

Take Back Our University: *MUNFA's Take on Attrition*

Memorial's senior administration has [been clear](#) that budget cuts and attrition will harm the university's core academic and teaching mission and we are feeling those effects. Individual Academic Staff Members (ASMs) are being asked to do more with less, while collectively we will be compelled to do less with less.

In January, MUNFA's Executive Committee [asked our members](#) to tell us how vacancies are affecting your academic units. What we learned should concern anyone who cares about our university. ASMs from across Memorial gave concrete examples of how they and their colleagues are being stretched to sustain programs, and how programs and students are suffering despite their efforts.

Teaching: ASMs in several Science departments reported that students are already facing fewer course options: there are too few faculty members to offer the full spectrum of classes, particularly in departments where enrolment has increased. In consequence, students may require substitutions if they are to graduate on time.

ASMs in other faculties reported that – so far – they are maintaining the core undergraduate curriculum, often thanks to per course and term appointments. But academic administration and service, along with graduate programs are suffering:

The teaching will get done but who will do the other work, especially supervision and examination of theses? We are a vibrant and growing program but haven't ever marketed the program for fear that we would not have the capacity to meet the demand. I find it difficult to even articulate what this means.

As this ASM indicates, Graduate programs are particularly vulnerable to ASM attrition. Every Masters and Doctoral student needs multiple faculty for supervisory and examination purposes. Good graduate supervision and examination represents very significant commitments from faculty. Yet, in some departments, a diminished complement means that a handful of ASMs are left to serve on many committees.

Students justifiably expect specialization and expertise from their classroom teachers, particularly at the graduate and senior undergraduate level. But one ASM reported that post-docs and current PhD students are being asked to teach graduate courses. In other departments, people without relevant training are being assigned core courses in specialized programs, putting certificate programs at risk.

Program administration: Multiple ASMs recounted problems filling committees, as well as head, coordinator and other administrative positions in their units. Some programs are being run by contract ASMs. Circumstances like these foster stress and interpersonal conflict, as ASMs shoulder increased administrative loads. As one person noted, the burden is particularly intense for members of "targeted" (equity-seeking) groups, who are asked to serve on every committee.

In short, in many units the loss or extended absence of a single ASM - whether to retirement, administrative service outside the department, or otherwise – without filling such vacancies can jeopardize entire programs.

Research & Scholarship: Increased workload in other areas naturally affects ASMs' ability to engage in scholarship. The impacts range from an inability to use funder-provided teaching buy-outs to the time-squeeze imposed by added commitments in teaching, supervision and service.

Over the long-term, ASMs predict that these pressures will create difficulties in the faculty recruitment and retention, fundability of research programs, and, by implication, the viability and appeal of graduate programs. In some units, a shortage of ASMs threatens accreditation status.

Impacts on health and unit collegiality: Multiple ASMs pointed out that this situation carries significant costs for people's personal lives, health and for their relationships with their colleagues. These range from job satisfaction to burnout and tension related to work assignments and workloads within units. Further, several ASMs noted that they are apprehensive about the near future, as impending retirements exacerbate existing problems.

What is to be done?

We might be tempted to view this as a storm to be weathered with short-term sacrifices and redoubled efforts. That response is understandable and almost reflexive for academics. Many of us work long hours by choice at the best of times, identify strongly with our work, and care deeply about our students.

But it carries multiple risks. Beyond the immediate cost to personal health and relationships, one ASM offered a cautionary tale. Having previously worked at a university that faced similar cuts, this person reported:

...people did step up to the plate and taught more for no more pay and worked harder to keep up their research productivity. ... the University survived but [government] and the Board of Regents went on say [that] this just shows the University does not need extra funds. ... It just showed [people] were being too lazy to start. It will likely happen here as well. Once the budget problems are over ... no extra resources will be given we will just be expected to do more and work harder at the expense of personal life.

If something is not done now ... it may be too late. We will have shown we can exist (not sure if you can call it function) in this new reduced funding model, and so this will then continue.

If we “cope” and adapt in the short term, the viability of entire research areas and even disciplines will be at risk of disappearing from Memorial.

Shared Governance

The University has said repeatedly that Memorial's academic mission is its top priority. Yet we still see places where decision-makers divert money from support for research and teaching. They haven't kicked their [headhunter](#) habit. Likewise, are a “[stylish](#)” “innovation centre” – [federal contributions](#) notwithstanding - and the [Student Success Collaborative](#) – a new \$1.5 million student tracking system - really vital to the core work of our university?

It's no surprise such decisions are being made given the state of shared governance at Memorial. University governance has become [increasingly corporatized and secretive](#) across Canada, but the Canadian Association of University Teachers rates [Memorial's governance model](#) as the least collegial. Faculty here are excluded from institutional decision-making and priority setting in the Board of Regents. Where we do have a voice, it is often limited to “consultation” or approval of an executive agenda. This is not the best way to protect the university's academic mission.

Budgets are about priorities – and politics

Still, extravagances of administrative spending pale when compared to the Province's [devastating cuts](#) to MUN's Operating Grant, cuts compounded by the spectre of aging infrastructure, including labs no longer fit for purpose and buildings beset by health hazards ranging from asbestos to leaks and mould. And then there's the issue of the unfunded liability on the MUN pension plan.

Everyone who cares about this province's only university, from students and alumni to MUNFA and the Senior Administration, must unite to tell our elected rulers why they need to reverse the assault on higher education in this province. As our students have said, it's about [funding the future](#).

MUNFA has requested a meeting with the new Minister of Advanced Education, Labour and Skills. Similarly, we are doing everything we can to prepare for the pending [Review of Public Post-Secondary Education](#), with a view to defending the core value - and values - of the university: education by teacher-scholars, comprehensiveness, support for research in all its dimensions, academic freedom, and institutional autonomy. We urge our members to do the same. A provincial election is on the horizon. We must send a strong collective message to politicians that meaningful support for higher education and scholarship is the cornerstone of a vibrant society and economy.

Protecting the tenure line: Ultimately, the way to protect the academic heart of the university is to defend its tenure stream. MUNFA volunteers are preparing to fight at the bargaining table and beyond for a secure and diverse complement of tenured and tenure track teacher-scholars.

What's next?

In the coming months, MUNFA will be mounting campaigns and actions designed to strengthen collegial governance; protect the tenure-stream complement; and make the case for a well-resourced provincial university for Newfoundland and Labrador.

Please join us.