

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT



MARCH 2016

As the end of March approaches, I would normally be busy grading papers, prepping final exams, and looking forward to relaxing a little in late April, after the marathon days that tend to crop up at the end of the semester. This year is a little different. While I'm still grading the papers, rather than anticipating the end-of-semester exhalation, I find myself bracing for a hectic spring and early summer as President of your faculty association. Two processes that will have a heavy bearing on our lives and work as academic staff are close on the horizon. One is bargaining. The other is the provincial election.

I've talked about bargaining before, and you'll be hearing a lot more about it in the weeks to come. I particularly hope to see many of you at the Special General Meeting (SGM) on the 31st of March. I cannot overemphasize how crucial it is that every UMFA member make an effort to attend. UMFA is your association, and the SGM is a key moment in making your voice count in the direction our bargaining team takes as we work to negotiate a fair deal that protects your rights, your time, and your working conditions. As bargaining gets underway, stay tuned to the (soon-to-be-revamped) UMFA website and social media, as well as to UMFA emails, for info and updates on the bargaining process. The election, which will be held on April 19th, will also have a significant impact on life at UM over the next four or five years. About a half of the university's revenue comes from the provincial grant, and university funding in Manitoba really needs a shot in the arm, having suffered from a long-term decline in public investment. It's worth revisiting the historical funding picture in Canada and Manitoba to see how we got where we are today.

Deep cuts in federal funding extend back to the late 1970s, but they hit Manitoba hardest starting in 1989. Former UM Professor of Social Work Neil Tudiver estimated that in the decade following 1983-84, federal contributions to post-secondary education were cut by almost \$13.5 billion. This wasn't reflective of a declining public sense of the university's value to society. Rather, it was part of an explicit policy to bring Canadian universities more closely into association with the private sector, as elaborated, for example, in the 1981 *Report of the Task Force on Labour Market Development*. The logic was that with drastically reduced public funding, universities would be forced to turn to private sources—tuition, corporate funds, partnerships, and private donations—to make up the shortfall. The decline in public funding relative to private funding continues.

In 1990, 80% of university operating revenues came from government. By 2014, public funding's share had fallen to less than half of the total.

In Manitoba specifically, we were hit with a decade-long decline and stagnation of provincial funding that ran uninterrupted from 1988 to 1998. Since the turn of the millennium, things have improved somewhat in Manitoba, but a close look reveals that investment in our universities remains weak. If we look simply at raw dollars going to universities, it appears as though the public is investing more heavily. In Manitoba, provincial funding for universities rose in inflation-adjusted terms by 45.2% from 2000/01 to 2012/13—not bad, although well below the national figure of 55.1%. If the post-secondary environment had remained similar in 2012/13 compared to 2000/01, this revenue growth would represent a real investment in our universities. However, from 24,464 student full-time equivalents (FTEs) in 2000/01, university enrolment in Manitoba rose to 37,809 in 2012/13—an increase of 55%. Given that increase, which is on the whole a good-news story, our public investment looks considerably less rosy. Across the province, operating budgets (money designated for the core teaching and research functions of the universities) per student FTE have dropped by 2% in inflation-adjusted terms from 2000/01 to 2012/13. This was compared to a nationwide increase of 14.9%—itself nothing to crow about, representing a paltry investment of just 1.2% per year. University funding in the 2000's has not kept up with demand for higher education.

The Manitoba Government has in recent years made some attempt to halt the decline and begin rebuilding. Increases to the provincial university grant have been modest but stable over the past several years, while governments in other provinces have been cutting their provincial grants.

Our ability to do our work depends partly on decisions taken within the UM—at Faculty and Department Councils, at Senate, and by UM administrators (particularly on the question of *how* they spend the money). But it also depends on the extent to which governments prioritize public and accessible universities. When your candidates come knocking this spring, make sure to ask at the doorstep—and at every other opportunity—“what is your party's commitment to Manitoba's universities?”