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## **BEING ACADEMIC RESEARCHERS: NAVIGATING PLEASURES AND PAINS IN THE CURRENT CANADIAN CONTEXT**

### **Abstract**

Research productivity and research capacity development are increasingly important to universities in a globalized world, and have considerable implications for the academics who staff these institutions. The current neoliberal and managerial context has heightened pressures on academics to do more and to be held accountable to higher standards for research. This paper is based upon qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with 10 tenured or tenure-track academics from social sciences, humanities, and Education, representing diversity by sex, discipline, and career stage. All participants work at a Canadian university that is transforming from a primarily undergraduate to a comprehensive, postgraduate institution with an increasing emphasis on research, including collaborative research. The interviews addressed the academics' motivations, pleasures, satisfactions, and challenges as researchers in the current context, with particular attention to tenure-and-promotion decisions, research projects, research reports, research grants, and research collaborations. Regardless of career stage, the academics expressed concerns about the pressures they faced and the ways those pressures affected their institution, their fields, and themselves.

The dual functions of research and teaching that are at the heart of university missions are targeted toward maintaining and increasing research productivity and research capacity. Academics are constantly faced with opportunities and pressures to engage in research and contribute to research education for the next generation. The research obligations associated with academic positions would suggest that academics are researchers, yet very little is known about academics' perceptions of themselves as researchers (Åkerlind, 2008; Armstrong, 2001; Elizabeth & Grant, in press), and even less is known about the ways these perceptions evolve over time based upon changing contextual, institutional, and personal situations.

The purpose of this paper is to explore what it means for academics to be researchers and to engage in research in the contemporary Canadian context. I investigate the ways in which evaluations and interactions with others influence academics' perceptions about themselves as researchers and about the pleasures and pains they associate with research. Evidence is drawn from a set of interviews with 10 academics from different career stages at one institution in Canada. I devote particular attention to decisions and practices related to tenure and promotion, research projects, research reports, research grants, and research collaborations.

## The Current Context for Canadian Researchers

As I make myself complete the “productivity” report, its very composition a testimony to what counts and what doesn’t count as academic currency, I find myself confronting the fact that much of what I care about in my life as an academic doesn’t fit with the prevailing definition and dominant view of what is meant by and counts as productivity. (Litner, 2002, p. 129)

In Canada, as in nations across the globe, academics are feeling pressure to do more and to be held accountable to higher standards for research productivity. Some critics argue that neoliberalism and managerialism, as well as the associated forms of accountability, are taking over academe and the research enterprise (Davies, 2005; Kurasawa, 2007; Shore & Wright, 2004; Thomas & Davies, 2002). Academics’ professional practices are “scrutinized, quantified, statistically ranked and ‘rendered visible’” for consumers, supervisors, and the bureaucracies of State (Shore & Wright, 2004, p. 100). Accountability (literal counting in the words of Elizabeth & Grant, in press) is highlighted through schemes such as the Excellence for Research in Australia Initiative, the Performance-Based Research Fund in New Zealand, and the Research Assessment Exercise in the United Kingdom (see the comparison of these schemes by Mathews & Sangster, 2009). At this point, Canada has not adopted a comparable national evaluation mechanism, but there is increasing emphasis on accountability and monitoring of performance by universities and funding agencies. Individual academics, units or departments, and institutions as a whole are subject to accountability measures, as are funding agencies (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [SSHRC], 2008) and publishing outlets (Graham, 2008). The Office of the Auditor General of Ontario (2011) recently conducted a “value-for-money audit” of the Ontario Research Fund and is currently finalizing a similar audit of teaching quality at Ontario universities; some believe a broad audit of research productivity cannot be far behind, especially after the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education commissioned the Canadian Council on Learning (2006a, 2006b) to prepare a report on schemes to measure research and innovation in the post-secondary education sector.

The proliferation of auditing schemes within universities is part of a similar trend evident across organizations. As Power (1997) argued, maintaining such an “audit society” suggests a “pathologicality of excessive checking” (p. xii). It represents a lack of trust and it focuses on those aspects of performance that are readily subject to accounting, thereby detracting attention from or even limiting other practices that may be aligned with overall objectives but cannot readily be counted. Auditing fosters regulation and self-regulation to achieve compliance (or perceived compliance). The various mechanisms of regulation and control through audits are central characteristics of neoliberalism (Bansel, Davies, Gannon, & Linnell, 2008).

In the Canadian university context, academics typically have a range of job responsibilities that include research, teaching, community service, and institutional activities. The auditing focus thereby requires documented evidence of performance across these four areas be considered in decisions regarding initial hiring, progress evaluations, contract renewal, tenure, promotion, and awards or designations. Departmental, institutional, and sometimes national or international evaluations are sought on a regular basis for a broad range of academic tasks as McGinn (2012) articulated. Despite this breadth of responsibilities, the major emphasis for evaluations of academics’ performance revolves around research activities. As Kurasawa (2007) argued, research is the “principal commercializable ‘output’” (p. 15) from universities and hence from the individual academics employed within these institutions.

In assessments related to research accountability, particular kinds of research are rated as more valuable than other kinds of research. Peer-reviewed publications in top-tier scholarly journals and academic presses are seen as the “gold standard” and perceived as essential to academic success; publications in lesser-known or more professionally focused outlets gain limited favour. Similarly, research that is supported through external grants is rated more highly than research that does not require such funding, such that “the proper role of such financial support [has been] inverted: from being a secondary means to

assist intellectual work that may be useful in certain instances, it becomes an end in itself held to be the ultimate measure of productivity” (Kurasawa, 2007, p. 20). In this numbers game, large-scale collaborations involving huge grants are seen as particularly favourable.

In the current neoliberal times, questions about quality, quantity, and impact have grown more and more common, with less and less consensus about what any of these constructs mean or how they can be operationalized. Talk has turned to the importance of impact factors, h-index, lists of ranked journals, citation counts, and a host of other bibliometric measures, along with corresponding concerns about the reliability and validity of each of these measures. Academics are torn between competing objectives, wondering if it is better to “play the game,” devote efforts to critiquing the proposed processes, commit to developing better measures to avoid the faulty ones that are (or could be) imposed, or declare themselves conscientious objectors. Not all have, or feel they have, the same choices about how to respond to these pressures.

Across nations, several studies have shown the ways the focus on accountability and accountancy affects academics’ lives, influencing their sense of self-worth, undermining or contradicting their personal definitions of quality or success, affecting the ways they spend their working time, and influencing the ways they interact with each other (e.g., Elizabeth & Grant, in press; Litner, 2002; McGinn, 2012; Morley, 2001; Sparkes, 2007; Zabrodska, Linnell, Laws, & Davies, 2011). Whether working individually or as part of a team, individuals’ self-identities as researchers are influenced by the kinds of research undertaken and the conditions for that research, including the evaluations of the research. Newly appointed academics are particularly focused upon establishing their self-identities as scholars and researchers, but this process is ongoing throughout an academic career as academics begin to see themselves in new light each time they undertake new projects (Hall, 2002; Lang, 2005; McGinn, 2006).

Given this current context for academic researchers in Canada, many anecdotal stories indicate that academics at all career stages are feeling new pressures to engage in research and to demonstrate research productivity. In this paper, I report the perspectives of 10 academics from the social sciences, humanities, and Education at one Canadian institution.

### **The Institution**

The institution is in the midst of a transformation from a primarily undergraduate institution to a comprehensive institution with a broad range of postgraduate programs and an increasing emphasis on research. This transformation has led to the appointment of many new academics, the establishment of middle-level management positions that emphasize research (e.g., Associate Deans of Research), the creation of a research chairs program, and considerable expansion in dedicated offices for postgraduate studies and for research services. Correspondingly, the institution has developed a strategic research plan in line with SSHRC’s (2010) emphasis on large-scale collaborations, including international and transdisciplinary initiatives. Similar transformations are evident across many Canadian institutions (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2007).

### **The Academic Researchers**

Participants include 10 academics selected from social sciences, humanities, and Education representing diversity by sex, discipline, and career stage. Pseudonyms for each participant reflect these demographic details. For example, the pseudonym “Henry Eldridge” is used for a humanities scholar in his 60s who has achieved the highest academic rank in Canada (Full Professor). The surname Eldridge is intended to represent his elder status as a senior scholar, and the given name Henry begins with an H for humanities. In contrast, “Shirley Middleton II” is the pseudonym for a mid-career academic in her 50s who holds the rank of Associate Professor. She is based in a social science discipline (S for social science and Shirley) and had a prior career outside academe (indicated by the II). “Eric Newton III” is an untenured Assistant

Professor (as reflected by the surname, Newton) in Education (E for Eric and Education) who is in his 50s and had a prior academic appointment. The II and III suffixes are intended to reflect Boice's (1992) distinctions between those who began their academic careers at the institution as inexperienced newcomers who came directly from degree programs into a first career as academics (no suffix), returning academics who entered academe as a second career after working elsewhere (the II suffix), and experienced academics who had full-time academic appointments elsewhere prior to joining the institution (the III suffix). The II suffix is used for the 5 participants who explicitly referenced a prior career outside academe and described how they transitioned from that non-academic career to an academic career. The III suffix appears for 2 participants who had held prior academic appointments at other institutions. One participant held both academic and non-academic appointments prior to arriving at the institution; her pseudonym includes the II suffix because she emphasized her transition from non-academic to academic employment much more than her transition from the prior institution to the present institution.

It is important to note that judgments about career stage are complicated. For the purposes of this paper, distinctions between early, mid, and late career are based upon years of employment and academic rank, as well as participants' self-identified labelling. Age was not a determining factor. Participants' ages ranged from 30s to 60s with no clear relationship to identified career stage. One half of the participants held tenured positions, and the other half held tenure-track positions. There were 6 Assistant Professors (of whom, 1 was tenured and 3 were awaiting decisions regarding their applications for tenure and promotion), 2 were tenured Associate Professors, and 2 were tenured Full Professors. Length of full-time academic employment ranged from 3 to over 30 years. All participants had earned doctorates at the time of the interviews, but 4 had received these degrees since joining the institution (in the first, second, fifth, or seventh year of appointment). Based upon this range of demographic information, participants included 4 early-career academics, 4 mid-career academics, and 2 senior academics. In relative order of seniority the 10 participants include: Samuel Newton II, Emily Newton, Elaine Newton II, Eric Newton III, Edward Middleton III, Elizabeth Middleton, Ethan Middleton II, Shirley Middleton II, Suzanne Eldridge II, and Henry Eldridge. Overall, there were 5 men and 5 women, with 3 from the social sciences, 1 from the humanities, and 6 from Education. Three were members of visible minorities.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Ethics clearance for this project was provided by the institution where the research took place. All participants provided free and informed consent before becoming involved in the research. Participants engaged in extended interviews (from 30 to 100 minutes) about their motivations, pleasures, satisfactions, challenges, and struggles as academic researchers, especially as these perceptions related to evaluation methods (e.g., tenure and promotion, publications, research grants) and research collaborations. One or more members of the research team were present during each interview, depending upon participant preferences and team availability. Demographic data included participants' sex, department or discipline, academic rank, years of academic employment, and Ph.D. completion date. Extensive fieldnotes were written during and immediately after the interviews. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The transcripts and fieldnotes were used to create 1-page summaries for each participant. Two members of the research team followed a grounded analysis approach by reading and assigning open codes to reflect key concepts in each interview transcript (Freeman, 1998; Saldaña, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Reading across transcripts, fieldnotes, and summaries, the two researchers then sought key themes, similarities, and differences among participants. The team met regularly to discuss interviews, review transcripts, identify themes, and engage in theory building.

### **Becoming Researchers**

Importantly, all 10 participants identified themselves as researchers. Åkerlind (2008) based her study at a research-intensive institution to ensure "that all of the academics sampled were likely to identify with the concept of 'being a researcher'" (p. 23). As indicated, the institution where these 10 academics are

employed has increased its research emphasis, but is not formally recognized as a research-intensive institution. Edward Middleton III had left a previous appointment at a research-intensive institution, and was enjoying the less competitive atmosphere at this new institution, although he did express some mild concern that “this is making me feel a bit too relaxed, which is not very good either.” In the current climate at Canadian universities, the emphasis on research probably means a broader range of academics may now be seeing themselves as researchers than was once the case.

For most participants, their identity transition emerged slowly through postgraduate study and the early years of their academic appointments. For example, Elaine Newton II explained:

I’m trying to remember back to my first master’s, which I took right after my B.A. and I don’t think that I felt that I was an academic researcher at the time. It was a course-only master’s and so I don’t think I felt I was an academic researcher. So I think my first conscious experience, I might change my mind eventually, I might wake up in the middle of the night this week and think earlier than that, but I think the first time was when I did my second master’s, the Master of Education and took a research methods in education course, the first of many, and during the course our instructor asked us to complete a full research project.... I think that was the first time that I felt that I was becoming a form of academic researcher.

Many described circuitous routes to their research careers. Elizabeth Middleton was representative of the others when she reported, “It wasn’t really something that I planned in advance, but I just sort of ended up moving in that direction.” They used language such as “unexpectedly” (Emily Newton), “accidentally” (Edward Middleton II), or “kind of convoluted” (Samuel Newton II) to describe their transitions into academe. For half the participants, academe represented a career change, from earlier careers as teachers, clinicians, consultants, and counsellors. Two (Elaine Newton II and Suzanne Eldridge II) had been responsible for considerable research in their previous careers in applied settings, which they described as the impetus for them to formalize their research identities through doctoral study and eventual academic appointments as a “natural extension” (Suzanne Eldridge II).

### **Pleasures and Pains in Academic Life**

There are many pleasures associated with the role of an academic (Manley-Casimir, 2012; Raddon, 2008). Participants spoke extensively about the joys of being academics and being researchers. As Ethan Middleton II enthused, “I love being a university professor. I mean, it’s just terrific.... It’s an exciting way of life.” Emily Newton perceived the opportunity to work in academe as “a great privilege,” thereby echoing the assertions from participants in Raddon’s (2008) research. Several participants described, in particular, the freedom to pursue their own interests and their love for their own research areas. For example, Henry Eldridge explained, “I’m interested in the things that I try to explore and so you know I mean I really enjoy what I do.” Likewise, Shirley Middleton II reported, “I’ve been able to pursue research that really is of interest to me personally related to my own experience and it’s been very gratifying to answer questions that have been plaguing me.”

Several participants emphasized the sense of accomplishment associated with their roles and the work they have undertaken. Henry Eldridge said, “It’s nice to see the book up on the shelf.” Suzanne Eldridge II indicated, “There’s nothing more satisfying than being able to, for me in the nature of work that I do, is to influence practice and research.” Likewise, Samuel Newton II reflected on his own sense of accomplishment after a major presentation to an international audience, “to realize that you’ve arrived in the international field of scholars in your own particular area of research interests and discourse, I’ve never really felt anything quite so pleasing.” Similarly, Eric Newton III described the satisfaction of new knowledge:

When you find something that people have never seen before, it's kind of a very great pleasure and if you feel that your work is worthwhile and you are proud and you tell people that you know something that they don't know and you find that people are not even aware of it. So that's the biggest satisfaction, I think, because sometimes I was surprised that people didn't know this but I have [learned this] because I spent some time looking into this and that's a huge satisfaction, I have knowledge.

As a group, the participants expressed satisfaction and appreciation for opportunities to generate knowledge, inform student development, influence policy, shape practice, and work with great colleagues. Their satisfactions and pleasures covered the range of interpretations of the significance and value of research projects that Bruce, Pham, and Stoodley (2004) found through their interviews with academic researchers in the field of information technology. These satisfactions also mirror Åkerlind's (2008) four views of being a university researcher: (a) satisfying academic requirements or duties, (b) establishing a reputation and contributing to the field, (c) attaining personal understanding and fulfillment, and (d) enabling societal benefits.

The pleasures identified by the 10 participants reflect the high points of academic careers. These are the kinds of activities and incentives that encourage people to pursue academic careers as Raddon (2008) reported. Unfortunately, these pleasures were often counterbalanced with the kinds of difficulties, challenges, struggles, doubts, and insecurities that Elizabeth and Grant (in press) and Sparkes (2007) have documented. Consistent with other reports (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2007; Menzies & Newson, 2007; Raddon, 2008; Rockwell, 2009; Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003), all participants talked about constraints and pressures, competing demands, and limited time, which undermined or circumvented their pleasures. Most notably, when asked about the pains they associated with research and their roles as researchers, the participants emphasized tenure-and-promotion decisions. Not surprising in a Canadian context, the participants' discussions about research projects, research reports, research grants, and research collaborations all connected in some way to tenure-and-promotion considerations.

### **Tyranny of Tenure Decisions**

The participants described institutional, national, and international pressures that seemed to suggest increasing standards for productivity in terms of peer-reviewed publications, external grant funding, and, to a lesser extent, research collaborations. Importantly, the decisions from the institution's tenure-and-promotion committee were released shortly after this set of interviews, revealing a huge increase in the number and proportion of tenure-and-promotion applications that were challenged or denied, including applications from some of the participants in this research. Across the institution, some of these decisions were overturned on appeal; however, as found in other research (McGinn, 2012), the ramifications of these decisions are expected to affect the applicants' sense of self and the choices they make about remaining at the institution or within academe, whether the decisions are upheld or overturned.

Given the results from the tenure-and-promotion committee, the participants' concerns were clearly well founded. Untenured academics expressed a sense of trepidation, especially those who were interviewed while their tenure-and-promotion dossiers were being evaluated. For example, Elaine Newton II described her diminished self-confidence as she awaited a decision about her application:

I've lost a lot of confidence.... The whole process leading to tenure and promotion at the university is a rough process. It's emotionally draining and difficult.... I have felt broadsided by all these kinds of issues around tenure and promotion and the attention given to the quantity of peer-reviewed articles, to the fact that the only real ones that count despite what's written in the collective agreement and despite what's said, that the only real ones that count are peer-reviewed articles in specific, better known journals within our fields and so I feel undervalued.

More stridently, Samuel Newton II described the promotion-and-tenure process as “tyrannical”:

There’s a tyrannical kind of fear in these things that needs to be named and identified and just say, “Hey, you know, we got here because we’re good people.” It’s like that impostor syndrome.... The truth is we need to step back and look at the kinds of scholarship going on in this building. Nobody’s got anything to be ashamed of, in any way: my colleague or myself or anybody else in this department or your place. The pressure that this is creating is an illusion.

The pressure may be misplaced as Samuel argued; yet it still had real effects for all participants. New academics who said they were not concerned about tenure and promotion tended to also describe other career options in case their applications were unsuccessful, thereby suggesting underlying uncertainties. Shields and McGinn (2012) similarly reported most of the Canadian academics in their study had identified “back-up careers” away from academe (p. 475).

As McGinn (2012) showed, evidence of accomplishments could contribute to envy or resentment from others. For example, Emily Newton had achieved a considerable level of success in grant writing, publishing, and securing research collaborators, yet she felt shamed and discouraged by others who assumed these accomplishments meant she was not committed to supporting students or providing service to the community; she found the implied accusations extremely hurtful.

Those participants who had attained tenure and promotion expressed concerns for the fate of junior colleagues along with implications for themselves and their own practices. For example, Henry Eldridge described the need to fulfill additional service responsibilities that new colleagues could not undertake for fear of jeopardizing tenure or promotion: “Senior people now feel that they don’t want to put too much burden on the junior people because they have this need to get published.”

For Shirley Middleton II, the pressures on new academics prompted her to shape her research program so that new colleagues could collaborate and still meet tenure-and-promotion expectations:

I try to include [new scholars] in teamwork so that they have a platform. They can get productivity because as a team we can produce more and I include them in that way so they are supported and there’s some infrastructure and there are products coming out from various team members, rather than each person having the pressure to produce alone.

These pressures affect individual academics, and they also affect departments and fields of study. As Henry Eldridge stated:

I guess my main beef at the moment is the way in which the system has evolved and the emphasis that is placed on getting funding. It sometimes seems to me that the university is encouraged to try to teach as many students as possible for as little money as possible and do as much research as possible for as much money as possible because you have to bring in large amounts of money and your department is judged by the amount of money it brings in.

Consistent with McGinn (2012), Henry did not believe funding was equated with quality or success in research:

I was told by the Dean basically that I had to apply for a research grant in order to apply for sabbatical leave, so I did. The project that I actually wanted to work on during that sabbatical was, there was no way I could make it sufficiently expensive that it would qualify for a grant for the amount that I was supposed to bring in. So I came up with an entirely different research project, which I submitted ... and it went through the usual review process and it was not funded. It was rejected, which I was quite pleased with, because then I went back and did my original project and published the work. [The grant application] was a waste of time doing, well it wasn’t a complete

waste because I would have liked to do the project that I applied for, but I've never had the time to do it since then. It would have diverted me I think from what was the more useful and the more likely to result in a major publication thing I was doing.

For these participants, research projects, research reports, research grants, and research collaborations were all framed in terms of their influence on tenure-and-promotion decisions. It is evident that the participants were feeling pressures and a somewhat unhealthy climate. Edward Middleton II hypothesized that academics probably have shorter lifespans and more diseases than the general population, a suggestion that is supported, in part, by Menzies (2005).

## Conclusions

The participants all saw themselves as researchers, and all associated both pleasures and pains with this identity. They truly appreciated the freedom and the satisfactions of their scholarly endeavours, but expressed considerable concerns about the demands for accountability and the various institutional evaluations that frequently differed from their self-evaluations and other feedback they received about the quality of their work. They responded negatively to the lack of trust and respect prompted within the neoliberal audit society (Power, 1997, 2000).

Tenure-and-promotion decisions were focal concerns for these academics, regardless of academic rank; they were concerned for their own academic careers and for their junior colleagues' careers. Pressures associated with tenure and promotion influenced their practices and perspectives related to research projects, research reports, research grants, and research collaborations. As is evident in other critiques of neoliberal tendencies in academic practice (Bansel et al., 2008; Elizabeth & Grant, in press; Shore & Wright, 2004; Thomas & Davies, 2002), they could see the many ways that counting and accountancy were shaping and limiting the work they did.

The more senior academics characterized these pressures as changes that have emerged in recent years while the newer academics characterized these as unexpected circumstances they encountered upon moving into academe. Throughout the interviews, there was a clear sense that academic practice, work, and culture were being reshaped without due consideration for the impact on individual scholars or the future of institutions and disciplines. Kurasawa's (2007) manifesto for Generation-X academics is relevant for all generations still practicing within the academy.

The present set of interviews was conducted at an institution that historically has emphasized teaching undergraduate students and is now in the midst of a transformation toward a more balanced teaching and research focus with more equal representation of undergraduate and postgraduate students. This is not a research-intensive institution, yet research and researcher identities were focal for these academics. Past research about researcher identities and research needs (e.g., Åkerlind, 2008; Mullen et al., 2008) has tended to be limited to research-intensive institutions with the assumption that such institutions are the places where academics will be attuned to their research roles. The current findings suggest that research roles are not confined to research-intensive institutions. However, non-research-intensive institutions may lack essential institutional infrastructure and supports for research (Rockwell, 2009), including research mentors and active role models who are particularly important to new academics (Mullen et al., 2008).

The perspectives provided by the academics in this study can inform research administrators and research services personnel about the biggest challenges and concerns that academics face and possible supports that could be put in place. As Mullen et al. (2008) have noted, research administrators have not always "listen[ed] to those [they] serve" (p. 10). Strategic plans and programs are frequently based upon assumptions or data drawn from administrators rather than data drawn directly from academics.

Most Canadian universities have established research services offices and have instituted programs and activities intended to support academics in seeking external funding. As VanOosten (2008) has reported, research services personnel need to move beyond “grant getting” to supporting academics with “grant having,” that is, with financial accounting, staffing, time management, and a range of other program-management activities. The present study echoes the findings of Mullen et al. (2008) in suggesting that institutions would be well advised to expand their research support services even further. Mullen et al. found that financial and material resources were critical to academics at all ranks, and intellectual and scholarly resources in the form of research mentors and research-active peers were also deemed critical by new academics. They found that limited time and extensive paperwork were huge impediments to the academics, a sentiment that carried through many of the interviews in the present study. Importantly, these academics emphasized that supports and rewards should be distributed equitably toward a broad range of scholarly work to respect and value diverse forms of scholarship.

Building awareness around the concerns expressed by these academics may also help other academics feel a greater sense of solidarity and may influence the ways they take up their roles as assessors of their colleagues (cf. McGinn, Tilley, & Hadwin, 2005). Furthermore, better understandings about the national and international contexts for research could inform the ways academics agitate for policy changes within and beyond their institutions.

#### NOTES

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