

The Educator



President's Column

By Darryl Bedford

A Surprise from the CEC: Or was it?

In February OPSEU received an early contract offer from the College Employer Council (CEC). This offer was several months early, months before bargaining could officially begin on July 2.

The CEC offer would have done nothing to address issues experienced by Counsellors and Librarians, the issues being experienced at other colleges, nor any issues resulting from the pandemic.

After extensive consultation with the 24 union local presidents and the Bargaining Advisory Committee (BAC), our elected CAAT-A Bargaining Team decided to not accept the CEC offer and instead proceed with the normal process of bargaining.

The early CEC offer was seen as a surprise. *But was it really?*

The CEC has never been keen on actually engaging in the process of bargaining. What better way to rid themselves of a burdensome task than to propose that we not bargain at all?

Trepidation is Normal

You might be thinking "should we not give the CEC offer more consideration in the interests of having some certainty?"

Collective bargaining at any time is difficult. We never go into a round of negotiations and think it is going to be easy.

After every decision, we constantly ask ourselves as union leaders: did we do the right thing for our members?

It is normal to have a sense of trepidation. We feel it too. What I will say to you is that you have a team of elected colleagues who are sworn to look out for your best interests.

Fanshawe can afford Fairness

For the year ending March 31, 2021, Fanshawe College will declare a \$2.9 million surplus. Now if you would have told me a year ago that Fanshawe would go through one year of a global pandemic and still declare a surplus, I would at least owe you a coffee. That is even after committing \$5 million to the construction of new HR, finance, and administration offices, this year's share of the \$55 million Innovation Village, and a few other projects.

Fanshawe is not broke. Between the other colleges who are also on a strong footing, other colleges were given money from the province to get by.

It is not the best of times but the parties can reach an agreement that is fair.

The Work of the Union Continues

In the last issue of *The Educator*, we profiled how the union was working the time of COVID. That work continues.

We advocated for college faculty who are teaching in-person to be included in Ontario's Stage 2 Vaccination Plan. We've advocated that the 2 hours per week that Fanshawe College added to SWFs be returned, or in the alternative, include 1 hour per week. Both offers were denied.

Regardless of whether you are teaching in-person or online, we recognize the unique stresses you are under. That is why our work continues.

Stay Connected and Have Your Say

As always, you can reach us at union@opseu110.ca

We also invite you to join our Zoom Coffee Chats on Fridays at noon. Feel free to ask questions, raise concerns, or simply vent. We are here to listen.



WHO MOVED THE CHEESE?

by Sarah Ashkanase

“It would all be so easy if you had a map to the Maze. If the same old routines worked. If they’d just stop moving “The Cheese.” But things keep changing”(Johnson, 2002).

At the recommendation of my aunt, I recently picked up the book “Who Moved My Cheese?” by Spender Johnson, M.D. This book is about learning to overcome fear while navigating major life changes with grace. LifeClub offers a summary here:

<https://lifecub.org/books/who-moved-my-cheese-dr-spencer-johnson-review-summary>

So why am I sharing this?

Now that we are past the 1-year mark of the pandemic I cannot help but reflect on how the continued uncertainty can be utterly paralyzing at times...and now, we are moving into bargaining.

With the realities of the 2017 strike still clear in the rear-view mirror paired with the knowledge that people close to me have lost their employment, the FEAR is real. I feel this urgency to resolve bargaining and to create some security wherever I can. I recognize the demands of the virtual world have increased my workload and I also don’t want to appear ungrateful because, well, I still have a

job. From my recent conversations with members, I get the sense that this internal tension is a common experience.

Here's the thing with fear: it has the potential to defeat us before we even have a chance to get started. When I put the fear aside, I remember that fear exists to help protect us. It alerts us to potential danger and prepares us to deal with whatever lies ahead. It is *very* natural to feel afraid and it offers some internal wisdom to proceed with caution.

But in the end, the only way through the fear, is to move through it.

Ok...but what does this have to do with me?

Our collective agreement applies to all colleges across Ontario, and not all colleges are making the same kinds of decisions Fanshawe is making. Some colleges are making choices that include more precarious work and even the privatization of work. These are concerning trends that can impact all colleges if we do not address these issues now. We are visualizing less precarious work, protecting academic freedoms, and ideally no privatization of work (amongst other things).

Change is inevitable. Fear often accompanies change. These unprecedented times have already proven you have the capacity to adapt. So what do you want to adapt to?

Stand with us, lean into the discomfort of it all, and trust the (bargaining) process.

We are not the ones trying to 'move the cheese', we are trying to protect the cheese we have and locate new cheese that will better serve our members for years to come (while also considering our current context in the maze).



Darkest before the Dawn

by Jennifer Boswell

Dear colleagues and friends: I was supposed to write an update of my October Educator article "Taking the Pulse" in which I polled a number of faculty coworkers and some support staff about how they were handling the sixth month of the pandemic. Results were mixed: good, bad, and ugly. The conclusion was that it was normal to 'hit the wall' at six months, but soon our ability to handle the situation would improve and we would get to the other side.

But I can't do the update article I was asked to do. Why? Because no one is talking.

It seems to me in the terse interactions I do have with coworkers and friends that people have truly entered lockdown—but now it's verbal as well as physical. Good friends can still cackle about the odd funny thing, but if asked 'how are you doing?', the non-answer prevails. People seem grim, hunkered down, doing whatever they have to do to get through the day and no more. We no longer have the bandwidth for entirely social interactions. Texts go unanswered for days; calls are rare and definitely prescheduled and sometimes postponed with "I just don't feel like talking today. Catch you in a day or two".

News reports say that student morale is at an all time low. Yes—and so is teacher morale. The news is filled with anti-teacher sentiment. Early spring is typically a hard time for college professors in any case. Now that we are past the year anniversary of this dangerous global pandemic, this Spring 2021 may go down as the darkest one ever.

Limits to Self-Care

But what can be done? Fanshawe has considerately offered mental health and resilience learning and sessions through the Fanshawelearns, for which I and many others are grateful. However, we realize that it's the situation that is depleting and terrible, not our unsuccessful attempts to deal with it. All attempts at mindfulness and stress reduction and self care are aimed at one thing: trying to change us, the people, rather than trying to ameliorate or change the conditions we have landed in. Faculty workload, already high, has increased. Hours of work and teaching difficulties have increased still more. Autonomous self-care attempts try to get us to accept what our bodies and minds are finding ever more intolerable.

During an emergency, various systems of our body kick in to help us manage extreme stress and deal with the situation. But it's been over a year now. Those protective and helpful emergency systems have been long depleted and we are running on empty.

Not Asking for Help

I recently attended the Homewood Employee and Family Assistance Plan (EFAP) report for the year 2020. While protecting confidentiality, details on number and types of contact the plan had for the year are disclosed. Surprisingly, reach-outs to EFAP were **down** for 2020, with the numbers being the lowest for program access in the last 4 years! When I asked if Homewood is expecting an increase after a return to 'normal', the person exclaimed "oh yes!" She went on to say that people are experiencing trauma right now; this past year people have lost loved ones, missed events and important celebrations, and experienced substantial life disruptions and changes of all types. Once everyone has a "chance to breathe," as she put it, a large increase in help needed is expected.

These low EFAP figures and the belief of those in the counselling professions about future fallout seem to prove the point that we are white-knuckling it through these times without seeking much outside help. We're just getting through it for now, and we'll tally up the damage at the end.

Third Quarter Syndrome

A March 2021 *Time* magazine article by Tara Law discusses a phenomenon called "third quarter syndrome": this (still theoretical) syndrome refers to negative mood and behavior shifts when people

are coming toward the end of a long period of isolation. The syndrome has been observed in polar researchers, submariners, and people who have been on simulated Mars missions of various lengths, among others. Common to all these people are long periods of isolation in extreme settings. Insecurity, anxiety, mental fatigue, and irritation rise towards the end of the isolating period. The projects become more difficult three quarters of the way through, seeming to illustrate the maxim "it's darkest before the dawn."

The *Time* article makes the link to our society being at the three-quarter mark of the COVID pandemic since vaccines are rolling out. Despite the hope that we are almost at the end of our long isolation and difficult work and personal experiences, new psychological hurdles are arising, seemingly paradoxically. If we're almost there, why does the situation seem especially difficult now? Well, we may be experiencing third-quarter syndrome.

Focus on the Goal

The subjects who experienced third quarter syndrome noted that focusing on the larger project goal or mission helped them cope towards the end. For us, as individuals, this would be continuing to follow health regulations to reduce the spread of the virus and keep people from becoming ill, despite pandemic fatigue and the allure of warmer weather. As faculty, our goal is to continue to help our students succeed in our courses, complete their programs, and get on with their lives.

Despite the darkness we may be experiencing now, the dawn will be beautiful. And help is standing by.

***President's Last Word: Microcredentials* by Darryl Bedford**



Microcredentials: Good, Bad, or Indifferent?

What?

You may have heard a lot about microcredentials. But what are they really? I heard this definition once: "a microcredential is less than one learning outcome." That definition sounds just plain odd.

In search of a better definition, perhaps for now we can use this one from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO): "A microcredential is a representation of learning, awarded for completion of a short program that is focused on a discrete set of competencies (i.e., skills, knowledge, attributes), and is sometimes related to other credentials."

The Hottest Thing

One could be excused for thinking that microcredentials are the "flavour of the month." According to HEQCO, since early 2020 the Ontario government has dedicated close to \$60 million to its microcredential strategy. Part of the strategy is eligibility for OSAP student loans. Apparently, more funding has flowed to microcredentials than even Colleges Ontario had been hoping for.

Mind you, much of this funding was allocated even before government agencies such as HEQCO developed a definition for what microcredential even is.

Who?

Besides the obvious push from the Ontario government, HEQCO is joining forces in its research project with the Business and Higher Education Roundtable (BHER). You'll recognize some familiar names leading BHER, notably David McKay (CEO of RBC), Meric Gertler (President of the University of Toronto), and Anne Sado (President of George Brown College).

Why?

If you catch key people in private conversation, odds are they will tell you that the thinking behind the microcredential push is that colleges and universities are not adequately preparing workers for the workforce.

Can microcredentials be good?

I've heard there are slices of the community that have created microcredentials for the greater good. Whether it be learning about Indigenous history and struggles, or improving the prospects of non-profit organizations, we should consider where they might be useful.

Ontario's public colleges have much experience supporting workers throughout their careers. There are continuing education courses and programs and postgraduate programs to name just two avenues. Traditional credentials give students a widely recognized and transferable platform for further education, microcredentials do not.

Colleges already have significant connections to the industry through Program Advisory Committees. It would be natural to think that faculty at public colleges could take the microcredential concept and improve it, if given the chance to do so.

What are the downsides?

Traditional credentials (degrees, diplomas, and certificates) give students well-rounded preparation for a career, not just for a specific, corporate-determined job skill. Traditional credentials prepare students for a variety of job possibilities, whereas microcredentials do not.

One immediate danger is a loss of a *well-rounded education* for students. Goodbye general education? Goodbye essential employability (reading, writing, speaking, math, interpersonal) skills as part of a diploma or degree? And hello quick bursts of one vocational skill that leads students to their next precarious gig? The path to improving the economy is not by increasing precarity in the workforce. Our graduates deserve education in a range of skills and through that they will become adaptable and flexible.

There is the risk that private corporations will exert *undue influence* on the public system. One way they can do this is by taking their training materials and converting them to microcredentials. This is exactly the sort of concern that OPSEU/SEFPO had with the deal between McDonald's and Colleges Ontario.

Following on that, the Union is concerned about *privatization by stealth* of the system. Can the work of developing and delivering these microcredentials be outsourced? Particularly if private companies are developing these modules?

Then there is the reverse of privatization, the *transfer of responsibility for corporate training to the public sector*. If you are a corporation, what better way to cut costs than to pass your training costs to taxpayers? Or let the students pay (and assume more OSAP debt in the process)?

What's next?

Microcredentials are gaining too much steam for us as faculty to ignore. The first step is to pay attention to what is going on. The next step is to advocate. You've heard us say this before: by joining together as faculty, we can make a difference for our profession and for our students. And we join together through our union.

At this point, let's switch to a different definition for microcredentials. How about this one from SUNY (State University of New York)?

- verify, validate and attest that specific skills and/or competencies have been achieved;
- are endorsed by the issuing institution;
- having been developed through established faculty governance processes; and
- are designed to be meaningful and high quality.

Now that is more like it. As you can see, to get there we need *shared governance* in the colleges. We need a focus on *quality*.

And especially if we are to get there, we need *you* to be involved. It's at the bargaining table where we represent your concerns and advocate for our profession.

What concerns do you have? Have you been asked to develop them? How is it going? We welcome your feedback at union@opseu110.ca

--Darryl Bedford

(with thanks to Kevin MacKay, Local 240)