



University of Prince Edward Island FACULTY ASSOCIATION

2013-2014 Officers & Staff

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Dr. Alaa Abd-El-Aziz
President
University of Prince Edward Island

Dear President Abd-El-Aziz:

The Faculty Association welcomes the opportunity to comment on the “Draft UPEI Strategic Plan (2013-2018)”. We are grateful for the efforts of all who have contributed to its development. There is a great deal in this Plan that the Executive and the approximately four hundred Members of the Association can fully support. In the comments that follow we aim to bolster the strengths of the current document, and even more critically, to raise and resolve a number of issues before they become problems.

One such issue is the term “faculty”, used throughout the document. As you know, our Membership is comprised of more than tenured and tenure-track faculty, and these other Members also play critical roles in the student experience and learning. We use the more inclusive term “academic staff”, denoting faculty, librarians, sessional instructors, clinical nursing instructors, and clinical veterinary professionals. We are confident you will appreciate the necessity for precision in the language of a document laying the foundation for the next five years of life, work, and study on this campus.

We value the commitment to transparency of operations, integrity, and respect as expressed on page [2], and naturally as academics we recognize the need for the open exchange of ideas. At the same time, the phrase “experiential learning opportunities” on that page (and elsewhere in the document) is seen by many of our Members as an attempt to impose one pedagogical approach or tool, when “experiential learning” is in fact only one of many available, and employed by our academic staff.

Student Experience

“How we teach and what we teach” is definitely the core of the student experience. It should go without saying that the principle of academic freedom and related provisions guaranteeing our Members’ rights with respect to the delivery of their courses, as outlined and protected in the Collective Agreement, must be considered inherent to “how we teach”. Of course, it is Senate which “is responsible for the academic policies of the University” and “has the power ... to determine the courses of study ...” (University Act, Section 24).

Academic staff must be supported and encouraged in their teaching. We are pleased to read that the Plan envisions the establishment of a Teaching Centre as one way to support excellence in teaching. The process of determining the staffing requirements of the Centre, and carrying out its evaluation, must include academic staff. We foresee that our Members may need to increasingly make use of the provisions of Article C-3 (Study Leave), and that there may also be a need for an augmentation of the Professional Development and Travel Reimbursement funds. Elsewhere, the phrase “[e]mphasis on measures of academic innovation” is unclear and may be open to interpretation. However, it is essential to underscore the fact that evaluation of academic staff is a collective bargaining issue. The goal of finding “ways to enhance faculty interaction and increase interdisciplinary opportunities” is entirely laudable, though we wonder how the enhanced interaction and the new opportunities will be encouraged and rewarded, and their impact on workload.

Finally, on page [4] the Plan calls for the development of a “fully integrated, single point of front-line support for students through a one-stop shop”. Again, this goal is commendable. Still, we recognize that the nature of a single point of contact requires both exceptional and well-informed people and extremely careful organizational planning. These “front-line” employees must be given time to meet and speak with academic staff in all areas; their knowledge and familiarity must comprehend all programs and services on this campus, not only those in great demand or highly visible.

Vibrant Communities

The opening statement on page [5], that “Job satisfaction and employee development have a direct impact on the quality of education and student experience we deliver” resonates with the Association and its Members. We recognize that “development” is essential, but wish to emphasize that fair treatment is a vital contributor to job satisfaction. Nor is “improved co-worker support and interaction” necessarily met by training. The Association has previously expressed concern over the framing and implementation of respectful workplace policies, and is confident that our views will be respected in this regard.

There are grave reservations with some of the implications of the Human Resources Development Plan “to ensure the HR requirements of UPEI are aligned with the strategic goals of the University”. This raises the very real, and quite unacceptable, possibility that non-academics will determine the levels and kinds of staffing needed for the delivery and support of academic courses. Elements of the Plan will certainly address professional development and mentorship models. The Faculty Association is eager to be a full partner in this process from the earliest planning stages.

Employee support of (and participation in) campus initiatives is very much linked to job satisfaction. Employees who feel that they are treated fairly and who believe that their opinions count, take pride in their place of work. They are also much more likely to adopt campus initiatives with eagerness and creativity. We are aware of possible implications for the workload of academic staff, however, and have some concerns around potentially punitive consequences for those who abstain from such campus initiatives, or air their criticisms of those initiatives.

Exploration and Discovery

Our Members have expressed significant apprehension that only research that “promises near-term impacts on local and regional economies” will be supported and encouraged; their anxieties have not been alleviated by the specific examples of “existing expertise” to which the Plan refers.

We are, however, very pleased to see that the Plan envisions “[p]roviding more efficient grant application processes and personalized assistance ... with respect to funding opportunities and applications”. Of course, the staff who provide this assistance must have appropriate expertise, including an understanding of the unique nature, demands, and needs of each discipline.

Finally, a statement in Appendix 1 commits to the creation of a summer research program for undergraduates. This goal is threatened by the cut to internal research grants announced in the spring of this year, a cut which seriously jeopardized student research. We are unclear whether the intent is merely to reinstate the funding level or to increase it, or whether an entirely new program of some description is foreseen. The details will be important, as they affect our Members’ ability to enlist and develop undergraduate researchers.

Long-Term Sustainability

“An integrated culture in which *every* employee regards recruitment, retention, and student success to be central to their role” again is very much linked to job satisfaction. There are fears arising from the implications of the proposed “University-led program review cycle”. While it is unclear what that phrase means, program reviews need to be academic-driven and focused. Indeed, departmental and program reviews have been conducted throughout the campus for many years, though, to the frustration of our Members, their recommendations have been too often ignored. Of course, reviews of academic staff are provided for in the Collective Agreement.

We are worried that there has been inadequate attention given to the academic considerations implied by the creation of new operating models for “all faculties and schools”, with responsibility for these models assigned to the VP Administration & Finance. Reference to UPEI’s pension plan in the paragraph dealing with “long-term financial sustainability” prompts us to emphasize that discussions about any changes to UPEI’s pension must of necessity take place with the joint union group.

A section in Appendix 1 identifies the intention to “Develop governance structure for policy and procedure review”. Over a number of years, the practice of advancing or altering policies without consultation with the Faculty Association has produced deleterious results. Either we have had to sort matters out through the grievance process, or both the Association and the Administration have had to expend a great deal of effort both to mitigate the effects and resolve the issues, well after the fact. We request a change in approach, to the benefit of all parties, so that the Faculty Association is routinely consulted at early stages of policy development and revision.

More fundamentally, our Members have expressed their dismay at the consistent use of terms, attitudes, priorities, and approaches that are more appropriate to a for-profit corporation. Members are wary of any University Community Advisory Group with an agenda driven by the values and outcomes of business and industry. We were, of course, heartened to read on page [1] that “the implementation of planning priorities will be carried out in consultation and collaboration with the campus community ...” All of us recognize “the need to better communicate the inherent value of a University education” page [1]. The Faculty Association and its Members are committed to protecting as well as conveying that value, and to ensuring our students benefit from their experience for the rest of their lives.

Thank you for what we trust will be serious consideration of our thoughts, our suggestions, and our concerns. The Association and Membership are committed to continuing our efforts to ensure that UPEI is “known as a great employer” page [5] and remains a great university.

Yours sincerely,

Betty Jeffery
UPEIFA President

cc: N. Etkin, UPEIFA Vice-President