

The University the Faculty Needs?

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By now we are all familiar with the rather pretentious University motto, “The University the World Needs.” It is the source of much amusement amongst our colleagues at other universities, aware of our perennial spot in the Maclean’s rankings.

This past year, more than ever, the faculty have needed the University to have our backs so that we could continue to perform at the highest possible levels. This was a year in which policies could be massaged, rules could be bent, procedures could be altered. Thankfully, we saw some of this in service to our students. Unfortunately, not so much when it comes to faculty.

Back to that motto: perhaps the more important question we should ask is, is this the University that the faculty need? A university that meets the needs of its faculty will surely be a positive force in identifying and meeting the needs of the province, country, and the global community. A university intent on suffocating faculty with micro-administrative frustrations, rigid policy applications, mystical procedural changes, and impossible course loads will meet the needs of no one.

The Pandemic Year has brought us together in so many ways, and we should all be proud of the team spirit that has emerged in this crisis. Sadly, however, covid-19 and response has highlighted some of the most egregious seams, inconsistencies, and inex-

plicable hostility that faculty encounter when undertaking their work. Asked to pull together, to dig deeper, to work harder – all to ensure student success – the year has exhausted us. And the University Administration has not made it easier.

Suddenly, APEF claims were rejected as faculty shifted to working remotely. Connection Point kicked back expense claims, insisting that faculty explain how the claim relates specifically to their research. We were told by AES that we had to manage all the exam exemptions on our own, often dozens of students all writing remote exams! Some unit leaders decided this was a good time to micro-manage assignment of duties, with an aim toward increasing teaching loads. Some of our colleagues were labelled as “inactive” researchers based on faulty criteria, and the budgets of their units cut as a result. Those on sabbatical were not given the option to postpone, only cancel and reapply. Sabbatical travel grants were made available but travel not permitted, the money to be reclaimed as soon as leaves ended. Many of the support staff that matter most to us, such as in research services, were terminated. It was announced that our teaching platform, Blackboard, would be phased out and replaced with a new one, Canvas. As we all struggled to learn how to teach and hold meetings remotely, we were told to use only one platform, WebEX, which not only underperformed but which was not

even being used by some members of the Administration, who seemed to prefer the banned Zoom (which we then had to learn too).

Then the greatest injustice of all: the announcement that elements of UnivRS will no longer be supported. Like many of you, I don’t know if I should cheer at the impending death of the single most irritating administrative tool of punishment in the last decade, or rage at the Big House for putting us through this for so long.

Faculty moved at breathtaking speed to shift to working remotely. The Administration, it seems, moved at a snail’s pace to help us. Positive changes have been made – and there is optimism for a future in which our concerns are acted upon – but the delays were inexcusable. Our USFA Executive has had a central role to play in some of these positive moves and for that, we thank you! There were also some important positive changes in senior Administration in the past few years that cannot be discounted.

But it is fair to ask, why did it take so long to help faculty set up home offices after being told we could not come to campus? Why did it take so long to appreciate the dilemmas that sabbaticants faced? Why did it take so long to loosen the iron grip of Connection Point even a tad? Why was it decided that this year – of all years – would be the time to make significant

changes that would negatively affect our burgeoning workloads?

We continue to be reminded by HR of the need to achieve “work-life balance” while we are working a double load to teach remotely, in some cases sitting at our kitchen tables, all the while fending off pets and children. We receive incompetent, externally contracted “pandemic engagement” surveys that lump us in with the other bargaining units despite the obvious differences in work assignments. We are told of the need to “hard stop” our workday, and “take a walk.” How insulting. This is not an improvement on the recommendation offered during a previous campus crisis to “drink water” and stop worrying about losing your job.

Do more with less? We are doing as much as we can. Who among us has more to give? Yes, we have a financial mess on our hands. We know that. But breaking faculty will not balance the books.

Faculty complement seems lower than ever. We are losing significant numbers of our Indigenous colleagues to other institutions. Our library holdings are shrinking to almost invisible levels. We are buying basic supplies out of our APEFs and even our own pockets. Core funding for our students remains inadequate as their tuition and other costs continue to rise.

And then Laurentian happens. That is truly scary. I have been waiting to hear from senior leadership that, despite the financial crisis, the plan going forward here will not entail any faculty losing their jobs, which, honestly for most, is career-ending. Will our “people leaders” step up and assure us we have nothing to fear? Or will they allow the rumours about impending cuts to continue to circulate? Governance by fear is a sign of failed leadership. What kind of leaders do we have?

A colleague has often remarked that a university really only needs faculty and students. I see faculty as the heart of the University, and students its spirit. We energize each other. So, what do we need to be the very best we can be? We are rarely asked that question. So, I put that to you, my colleagues. As I step into the role of Editor of **VOX**, I am calling on you to share your experiences, your stories, your joys and frustrations, as you strive to be the faculty the University needs. As importantly, I call upon you to talk to your colleagues through **VOX** about what the University needs to do to help us.

How can this University be the University the faculty needs to best serve our students, communities, and the world?

Let’s Talk!

Contact me with your ideas for future **VOX** articles:

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Dear Colleagues,

I have accepted the opportunity to take on the role of Editor of **VOX**, in the anticipation that we can use this vehicle as an important means to talk amongst ourselves about the issues that most affect us as faculty. We have few venues to share our experiences outside of our own little scholarly worlds. Through **VOX** I hope to continue to inculcate a sense of solidarity, to break down some of the provincialism that divides us when we need to speak with a singular voice in these trying times. Your participation is crucial.

I believe in the importance of labour unions, and you could say I am union-adjacent, having put myself through university by working in the General Motors plant in Oshawa alongside UAW members. **VOX** is “arms length” from the USFA, and I have never run for the Executive nor held any official position in the association. **VOX** is not their voice, it is ours.

The other stuff: I am an applied medical anthropologist, and came to the U of S in 1983 in the newly formed Native Studies (now Indigenous Studies) Department. Over my academic career I have held full-time appointments in Native Studies, Psychology, and now Archaeology and Anthropology, giving me a wide range of experiences as a faculty member in small (3 faculty), medium (8-10 faculty), and large (25+ faculty) units, and in programs that offer humanities, science, and social science curricula. I have received the University’s Distinguished Researcher Award and the SSHRC Impact Award, am a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and now Distinguished Professor (which I think means they want me to retire). I have done time as a Department Head and member of multiple committees at all levels. I was on the picket line during the Great Strike.

VOX is a forum for the expression of opinions of members of the USFA on topics of general interest to the membership. Submissions to be considered for publication may be sent to the USFA office or usfa@usaskfaculty.ca to the attention of **VOX**, or the Editor j.waldram@usask.ca.

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