

Terence P. Smith

Special Counsel for Labor Relations

TO: Diana Vallera
President, Part-time Faculty Association at Columbia (“P-fac”)
RE: Contract Negotiations
DATE: August 4, 2017

Dear Diana:

First, thank you for the introductory bargaining meeting. I was pleased that we agreed on so many concepts regarding bargaining conduct, etc. This will serve our teams well.

You mentioned at the meeting that P-fac is looking to reset its relationship with the college. I think a good start would be to extend the current contract as we begin to negotiate a new one. Please let me know P-fac’s answer. Also, you mentioned that you would be forwarding me a proposal that you had made to Stan, stemming from your last meeting with him, regarding some of the pending disputes and issues. If that is something you would still like to discuss, please send it ahead of next week’s meeting.

As promised, below is an outline of the college’s key bargaining interests. In an overarching sense, the college is mostly interested in ensuring that students will always benefit from the most qualified part-time instructors available. This central interest is embodied in several of the college’s key bargaining objectives.

(1) Assigning courses based on the relative qualifications of all available part-time instructors. To ensure the best possible educational environment for students, the college seeks to remove the tiering restrictions that often prevent it from hiring the *most* qualified part-time instructors available. Unfortunately, the current tiering system creates situations in which the college must assign courses based on the number of credits someone has accumulated, rather than an assessment of relative quality factors such as:

- recent professional work, achievements, and experience relevant to the discipline (aside from teaching);
- current skill and expertise with new technology, contemporary pedagogy, etc.;
- academic credentials;
- past teaching performance; etc.

When departments are prevented from assigning the most qualified available instructor, because a higher tier unit member is available and is—as P-fac says—“minimally qualified” to teach the course, students do not receive the highest possible level of specialized knowledge and expertise (regarding technologies, industry practices, etc.). The college often cannot hire that most qualified instructor at all, given the restraints of tiering and course availability. This does not serve the best interests of the students and the college does not favor this result.

In lieu of tiering, the college is willing to discuss other benefits for part-time instructors, such as opportunities for extended assignments, a process by which part-time instructors can facilitate courses in the new Digital Learning sphere, a different process for summer session assignments, and so on.

(2) Demonstrating qualifications to teach. As an institution of higher learning, the college must continue to assess and be able to demonstrate the qualifications of those who teach. Our accreditor, The Higher Learning Commission, requires the college to ensure through contract negotiations that it can meet all of its obligations. The HLC recently updated its guidance regarding qualifications, and there are two ways to establish qualifications under the guidelines:

- a. **ACADEMIC CREDENTIALS**, e.g., possessing a degree that is relevant to the subject being taught and that is at least one level above the degree level being taught (see the HLC’s guidelines and assumed practices for more detail), or
- b. **TESTED EXPERIENCE**, a breadth and depth of experience *outside the classroom*—in real world situations that are relevant to the discipline being taught—that confers the expertise needed to teach the assigned course.

At a minimum, the college must have transcripts and a current CV on file in order to document each instructor’s background and experience. The college must always be able to make a qualifications case for each part-time instructor, in particular in advance of the 2018 HLC accreditation visit. While assessing and demonstrating qualifications to teach is a management right and an established past practice, the college needs to ensure that nothing in the contract will conflict with or restrict its ability to meet its obligations regarding accreditation.

(3) Improving the evaluation process. The college seeks to improve the process by which it evaluates the performance of part-time instructors, to ensure that students continue to receive the best possible instruction. Without conceding its management right and ongoing need to evaluate employees, the college welcomes P-fac’s input and participation to improve the current evaluation tools and processes.

(4) Allowing any interested part-time instructor to apply to serve on the department curriculum committee. Continuous curriculum development is vital to any institution of higher learning. Having input from the most qualified part-time instructors available will help ensure that the college is providing the best creative education possible, through a curriculum that is always current, intentional, and relevant.

The college, therefore, believes that any Unit Member hired to teach in the upcoming semester should be able to apply to serve on the department curriculum committee. The P-fac union would continue to be able to nominate candidates for consideration as well. This way, the department can appoint the most qualified candidate, whether that be P-fac's nominee or another interested P-fac Unit Member.

I look forward to receiving the union's interest statement. I believe that when negotiating partners take the time to better understand their respective interests, even where disagreements exist, the chances for crafting creative and mutually agreeable solutions improve dramatically.

I also look forward to our next meeting on August 9, when our teams can begin to discuss these and other important topics.