

No Good Deed Goes Unpunished: Keeping Academic and Labour Relations Distinct in a Unionized Environment.

Douglas M Peers
Dean and Associate Vice-President Graduate



Situation at York (and Canada)



- Large urban university located in Toronto – second largest in Canada
- Approximately 55,000 students of which 5500 are graduate students
- Of the 5500 graduate students, part-time students and students in professional programs are usually not members of the union
 - The remainder – around 3000 – have union membership
- Similar situation elsewhere in Ontario and Canada where graduate students are often members of a union by virtue of TA duties
 - Salaries, terms and conditions of work settled through a collective agreement
- Situation at York is however more complicated
- CUPE 3903:
 - Unit 1 TAs
 - Unit 2 Part-time (Adjunct or Sessionals)
 - Unit 3 GAs
- TAs and Part-Time Instructors are responsible for just over 50% of instructional contact hours
 - Can in effect bring the university to a halt

- York has had a history of labour unrest
 - 1997: 55 day strike by faculty
 - 2000/1: 76 day strike by TAs and part-time instructors
 - 2008/9: 85 day strike by TAs, GAs, and part-time instructors
 - Strikes have also occurred in other Ontario institutions, but there have only been three strikes that have lasted more than a month and all three were at York

Many reasons account for this

- history of activism
- conflation of identities: student and employer
 - has led to competing understandings of the purpose of graduate funding, i.e. 'living wage' vs 'academic support'

Challenges: the Role of the Graduate Dean



- **The primary responsibility of a graduate dean is overseeing academic matters**
 - **Few of us are trained in labour relations**
 - **Labour relations and academic priorities are not always reconciled**
- **At York, I have endeavoured to keep them separate**
 - **Deliberately was not part of the bargaining team**
 - **Enabled me to maintain some distance – an honest broker**
 - **Moreover, I am not a hiring dean, therefore was not the employer**
 - **But it necessitated consultation to ensure that academic objectives did not become sidelined or undermined by labour relations**
 - » **historically this was not always the case**

Challenge: Incompatibilities between Adjuncts and TAs



- **Biggest challenge in many respects is that the interests of adjuncts and TAs are not the same, yet they bargain together**
 - **A constraint on grad students getting teaching as compared to tutorial experience**
 - **Understandably, Unit 2 sought to protect their employment**
 - **Longstanding limit on the number of ‘tickets’ available to graduate students to be the instructor of record for courses**
- **At the same time, our collective agreement puts TAs in a priority pool, giving them six years of funding**
 - **Yet university receives only four years of government funding**
 - **Limits our flexibility in how we can fund PhD students**
 - **Little opportunity to introduce other ways of funding to release students from teaching**
 - » **Impact on times to completion**

Challenge: Distinguishing between 'Work' and Work



- Uniquely, graduate assistants at York were unionized
 - students performing 'work' for compensation are covered in the collective agreement
 - 'clarity clause' recently introduced to differentiate GAs from RAs
 - RAs are where the activity undertaken contributes substantively to the students' own program and meets degree requirements
 - this has meant that much 'work' that is indirectly related to the students research program has to be funded as GA

Challenge: Funding for Work versus Funding for Support



- **Language of funding packages often fails to delineate the expectations and conditions for support from those intended as remuneration for employment**
 - **Funding for support is often couched in terms of ‘satisfactory academic progress’**
 - **But what of funding that is implied as tied to work-related duties**
 - **Case in point is the funding that was promised to students at York during the past two strikes**

Challenge: Times to Completion can become a Labour Relations Matter



- **In a context where the Collective Agreement specifies years of support, any effort to reduce attrition and reduce times to completion can be seen by the Union as an attack on the students' rights as a worker**
 - **Witnessed in efforts to introduce milestones – led to a work to rule campaign**

Contact Information



Douglas M Peers
Dean and Associate Vice President Graduate
York University
4700 Keele St
Toronto, ON
Canada
M3J 1P3

www.yorku.ca/grads

fgsdean@yorku.ca