

## Grid Movement: the Creeping Fear — President's Report



Marc Schroeder,  
MRFA President

This year, like most that I can remember and certainly in each of my now-four years as MRFA President, whispers of a fear have troubled the late winter semester air – of an insatiable hunger that devours our tenuous revenues; a gremlin that confounds the machinery of our budgets by endlessly inflating labour costs; a threat to our very

sustainability. But, some brave souls have dared name it over these years, in the now defunct Budget Advisory Committee's meetings, in town halls, in budget updates and in meetings of the Board of Governors: annual movement up the salary grid.

Mount Royal's recent budget update, sent by email to all employees on April 18, singles out (*literally* the *only* example provided) "annual salary grid step increases" as a reason why another year of growth in

our provincial operating grant (not to mention overall growth in MRU's revenues and net assets) "does not solve all our financial challenges" and therefore must still be accompanied by internally-directed cuts in the interest of "ensuring there is capacity to address strategic priorities" through redirection of resources into reserves and a "Possibilities Fund". Specifically, the claim made in the April 18 update is that annual grid steps "cost approximately \$3.8 million".

Is this claim true, or even in the ballpark? I and others who like to crunch numbers for the Association have attempted to do the math ourselves, at least for faculty employees, to see if the monster under the bed is real. I will start by shining the flashlight on movement up the salary grids by those in the professorial ranks (Assistant, Associate and Full Professor, i.e. the grids of Collective Agreement Article 13.1).

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## Pay Equity and Strike Preparedness— Guy Obrecht, Contract Member Representative

One of the misconceptions regarding contract faculty is that, unlike full time faculty, their teaching contract is supplemental to their "real" job elsewhere. According to our census, for an overwhelming majority of us, this is not the case. For most of us, teaching at Mount Royal is our sole source of income.

It comes as no surprise then, that when contract members talk to me about job action, their first question is, "How much will I get paid if we were to strike?" The worry is that they will be paid a fraction

of their current salary, which, depending on their contract, could put them into a dire financial situation.

The purpose of strike pay is to minimize the financial hardship that comes from loss of income and to compensate members for their participation in the job action. Strike pay is not meant to replace the member's salary. The MRFA's Strike Pay Policy ensures that when it comes to job action, no one role is greater than another.

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## Grid Movement: the Creeping Fear (Continued)

To begin, we know how many faculty are on these grids, and we know roughly how many (about 40%) are currently at the highest step of their respective grid (that is, no longer receiving automatic annual grid step increases). From this, and because we know the values of the topmost annual salaries on the grid and also the mean salary of all full-time faculty in the professorial ranks at MRU, we can derive a reasonably precise estimate of the mean salary of those who are *not yet* at the maximum step of their grid and who will therefore be receiving an annual grid step increase. All of this together allows us to estimate with reasonable confidence the aggregate cost of this grid movement: slightly over \$800k for 2018-2019 over 2017-2018.

That might still sound slightly unnerving to some, although when put in perspective it is about one third of one percent of MRU's estimated budget for 2018-2019 (expected to be about \$240M according to the MRU President's email to employees on March 22). After all, if this grid movement is inflating labour costs each year, won't it slowly but surely become problematic over time? The answer is that grid movement is not an inflationary force in the first place, nor is it open-ended. Grid movement is inflationary in the same way that people riding the escalator at your local mall cause it to slowly rise into the sky (it is only when we negotiate cost of living adjustments to the grids during bargaining rounds that the escalator as a whole rises, and even then these "rises" have to be measured relative to changes in the CPI to be properly understood). The escalator analogy isn't perfect, of course, because faculty don't leave the grid once they get to the top (unless that's the year they also leave MRU), and also because faculty aren't idle passengers but are putting in great effort each year to teach well, hone scholarship and attend to the professional responsi-

bilities that keep the University and the academy running healthily. In any case, reaching the top of the Associate grid happens roughly after the first 1-to-2 decades at the institution, depending on credential and initial placement. After that point they continue moving along horizontally for the remaining years of their career (notwithstanding two modest 20- and 25-year long service increments, and that some later hop over onto a second, shorter escalator up to the top of the Full Professor grid). From the MRFA Member Census in 2017 and 2018, we know from the age demographic data that there are relatively few faculty younger than 35, after which there is a sharp increase in numbers, and then a sharp decrease after 65. This suggests that, although there is of course variance in length of career at MRU and by no means do all faculty start at the same age or remain employees for the same length of time, employment of several decades is not uncommon and therefore that a large proportion of faculty are indeed not moving up the grid at any given time. Very conservative estimates suggest that with a full-time faculty complement of our size, just through ordinary turnover due to retirement, the University should need to backfill at least ten (and probably more) tenured positions per year. This estimate does fit with the roughly 50-person decline in our full-time ranks that we have measured over the past five years, subsequently to the throttling back of tenure-track hiring around 2013.

When a colleague departs the institution, and a corresponding position is filled by a new colleague who will begin at a lower grid step, the accumulated effect of grid movement is rolled back. In aggregate across the entire faculty complement this creates an offset to the effect of grid

## Grid Movement: the Creeping Fear (Continued)

movement and should result in a steady state, albeit with some minor fluctuations year to year – a little noise overtop of a steady signal – except following periods of significant expansion in positions, or periods where a significant number have been left vacant or abolished. It is hard to estimate exactly how much of an offset results from this turnover. But, even with very conservative annual turnover estimates, the actual, *current* cost of full-time faculty grid movement is likely offset by several hundred thousand dollars – the actual *current* cost of full-time faculty grid movement could be less than \$500k.

Why is the number not currently estimated to be zero? Assuming a constant faculty complement size, and over a sufficiently long period of time, it should indeed average to zero. However, Mount Royal engaged in a large round of tenure-track hiring a decade ago, and so there is a grid bubble that is, for a limited time, still rising. With the more recent reversion to pre-2008 tenure-track hiring rates, this trend can be expected to eventually reverse. Still, the administrators and Board members of that earlier era (all long gone) no doubt considered that increase in hiring to be a “strategic priority” aligned with our institutional transition, and presumably one that should have required multi-decade follow-through via a longer-term view of budgeting, planning to support and stabilize the movement of that bubble up the grid (notwithstanding that its effects seem to have been exaggerated, as sketched out above), and faculty complement planning more

broadly. We know what has been happening instead.

As to the other two Collective Agreement articles containing salary grids: 13.2 is the non-contract laboratory instructor grid, and 13.3 is the hourly contract instructor grid. I have omitted the former from this analysis because of the very small numbers involved. I have omitted the latter because greater unknowns and greater variance in contract faculty workloads make a meaningful analysis difficult. Having said this, my strong suspicion, based on what the MRFA Member Census data tell us and in light of the structure of the contract grid, is that contract grid movement should be almost entirely offset through the effect of turnover, in aggregate, and that the cost of grid step movement should be negligible.

To be fair, not all Mount Royal employees are faculty, and in fact the majority of the University’s salary expenses do not go to compensation of faculty. Other categories of employee have salary scales similar to our grids. Nevertheless, a statement by administration that the annual grid movement cost is \$3.8M is a monumental claim, and it should therefore require some proof. Especially when such claims have so often been made a focus at budget time, and with the implication or express statement that sustainability is compromised, it is high time to delve into whether or not this is a real problem or a phantom.

**The Mount Royal Faculty Association provides a collective voice for faculty, promotes tenure and academic freedom, advocates for the highest standards of professionalism in higher education, and upholds the values of diversity, equity and human rights.**

## Pay Equity and Strike Preparedness (Continued)



Guy Obrecht,  
Contract Member  
Representative

If you are participating in a picket or performing any other duty related to the job action, you will get paid.

The rate of pay does not differentiate by category of employment or grid step. We don't know exactly what it would be,

because it is partially dependent upon our contingency fund, but we do know that it will be somewhere between \$100 to \$170 a day. Strike pay is non-taxable, so the take home pay would be between \$1000 and \$1700 for participating in 10 days of job action.

Job action would therefore be a moment of pay equity: everyone would be getting the same pay for the same work. Our next step should be advocating for pay equity in the classroom. The principle of pay equity is now legislated in Ontario through Bill 148, the Fair Workplaces, Better Jobs Act. This bill requires that anyone doing "substantially the same work" be paid at the same rate. While it doesn't include benefits and needs to take into account seniority, the changes mean that contract faculty in that province are going to be making considerably more money per class than they did previously. One college in Ottawa, Algonquin, estimates that the cost to implement Bill 148 will require an additional 25 million dollars to the annual instructional budget.

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***Negotiations Reports will no longer be provided in News to Use. A Detailed Negotiations Update will be provided, in camera, at the upcoming Annual General Meeting.***

Friday, May 11, 9:30 – 1:00, MRFA AGM, Lincoln Park Room

The agenda package will be emailed to members on April 27.

## Strike/Lockout Preparedness – Considerations for Individual Members

### –Brenda Lang, MRFA Communications Officer

Because we are in a new bargaining environment, it's important to be appropriately prepared for outcomes not possible under the Post-Secondary Learning Act between 2003 and 2017: strike or lockout. The 2018 round of bargaining is ongoing and this is not to suggest this round will result in either of these outcomes. The goal is always to achieve a good collective agreement at the table; however, it is prudent to be prepared for these eventualities.

The Faculty Association has been working on our collective preparedness plans since before the change in labour relations legislation in May 2017, including with respect to financial preparedness and resources for providing strike pay. Members should also consider their own individual circumstances. The following are tips for members to consider as part of a personal strike/lockout preparedness plan:

- . Reserve fund: Financial planners recommend six weeks to three months income as an appropriate reserve for unionized workers. This is even more important in dual-income households where both earners are unionized workers.
- . Mortgage or rent payments: You may be able to arrange a payment plan with your mortgage lender or landlord for the duration of a strike or lockout, if you'll be unable to meet your current payment obligations.
- . Utilities & insurance payments: Utilities and insurance companies are often willing to spread out payments.
- . Dental/vision appointments & prescriptions: Make your dental/vision appointments and fill your prescriptions ahead of the strike/lockout.
- . Property taxes: You may be able to defer payments (if on a payment plan) or to make payments ahead of time (if taxes are normally paid in a lump sum).
- . Budget: Be aware of monthly expenses and reduce non-essential spending. Reduce credit card debt in advance and don't rely on credit cards to finance essential purchases during a strike or lockout; arrange for a line of credit, which has a much lower interest rate.
- . Non-perishable foods: Stock up on pantry and freezer items in advance.
- . Home/car maintenance: Arrange for any necessary maintenance or repairs; put off whatever repairs are non-essential.
- . Stress reduction:
  - . Keep active (go for a walk)
  - . Eat healthily
  - . Get enough sleep
  - . Enhance your social support system

The MRFA has an approved strike pay policy, and will have a job action plan in place to help ensure appropriate resources and supports for members in the event of job action.

## What Does It Mean for the MRFA to be a Union? — Kit Dobson



Kit Dobson,  
English and Languages

In 2015, the Supreme Court of Canada found that the right to strike is constitutionally protected under the freedom of association. One result of that decision is the set of revisions contained in Alberta's Bill 7, An Act to Enhance Post-Secondary Academic Bargaining, which went into effect on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017. This Act revised the Labour Relations Code to include academic workers and affirms the right to strike for post-secondary bargaining units. This Act, at least as I understand it – and I seem to be far from alone in this understanding – renders the MRFA and all faculty associations in the province into full-fledged trade unions. What does this change mean for our Association?

In my view, this change will mean what our members want it to mean. I was, personally, somewhat surprised by the change, which effectively rendered all faculty associations in the province into unions overnight. I had expected something more drawn out: perhaps a membership drive, card signing, and ratification vote – or something of that nature. Had the MRFA had to go down that path, our members would have had a fulsome opportunity to discuss what sort of organization we would like to be under the new legislation. Instead, well, here we are.

Do not mistake me, however: I support the change. Not only is it constitutional. It also renders obsolete the previous legislative requirement that our Collective Agreement be referred to binding arbitration in the event that no agreement can be achieved. Instead, the Association will have more options in the event of serious challenges at the bargaining

table: arbitration will remain a possibility, but so will other forms of enhanced labour action, up to and including the possibility of a strike. I have no desire to strike, but increasing the Association's flexibility seems to me to be a good thing.

At the same time, however, the Administration will have more options: in addition to the possibility of arbitration or facing a strike, they could choose to lock out the Association in the event that an agreement cannot be reached. There are complex mechanisms involved in triggering either a strike or a lock-out, but those are now possibilities. The Association should take these possibilities seriously, and the increased flexibility on both sides of the negotiations table should, ideally, compel both parties to negotiate in good faith.

In other provinces, some faculty associations have chosen to be unions, while others are sole bargaining agents without the right to strike. In my own previous experience, unions offer strong – stronger – protections for their members, but it will very much be up to us to determine how we wish to proceed. The MRFA has become a full member of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), and we now have access to the CAUT strike and defense fund. The possibilities of gaining cross-sector labour solidarity might go further: should the MRFA, for instance, develop a relationship with the Alberta Federation of Labour, which has already been discussed on campus? What about the Canadian Labour Congress? What sorts of connections might the MRFA develop with a union like the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which represents academic faculty and staff at many universities in the country? These are all, I believe, things that we should explore.



## What Does It Mean for the MRFA to be a Union? (Continued)

When I was working on my PhD, I served as the Chief Steward of CUPE local 3902, the union that continues to represent teaching assistants and sessional employees at the University of Toronto (it has grown now to over 9,000 members). I was actively involved in the labour drive to organize sessional employees there, knocking on doors and getting employees to sign union cards. I subsequently played a role in organizing the ratification process. I also served on our negotiations committee. My experience with CUPE was that engaging in a meaningful, strong, vibrant form of labour organizing had the potential to enhance members' lives.

Labour organizing with CUPE implied – and it could imply for the MRFA, too – reciprocal relationships with other labour organizations, for instance with solidarity picketing and other forms of strike support (our Executive already engages in some of these). When I served as the Communications Officer for the MRFA, early in my time at MRU, I was among those who were involved in establishing our Advocacy Committee, and that group could,

in the future, play an enhanced role in developing such reciprocal relationships with our sibling labour organizations either inside or outside of the academic sector. It is common practice for unions to maintain Political Action Committees for precisely such a purpose.

I share some of my previous experiences because they taught me more about what the world of organized labour looks like. I also share those experiences in a spirit of asking MRFA members to think about the significance of having become a union. We might decide as a united Faculty Association to step more fully into the world of organized labour. I support our doing so. Or we might continue on much as we have, because, as our President Marc Schroeder has noted, the MRFA already behaves like a union in many respects. What a union looks like, however, is not set in stone; each union, each local, is different. What a union looks like and how it acts is determined by its membership. It's up to us to decide how we want to go forward.

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## What Might Next Year's Provincial Election Have in Store for ABPSE?

— Michael Truscello

The Alberta United Conservative Party currently holds about a 13 percent lead over the NDP in the polls. By most measures, the UCP are favoured to win the next provincial election; however, much can happen before the next provincial election. It is worth considering the UCP education policies, before we break for summer. When we return in September, we won't have much time to make our case before Albertans, repeatedly and effectively, to defend public education in this province.

In January, the UCP circulated a draft policy framework that included a call to return to the flat tax, a move that would unquestionably lead to public sector cuts, and which runs counter to the kind of progressive taxation the province needs to provide sustainable public-sector funding for an accessible and just higher education system. The draft policy also championed several changes to higher education:

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## What Might Next Year's Provincial Election Have in Store for ABPSE?

### (Continued)

- Aligning program funding to anticipated skill demand.
- Various points on trades, including the development of apprenticeship programs.
- Expanding research funding through private-sector partnerships.
- Greater financial aid for low income students, along with the use of Open Educational resources.

"Require publicly funded post-secondary institutions to implement a policy guaranteeing the freedom of speech and freedom of assembly of all students and staff on campus."

The collective impact of these policies clearly aims to increase the privatization of the universities, an experiment that has already contributed to less freedom for researchers in Canada and elsewhere, and more expensive tuition for students; and in the case of Alberta this means doubling down on the oil industry, an industry at odds with climate science and the necessary decarbonization of the economy. By connecting university funding with "anticipated skill demand," the UCP obviously intends to eviscerate the Arts and Social Sciences. Already, the neoliberalization of SSHRC has created incentives that reproduce the instrumentalization of higher education. The UCP would only accelerate that tendency.

The "greater financial aid for low income students" means little when tuition will soar because of reduced funding for universities, and Alberta is already the most expensive province for low income students to attend univer-

sity in Canada. The other part of the UCP agenda includes increasing provincial funding for students at private schools. Taken together, these education policies will likely increase the gap between the rich and everyone else in Alberta, a gap that is already the most substantial in Canada.

The last point about "freedom of speech" is an obvious dog whistle to far right conservatives who believe there is a crisis of free speech on campuses they do not attend. The fake free speech crisis is a tactic that far-right groups in the US openly admit using to justify on-campus "debates" about ideologies long ago debunked, refuted, and even defeated in a world war. If this redundant "policy" proposed by the UCP were publicized as necessary, it would likely escalate the normalization of racist and fascist ideologies currently storming US campuses.

When we return in September, we must begin almost immediately promoting the values voted on by the members of the MRFA: a higher education system that is accessible and funded sustainably. This means each member of the MRFA must become an advocate for public education in Alberta. A UCP government, which seems likely at this point, will foster far-right policies intended to defund the public sector, increase the power of the corporate sector, and create more space on campus for extreme right ideologies.

<https://www.thegatewayonline.ca/2018/01/ndp-and-ucp-clash-over-post/>