

Dear Colleagues,

The items in the November President's Report are:

- A Call to Action in Defence of Academic Governance
- Ratification of the Collective Agreement
- Resignation of the MRFA Treasurer
- Budget Advisory Committee
- Advocacy Committee Event
- Child Care Survey
- MRFA Executive Board Planning Retreat
- Joint Meeting with MacEwan and Alberta College of Art and Design Executives
- Presidents' Discussion Series: The Value of a Liberal Arts Education
- CAUT Parliament Hill Day
- Canada's Past Matters Campaign
- CAUT Council Report
- Holiday Wishes

### **A Call to Action in Defence of Academic Governance**

Recent events at the General Faculties Council and its Academic Program and Policy Committee have raised concerns regarding whether academic governance is working as it should. These concerns merit the attention of all faculty.

A motion to add a reduction of instructional hours in a course due to budget considerations to the list of editorial (non-substantive) curriculum changes was considered at the meeting of Academic Program and Policy Committee held on November 20. The list already contained non-substantive changes such as deletion of a course prerequisite within a Faculty and minor course description changes which do not affect transferability. The discussion paper accompanying the proposed addition stated that the Provost and Vice-President, Academic has indicated that a Dean has the authority to designate a reduction in instructional hours as an editorial change. This document also suggested that a reduction in instructional hours due to non-budget considerations would remain a substantive change.

The policy on the Credit Curriculum Approval Process (POL 550-1) defines editorial changes to be "non-substantive changes that do not alter or affect the substance of curriculum, programs, or policies" and makes the originator of a curriculum change proposal responsible for determining whether a change is substantive or editorial, with the list of editorial changes to be used to guide this decision. The approval process for an editorial change is Chair/Department, Faculty Council, Dean and Registrar (final approval). The approval process for a substantive change continues from the Registrar to APPC and GFC (final approval).

I attended the November 20<sup>th</sup> APPC meeting, along with two other members of the MRFA Executive, Scott Murray and Marc Schroeder. I requested permission to speak, in accordance with the GFC Bylaws, and permission was granted by the Chair. I observed that a reduction in instructional hours is incompatible with the existing editorial changes

because, for example, a reduction in hours could affect transferability. I then made the following statement, cited from the draft minutes of the meeting:

*“with respect to principles of academic and bi-cameral governance, academic matters which involve budget should be considered by General Faculties Council [GFC] prior to going forward to the Board so that the Board may consider an academic perspective. The assertion of the Provost that the dean has authority to dictate that a reduction in instructional hours due to budget considerations is an editorial change constitutes a direct attack on academic governance and academic debate. The principle is that if instructional hours need to be reduced for budgetary reasons, that recommendation needs to be considered by the Board along with other options which may be presented. The Board needs as much information as possible about all options in order to make an informed decision.”*

The GFC Bylaws describe the principles of bicameral governance as follows: “Although the Board of Governors is the senior of the two bodies, the two share and balance the decision making responsibility and authority within the institution. In general terms, the Board of Governors is responsible for business policy decisions and the GFC, subject to By-laws as may be passed by the Board from time to time, is responsible for academic policy decisions.”

One reason faculty-led academic governance at General Faculties Council sometimes fails to work is because Deans’ Council, on occasion, usurps the process and assumes the responsibility of academic decision making. So, instead of GFC advising the Board, GFC is advised by Deans’ Council. The standard grading scheme for conversion of percentage grades to letter grades, passed at the April 2012 GFC meeting, is emblematic of how this situation can distort the process of academic governance. When the grading policy proposal came before GFC, councillors were told it had been considered by all DAGs and Faculty Councils. Several councillors asserted, however, that this was the first they had heard of the proposed policy change and that it had never been discussed at some Faculty Councils.

On the grounds that the new grading scheme had not been discussed thoroughly by faculty, who would be left to implement it, a motion to refer the policy back to the originators for further deliberation was made. Several Deans rose to speak against the motion and it was eventually defeated by a vote of 21 to 31, with one abstention. The principle of hearing academic arguments at GFC and then making a decision did not apply to the administrative councillors on this issue because Deans’ Council had already made a decision (and the Provost had previously indicated that he expected deans to “vote in accordance with Deans’ Council decisions” [Executive Committee Minutes, April 10, 2012]). I can only assume that their arguments swayed a number of faculty councillors to vote against what seemed to be a compelling case to refer back. The tail had wagged the dog.

Nevertheless, the validity of the arguments to refer back had been heard and at the next GFC meeting the Provost announced that, because it was necessary to address issues and challenges associated with a move to a common grading system, Deans’ Council had determined that university-wide implementation of the grading system would be deferred to Fall 2013, although faculty who were prepared to implement in Fall 2012 could do so.

The motion to add a reduction of instructional hours in a course due to budget considerations to the list of editorial curriculum changes was defeated at the November

20<sup>th</sup> APPC meeting, albeit by a bare majority. Therefore, a reduction in instructional hours cannot be approved by the Registrar as an editorial change; it must be processed as a substantive change.

Would approval have set a precedent? What other academic matters might have bypassed GFC in the future because they had budget implications? Although the final responsibility for approving the budget rests with the Board of Governors, the Board is concerned about academic quality and, in a properly functioning system of bicameral governance, its decisions must be informed by the academic advice of General Faculties Council.

What can you do?

1. Resist the argument that academic matters with budgetary impact cannot be considered by GFC. Academic and budgetary matters are often intertwined, and cannot be easily separated, if at all. Where both academic quality and budget are involved, both must be considered. Academic governance by administrative fiat is not genuine academic governance.
2. If you are under pressure to reduce instructional hours and you believe this would “affect the substance of curriculum,” then according to POL 550-1 the curriculum change should be processed as a substantive one. Even if your department has chosen to make budget cuts by reducing instructional hours, you have an obligation to identify the academic consequences of these reductions in a curriculum submission. Academic matters require meaningful academic discussion, irrespective of their budgetary implications.
3. Since budget is not within the authority of Faculty Councils or GFC, vote for or against proposals based on their academic merits. I am not suggesting that you take any particular stance on issues. I am only asking that you participate in meaningful academic debate.
4. If you are not a GFC councillor, speak with the councillors in your Faculty about the issues. Ensure that GFC decision items are discussed at your Faculty Council. Consider running for GFC in the future. Recognize that you have a voice in academic governance whether or not you are a GFC councillor. Question your administrators about matters that will impact your work.
5. If you are a GFC councillor, participate in your Faculty caucus. Our Academic Liaison Committee has been working diligently to make caucuses effective for the past year and a half. They are intended to be a way in which you can become better informed about the issues, in order to improve academic governance. The objective is not to engender block voting, but rather to strengthen the voice of faculty in the academic governance process.