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If Tuition is Up, Don't Blame Us

Guest Opinion: By Wayne Peters

Recently, the Guardian reported that the Province's Minister of Education, Mildred Dover, indicated that UPEI's 6.5% tuition hike for the current school year was largely due to the "*salary increases in the wake of the university strike by professors earlier this year*". The UPEI Faculty Association wishes to respond to the Minister's reported comments.

In its opinion, the academic staff at UPEI have been about the only thing working to keep tuition down! It is, indeed, unfortunate then that the Minister would make a direct connection between UPEI's rising tuition costs and the recent negotiated settlement. It is clear to the Association and its members that this connection is, at best, an unsubstantiated and unfair one.

In 1998-1999, tuition at UPEI was \$3,310. By 2005-2006, this cost had risen to about \$4,650, an increase of 40%. With the 6.5% increase for this year, tuition is now just under \$5,000, giving an average annual increase since 1998 of about 5.5%. A portion of the increase over this time, of course, simply reflects inflation which rose about 18% over the same period. This was the tuition reality prior to the strike in the spring of 2006 and shows that this year's tuition increase is very much in line with annual increases over the previous decade.

The usual assumption is that tuition costs go up as the University's costs increase. During the period indicated, UPEI's budgeted expenditures (excluding those for the Veterinary College) rose by about 48% after adjusting for inflation. Recognizing that student enrolment increased by about the same amount, 40%, over the same period, this significant increase in costs should come as no surprise. On a per-student basis, though, the University's inflation adjusted costs only went up by 5.7% or about \$609/student in year 2000 dollars, an amount which is very much in line with the annual tuition increases of \$613/student in comparable dollars over the same years.

So, what role did academic staff salaries play in all of this? Adjusted for inflation, UPEI's teaching salary costs per student actually went down during this period which saved the University about \$285 per student or about 6% of the current tuition cost for a full-time student. In the five years prior to the strike, on average, academic staff salaries at UPEI increased by about 2.75% annually. Negotiated salary increases for the 2005-2006 and the 2006-2007 school years were 2.5% and 2.75%, respectively. These are very modest increases, representing significant concessions by the union to allow the University to work within its planning framework for those years. The point, of course, is that these salary increases can hardly be blamed for the current 6.5% tuition increase.

So, what is the problem? In the Association's opinion, the largest single factor is the failure of the provincial government to keep pace with the significant growth of the University. Although provincial transfers to the University in absolute dollars increased substantially over the period in question, the inflation adjusted, per-student transfers from the Province fell by 13.4% or \$910 per student. In fact, since 1992, the Province's per-student funding support to the University has fallen about 24%. So, yes, tuition keeps rising at an unacceptable rate, but let's put the blame where it belongs. If anything, faculty and students should have common cause against the current fiscal restraint that hurts us both.