

UMFA President Statement on Bill 31



On March 20, 2017 the Conservative Government introduced a bill that would see tuition in Manitoba increased by over 5%. Below is a copy of the submission made to a legislature committee hearing by UMFA President Janet Morrill, outlining some of the issues with the government's plans.

Bill 31 proposes that universities may increase tuition by the consumer price index plus 5%. There is no question that this will impair the affordability and access to post-secondary education. To provide fewer opportunities for students from low income families than students from higher income families perpetuates inequality. It depresses income growth as debt ridden graduates delay starting families, purchasing homes and setting up households. It deprives society of talent and productivity that these young people could develop and contribute. To suggest that scholarships would fill the gap is simply unfair: students from a low income family must meet the quality hurdle required by the scholarship whereas a student whose family can afford the tuition does not.

There are other, far reaching, negative effects on post-secondary education when tuition is raised. For example, most professors have approximately 10 years of post-secondary education. My tuition was approximately \$600 per year. If tuition is 10 times that, will you have talented students prepared, or even able, to make the kind of investment needed to become the talented professors we need?

In addition to being the president of the University of Manitoba Faculty Association, I am an accounting professor and have studied the finances of universities. I have co-authored reports on the financial results of 18 different Canadian universities, a guide on analyzing university and college financial statements, and an article on university accounting and disclosure practices. I would therefore like to comment the effects of increased tuition fees on university finances and operations. Governments eventually couple tuition increases with decreased block funding to universities. Even if the overall level of funding is the same, the conversion from stable funding to precarious funding has terrible effects. Universities need to chase a fixed number of donation dollars and a relatively fixed number of students, leading to a huge administrative machine to deal with communications, recruiting, advertising, media relations, and solicitation. There seems to also be a tendency to invest scarce resources in cosmetically appealing capital projects to attract those dollars, based on reports from academics that these buildings are expensive, often not very functional, but figure prominently in promotion materials.

Finally, the precariousness of funding makes administrations reluctant to invest in full time, tenure track or continuing positions for professors, instructors and librarians. Instead, they offer casual, term or sessional positions. This is transforming post-secondary education in disastrous ways. Overworked, underpaid professors cannot offer the same quality of education to their students. We are again unlikely to be able to encourage our best students to enter academia when they see a career ahead of them that doesn't include a stable job and an income where they can pay off student loans, much less buy a house, or raise a family. Moreover, because so many of the people teaching in a university have positions that are at risk, there is no real academic freedom which is the cornerstone of a university.

I ask that members of the legislative assembly vote down this bill.

Janet Morrill
President, University of Manitoba Faculty Association

