



McGinn, M. K. (2012). Introduction to “Belonging and Non-Belonging: Costs and Consequences in Academic Lives.” *Workplace*, 19, 1–3.

Special Issue
***Belonging and Non-Belonging:
Costs and Consequences in Academic Lives***

Michelle K. McGinn
Brock University

Introduction

What does it mean to “belong” in or to the academy? How do academics develop and maintain a sense of belonging despite disappointments or conflicts within their institutions? What happens when individuals feel they do not (or no longer) belong? How does belonging or not belonging influence academics’ lives? These are the central questions that guided a collaborative research project.

The heart of the collaborative research project drew from multiple conversational interviews over a four-year period with 15 Education scholars at different career stages, including graduate students, newly hired faculty members, and experienced untenured or tenured faculty members from universities across Canada. The group of 15 includes the 4 authors of this collection plus our collaborator, Annabelle Grundy, and 10 other scholars who we have met in our forays through academe. The stories and descriptions provide a tempered and reflective perspective on life in the academy. These 15 scholars associated costs with belonging or attempting to belong, and

they made judgments about when these costs were or were not acceptable. These judgments affected their engagement or disengagement within institutions and the scholarly community more broadly.

The resulting collection of seven linked articles presents nuanced understandings of the institutional experiences and stories of belonging for these academics and would-be academics. The collection begins by establishing a historical context for understanding academic lives. Specifically, in “Contextualizing Academic Lives,” we identify some of the issues individuals face as they adopt and enact the role of academic, including their experiences as newcomers, interactions with saga-keepers, and the limits of their voice and role in new institutional environments.

In “All the World’s a Stage: Players on the Academic Landscape,” we introduce the specific group of 15 scholars whose stories are featured throughout the collection. This article emphasizes the academics’ feelings of being excluded, with particular attention to their discussions of marginalization,

lack of belonging, and identity struggles. Most notably, all found that the prevailing academic context made it difficult to establish and maintain a sense of belonging within academe.

The subsequent five articles explore the various costs and consequences of these perceptions of not belonging. “Confronting the Myths and Norms of Academic Engagement” examines the myths academics bring with them into their academic lives, influencing their initial and prolonged engagement in departments and universities. We then look beneath the surface of these people’s academic lives to explore the emotional aspects of seeking identity and belonging in “Exploring Emotional Experiences of Belonging.” In “Required Payment: Extracting a Pound of Flesh,” we address the costs of academic engagement, focusing on the payments that academics make to secure their identity and become established within the academy. Then in “Fitting Procrustes’ Bed: A Shifting Reality,” we use the metaphor of Procrustes’ bed to discuss the experiences of academics “fitting” the academy amidst shifting realities. The focus is on external evaluations faced by the academics, as well as their engagements in evaluations of self and others (which are inherent aspects of academic life). In “The Erosion of Academic Troth: Disengaging from the Ties that Bind,” we examine the ways academics disengage when they no longer feel desired or appreciated, and the resulting personal and communal loss.

Taken together, the collection draws attention to numerous institutional barriers, stresses, and strains that undermine successful academic careers and detract from Canada’s ability to

advance an innovation agenda and circumvent impending faculty shortages. At the same time, the collection points toward personal and institutional strategies to maximize positive and minimize negative aspects of academic life. The identified strategies acknowledge that academic institutions are not disembodied forces, devoid of human intent; rather institutions are comprised of individuals who collectively keep those institutions running and have the power to rewrite the policies and practices of the institutions. Individuals can advocate for, enact acceptance, and celebrate the diversity of academics and the work they do. Such perspectives can be enshrined in formal agreements, but more importantly it is in the subtext of the relationships academics form with each other that belonging is supported or thwarted.

As noted, this collection of articles emerged from a collaborative research project (funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada). Different members of the team took primary responsibility for the analyses and interpretations for each article and are accordingly identified as lead authors for those articles. However, each of the articles was influenced substantively by the ongoing conversations, input, and feedback from other members of the team. The research project was a powerful collaborative space (McGinn, Shields, Manley-Casimir, Grundy, & Fenton, 2005), and it is therefore not possible to fully assign authorship credit for any one article to an individual team member. For this reason, other members of the research team are identified as secondary authors for each of the articles in the collection. In addition to the four

primary authors in this collection, another team member, Annabelle Grundy, who moved on to other activities before this collection of articles came together was an important secondary author for one of the articles

(“All the World’s a Stage: Players on the Academic Landscape”), which arose in part from an earlier conference paper she co-authored (McGinn & Grundy, 2004).

References

- McGinn, M. K., & Grundy, A. L. (2004, May). “*Life on the Academic Periphery: Multiple Stories of Identity, Participation, and Belonging*”: Responses from the participants. Paper presented at the annual Qualitative Analysis Conference, Ottawa, ON.
- McGinn, M. K., Shields, C., Manley-Casimir, M., Grundy, A. L., & Fenton, N. E. (2005). Living ethics: A narrative of collaboration and belonging in a research team. *Reflective Practice*, 6, 551–567.