

Senate of York University

Report on the Senate-Sponsored Community Forum on Renewing Institutional Focus

What was Planned and What Emerged

The impetus for the community forum was a request from several Senators to dedicate a portion of a Senate meeting for a respectful exchange on re-establishing conditions for academic excellence post-strike. The Executive Committee saw value in bringing together York's community of scholars, students and staff to voice reflections and share opinions on regaining institutional momentum and re-setting the focus on advancing the University's academic priorities. An open forum, which would broaden access to the whole community, and enable discussion without the constraints of the rules and timelines that must frame a Senate meeting, met the spirit and intent of the Senators' request. The event was held on October 4, 2018 at 4:30pm in a large classroom in Accolade West building, and was live-streamed to accommodate members on the Glendon campus and anyone unable to attend in person. Approximately 200 people were in attendance, including the Chair and Vice-Chair of Senate, the President, the Provost, the Vice-President Finance & Administration, and members of Senate Executive. The session was moderated by Professor Ellen Auster. It ran for approximately two hours and was adjourned shortly after 6:30pm.

Designed to begin a conversation about how best to move ahead with our mission and academic objectives, two framing questions were posed in Senate Executive's invitation to the forum: *What advice do you have for regaining momentum and moving forward as a community*; and *What suggestions do you have for achieving our academic priorities*? Professor Auster was asked to moderate the session to garner participants' thoughts on York's collective strengths, the barriers that might emerge as we re-focus, and tangible ideas to collectively steer us toward our shared academic purposes. The will of the attendees - made clear very quickly - was to take the forum in a different, less defined, direction. The format that ensued was a candid airing of views, critiques and questions most often directed at the senior administration about matters rooted in the labour disruption.

Participant Reflections

Forum participants included faculty members, both long-serving and early career, and a mix of undergraduate and graduate students. Many in attendance planned to address the proceedings, and a communal decision was reached to allot two minutes for each speaker to afford room for all to contribute their remarks. Opinions were expressed on a

Senate of York University

wide range of topics, mostly centred on perceptions of the state of the University. Some were replies to the two framing questions by Senate Executive, which proffered contemplations on values to embrace and strategies to follow to continue York on its founders' vision and footpath. Several participants pointed to specific areas of the University where they believe improvements are needed to enhance community satisfaction and well-being. Campus infrastructure and cleanliness, classroom AV equipment and student support services were areas of concern in this context. Other expressions voiced were raw, personal observations grounded in strike-related experiences and frustrations.

The forum was provided to give the community an opportunity to share its views and for the Executive Committee and the senior administration to hear them. Of the moment responses to specific questions and statements were not planned. However, heeding the call of the room, President Lenton endeavoured to reply to the prevailing concerns and queries presented at the session. Loud and persistent interjections largely thwarted the President's efforts to comment.

Most of those speaking expressed criticisms or complaints with actions taken by the administration around the recent CUPE 3903 strike and/or with what they consider as a general trend toward increased corporatization of the university and away from collegial governance. Several remarked on specific recent issues such as the position taken by the Board of Governors on divestment, challenges experienced by CUPE 3903 members in getting paid and the Student Code complaints arising from certain events that took place during the strike. Emotions were high and the atmosphere was charged.

A number of participants in attendance advised that they had wished to provide comments and suggestions but, seeing the hostility exhibited by many in the room, were not comfortable doing so.

Broad themes in the commentary were captured as follows:

- General University matters
- Labour Relations
- Governance
- Board of Governors
- Public Policy / Post-secondary System
- Decision-making and disruptions

A compendium of the ideas raised has been compiled, and is attached as an appendix to this report. While no questions or comments came forward from members who joined the forum via the livestream feed, a written submission was received from a group of faculty members in the Faculty of Education, and one attendee provided the full text of his truncated oral remarks made at the forum. In addition, several participants at the event wrote and submitted comments on a form that had been created and distributed

Senate of York University

for that purpose. These written submissions have also been reviewed and incorporated into the compendium.

Outcomes Related to Senate

There were many significant recommendations proposed at the forum for consideration of which just a few lie directly in Senate's hands. Two key items related to Senate were noted and will be taken up by Senate Executive: Enhancing governance from the lessons learned from the labour disruption; and forging ahead with academic plans.

A. Enhancing Governance with Lessons Learned from the Disruption

Feedback received— from this forum and other community members in recent months – has identified several priorities for the Executive Committee to pursue this year to address gaps and make improvements in governance matters related to labour disruptions. The specific initiatives are as follows:

1. Process for to clarify responsibilities in a disruption

In concert with the Executive Committee of the Board of Governors, Senate Executive agreed to bring forward recommendations on the mandate and membership of a group tasked with clarifying the responsibilities of the Board, Senate and Administration relating to suspension of classes in the event of a Disruption. A proposal to that end is scheduled for a preliminary discussion in November 2018.

2. Review relevant Senate policies to address questions and the need for clarity on matters that emerged, including:

- Policy on Academic Implications of Disruptions or Cessations of University Business Due to Labour Disputes or Other Causes
- Class Cancellation Policy
- Policy on Sessional Dates and the Scheduling of Examinations

Feedback from the community and a “lessons learned” discussion by the Executive Committee surfaced the need to review those Senate policies about which questions surfaced due to vague or broad language. The experience of this lengthy and complex disruption may serve to better position the University to respond to any future disruptions.

3. Create a comprehensive record of remediation options and actions taken by the Executive Committee and Senate during the disruption; evaluate the effectiveness of the actions; create a formal reference document of options for future use.

Senate of York University

The Committee's post-strike reflections resulted in a recommendation to create a comprehensive record of the decisions taken by Executive. It will detail each action taken and identify some of the advantages and disadvantages of each. From the analysis of the record, a concrete reference document - informed by past practice and experience - will be prepared to assist decision-making in any future disruptions. Work has already begun on this project.

4. Senate's Rules, Procedures and Guidelines review

Minutes of meetings in 2018, survey results and correspondence from Senators about the Senate meetings during the labour disruption identified specific rules and issues that will benefit from assessment during this Senate Rules review cycle. That exercise will commence shortly and will be brought forward to Senate for approval.

5. Establishment of a review cycle of Senate Policies

Drawing in part on the experience of the 2018 labour disruption, the Executive Committee determined that a regular review of Senate policies would keep the legislation current and create timely opportunities to address issues that arise.

B. Forging Ahead with Academic Plans

Regaining institutional momentum requires more than tending to needed governance revisions. Opinions have been expressed in all corners of the University that an equally constructive course of action is resuming at full strength our academic and research plans. Resuming focus on activities that inspire and motivate us in our work and study will help recuperation. Senate can best serve the University in this regard by supporting the attainment of objectives in the University Academic Plan (UAP) and Strategic Research Plan, by encouraging and fostering innovations and excellence, and restoring engagement in significant initiatives including the Markham Centre Campus.

In this vein, Senate committees have been spurred into action. In response to Executive's call, they have articulated their respective 2018-2019 priorities that are designed to help advance the 2015-2020 UAP goals. Facilitated discussions on topics of significance to the University are being planned for upcoming Senate meetings, an academic forum will be hosted by APPRC in the coming months to further recent progress on enhancing curriculum development, and ASCP is modernizing the University's grading scheme. These are just a few of the academic initiatives being driven by Senate this year. We encourage the community to review the committees' priorities and to likewise identify individual, departmental or Faculty opportunities that help the University resume its momentum.

Senate of York University

Outcomes Related to Administration

As noted above, several of the suggestions put forth in the open session are not within Senate's purview. Members of the senior administration were in attendance at the forum and heard first-hand the views expressed and requests made by the community. Senate Executive has also shared with the administration the written summation of recommendations.

The Committee understands that the administration is continuing to gather input from the community and to develop plans for addressing the concerns and suggestions raised.

Senate of York University

Appendix: Compilation of Concrete Suggestions¹

General

- Address anxieties / mental health distress in the community resulting from the disruption
- Make a conscious return to York's values (progressive, equitable etc.)
- Actively pursue truth and reconciliation
- Support survivors of sexual violence with proper training and consultation on the sexual violence policy
- Provide contract faculty with mailboxes, access to a computer/printer/photocopier, space to hold office hours with students
- Improve the condition of AV equipment in classrooms
- Encourage department / school heads to acknowledge and interact with contract faculty
- Open work-study programs (RAY, CLAY, YES) to international students
- Make all meetings and spaces on campus accessible
- Provide funding to graduate students, contract faculty and unions to host / offer academic activities to enhance intellectual engagement at the University
- Promote student engagement through participation in clubs, councils
- Champion the Liberal Arts
- Improve washrooms
- Return a focus on learning and program development
- Act on matters raised in this forum and by the community

Labour Relations

- A York strength turns on the special role played by unions
- York would be severely damaged by another strike and it must be avoided
- Limit public relations, social media efforts by the employer
- Hire a firm other than one that has a track record of taking on unions, forcing strikes
- Recognize unions as trustworthy, capable of partnering with the administration within a collegial setting not in an adversarial role
- Ensure prompt payment for work done
- Clarify TA responsibilities
- Provide TA contracts in a timely manner
- Increase tenure-track hiring; recent increase in Alternate Stream a good start.

¹ This list is based on remarks at the forum, suggestions relayed on the worksheets distributed at the event, and written submissions.

Senate of York University

Governance

- Create a comprehensive strategic plan and focus on execution
- More consultative, transparent, bottom-up decision making with appropriate consultations
- Ensure there is appropriate consultation on issues before decisions are made
- Listen so that those consulted know they are heard
- See Senate as trustworthy, responsible and recognize its authority
- Review the Student Code of Conduct / do not apply to actions taken by or in support of unions and their members
- Be transparent about university finances and encourage awareness
- Strive for consensus, foster democracy, break down silos
- Develop a divestment strategy to address health concerns such as tobacco use abroad / climate change solutions / arms reduction / affirmation of the land and human rights of indigenous peoples; do this in consultation with diverse University stakeholders
- Restore the supremacy of Senate over Senate Executive in decision-making
- Open searches for senior academic positions
- Address a change-averse culture and promote agile decision-making
- Hold student town halls so students can participate better in collegial governance
- Review the role and membership of Senate Executive and how it relates to Senate and the academic community
- Require Faculty Council chairs to be members of Senate
- Convene a meeting of Faculty Council chairs to explore the role of Senate and Faculty Councils in the conduct of academic governance
- Ensure that Senators address one another with the title of Senator
- Send a Senate group to each Faculty / department for consultation with faculty members and educate them about the important work of Senate
- CAUT review of governance

Board of Governors

- Diversify Board membership to better reflect the community and its values (e.g. more Liberal Arts backgrounds, or people from advocacy and not-for-profit groups; do not blunt diversification through a skills matrix)
- Allow community more say in who is selected for the Board
- Elect Board student member through YFS, GSA
- Divest from tobacco, arms, and companies that deal in fossil fuels; restore YUACRI or replace; many groups have endorsed this but the administration and Board appear to be standing alone
- Accept YUFA's analysis of the Board membership (number of faculty members, how elected, eligibility for Executive, retention of union membership, YUFA officers eligible) and redress in bargaining
- Clearly delineate fiduciary duties and academic duties in regular and exceptional circumstances

Senate of York University

Public Policy

- Join together to take on Queens Park and ensure that university autonomy, funding etc. are protected (paying special attention to the freedom of speech initiative which, at York, should involve thorough consultations and Senate action)
- Address job precarity

Decision-Making and Disruptions

- Cancel classes in a disruption
- Ensure remediation framework does not undermine academic integrity or is overly complex, confusing
- Address the fact that accommodations are not being delivered by some professors in contravention of Senate Executive decisions
- Reach out to students to understand how they perceived remediation
- Strike an ad hoc group of non-Senators to investigate and report on actions taken and processes followed by Senate Executive during the strike
- Continue to hold open sessions to promote healing / keep community informed and offer opportunity for comments and input on University matters; administration needs to be more accessible and responsive to critiques