

Culture of Fear at USask

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These are times of trepidation and anxiety. While many had hoped to have a summer of calm and respite, covid-19 may have made that difficult. There were so many things to be concerned about in the ever-changing pandemic landscape. The Delta variant was on the prowl. Will we need to shift to remote delivery again? Will my colleagues be vaccinated? Will my students? How can I lecture through a mask? Will the University mandate vaccinations? Will the Riders mandate vaccinations? (Ok, that last one was my own source of great distress).

The pandemic has also allegedly contributed to a significant change in the fiscal environment within which we work. Budget deficits lurk in the hallways the same way we imagine the virus floating in the air. Is my job safe? Will the University seek to shut down my program? Will staff get cut again (ask your

Head about “Uniforum”!). Will we get Laurentianed?

We have been here before. Every now and then there is a financial crisis that results in Central Admin declaring the need to evaluate programs with an eye toward cost saving. Great amounts of time are spent by units preparing submissions designed to defend their programs from the Slasher. I don’t think any faculty member has ever lost their job as a result of these typically flawed exercises. But the threat hovers. Usually, by the time these evaluations are completed the financial picture has started to resolve itself, although the Admin has likely used the “crisis” to claw back even more resources from the shop floor to dole out to pet projects or more administrators.

That said, there is little question that those in other unions have borne the brunt of these cuts. I remember a few years back when

CUPE was being purged yet again. A CUPE member I was working with closely on a project was stressed out because she was unsure if or when the axe would fall. It was jarring to see her largely empty office. “Most of us have cleared out our personal belongings,” she explained. “In case of the perp walk. We don’t want them touching our stuff.” How can one work productively with such fear?

These kinds of things generate broad anxiety on campus across all units. The “perp walk” was perhaps the most jarring and symbolic of inhumane actions designed to cut costs. Among some faculty it became known as “getting bucked,” after the sudden firing of the Director of the School of Public Health over insubordination (he was reinstated in his faculty position, and ... well you know the rest. If not, ask a colleague who has been around a little longer).

Many faculty members were alarmed by the perp walks, by how suddenly unemployment could descend on those with whom we interacted daily and who helped us in our work. Yet

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there was some comfort in the fact that faculty layoffs simply did not happen in Canada. Suffocation by attrition, yes, but not layoffs. Then Laurentian happened. There was now an opportunity for the “People Leaders” at USask to step up with reassurances. Yet they have steadfastly refused to state that the current budgetary situation will not lead to any individual faculty job losses or the dismantling of academic units. Keep ‘em scared. It’s a sound management tactic.

When you are scared you keep your head down, don’t challenge authority, don’t create controversy. You go along with the “People Leaders.” I have been in hundreds of meetings involving faculty and administrators where this plays

out. Simply put, I suspect senior administrators – once faculty themselves – are aware of this trepidation and use it to their advantage. It is hard to openly oppose an initiative or motion coming from a senior administrator sitting in the room. I remember when I was on University Council, back when it met in a large hall, how senior administrators always sat at the front and turned to look who was voting which way among those seated behind (the faculty section). One even stood up to do so. Deliberate or not, this is intimidation. They want you to be afraid. This is a strategy for ensuring conformity, keeping the workers in line, deflecting challenges. If I cross my “People Leader” will my program get cut? Will they shrink

our budget, or deny us recruitment of new faculty? Will they block my tenure or promotion? During my time on Council a few members wrote privately to me saying that they had been warned by their “People Leader” not to speak up or challenge at Council. It happens. It should make us angry.

But it does not need to make us fearful.

The fear of repercussions should not guide our actions. We have a strong faculty association. Talk to them if you think you or your unit are being targeted for speaking out or voting against Admin initiatives. There is no place for fear or pressure from above to make you conform in a collegial system of shared governance.

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