

Take Back Our University:

MUNFA's Take on Budget Issues

The politics of the university's budget have lately been heating up on campus. Under pressure from a provincial government eager to squeeze more out of MUN's already strained budget, the university has initiated a consultation process that so far has done little to reassure concerned students, faculty and staff. On the contrary, our members report that the process has left many feeling frustrated and dispirited. Talk of the budget has also drawn attention to persistent underfunding of basic functions on campus.

Given the centrality of the university's budget to everything we do, Academic Staff Members have been turning up in significant numbers at consultation sessions across campus. Yet, despite ASMs' readiness to engage in discussion of the university's goals and priorities, what members have told us casts doubt on the sincerity of the administration's desire for input.

Many members attending the sessions report frustration at being asked to provide input without access to key budget details needed for meaningful consultation. Many ASMs said their ideas were dismissed or belittled, at the same time as the administration seemed to be fishing for endorsement of its favoured solutions – tuition increases, for example. A number of MUNFA members also reported that faculty were attacked as poor teachers by the Provost, with no evidence provided to support the claim.

Erosion of academic support services

We have also heard from ASMs in several departments that academic support services are being eroded enough to interfere with their work. ASMs and departments face increasing demands for reports, research fund management, and participation in interdisciplinary programs and projects – all of which bring new administrative burdens. Nonetheless, departments have periodically been left without any administrative support coverage, a situation that is compounded by the temporary nature of many staff contracts.

While budget cuts present clear challenges, there are no excuses for failing to plan or to consider the long-term effects on the university if ASMs hesitate to help run academic programs or apply for external funding without basic supports. For their part, the administration offers only the lame excuse of a “need for attrition” – even as it maintains large groups of administrative personnel whose *raison d'être* is not critical to the core mission of our university.

The public university under assault

Despite the perceived hostility or inaction of the administration, our members clearly care deeply about the core teaching and research mission of their university. They want Memorial to thrive, and they want to contribute as teachers and researchers to a vibrant university. However, they are increasingly frustrated by poor leadership in a context where the ideals of the public university seem to be under assault.

It is clear that the provincial government has Memorial University in its crosshairs. For instance, the provincial government's own pre-budget consultation materials include graphics that are clearly designed to show Memorial as costly and unaffordable to Newfoundland and Labrador taxpayers (see [here](#) and [here](#)). The government has also gone out of its way to try to download costs by orchestrating pension reform in a manner that is detrimental to the university and its employees ([for more details](#)).

In this context, we might expect our senior academic administration to offer a spirited defense of Memorial and its special relationship to the people of the province. In contrast, at a time when the university community more than ever needs unity of purpose, our administration seems to be fomenting division, pitting students, faculty and staff against one another, and encouraging a sense of competition, whereby one group's gain can only come at the expense of others.

This zero-sum game approach to governance comes straight out of the neo-liberal playbook. It is based on a model of market competition that is wholly inappropriate for a public educational institution, a central purpose of which is preparing people for democratic citizenship. Similarly, the devolution of responsibility for budgeting – onto people and units that have limited ability to cope with cuts – is another familiar tactic of austerity politics. Such devolution might appear on the surface to include people in decision-making. However, true collegiality must really empower people to help set the agenda, not just manage the fallout.

The lifeblood of the university

A central question in the campus-wide budget consultations was what principles and priorities should guide the budgeting process.

From where MUNFA stands, the answer is clear: a reassertion of the university's core missions of teaching and research, and of Memorial's vital contribution to Newfoundland and Labrador.

MUNFA Communications Committee