

OPSEU Local 653 – General Membership Meeting

Union College Committee (UCC) Annual Report

In these reports I try to highlight the most significant issues that were discussed at UCC during the previous year.

Automated courses

During the strike we became aware of some courses in the business program that were being completed by students despite the work stoppage and despite the fact that these courses were assigned to a full-time faculty member. The faculty member was not actively teaching during the strike, but rather the course(s) in question were fully automated courses that did not require a professor in order for the students to complete all course requirements, including assessments. Upon further investigation we discovered that not only were automated courses being used in lieu of regular scheduled classes in some programs, but that Northern was launching an entirely new platform, the “Northern College Digital Campus”, that would offer a variety of college credit courses, and even full diploma programs, through automated course delivery (see digital.northernc.on.ca).

To clarify, these automated course have the following features:

- All lessons are pre-recorded in various formats, and there is no teacher/student contact time
- The course will have a ‘facilitator’ who is available to answer questions and provide assistance, but not to teach the students in the typical sense
- All assessments are automatically graded (true/false, multiple choice style)
- No performance assessments are used (Reports, projects, presentations etc...)
- Assessments are not invigilated
- No individual feedback is given to students

The union’s concern with this approach is obvious:

- Clearly this type of course offering, if widely adopted within the college system, would result in far fewer full-time professors being employed.
- Of perhaps greater importance is the erosion of education quality that would result from the widespread adoption of this model.

At the UCC meeting in January, the following questions were asked:

1. Is it the Academic Administration’s belief that automated assessments offer the same depth of evaluation and student growth as hands on/essay/project based assessments?
2. Is it the Academic Administration’s belief that pre-recorded ‘canned’ lessons offer the same quality of student learning as regular contact time with a professor?
3. What concrete evidence do you have that automated courses offer the same level of quality as faculty led courses?
4. What has been done to ensure that the students submitting the work in an automated course are actually the ones doing the work?
5. Is it acceptable for faculty to use a fully automated courses in lieu of the contact time, responsive lesson preparation, project/essay type evaluations, and personalized feedback contemplated by the SWF through which they were assigned the course?

To date there has been more deferment than anything else in response to these questions. Through various meetings, management has claimed:

- That this “digital campus” is aimed primarily at international students, and not domestic students (we are not sure what relevance that has to questions of education quality)
- That the courses meet the College’s “quality criteria”
- That the complete removal of a professor from the delivery of a course is not substantively different from the move from in-class instruction to distance instruction via video
- That feedback from students taking the classes is being monitored to evaluate the quality/success of the courses.

There has been no concrete evidence provided to assure us that these courses deliver the same level of quality as a regular professor-led course. It is our belief that no valid evidence will be provided as it is well established that automated assessments are not equivalent to performance based assessments.

It is disappointing to see yet another initiative from the College that sacrifices education quality and true student learning for easy profits. We will continue to press for responses from management and will explore options for challenging this mode of course delivery.

Strike Aftermath

We tried to receive clarification from management on the following issues that were raised either during the strike or in the aftermath of the Kaplan award:

- We questioned the claim by President Gibbons that the new Academic Freedom language in the collective agreement was little different from the Academic Freedom policy already in place at Northern and many other colleges. We pointed out to management that Northern’s Academic Freedom policy deals exclusively with a professor’s rights and obligations in applied research situations while the new language in the collective agreement states that academic freedom applies in the performance of all a professor’s duties and ties it directly to education quality.
- We asked about the status of the student strike relief fund, specifically how many students applied and how many were granted the \$500. We have been promised an answer by the end of the academic year.
- We questioned President Gibbons’ claim in the media that the reimbursement of student tuition that was imposed by the government would require the college to cut some \$700,000 from planned investments in “classroom technology”. We asked how much money was saved from salaries during the strike and if that could not offset the costs of tuition refunds. The reply was that the purchases had in fact gone through.

Respectfully Submitted,

Neal McNair
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OPSEU Local 653