

# CUASA COMMUNIQUÉ

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## Excellence at Carleton

*by Arnd Bohm, President/CUASA*

Many unfounded myths circulate about unions. One is that somehow unions protect shoddy work and shield careless workers. A moment's reflection should dispell any such notion. Ever since the medieval guilds, the quality of the product has been a high priority of organized labour. The primary reason is obvious: in the long run there will be no market for poor or low quality products (as the Big Three automakers have now learned the hard way). Workers have an essential stake in defending the standards of excellence.

Here at Carleton maintaining the quality of teaching and research is enshrined in the Collective Agreement (Articles 15.2, 15.3, 15.4 and 15.5 are key). The goal of excellence is made explicit in the Preamble of the Collective Agreement:

The goal of the University is the attainment of the highest possible standards of academic excellence in the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge, to be achieved principally through teaching, scholarship/research and community service. The parties agree to cooperate in the promotion and enhancement of the University and to encourage a climate of freedom, responsibility and mutual respect in the pursuit of these goals.

This is clear and admits no compromise. Any attempt to achieve lesser goals at the expense of academic excellence, such as making money or appeasing the electorate, is not worthy of us. CUASA rejects attempts by the administration to coerce us into lowering our academic standards: that may be possible elsewhere, but not at Carleton.

## The long and winding road to DFW bullying

*by Pat Finn, Executive Director/CUASA*

When I went to High School, graduation from grade 13 was via provincially set examinations. Ontario Scholars were those who achieved grades of 80% or higher. Typically, only a few such grades were awarded. A really good school might have 6-10 such scholars. My High School had only one. While I entered the work force, he came to Carleton and flunked out. When I was hired by Carleton in 1967 with an annual starting salary of \$3,000.00 it seemed important to maximize that sum by taking advantage of free tuition. Even though Carleton would not have admitted me on the basis of my grades, as I had been working, I was allowed to "prove myself" by registering as a Special Student in one course. Taking courses at Carleton was a joy compared to the 'memorize and regurgitate' high school regimen and I was encouraged and, frankly, amazed to find that I had the top grade in the course for my first essay. In those days Carleton was known as "easy in – hard out".

People like me and Eric Sprott (yes, *the* Sprott of the Sprott School of Business) -- who publicly stated that he is glad he went to Carleton when it was "Last Chance U" because he would not have got into any other university -- benefitted from Carleton's willingness to give us a chance. We appreciated the opportunity and worked hard. It is true that not everyone given the opportunity was successful but then, not all Ontario Scholars were successful either. Beyond giving us a chance, Carleton's admission policy served the entire high school and university system well. High School teachers could stand against grade inflation demands from parents by assuring them that their child could apply to Carleton. Other universities were, as a result, able to ensure that their admission intake was sequestered to the best and the brightest defined by high school grades that were not subject to extreme inflation pressures.

Unfortunately, a concurrence of events starting with increasing derision aimed at Carleton that moved our reputation from "easy in – hard out" to "LCU", a desire to teach "better" qualified students, and government demands to increase retention rates resulted in high school grade inflation leading to an intake of students with excellent grades that may not necessarily be a true rendering of only the student's own efforts. Some students armed with such grades arrive with an attitude of assurance about their success at university. Should that assumption be brought up short by lower grades, they are caught off guard. A new wrinkle CUASA has seen develop over the last couple of years is that of parental complaints on behalf of students with lower grades than anticipated.

Government directives now issued to universities on increasing retention rates and moving students through university in a timely manner have funding implications. This shift is behind the wave hitting instructors of record who are now required to account to their Dean for DFW rates of 30% or higher in their courses. CUASA is receiving numerous complaints of bullying with respect to keeping up retention rates, justifying low grades (**D**) and failures (**F**), and withdrawals (**W**) from the course.

As Carol Miles pointed out in her "Ghost Whisper" article (Faculty Wave/Winter 2008), some students register in the course and never show up. How an instructor is supposed to intervene in such cases remains a mystery but one you will have to explain to your Dean. Carol's advice is that you keep "your own records of these "ghost" students (that) will allow you to determine an accurate DFW rate for your course that includes only those students who are actively attempting to complete it".

But that leaves open an interesting question. Since the grades are "owned" by Carleton University and not the individual instructor of record who signs the FGR form, the Chair/Director, Dean and VP (Academic) all have the power to alter the grades as they see fit. If the instructor of record is satisfied with the grades and the Dean does not like them, then why doesn't the Dean simply change them to something deemed more appropriate? Why are members called in and subjected to an inquisition and demands to "justify" their grades. The implication is that somehow the instructor has failed, rather than the student.

The most recent round of cases and the detailed explanations we have seen indicate that members are working very hard to achieve lower DFW rates but the member cannot do that alone. A student must be engaged in the process and where they, for whatever reason, have opted out, they simply cannot be forced to engage.

If we are now admitting "better" students, why is DFW even an issue? Why is passing failing students to the next level, where they will have every likelihood of failure something we would even tolerate? Is this even an option for those departments/schools that have the additional burden of meeting outside accreditation standards? Thankfully, we don't have Medicine; but, we do have Engineering and Architecture. Some of us still remember the failure of the original Heron Road Bridge, spanning the canal and Rideau River just down Colonel By, and the deaths that resulted. There are consequences to certifying a sub-standard product.

Perhaps that is why the Deans are requiring the justification before they simply move to alter the grades. Who knows? But it all adds to the increase in workload related to teaching at a time when the institution is positioning itself to even greater research achievements.

Members have the choice of justifying their DFW rates to the Dean's satisfaction after which, the Dean may or may not alter the grades, or of responding that their grades are appropriate and require no discussion as the Dean has the power to alter them in any event. The choice may well be easier to make later in a career and harder for those on preliminary or term appointments. For those who decide to justify, CUASA is on hand to assist and go with you to such meetings..



## DFW and Harassment of CUASA members

*by Gerald de Montigny, CUASA Grievance Chair*

Should you be called to a meeting concerning DFW rates you have the right to be accompanied by a CUASA representative.

This guide has been developed by CUASA to assist members.

CUASA's position on the issue is primarily informed by Articles 1, 4 and 15 of the Collective Agreement and by the following principles:

- ▶ CUASA supports the academic freedom of its members.
- ▶ CUASA views the development, outline, organization, and teaching of courses to be an expression of that academic freedom.
- ▶ CUASA supports the right of members as scholars, researchers, and experts in their respective fields to determine the best way to fulfill Calendar Course Descriptions through the structuring of course content and assignments.
- ▶ CUASA recognizes and supports its members professional commitments to scholarship and academic integrity.
- ▶ CUASA believes that scholarship and academic integrity take precedence over all other concerns.

Accordingly CUASA advises its members to safeguard their academic freedom, and the academic integrity of their courses by ensuring that they set in place a documentary record that demonstrates fulfillment of academic and scholarly tasks and objectives. A primary means for achieving this is through the development of a well organized and clearly set out course outline. CUASA recommends that course outlines set out the following:

- ▶ Calendar description combined with clear specification of course objectives;
- ▶ Expectations of the students for successful completion of the course;
- ▶ Grading criteria and specification of the relationship between numeric values and assigned grades;
- ▶ Deadlines for assignments;
- ▶ Development of assignments that allow for early and regular assessment of student progress through the term of course delivery;
- ▶ List office hours, and other relevant contact information;
- ▶ Include relevant statements of information concerning plagiarism policies, health services, referral to Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities, etc.

During the term

- ▶ Monitor students' progress through grading of regular assignments through the course term(s).
- ▶ Maintain regular weekly office hours for each course of instruction.
- ▶ Record every student visit during office hours and all referrals you might make on behalf of a student for outside assistance.
- ▶ If you have Teaching Assistants, ensure that they are conducting their assigned duties.
- ▶ When returning graded assignments, remind students that if they are concerned about their grade or progress in the course that they should book an appointment with you during your office hours.
- ▶ In addition, consider retaining all student e-mails in an electronic folder for each course.

At the end of term be prepared to:

- ▶ Produce a documentary record which allows you to justify your grades should you be asked;
- ▶ Present the course outline which indicates criteria for grading;
- ▶ Provide a numeric or letter value assigned for each course assignment;
- ▶ Provide a cumulative letter or numeric grade resulting in a final assigned grade;
- ▶ Provide a record of office hours and a list of students explanation of interventions taken during the term and the results of your actions.

Remember that, as student grades belong to Carleton University, it is the Dean who has responsibility for submitting them for approval. This includes the right to change any grades.

To Repeat:

You are entitled to have a CUASA representative in attendance at any meeting called to discuss the assigned grades.

Should the employer propose to take any action against the member, the member has a right to CUASA's assistance, which may include a formal grievance.

## Initiative to Identify and Improve Course Sections with Low Success Rate

*by Feridun Hamdullahpur.  
Provost and Vice President Academic (Interim), Carleton University*

The Section Level Success Rate initiative attempts to identify the sections with low success rate (defined as grades of C- and below) and hence high rates of D, F and also withdrawals. We would like to work together with EDC, Deans, Chairs, Directors and faculty to explore ways, without compromising quality and learning objectives, to improve student success in these course sections. For these sections the initiative has the goal of identifying:

1. Benchmark DFW rates for identifying sections at risk.
2. The sources of the low success rates in these sections.
3. Remedial actions related to improvement in:
  - a. Course design and delivery
  - b. Student support
  - c. Instructor support
4. A process that can be followed on an operational basis to implement these actions.