

Advocacy Matters: Faculty Salaries in Alberta

Sunday, February 6, 2022

Advocacy Matters is a semi-regular feature of the Weekly Bulletin. At least once a month, the MRFA Advocacy Committee will share a short article that focuses on a PSE advocacy-related issue. This year, installments are focusing especially on the Alberta government's plan for transforming PSE: Alberta 2030.

Last semester, installments of *Advocacy Matters* began unpacking the *Alberta 2030* project to thoroughly transform public post-secondary education in Alberta. Following an overview, our focus was particularly on [changes to PSE governance](#) heralded by *Bill 74*, now proclaimed as of December 2021. For this installment—especially with labour unrest [becoming acute](#) at multiple universities across the province—we shift our focus to take a closer look at faculty salaries in Alberta. There is reliable national data on full-time academic staff salaries and how they compare between institutions and provinces. In short, Alberta's faculty are paid below the national average, and, after multiple years of taking 0% increases that represent cuts in real income, they are falling farther behind the rest of the country.

To force PSE's ongoing [reconfiguration](#), the provincial government's most powerful levers are [austerity](#) coupled with [performance-based funding](#). The former, rolling out over three consecutive budgets and counting, leaves institutions [on-track](#) for an unprecedented 20% cut in government-funded operating expenses by 2023-24; more than 30% per full-load-equivalent student, accounting for inflation and enrolment growth. Thankfully, there is growing awareness, [including among MRU students](#), that skyrocketing tuition (7% per year on average and higher in some cases) and demands for faculty and staff to accept wage concessions have the same underlying cause: deep cuts to public operating funding. In other words, people are coming to understand a key point: students, their families, faculty, and staff are in all cases being asked to subsidize PSE cuts.

Alberta's Advanced Education Minister, citing the government's 2019 [MacKinnon Report](#) on Alberta's finances, claims that the problem is overspending and therefore that the goal must be to bring Alberta's spending in line with comparator provinces. Neither the full set of data used to reach these conclusions nor the \$3.7M *Alberta 2030* report on PSE delivered by private sector consultancy McKinsey & Co. have been publicly released. [By contrast](#), independent, publicly available examinations of the government's claims about PSE spending have concluded that Alberta does not overspend on its university system compared to comparator jurisdictions (Alberta *does* spend more to maintain its system of smaller colleges, many of which are located in rural communities, but the province's decisions to build and support a college system represent a choice that others have argued provides significant benefits—in any case it does not bear on the data presented below).

Beyond the above, and specifically concerning faculty compensation, we can turn to Statistics Canada data. The agency tracks full-time university academic staff salary data using information it collects annually as part of its [UCASS](#) system. The data set is compiled from actual employment and compensation data pulled directly from Canada's universities. Contract academic staff data is not currently tracked, although it should be and there has been continuing political advocacy on this front, with some forward progress made. This advocacy has also pushed for more comprehensive equity-related data collection. UCASS data is not directly downloadable from Stats Can's public website, but the MRFA has access to the data set through its membership in the Canadian Association of University Teachers.

For 2019-2020, the most recent year for which complete UCASS data is currently available, the average full-time academic staff salary at Alberta's public universities averaged 2.5% (\$3,434) *below* the Canadian average for a full-time university faculty member (these averages exclude members of the academic staff who also hold senior administrative positions, and they do not include faculty appointed within medical or dental schools—these groups are categorized distinctly within UCASS).

This shortfall represents a widening gap for Alberta: in 2018-2019 Alberta salaries were 1.6% below the Canadian average, which has kept pace more closely with inflation (the number of full-time Alberta faculty also contracted slightly in 2019-2020). We can expect that the pay gap will continue to grow as 2020-round collective bargaining drags on across the province, and certainly if Alberta faculty accept the employer-side wage demands currently being sought at bargaining tables across the province.

Interestingly, although Alberta comprises roughly 11.6% of the Canadian population, it is home to just 10.2% of its full-time academic staff. As faculty at Mount Royal know, just maintaining our full-time complement size has become an increasing struggle even as our enrolments have continued to rise, whereas the majority of our credit instruction is carried out by colleagues on contract appointments.

In sum, in Alberta a relatively smaller cohort of full-time faculty is receiving collectively lower salaries, all while many institutions, like ours, continue to make heavy use of exploitative precarious employment practices. This disparity is compounded by our province's high cost of living, with very high rates of annual inflation that tend to exceed the Canadian average by a considerable margin.

Over the coming days, faculty can expect once again to encounter government and employer narratives that still more spending restraint is required, given Alberta's "fiscal realities" (actually political choices to impose austerity on Alberta PSE). However, Alberta faculty can be confident that Alberta's level of spending on academic staff salaries is *not* at the root of problems our institutions face. Indeed, according to MRU's own audited financial statements, its spending on the instruction function (i.e., spending that occurs within faculties, a large part of which represents MRU's spending on faculty pay and benefits, although not exclusively so) has been falling steadily since 2013-2014,

from 44.7% as a proportion of operating revenues down to 39.1% in 2020-2021, even as enrolments and workloads have steadily grown. Faculty compensation may not be the problem or inefficiency it has been made out to be, but exerting downward pressure on faculty salaries plays a useful political function within an austerity agenda. This continuing pressure has also allowed the University to further its explicitly stated goal to increase revenue through higher enrolments without increasing instructional costs, thus allowing the University to continue to divert resources to other initiatives.

Whether the government and our employer are aware of the implications of the UCASS data or not, the government's [secret](#) employer [bargaining mandates](#) are not in place by accident.

If you have ideas about advocacy-related topics that you'd like to see us dig into, including issues related to the *Alberta 2030* initiative, please don't hesitate to contact the Advocacy Committee via facultyrelations@mrfa.net.