



Volume 4 Issue 4

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The CUPE newsletter is published by CUPE Local 3911. We welcome your submissions, letters and comments. Opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the authors and not necessarily those of CUPE Local 3911

Editor: Virginia Gillese

“If we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant: if we did not sometimes taste of adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome.”

[Meditations Divine and Moral]”

— Anne Bradstreet, *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*

Appraisals - Rob Wiznura

A short little reminder about the collective agreement as we approach the “appraisal” season. The wording has changed a bit with the last round of bargaining. It now reads as follows:

The employer and union agree that the primary purpose of performance appraisal is twofold:

- To assist the employee to develop and improve tutoring skills;
- To maintain acceptable standards off employee performance.

That is the function: to *improve* and *develop* and *maintain*. Thus, if there is a problem with your performance, the coordinator should be discussing with you how to develop or improve or bring your performance to acceptable standards. Keep those functions in mind when you fill out your own appraisal and meet or talk with your coordinators. The experience should be formative, not summative (to use the “cool kid” jargon).

Bargaining – Rob Wiznura

We are madly preparing proposals and strategies in anticipation of bargaining. We will keep you posted on all movements on that front in the weeks to come. . .



Want some free \$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$?

Sign up for your pension!

The pension sign up information is found at:

<http://www1.athabascau.ca/hr/benefitpage/CUPERRSP>



CUPE3911 Professional Development Fund - All that money! What's it for?

By Mark Dimirsky

Athabasca University, as part of our collective agreement, provides \$40,000 per year to fund professional development activities for CUPE3911 members. We've highlighted some information below but additional details can be found by accessing the application form and guidelines found under the tutor tab MyAU.

What this fund is for: union members only, conference/workshop fees plus transportation and daily living costs to support educational activities. An example might be attending a conference or workshop that is relevant to what you are currently teaching and that is likely to help you do your job better. You can also apply to use PD Funds for distance educational activities (where you don't travel) but need funds to register for a program or activity. We also want to encourage research into teaching techniques, strategies and approaches that are directly applicable to the kind of work we do (distance education) at AU.

What the fund is not for: buying materials such as computers, software, etc. There is a separate fund of \$300 per year for each member and that is available for those purposes. Our selection committee has nothing to do with that fund; it is separately administered through AU. The Fund also does not pay for tuition or other fees associated with advanced degrees but there is provision in the collective agreement for some support from AU for these activities (but our committee doesn't deal with that).

How you get approved: Fill in an application by

the deadline and be as accurate and complete as possible in giving the information the selection committee uses to make decisions. You can receive up to \$1500 for Canadian activities or \$2000 for international events. Be sure to tell the committee why what you are proposing is relevant to your AU work. We (the PD Fund) don't fund tuition or fees used for advanced degrees and we don't fund research unless it is directly related to the work you are doing for AU, i.e., research into how we teach and do our jobs at and for AU. Awards are given four times a year (quarterly) with the first quarter starting April 1 each year. The selection committee meets shortly after the close of the period for receiving applications and makes decisions. Our goal is to inform those who applied before the start of the next quarter about the status of their application. There are a few additional conditions you need to be aware of: 1) we approve in principle but AU actually is responsible for paying and they apply usual AU rules about allowances for travel, meals, accommodation, etc. and you will need to provide receipts to AU; 2) you must supply a report to us that can be used by either/or AU and CUPE3911 to tell other members about your activity; 3) you can apply multiple times in the same year but you will only be funded once per year for international travel and other applications may get preference due to past (same year) awards to you.

Here are your members of the PD Fund Committee: Teresa Bosse, Deborah Foster, Rochelle Sato and Mark Dimirsky



Call Centre: Why we *all* need to talk – Rob Woznura

Currently, many of our members work under the call centre model, many more are being shunted towards it, and others still work within the tutor model. The Vice-President Academic has been merrily telling the students union and others that *all* courses are being shifted to the call centre model. The local has been fighting these shifts, but some who have been working for years under this model might be feeling a bit puzzled by the fuss. Some find the call centre model to be quite effective and pleasant to work in and could very well feel that their work is being denigrated by the local.

Nothing could be further from the truth: No one from the local is denigrating or devaluing the work of the Academic Experts. To the contrary, our argument is that the *university* is undervaluing that contribution. As I see things, there are two critical issues here: student access and compensation for work done.

Regarding student access, some AEs have access to lists of their students and some do not. All tutors have full class lists and can freely contact any of their students. For example, in December I sent out messages to my students who a. seemed to have fallen off the planet and b. students who were closing in on their contract deadlines. Many in the “a” category responded very positively and have started to get on track. (While the call centre also has recently been sending out notices to inactive students, the AE is out of the loop, not to mention the significant difference getting a note from a call centre or one’s instructor). Such access or potential access is important to me and has proven to be important to a number of these students. In addition, in some

courses, I am the *only* tutor covering these students. It seems a bit silly NOT to have access to the students when all of them are, by necessity, mine.

The university has made two claims regarding the “block” pay, the pay tutors receive for carrying x number of students. One is that tutors should not be bothered with tedious administrative questions such as “how can I book an exam?” and so on. The other issue is the charge of negligence: that the university doesn’t know if we are actually doing the work. Many of these new systems are being put in place simply to monitor what we actually are doing. I personally think the question of whether tutors are contacting students in the first two weeks or not and so on is a red herring: A RED HERRING: students are paying (quite substantially) for *access* to our expertise. Having students go through an extra hoop and forcing them to go through a middle person who likely will not be able to help them is not breaking down barriers to learning. I have no issue with a call line for administrative questions, but I do find it an unnecessary barrier that students cannot access me directly if they so choose. That is one issue.

The other is the paycheque. Most of us work to pay our mortgages, eat and so on. The obvious question is whether we are being compensated fairly. Tutors’ pay is based on *general* contact with students: contact which includes answering *all* their questions, administrative *and* academic. Some questions are certainly administrative. For AEs, the administrative questions are filtered out by the call centre, so contact with the students is strictly academic.



Brenda Kuzio has been an AE since the commencement of her employment with AU 14 years ago and, until recently, had worked exclusively under that model; now having worked under both models, she sees the difference between the two models as the following: Block pay includes pay, in part, for dealing with students' administrative questions which AEs are not asked to deal with. AEs, therefore, deal exclusively with academic questions. However, AEs have been paid *the same* hourly rate as that which applies to the tutors. That is simply not fair. An administrative question does not require the master's degree or doctorate or experience in the field that an academic question does. Administrative positions attract less compensation than

academic positions for good reason: the academic question requires my education and experience (and research) to answer whereas an administrative question can be answered with minimal amount of job training.

In other words, we have been significantly undervaluing the work of the academic experts. By allowing them to be lumped into the same pay rate as the tutors, AU has been getting away with paying far too little for the academic work of the AEs, whose work is strictly academic, not watered down with administrative questions. Our fight is not about a model of learning or a way of working; our fight is about student access and proper compensation. I think that we need to remember that.



Next CUPE General Membership Meeting:

Saturday, May 10th, 2013 9:30 a.m.

10011 – 109 Street Edmonton

**** Teleconference Available ****

Link to Ryerson University distance education site:

<http://ce-online.ryerson.ca/ce/default.aspx?id=8>



What's in a name? Academic Titles at AU By Robert Holmberg, Ph.D. Emeritus Professor (now an occasional lab instructor but always a Tutor)

When a person is given a title - such as Captain, Mayor, Reverend or Doctor -the designation usually communicates something about that person's qualifications, accomplishments, position and responsibilities. It also may denote some societal status or respect.

The founding President of Athabasca University (AU) was Tim Byrne, Ed.D. (1971-1976). He did not want AU to emulate other universities that emphasized specialties and research over general undergraduate education (Byrne, 1989). President Byrne decided that AU academics should be titled Tutors. This started a long term denigration of AU academics.

About 1972, when the first full-time academics were appointed, all were designated simply as Tutors. The first academic hired was Barry Gilbert, Ph.D. who started work on AU's first course, eventually titled *World Ecology: the scientific context*. Within a few months, his position was taken over by T.S. (Lochan) Bakshi, Ph.D. who re-designed and wrote much of the course (Holmberg and Bakshi, 1992). Dr. Bakshi was soon joined by Joe Meeker, Ph.D. (Humanities) and, a bit later, by Ian Taylor, M.A. (Social Sciences). The unfinished *World Ecology* course opened for student enrollments in October 1973 and the first part-time Tutors were hired to help deliver it and, a little later, *Ancient Roots of the Modern World* as well as *Introduction to the Study of Human Communities*. I started full-time work as a Tutor on 1 September 1974. I became the fourth full-time member of the university's academics. I had an incomplete Ph.D. and was junior to the three other full-time faculty members. To

distinguish us, the three "heads" became Senior Tutors. My job was to personalize the ecology course for three hundred students and help finish *the course*. Supposedly, at \$14,000 per year, I was cheaper than four part-time Tutors.

For a few years after 1974, part-time Tutors became Telephone Tutors, to reflect their primary mechanism of communicating with students. This was followed for a short time by the term Local Course Tutors (LCTs) who, besides tutoring by telephone and postal mail, held in-person small group discussions/tutorials with students. The LCT designation arose from an idea that students would better relate to Tutors who lived fairly close by. The title and idea were quickly abandoned because it was impractical due to the asynchronous mode of course enrollments, the varying speeds of students' completion rates as well as the distribution patterns of students -including more and more students enrolling from provinces other than Alberta.

The term Subject Matter Expert (SME) was used for both internal and external academics who prepared course content. This term persists today.

There was always a difficulty in distinguishing between part-time Tutors who only tutored (and marked assignments/exams) and full-time Tutors who tutored only as part of their other duties. The title Course Coordinator started 1975-76 to refer to full-time academics.

At times, the Course Coordinator title was appropriate. For example, although I am a biologist, I had to take over a geology course for



several months when our single geologist left for another position. I could easily manage the administrative issues of the course but was not qualified for questions dealing with the subject matter. Initially, with a very small staff, we did not always have people who were academically qualified to handle certain courses. However, for most academics, the term Course Coordinator is demeaning and should be removed from AU's vocabulary. In the same way that someone who temporarily takes over the role of a President becomes Acting President, I think that when a Tutor takes over the role of a Professor, he/she should be designated Acting Professor. (I also think that AU should not have Academic Coordinators. This is a Professor without research responsibilities. This is what a college might have, not a university. Maybe we should become Athabasca College? It would save money now "wasted" on research.)

By early 1976, there were 24 part-time Tutors. By the early 1980s there were about 40, and 100 was reached in 1983 (Byrne, 1989). In 1977-78, my official designation became Academic Professional but the term Course Coordinator persisted.

The first honorary degree given by AU was not a doctorate but a professorship. It was given to

References

Byrne, T. C. 1989. Athabasca University: the Evolution of Distance Education. Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press. (AU Library LE 3.A899, B995)

Holmberg, R.G. and T.S. Bakshi. 1992. Post mortem on a distance education course: successes and failures. American Journal of Distance Education 6: 27-39. (DOI:10.1080/08923649209526772)

David Suzuki, Ph.D. who became an AU Honorary Professor in 1976. This was about the same time that Dr. Meeker became Interdisciplinary Professor. I am not sure which professorship came first. The term Professor was not generally used for any AU academics until at least 1981. Professors surfaced in the AU Calendar only in 1986-87. The telephone listings for staff included the title "Dr." a few years later.

The percentage of full-time academics who tutor students varies. At times, Professors become full-time course writers, administrators and/or researchers and do not tutor. During the term of President Dominique Abrioux, Ph.D. (1995-2005), all full-time academics and many professional staff (with appropriate academic credentials) tutored students. This was a cost saving measure but also helped more full-time staff understand the pluses and minuses of being a Tutor and the problems that students faced.

In 2000, Home Study Tutors became Individualized Study Tutors. Now the title is possibly changing again.

Today, AU's academics consist of Professors and Tutors. As Tutors continue to replace Professors on leave, and sometimes vice versa, the distinction remains blurred.