, and originality of their contributions on a daily basis. In addition, institutional recognition is provided through a range of procedures and used to determine whether professors meet the criteria for tenure, promotions, and grants. This recognition may result from an evaluation of scientific output or come from those in charge of units or committees that analyze workloads, activity reports, and files for promotion. Receiving tenure includes these steps and is a particularly important event that contributes to recognition for professors.

We had a small ceremony when I was promoted to full professor. It was in front of my peers. I never thought I'd be so proud to be promoted. It's almost as though the university was being recognized. I didn't think that it would have such a big impact on me.

These forms of recognition, reflected in activity reports, and which count when seeking a promotion, are

appreciated differently depending on the professor and the circumstances. Some professors feel satisfied at having accomplished something, others feel that they have achieved a goal that required a lot of effort and perseverance, and yet others are happy to experience the freedom from the constraints of the rules that comes with a promotion. It is a relief for professors to no longer have to prove themselves in order to have job security or get a promotion, and they are thus able to refocus their priorities.

One of the best moments? Hmmm! Probably getting tenure. I am not from the school of thought that says you always need to be under pressure to perform well. When I got tenure, I told myself: "Finally, I'll be able to thrive in my work." "As though the outside pressure was reduced?" "The pressure to publish I don't know how many articles. I also felt that pressure pretty strongly. To the point that when I got tenure…" "I was like 'Phew!'"

This not only reflects a sense of accomplishment, but also a sense of relief from work that was characterized by overload, urgency, a scattered feeling, a lack of support, and an increasing number of tasks and criteria that needed to be met. But do these feelings last?

NOT DOING ENOUGH OR DOING TOO MUCH?

Urgency, Fragmentation, and Overload

Faced with so many demands, many professors find it impossible to balance the three areas of their work (teaching, research, and service) in a satisfying way.

It's clear to me that we can't carry out each of the three areas of our work in just thirty-five hours a week.

On the weekend, I always spend one day doing corrections. It's true that we shouldn't do that and just do it during our work hours, but I don't think anyone is able to do all of their work in thirty-five hours.

Professors know that they can carry out their work when they can become engrossed in studying complex subjects, thinking of new ways to analyze issues, creating, and working on difficult long-term tasks. On the other hand, so many different requests lead to a fragmentation of work. A number of professors noted some worrisome difficulties related to juggling work that require a great deal of concentration, professional obligations, and occupational stressors.

You want to write a book. When do you have time to read, sit down, and think about it? And if you want to move forward with your thinking, you need to be able to read. I found this pathetic, and want to cry when I think about it because there is no way to have the time and space to just reflect on something and try it out. All we do is repeat the same things—repeat them with small additions.

Work that isn't purely research-related takes up a lot of time and it's not really valued. It's as though it doesn't really exist, but it needs to be done anyway. It takes up time each week, time each day. There are very real concerns, and they all happen at the same time. And this, this is what far exceeds a regular work week.

In addition to overload related to the amount of work, there is also cognitive overload, when professors need to expend extra effort in order to concentrate on a single task without getting distracted, in other words, without worrying about other tasks that are pressing or pending.

I find it very, very difficult to find time. When I luck out and have some time to spend on research, I'm on cloud nine. The problem is that I find everything else cuts into that time. There are always obligations that eat away at you. I use the analogy of a fragmented disk. When your disk is too fragmented, your computer doesn't perform optimally. I kind of feel like my head is too fragmented. Even if you had one afternoon a week or one day a week to do research, your head is too busy thinking of other things, like phone calls that need to be made and things that need to be resolved.

Priority is generally given to pressing work, which is often related to teaching and administrative tasks.

The pressure doesn't just come from the administration, it also comes from students. If you return their work three months after it's submitted, there will be issues, and things will definitely hit a snag somewhere. When you are a program director, if there is a problem with a course, you need to fix it. You have no choice but to fix it that day or the next day.

This situation can lead to lasting irritation—a feeling of never being able to do enough and having to constantly delay projects that matter most. Successive emergencies lead to a depletion of energy, as well as feelings of inefficiency and discouragement. There are fewer opportunities to get involved with intellectual work that is both focused and satisfying.

Recharging your batteries, gathering information, exploring new ideas… How can you be open to these things when you are overloaded with emergency after emergency? The problem with these emergencies is that they come up constantly. They never stop.

People work too much—on average 50 to 60 hours a week— and we think that it's normal; it's part of the job. But I think that this is one of the biggest issues. We do too much. So the issue, instead, is that we need to learn how to set limits.

How can we understand this work overload? How is it experienced? How has it become established in university culture?

Imposed, Normative, and Voluntary Overloads

Work overloads are experienced differently depending on whether they are imposed, normative, or voluntary.

An **imposed overload** is endured and cannot be avoided without running the risk of paying very dearly. It results from overly heavy demands from immediate colleagues, and these demands are almost impossible to get out of. These overloads are a struggle because they go against the principles of freedom and autonomy. Professors experiencing imposed overloads do not have the choice or the option to control their work, they feel trapped, they never get a break, and as a result, they become more stressed and fatigued.

Can things be seen realistically? If you realize that this year my workload's full, then why would you make me teach more courses or take on more students? Is there a way to reduce the pressure? We're all at our wit's end. At least that's how I feel. Everyone's at their wit's end. Can't they see that our plates are full? Full, I tell you, they're full..

A **normative overload** results from implicit norms, things that are unsaid, and indirect, sometimes insidious, pressure that leads to the fear of not being able to meet expectations. It creeps in through the internalization of external performance criteria. It can be seen, for example, when professors fear that they are not measuring up or not as productive as others, and this leads them to compare their CVs to those of their colleagues, to count their publications, or to complete an extra grant application to ensure that they conform to the supposed norms. This type of overload, rooted in a professional culture that values overworking, happens regardless of formal institutional requirements.

Everyone works hard and works more. There are people who work harder than you. That's the message we're getting.

And we look at other people's CVs, which are becoming longer without rhyme or reason. We tell ourselves that we're not doing enough. We add lists of things to our workloads and to our reports. This becomes the norm. But, everyone knows it's not doable!

A **voluntary overload** is a matter of professional ethics and a passion for engaging activities that require time

and that professors do not want to give up. It goes beyond high institutional expectations and social pressure. This type of overload comes from the tasks, despite often going unnoticed and unreported, that professors spend time on because such tasks are inseparable from their work and they do not want to compromise on quality.

"We're often criticized: 'You don't know how to manage your time, if you take too much, it's your fault.' No! I think it's pretty paradoxical: imposed and normative workloads are so crazy that to survive and stay motivated, we need to add things that are important to us. And so, I would say that voluntary overload is an essential part of our work. It's a big part of my life as an intellectual, as a professor. If I don't do it, nothing else would make sense."

"I think that's true. I was really overloaded last term, but I had no choice. I wouldn't be here otherwise. I did things that didn't count in the eyes of management towards a promotion request, but I needed to do them. If I didn't, I couldn't continue being a professor."

But I do think, in relation to the stress level, that the professoriate is in a kind of double bind because we do have the sort of basic system that you've expected to live up to but you also have your own personal desire to do well, to publish research or teach well or something like that, so there's an internal mechanism to encourage you to perform. But there is actually, at least at this point, no structural way, to reward that kind of motivation.

The Race for Tenure

For a number of professors, some sources of stress are related to tenure, which generally corresponds to job permanency, and the explicit and implicit norms upon which quality of work is evaluated. These norms also influence the way in which professors dedicate themselves to their work. The norms operate mainly at the beginning of professors' careers and lead to performance anxiety.

When we first start out, we're told: "tenure isn't won" and then your job is unstable for five years, and after that you can be shown the door. It's a lot of pressure. My first year, I submitted nine grant applications. It gives you an idea of how scared I was.

I tell myself that until I get tenure, things have to be this way, even though it's not a healthy pace, and I don't want to keep it up all my life. I'm worried about the future, but I hope I can have at least some type of balance.

In addition to having to be actively involved in teaching and research, needing to perform while learning new tasks contributes to fragmentation and overload during the probationary period.

And the semester started. I learned about how the schedules worked and all that. When I did my doctorate, I was not in a research group […]. All to say that I was not used to the hoops that needed to be jumped through and the dynamics of research group grant applications. For me, everything had been done on my own. It was overwhelming. I worked relentlessly on them and kept asking myself: "Where do I even start? What needs to be done?"

New professors must also learn a number of procedures in order to understand how their university functions, as well as its explicit and implicit norms. They need time to adjust before reaching their full potential, but they are not always given leeway. Many experienced professors are concerned about the pressure their non-tenured colleagues face.

We make them work like dogs. These are people. We talk about university and its rules and excellence criteria. It unnecessarily terrifies young profs. Again last week, I was speaking to a prof hired about three or four years ago. He wants to get tenure. He is stressed and isn't sleeping. We ask them for things that make no sense.

In addition to learning and taking on a heavy workload, new professors feel the need to pursue these processes seamlessly.

I attended my first departmental meeting where the file of a young colleague was being reviewed. Some profs were being very nit-picky. And I appreciate and give all the credit to an older prof, who at one point, pounded his fist on the table and said: "I'm sure none of you had a file like this after four years of working here, and yet you are all being so picky about the number of publications and the quality of the journals."

For their part, department heads are reluctant to sound an alarm even when it is necessary.

What I hate is that we don't have guidelines. There is no one who says: "It's enough!" Your department head is the one who countersigns your damn applications. After the third, he should tell you: "You need to wait a little bit!" We need to have stop signs somewhere.

FIND THE DIFFERENCE

Professors went as far as reporting some department heads for taking advantage of junior professors by always asking them for more. Putting pressure on them can be seen as a form of blackmail, in which tenure is at stake.

My department head told me: "You need to redo another grant application. And you need to publish two articles before next year, if you want to submit your file in a year." I realized later that my file was already sufficient to receive tenure; in addition to a large teaching load, I had publications and a grant. But, when we're isolated and don't receive advice, it's hard to know… I waited another year, but at that point I would have resigned. I would have left. I was sickened by it.

Known elsewhere for their ability to face key professional and scientific challenges, newly hired professors are surprised to be treated as though their past accomplishments no longer matter. Although many are in their forties, they are told that they must again prove themselves, regardless of their previous career paths.

I left a position where I was being considered, and I find myself making photocopies and begging for a seminar. How does this happen? Classes are starting and I'm still trying to figure out how to make a place for myself. But I feel like I'm not worth anything anymore. That is the starting point, and then you run around to try to find out what resources you have access to. How are decisions made? It took two years for me to learn that I had a small budget for teaching assistants.

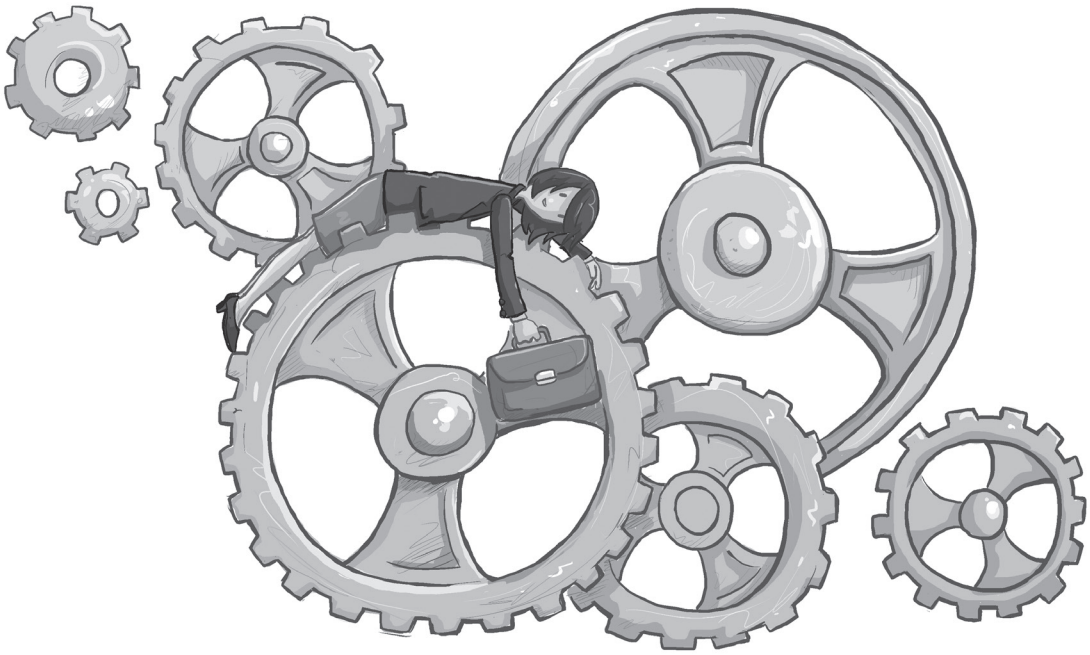
However, as one professor noted, despite the difficulties associated with the various types of work overload, tenure is almost always eventually received. But at what price?

I've found that promotion refusals are quite rare, especially for tenure, which is absolutely crucial for job permanency, but some people get promoted under circumstances that can be humiliating, i.e. by making numerous phone calls until their file is finally brought before the university council or even the parity committee, and only then do they get tenure.

Fragmentation and imposed and normative overload occur in different ways in the race for tenure early on in a professor's career. What happens after tenure is obtained?

When the Best in a Professor's Career is Not Yet to Come

Although overload weighs heavily on new professors, associate and full professors are not spared from it either. Are they the authors of their own misfortunes? Are they workaholics? Is it possible for them to avoid work overload? When so many professors keep up this unreasonable pace and take on too many commitments, it can not only lead to normative or voluntary pressure, but also pressure to stay active in research networks, fulfill obligations to



students, and take on their fair share of the shared burden of their unit, particularly by carrying out significant administrative duties.

From both a personal and a professional perspective, overload can be explained by concern for a job well done and by the value placed on collegiality, which encourages professors to take on unreasonable mandates and commitments. From an organizational perspective, overload is also explained by systematic pressure resulting from the tenure and research funding processes, which set a steady work pace, and by compliance with high standards.

Why do we continue to do research? It's because it's not optional. It's not like we could say: "This year, for these reasons, I'm going to slow things down and I'll start again next year." You can't do that because once you step off the train, it'll pass you by, and it'll be pretty much impossible to get back on. You don't have a choice.

Not all professors have strong records of achievement that are valued by university administrations and granting agencies. They also do not all have equal opportunities and workloads. Faced with a lack of recognition

for their work as a whole, tenured professors who take on administrative tasks, get involved in service, or have large teaching loads feel defeated or overburdened, as do those whose research is unusual, off the beaten path.

In terms of administrative tasks, the pressure is particularly strong in some departments, where it is difficult to find volunteers to get involved in department or program management. Systems must sometimes be established in order to compel professors to accept such duties and the extra work associated with them.

We are twenty professors and we have six administrative positions to fill. That means that we needed to establish a more or less compulsory rotation system. We wanted to make professors accountable, by saying: "It doesn't make sense, if you don't want to take the position, we'll be under someone's supervision, etc."

Professors find that teaching commitments become heavier because of repeated obligations to develop new courses, teach large groups, and teach subjects that fall outside of their areas of expertise. Imposed courses and demanding schedules are also obstacles that are difficult to overcome.

I have tenure and I still have not taught in the fields for which I was hired. It's very taxing. Your research and teaching are always at odds. I know I cry in March when the workload is set. I cry because I always find myself with undergraduate courses that I don't want to be teaching anymore. This has consequences on everything else. It's a source of tension, stress, and great sadness.

In research, it is difficult to work without the support of a good scientific network, especially for long-term projects and on issues that are not mainstream or topical.

This means that I don't have colleagues. All of my colleagues work elsewhere: in my field, it's just me. And so, when I started more than five years ago, I was told: "Teaching is not important, what students think is not important. What's important is to go out and get grants." In my field, there are no grants. I should really join a team, but it's very, very difficult. In my university, and those nearby, in my areas of interest, there's very little.

When you want to do research in a different way, despite it being frustrating, you need to fight for it. And you need to work twice as hard, because the work needs to get done, and the battle needs to be fought.

Unless they work 60 to 70 hours a week, unless they carry out research that is not continuous, or are able to delegate a lot of their work to staff who require very little supervision, professors who are more invested in teaching or

management are unsure of how to meet expectations without skimping on quality. They ask themselves how to achieve balance.

Balance? I've been a professor for fifteen years and I'm still searching for it. I'm sure that I won't tell you anything you don't already know, but the worst issue for me is overload. Basically, it's like when you are preparing to leave on vacation and you want to take a certain number of things with you, but you only have two suitcases. You realize, after trying to fill the suitcases, that you just have too many items. You tried to cram things in, move them around, place them differently, but you can't fit fourteen metres cubed into six metres cubed. I've tried a lot of things. I've tried to work in different ways and to lower the bar, in terms of my goals. I tried to detach from work. Nothing helps!

In addition to experiencing stress and frustration, professors who are unable to set aside enough continuous time for quality work in order for their research to progress appropriately could be at a disadvantage when their file is compared to colleagues who are more devoted to research. In this context, professors are more likely to compare themselves to others, especially to those who carry out the most research, thus increasing the amount of normative overload.

Even after professors have received tenure, promotion criteria seem to be a key concern for them.

Promotion Criteria: Vagueness and Standardization

In the personal accounts, two strong criticisms related to criteria for promotion were mentioned repeatedly:

1. Escalating expectations, which are open to many interpretations that contradict the norms for receiving tenure; and
2. Standardization of the criteria, favouring peer-reviewed publications and grants.

During required evaluations, imprecise criteria, a lack of transparency, and varying information add to the pressure.

They scare us. For years when we're building up our files, we hear all sorts of things. You can't refuse to do this. You need to do that. You have to in order to get tenure. We do it, and then after that, the new department head or someone else tells us: "No, no! That doesn't count. It's not worth anything, it's not as important as this other work."

We had two colleagues with great files. The first was really accomplished in research. The second, a young professor, was much more involved in administrative and other tasks. These two files, in our perspective at

the departmental level, were both excellent, but obviously in different areas. The second file failed at the next level [higher up in the hierarchy].

Even though some departments, usually in universities far from major cities, favour teaching, research is the aspect of professorial work that generally gets the most institutional recognition and is most valued by colleagues. The strictest promotion criteria are based mainly on research achievement and funding. These criteria place great importance on a certain type of scientific productivity, while teaching and service are undervalued.

When I started, they explained my work. It was made up of four components, and how it worked was that about 40% of our time was spent teaching, about 40% was spent on research, and about 20% was spent on the other two components, internal and external participation. At the same time, however, they also plainly told me: "When it comes time for promotion, tenure, getting a full professorship, or whatever else, your research will be worth at least 60%, your teaching, 20%, and 20% for the other two components." And so, right at the beginning, they tell you that you're going to put time into teaching, but it won't count much when it's time for a promotion.

It is assumed that all professors have the same conditions for research output. However, because the rules of granting agencies set a frantic pace for scientific production, other crucial aspects of professorial work are being neglected. Promotion criteria are increasingly standardized, and no longer consider individual career profiles and personal aspirations.

And that's why having way too many external forces thwarts what you're trying to achieve, which is more inspired and better research. I mean I think the whole quantitative thing is out of kilter too. It shouldn't be a quantitative measure, though there should be an expectation in relation to minimum quantity. But most professors become professors because they are really interested in their subject, they want to discover things, or maybe they love teaching etc., and those are intrinsic

motivations, and the more you know your work is subjected to external boxes and categories, the more distortions, and I think the less you're going to get what you want.

Instead of recognizing a professor's strengths and considering their capacity to meet departmental priorities, promotion criteria discourage individual contributions. These criteria also do not take into account the context in which someone is hired, as well as other constraints over which individual professors have no control.

Fewer Resources, More Bureaucracy

Professors associate the underfunding of universities with conditions that lead to overload and fragmentation of work.

We need more profs. We need to stop waiting. There are no positions. The university situation never gets better. It always gets darker and darker and people keep waiting. We are constantly disappointed. Constantly.

In the end, everyone leaves frustrated and each person tries to get their piece. But there is no piece! If there were more funding, people wouldn't compete as much and would spend more time doing what they need to do. It's the same thing with space. We keep putting people in the same buildings: the equipment is old. Unless universities are funded differently, we'll just have to live with it.

This underfunding leads to having too few faculty members to take on collective responsibilities. The number of students per professor and the size of course seminars are growing: there are more expectations, particularly at the Master's and doctoral levels, with a significant increase in the number of students. As a result, thesis supervision requires more time. In addition, finding research funding and teaching require more effort, at a time when support services for professorial work have been reduced for budgetary reasons.

In my class of about 100 students, teaching assistant hours went down by 60%. I did the tutorials myself and then I had enough T.A.s to kind of cover what I did before. I would take it on myself to compensate. But I mean it was raised in a departmental meeting by multiple people and the issue was budget cuts from the university and he had to cut somewhere. And this was the easiest cut to make because for whatever reason, they just felt that it was an easy cut. Now, I feel that a) the quality of education goes down, and b) there is more stress for the profs and you have to make do with the hours you have now.

A number of professors mentioned that they take on technical and secretarial tasks; almost all of them have learned to rely less and less on support services

in their universities. Some resign themselves to hiring students or to paying high salaries for professional help. Others with less funding must devote a lot of their time to tasks such as filling out forms, making photocopies, compiling notes, running errands, and resolving computer problems.

There has been a lack of funding for years. I came in at the beginning of the cuts. Since then, there has always been this discussion. I'm tired of it. There's no money, no new resources. There's nothing. They tell you that they need to cut a support staff position. So who's going to do the work? We are stuck doing work that is completely ridiculous, like making photocopies. I don't think that I'm being paid to do work like that.

These tasks divert attention away from important work. The frustration grows when there are technical problems or undue administrative tasks. The same goes for having to deal with too much bureaucracy on a daily basis.

Universities are real bureaucratic nightmares.

For example, I recently got a large research grant. I can't do what I want with it […] I need to submit a proposal. Everything needs to be justified. It's a mess, it's terrible. I struggled to get this grant, and somewhere, I began to feel cheated. It's not like I want to buy a car! I can't hire who I want. If I want to buy a specific apparatus, I need to submit a proposal, and I have to prove that there's only one supplier. You can't make a global submission. I need the apparatus for next month. Let's not exaggerate!

While many agree that a university must have policies and procedural rules to automate certain operations and ensure its sound management, most professors feel that there is also a need to reduce bureaucracy.

WHEN YOUR PLATE IS FULL

Live to work?

Despite the fact that professors value their work, they find it unhealthy that professional obligations infringe upon their personal lives. Social and recreational activities are often sacrificed. High tensions and more considerable sacrifices can occur when work reduces a professor's availability for parents or family at crucial moments. These are no longer minor sacrifices, but conflicts of values and moral dilemmas.


I DON'T BELIEVE IT.
IT'S MY LAST ONE.
I'M FINALLY FINISHED.
CRACK
WHAT'S ONE SLEEPLESS NIGHT?
IT WAS WORTH IT!
HONESTLY, I NEVER THOUGHT I'D BE ABLE TO LEAVE THIS OFFICE.
GOOD MORNING!
GOOD... MORNING?
IT'S WEDNESDAY MORNING!
...
IT'S YOUR OFFICE HOURS FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE TERM PAPER.
LAMPRAY

We drag our work around with us. We are researchers during the days, on the weekends, summers, nights, all the time—stuck to our computers. The first few years I brought my laptop from home to work and back again. When I gave birth, I had my laptop… I was completely connected. I told myself: "Look, I can't believe that everyone does this."

My mother lives alone outside of the country and had very serious health issues. She almost died at the beginning of October. Since it was the grant application period and I had to support a student who was applying for a fellowship, I didn't go. My mom was in the hospital, in the ER. It was really big and I didn't go because I couldn't delegate anything. This is a serious issue.

Interviews revealed a tendency to too easily accept the fact that professors' professional lives spill over into their personal lives. A number of professors experienced discouragement when the pressure associated with their work made it difficult to preserve their personal and family lives. At the beginning of their careers, they hold back their anger when they keep hearing that it is normal to work constantly.

When I explained to my department head the context [of the overload] and why I couldn't write up these publications on top of my other work, he told me that I should be writing at night and on weekends if I couldn't find any other time. He told me: "I know that you have two kids and a significant other, but after having a nice talk with them in the evening, you should write." I didn't answer him. I closed the door and I left. I was seething.

With respect to family life, some of the women interviewed noted that they chose not to have a child, or not to have as many children as they would have liked, because of the demands of their work. In general, parents sleep less and wear themselves out by running around trying to get the important things done. In addition to never having a moment to themselves and to having to do everything too fast, many professors are worried about or regret missing moments with their families that will not come around again. Others, who prioritize their family lives by telling themselves "whatever happens, happens," feel that they are falling behind and are stressed because of it.

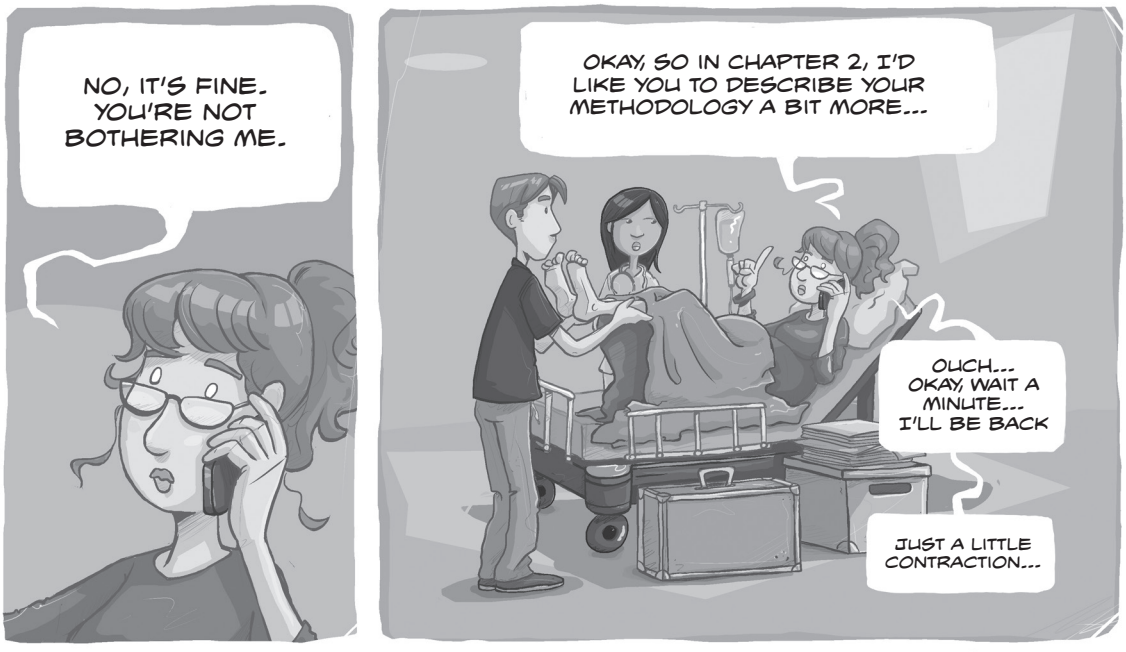
We made the decision to have a baby. And so, whether you want to or not, you have no choice but to reduce your workload a bit. It just doesn't work anymore. We have the right to a maternity leave, but forget about that: during my leave, I published my thesis and had students who were finishing their Master's. One week after I gave birth, one of my students came over so we could do one last reading of her Master's thesis. When you're with your son, you feel bad that you aren't working, and when you're working, you feel bad that you aren't with your son.

And so, you're always caught in this kind of dilemma. The tension is pretty draining. My son is turning four soon and I am only now starting to think that I'd have the energy to have another. I wouldn't have been able to before. It just didn't fit into my plan with work. It was impossible to even think about.

In addition, some women who live alone and have no kids have a bleak outlook on the future. For them, it can become difficult to have to bring work home every night.

I want to talk about single people. When we talk about balancing our personal and professional lives, we never talk about the people who have sacrificed everything for work. Women with no personal lives, that have put aside having a love life or children because of professional demands, it's not something we talk about. Professional lives can't be balanced with personal lives. But when our professional lives disappoint us on top of it… Divorce, it's not with your partner, because you can bounce back from that. It's a divorce from yourself, from your ideals. It's another type of divorce. And I think that a lot of women find themselves in this situation.

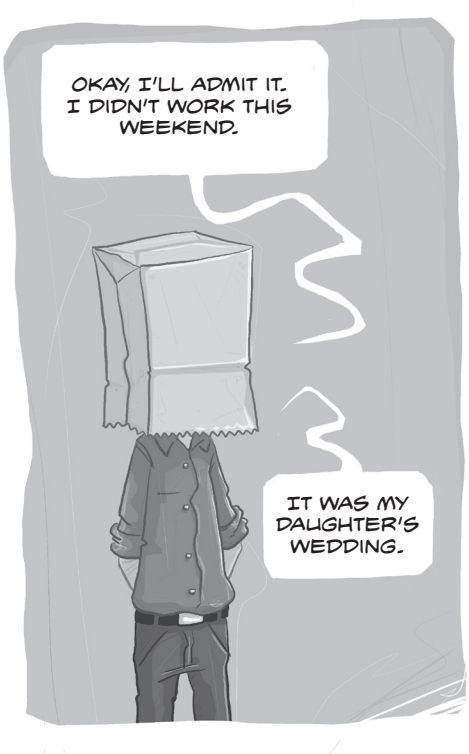
These sometimes difficult life choices go hand in hand with health problems that manifest themselves in various ways.



Lifestyle and Health Problems

A number of professors give up on leading healthy lifestyles. They are stuck between a rock and a hard place, told to perform, and "glued" to their computers. They are compelled to work long hours without taking any breaks and it infringes upon their sleeping habits. Some eat too much, too little, or poorly.

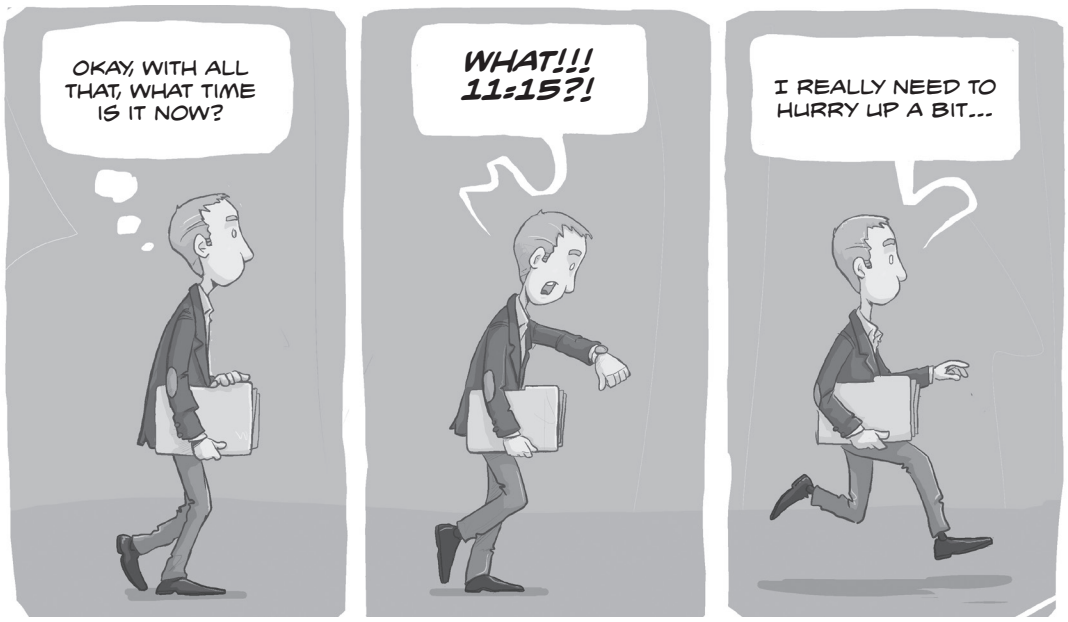
Several attempts to redefine the relationship with work were also brought up during the interviews. However, when work continues to accumulate, no matter what, it seems to be discouraging.



And so, physical health, emotions, thoughts, it's all related, it goes together. Again, last summer I only took two weeks off. Needed to finish this, needed to finish that. Finally, I was able to spend two weeks with my family because we rented a cottage. We had to go. You have false hope all the time. From time to time, I realize that I've always had this hope [of restoring balance to my life] and I continue to have it. I'm tricked by it. And that's it, all the time. It's like that all the time.

Professors are worried about their health and see themselves heading down a slippery slope. Some of the symptoms they report are insomnia, fatigue, muscular tension, digestive problems, weight gain, hormone imbalance, tightness in the chest, difficulty concentrating, perceived loss of control, sadness, and despondency. Experienced professors described their attempts to stay healthy through developing better habits, consulting various specialists, and reflecting on their attitudes.

After overcoming a bunch of issues, I developed a wide variety of ways to manage stress, such as yoga, meditation, jogging to work, rollerblading home, and biking to my meetings.



These solutions do not necessarily allow professors to keep up with the pace that is imposed on them. Occasionally, the feelings of loss of control return.

At some point, you feel like there are a bunch of things that need to escape—and quickly. It's like a bottleneck. It's insomnia, digestive problems, and anxiety attacks. I wake up some nights, completely like that. There are periods like this maybe three or four times a year.

Despite warning signs and the physical or psychological distress that some experience, a sick leave is not an easy choice for professors. Because of the culture, the type of work, and how it's organized, a number of professors prefer to remain active, regardless of their worsening health.

I refused to get sick, despite my doctor's advice. I just said no. I also take antidepressants so I can try to stay healthy until April. I can get sick after classes finish.

Professors' continued presence at work can be explained by their fear that their colleagues will judge them or by hesitation to provide their colleagues with more work. Absences can also have too high of a cost for professors, namely a loss of control over their research and teaching, which they must once again take over when they return. There is also the risk of compromising the work that they have spent months on, and the fear of missing a deadline or missing out on opportunities for funding and publication.

It takes a lot of juggling to tweak everything, and all this without sick leave. But at some point, the system breaks down.

While they remain devoted to doing things well, a number of professors ask themselves how to live a more balanced life, and whether or not it is possible to escape the insidious pressures experienced in the workplace.

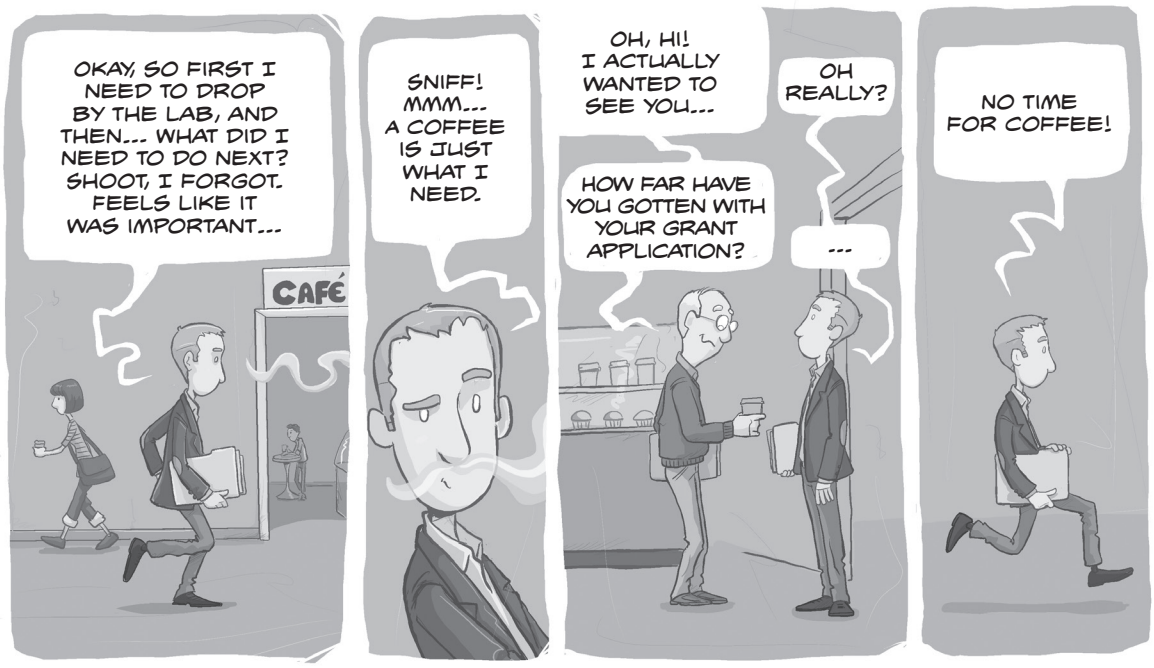
Self-Protective Strategies

Retreating tops the list of strategies that professors use to protect themselves from work overload. They learn to say "no" to calls for participation, to focus their energy on their own work by decreasing their availability, and to work from home more often. The strategy is thus to "hide" in order to work.

One of the solutions that I foresee is to set aside one day a week that I could work at home where things are calmer and quieter, and where I can write or focus on a task while putting everything else aside. I try, but haven't been able to yet.

These retreat strategies, however, are additional threats to the health of professors because they lead them to abandon spaces of intellectual exchange, experience fewer spontaneous opportunities to be friendly and to collaborate, and have weakened relationships with colleagues.

This leads to major withdrawal from the institution. We tell ourselves: "I'll build up my CV, so I'll improve my research file, but I won't be present. I'll retreat, work in a bubble, and produce. I'll be very efficient, but don't ask me to do anything administrative. As for the students, I'll meet with them occasionally, when it's convenient."



Those who successfully protect themselves, however, hesitate to openly say so, and feel that admitting that they have interests other than work warrants extreme caution.

The struggle to keep up appearances doesn't bother me anymore, but it used to: appearing to do more, to do better. I developed bad anxiety. I had to take two leaves during the first few years. Always needing to do more. But if you decide that you're no longer working weekends because otherwise you wouldn't be able to take it anymore, it's better not to tell anyone. After having too much on your plate for a while, you're forced to come up with other solutions.

Wanting to Give Up

When work overload occurs in addition to isolation and to a lack of recognition, some professors start envying their colleagues... who are on extended sick leave.

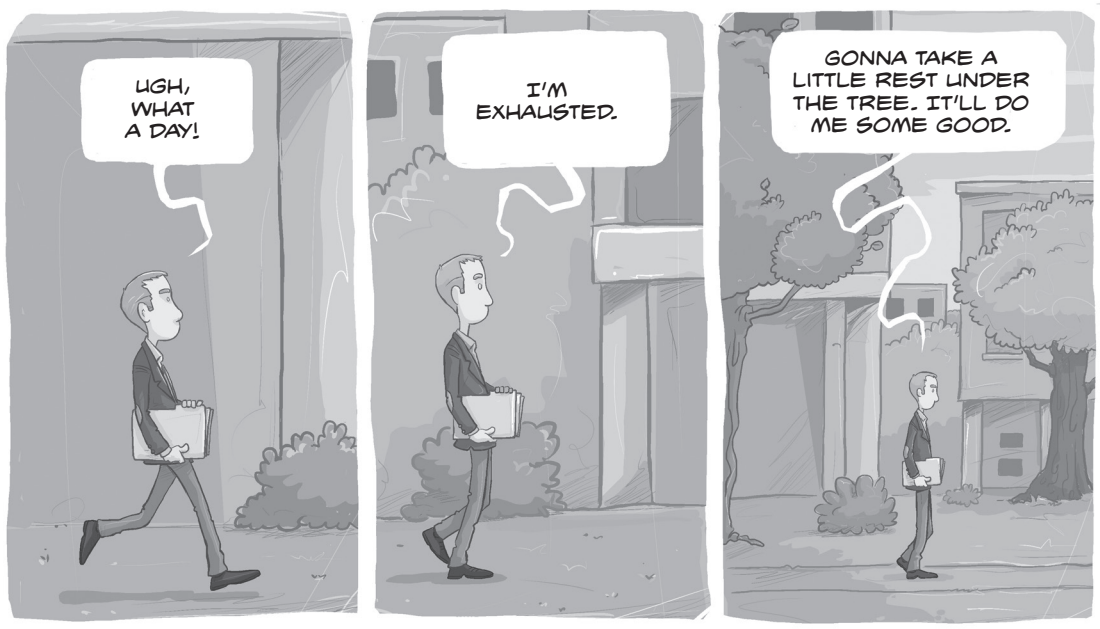
I spoke with my colleagues about a professor who left. We were saying that she was lucky to be on sick leave. At the same time, it's horrible because she was no longer able to answer calls or emails… It made her too anxious. She stopped talking for two weeks! Completely! It's terrible. You tell yourself that this situation is no joke. But, at least she escaped this three-ring circus.

Without going that far, professors are not only aware that they are compromising their health, but also that they are not living the life that they had planned. Even if they love teaching and research, they sometimes question whether or not they should be working at a university.

I can tell you that next year, if I start to become really anxious like before, I'm going to switch jobs, that's for sure. I won't last much longer, even though I have tenure.

I'm not even close to wanting to retire, you know, in terms of my energy level, but I don't want to participate in an organization like this anymore. It's demoralizing. There's an ugliness to some of the things that go on. That's just it: I can't take it.

Although very few professors leave the academic career behind, they do not feel that it is "the best job in the world," and this fact should definitely be addressed.



Thriving or Surviving?

Professors often consider their profession to be one of the most fulfilling. From an individual standpoint, it provides freedom and multiple opportunities for personal achievement. From a societal standpoint, it derives meaning and relevance from the mission of universities: the development and dissemination of knowledge.

However, many professors find themselves overloaded. Whether it is imposed, normative, or voluntary, this overload leads professors to not only work too much, but to overextend themselves with multiple commitments and tasks, which, for the most part, go unrecognized. The situation, made worse by overload and fragmentation of work, the vague yet standardized promotion criteria, and the bureaucratization of universities, has led to dissatisfaction, disappointment, and discontent, as well as high levels of stress, which could in turn lead to more serious issues like mental and physical exhaustion.


IF ONLY I COULD COME UP WITH A DAMN IDEA...
Lamprey

This can change:
CALL TO ACTION

This brief report, like the others in this series, aims to bring professors and union executives together to take action on shared issues.

- **Are you overworked?**
  Suggest a course of action that is not just about joining another committee.

- **Are you passionate about your research?**
  Suggest a course of action that would allow you to focus more fully on it.

- **Is teaching the best part of your job?**
  Suggest a course of action that would allow it to be recognized in its own right.

- **Is managing others a nightmare?**
  Suggest a course of action that works for you and for your colleagues.

Do you have a specific concern?
Do you have an issue that is important to you and no specific idea of how to take action?
Do you want change? Contact us!

The FQPPU's Committee on Working Conditions for Professors can put you in touch with colleagues at your university or other universities who want to find ways to deal with the issues that interest you.

The actions proposed by member unions could be supported by the Fédération québécoise des professeures et professeurs d'université (FQPPU).

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Methodological Appendix

Under the assumption that professors are well-positioned to analyze their working conditions and to identify possible solutions to the related issues that they are affected by, that they experience, or that they observe, the research methodology used here falls under action research. The subjects were invited to participate without censoring themselves and to examine how their personal experiences could carry over into an analysis of their shared work environment. In order to favour mobilization towards change, the approach chosen was qualitative, interpretive, collaborative, and based mainly of a series of focus group interviews, with the results being released in a series of brief reports. A more extensive research report will be published at a later date.

The process followed a gradual cycle of collecting and analyzing data. The results came from interviews which took place in Quebec universities between 2010 and 2013, but also drew from previous research, particularly from Dyke[2] on the profiles and experiences of new hires at the beginning of their careers, from Dyke and Deschenaux[3] on Quebec professors, and from Catano et al.[4] on the occupational stress experienced by Canadian professors. Finally, the results of research conducted by Leclerc and Bourassa[5] on psychological health and the work of professors also served as a reference point for refining the data analysis.

Focus group participation was optional and professor recruitment was carried out in co-operation with local unions. In accordance with the saturation principle, the sample remained open and groups were formed until the information received no longer helped improve comprehension. In accordance with the diversity principle, the sample was made up of men and women with different academic ranks, from different universities.

The personal accounts analyzed in this publication are excerpts of interviews carried out with 18 groups of between five and fifteen participants. In total, 145 professors from ten universities (École polytechnique, Concordia, Montréal, Sherbrooke, UQAM, UQO, UQAR, UQTR, Laval, and McGill) participated in these interviews:

- 81 women (56%) and 64 men (44%);
- 85 (59%) in humanities, social sciences or arts, and 60 (41%) in natural sciences, engineering or health sciences;
- 33 (23%) were employed by a Quebec university for less than 5 years or were assistant professors;
- 38 (26%) were employed by a Quebec university for at least 5 years and at most 10 years or were associate professors;
- 74 (51%) were employed by a Quebec university for at least 10 years or were full professors.

A full interview guide was sent to participants before the meetings. Some groups were asked to speak generally about what they enjoyed about their work, as well as the difficulties associated with it. Other groups instead discussed one of the following four themes: research and creation, teaching and education, collegiality and management, and

juggling the various components of their work while balancing it with their personal lives. Various validation processes ensured the thoroughness of the analysis

1. during the discussions, by asking subjects to comment on personal accounts and analyses from prior discussions;
2. when the analysts on the team linked categorizations and analyses that resulted from coding the body of data; and
3. when comparing the data from this study with that from other relevant studies, models, and theoretical frameworks. Such an approach is not intended to test a hypothesis or be statistically representative. It is instead intended to provide a deeper understanding of the meanings that participants attributed to their work experiences, while highlighting those that resonate in most work environments. The overlap and the critical opposition of the personal accounts and the analyses not only allowed for better understanding of the processes through which professional commitment and psychological health at work can be strengthened or reduced, but also for going beyond the anecdotal, and identifying patterns and constants, as well as differences and nuances. The results of this study are thus social constructs that provide frameworks for understanding and may lead to new courses of action.

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2 Dyke, N. *Le renouvellement du corps professoral dans les universités au Québec. Profil et expérience d'insertion des recrues en début de carrière.* Montréal: Fédération québécoise des professeures et professeurs d'université, 2006. **www.fqppu.org**

3 Dyke, N. and F. Deschenaux. *Enquête sur le corps professoral québécois. Faits saillants et questions.* Montréal: Fédération québécoise des professeures et professeurs d'université, 2008. **www.fqppu.org**

4 Catano, V., L. Francis, T. Haines, H. Kirpalani, H. Shannon, B. Stringer, and L. Lozanski. "Occupational stress in Canadian universities: A national survey." *International Journal of Stress Management*, 17(3), 2010. p. 232-258

5 Leclerc, C. and B. Bourassa. *Travail professoral et santé psychologique. Sens et dérives.* Québec: CRIEVAT, 2013. **www.crievat.fse.ulaval.ca**