Currently 30+ SFUFA colleagues, supported by coordinators in each Faculty, are canvassing the entire SFUFA membership. They are asking members to sign cards saying they support a unionized SFUFA. If over 45% of all our members sign cards (but the goal is 60%), then there will be a Labour Relations Board supervised vote (likely electronic). If 50%+1 of those who vote are in favour, SFUFA will become a union. This process was set in motion by the SFUFA membership in a democratic process. A resolution was passed at last year’s spring annual meeting asking SFUFA to consider certification. We have held quite a number of events to allow members to discuss the question. There was a debate, a “pro” panel event, a number of coffee clatches, pub events, and lunches. In January, there was an “anti” panel event. And SFUFA has placed the discussion materials - pro and con - on its website.
“We are engaged in a great direct democracy experiment.”

In January, there was an “anti” panel event. And SFUFA has placed the discussion materials - pro and con - on its website. In November, at the fall annual meeting, a resolution was passed, 100-29, approving SFUFA to pursue certification within a year. Over Christmas, SFUFA conducted a poll and 85% of the 45% participating said they had enough information to make a decision. Over 79% agreed that SFUFA should begin to seek certification beginning in February. This decision was ratified by a unanimous vote, save one abstention, by the SFUFA executive. And we have begun.

I have received some criticism lately that as SFUFA president, I am not being entirely impartial. Yet I started the process not at all entirely in favour, and I have shared in communiques the experiences that have brought me to support the unionization process.

I spent much of the fall trying to demonstrate that certification was unnecessary by negotiating directly with our SFU administration for the same interest arbitration that has netted UBC, UVic, and UNBC with better salary and benefits settlements than we achieved with final offer arbitration. In the end, the good intentions of our SFU administration were torpedoed by PSEC, the BC government agency that directs public service settlements. And I realized that we could not rely on our own administrators because, good people as they are, they did not have the authority to help us even when they wanted.

I realize, however, that it really doesn’t matter what I think. We are engaged in a great direct democracy experiment. It appears to me that the majority of SFUFA members favour unionization. I am enough of a Reformer to believe that it is my duty as president to support the will of the majority of those I represent. Even if I opposed unionization, my duty would be to support and enable the will of the majority.
Given the vote of the membership supporting pursuing certification, the poll supporting immediate pursuit, and the vote of the SFUFA executive (I was not present at that meeting), my duty is clear to me.

We should understand that this is a very democratic process. This is not like the situation of a prime minister elected to a majority government because 40% of the 60% who voted cast ballots for him/her. We need 45% (and have a goal of 60%) of ALL our members to sign cards, just to get an actual vote where more than 50% have to vote in favour. That’s pretty fair.

Of course, as a Business Prof, I got to be the Faculty coordinator for Business Administration. My Faculty is not known for its pro-union stance so I was hoping someone else would volunteer for this opportunity. One person I asked said that s/he feared that if s/he was publicly identified as pro-union, it would negatively affect his/her likelihood of being promoted in the future! So I am the go-2 goat.

And yet, so far I have been surprised at the response of my FBA colleagues. I sent out an email. I said anyone opposed who emailed, I would put on a "do not disturb" list, so no unionization salesperson would bother them. So far, I have received more signed cards than "do not disturbs", and a bunch more business colleagues at other campuses have requested cards. If that’s the response in Business, I predict certification will succeed. I already have more than I expected.

I hope we get this whole question settled soon. I hope we don’t get some of the negative animosity that seems to have developed at UVic. I hope that win or lose, the “pro” and “anti” sides will accept the will of the majority of our colleagues. For heavens sake, if you are opposed, don’t sign a card. If you are in favour, vote your will.
There are other issues of importance to our membership, and we need to be united and on side with each other to address them. And personally, I think we will be more effective in achieving positive results if we are unionized.

We need to finally address gender pay inequalities. We now have a task force studying this issue. I have made it a top priority for my presidency, and Andrew Petter has made it a top priority of his as well. But if the task force makes recommendations that do not satisfy our membership, we will want all the means of recourse possible at our disposal.

We need to ensure a level playing field for First Nations faculty. I know the administration also supports this goal and AVP Jon Driver has taken a first step in conjunction with SFUFA. But we have barely started and need to do more.

We need to address the academic freedom of lecturers and senior lecturers in regards to research, for when they want to apply for teaching professor and find out that only publications on teaching protocol count for purposes of this promotion. Us research professors have our academic freedom guaranteed by the framework agreement. So, why not also the lecturers? But it’s a complex issue and the association will, again, need all it can muster to tackle this.

We need to address other governance issues like Learning Objectives that we cannot address without permission from the administration, as an association, but could as a union.

“There are other issues of importance to our membership, and we need to be united and on side with each other to address them.”
We need to address work load issues that affect our Quality of Working Life (QWL) that we cannot bargain as effectively as an association.

I’m not saying that if SFUFA was a union, suddenly all these issues would get fixed to our satisfaction. What unionization would mean is that we would have the right to discuss these issues and the administration would have to give us a hearing. That obviously doesn’t mean they would agree or run to do what we wanted. But at least we could discuss it, and maybe over time... As Lao Tzu said, “The softest thing in the universe overcomes the hardest thing in the universe” as the tide wears away the cliffs. But you’ve got to be able to start.

Right now, we can only address governance and work load issues if the administration is open to discussing them. Usually they are open to discussion but, for example, last fall on Learning Objectives they were not and it was a miracle that so far those plans have not been implemented. I expect this issue will come knocking again.

Anyway, please participate in our direct democracy experiment without rancour. If you are opposed, don’t sign a card, and if there is a vote, vote against. If you are in favour, sign a card, and if there is a vote, vote in favour. And let the membership decide. And please be magnanimous either in victory or defeat. In the end, SFUFA is strong as an organization only to the extent that it is united.

All the best  
Neil R Abramson  
SFUFA President  
Beedie School
Should Professionals Unionize?

By Robert Clift, CUFA BC

In the debate as to whether university faculty members should form unions, the assertion is often made that as professionals, faculty members don’t need unions. Their expertise, performance and reputation give them all the power they need to successfully navigate the vagaries of university administrators. Not so. Although this may have once been the case, it bears little resemblance to the reality of 2014. An extremely small number of “superstars” still wield such power. For the other 98% of university faculty members -- make no mistake -- senior university administrators think of you as employees, not as professionals. This change in the attitude of senior administrators has come about gradually. A number of external and internal pressures have shifted them away from being “facilitators” of the academic enterprise to becoming its “controllers”. As a consequence of this shift, university administration has itself become a profession and its practitioners act as if their profession is of greater status and importance than that of a university faculty member.

“I know what’s best for the university” is one of the six impossible things senior university administrators must believe before breakfast (with apologies to Lewis Carroll). The corollary to this is that faculty members, notwithstanding their professionalism and good intentions, cannot be trusted to make the big decisions. This is despite the fact that before being anointed a senior administrator, most of these people were themselves faculty members.

Through the senior administrators’ looking glass, “we have to cut the program to save the program” makes perfect sense. As do the ideas that measurement and action are synonymous, and that faculty members should be able to “do more with less”.

These problems are not unique to the university enterprise. They are endemic to a public sector struggling with increasing demands and stagnant or decreasing resources. The situation in other sectors is equally troubling. Consequently, other professions have formed unions or union-like organizations to protect both individual rights to fairness and the professionalism of their members.

For example, the BC Medical Association, the BC Principals’ and Vice Principals’ Association, and the Trial Lawyers’ Association of BC are, in some of their functions, indistinguishable from unions.

The Professional Association of [Medical] Residents, the Directors’ Guild, and the Airline Pilots’ Association are all legally-recognized unions.

Thousands of well-educated professionals are represented by the Professional Employees’ Association, the Health Sciences Association and the BC Government and Service Employees’ Union.

Forming a union will not turn back the clock to the good old days of senior administrators respecting the professionalism of faculty members and facilitating, rather than trying to control, teaching and research. It will, however, slow down the erosion of professional authority and academic freedom and give faculty members new legal tools to fight the individual and collective battles ahead.

Robert F. Clift is the Executive Director of the Confederation of University Faculty Associations of BC.
Pain without Gain
By James D. Fleming

There is no good reason for SFUFA to unionize. There are some very good reasons for it not to. Therefore, unionization should be rejected.

The classic argument for unionizing is to get more money. But as we have learned, there is no evidence that unionized faculty associations get better deals than non-unionized ones. The reason is simple: there is no more money to get. We are not working in a profit-making economic sector with wealth for redistribution. Rather, we are working in a profit-losing sector, where the wealth has, for the most part, already been distributed. We have no power over the amount of money the government gives the university. Student fees are already too high. And the administration—even if bloated—is little more than a minnow compared to the whale of our salaries and benefits.

Unionization would make no difference to any of this. It is not true that signing a union card means better settlements.

Another issue is workload. Unionization would allow us to bargain over workload—not just salaries, benefits, and working conditions (as we currently do).

But to bargain over workload, we would first have to define it. We would have to establish metrics for the different teaching, research and service expectations of different faculties and departments. Then we would have to deploy those metrics—and supervise each other, probably at department level, to make sure they were neither evaded nor exceeded. Not only would we as faculty members lose the freedom of managing our own workloads; we would also have to do more work, of a voluminous and tiresome kind, to manage the workload issue through union committees. Bargaining over workload would mean adding to our workload. A ridiculous result.

But perhaps the real question is governance. Certification, according to the pro-union side, means the administration taking us seriously. It means meeting them as equals, mano a mano, across the negotiating table. It means—as SFUFA Executive Director Brian Green has written—“the process by which we become citizens. It is the political process by which we gain the rights of citizenship, recognized as sovereign in our collective self, not [by] the university that employs us, but by the law.” These statements are bizarre. Faculty members of this university already enjoy its citizenship. Residents of British Columbia are already under the law—and so is SFU. Talk about “governance” is just empty ideological soundbiting. It is no reason to take the risks of unionization.

And what are the risks?

• A unionized SFUFA would become much larger and more bureaucratic. How else could it handle all the new powers and duties that the pro-union side is clamoring for?
• Upward pressure on dues would be inevitable. How else would we pay for the new, powerful, administration-fighting SFUFA?
• Union-to-member disciplinary vectors, of a kind we currently do not experience at all, would open up. These could be quite unpleasant.
• Our public image as academics, already fragile, would take a hit. Coddled university professors are bad enough; coddled university professors who unionize, to protect their privileges, are worse. We do not want to make politicians less afraid of cutting our funding.

Then there is the issue of strikes. The right to strike would be the only new lever that unionization would give us. The pro-union side has suggested that we might simply give up that right, for the sake of interest arbitration (or some other benefit). But as SFUFA President Neil Abramson has repeatedly complained, the administration is not in the habit of giving us something for nothing.
In our current collective agreement, we have already renounced the right to strike. Everybody acknowledges that the CA would have to be renegotiated, post-certification. **Why would the administration let us have right-to-strike, for nothing, without demanding something in return?** A fantasy.

Much more likely, the administration would view right-to-strike as a concession on their part, and demand countervailing concessions on ours. In our first collective agreement as a union, we would have to give up some ground, just so that we could get the right to strike, so that we could perhaps give it up again—absurd.

Or, we could retain the right to strike. Under straitened economic circumstances, it is entirely likely that we would find ourselves using it. During a strike, we would lose access to labs, offices, and computing accounts. Students, staff, and colleagues would suffer. The standing and functioning of the university—on which we all depend—would be seriously impacted.

And all for the pittance—perhaps half a percentage point—that lies between what we think we deserve, and what the university receives from the province.

Unionization of SFUFA, even on the account given by its advocates, offers benefits that are—at best—vague and marginal. Its detriments, on the other hand, are manifest and considerable. This process is being driven ideologically, not rationally. I urge colleagues to reject unionization, so we can all get back to work.

James D. Fleming is Associate Professor in the Department of English.

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The Rules Have Changed: Collegial Governance Withering at SFU
By Russell Day

Collegial governance is a mythical ideal that many academics at SFU ‘wish were true’. In my opinion, for collegial governance to be a viable model, certain expectations must be met. 1) Those members elected to govern come from the community. 2) Once elected, for a stipend, the newly elected administrator is tasked with governing ‘in the best interests’ of the community and the organization. 3) When the term as an administrator is finished, the elected member returns to the community from whence he/she came (losing the stipend) and must live with the consequences of the decisions made while being an administrator. This still happens with Department Chairs and at the Decanal level, but for many senior administrators at SFU, these expectations are now regularly violated. Those violations have significant consequences – they are diminishing collegial governance and disconnecting our senior administrators from their communities.

Let me provide some examples that illustrate, in my opinion, why the senior administrators at SFU do not always have our ‘best interests’ in mind when they make decisions – their focus has shifted from a collegial governance model to a corporate governance model.

First, a number of our Senior Administrators were hired from outside of the university and will not, in most cases, be returning to a home unit – hence will never have to live with the consequences of their decisions. Second, once hired or elected as a senior administrator, their salaries are no longer constrained by the same hard ceilings, nor required to average to 1.33 steps (at the faculty level, often 1.25 steps at the department level), making it very unlikely they would actively seek to return to a home unit after 8-10 years. With no ceilings and a 1.5 step average (self-approved), few return to the community – many remain in the senior administration ranks assigned ‘Special Projects’. Third, as they are no longer expecting to return to their home community, their loyalty shifts to their new colleagues – fellow senior administrators – to whom they now feel accountable. All decisions they make are now in support of the corporate governance model and their administration colleagues.

The rules have changed. When SFU was younger and more naïve, collegial governance could work because the expectations above were not being violated so regularly. This was when the Faculty Association was formed and the framework agreement delineated the rules that guided interactions between faculty members and their colleagues who chose to accept temporary administrative roles.

Now, senior administration is playing by different rules while members of the Faculty Association are stuck playing by the old rules. It would seem that senior administration has little interest in discussing important issues like governance or workload, and by the existing old rules, there is nothing that can force them to do so. One reason I support certification is that, in my opinion, it is the only way we will be able to develop a new, single set of respectful rules that apply to all - and that will benefit all members of the University community.

Respectfully, Russell Day

Russell Day is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Psychology and the Teaching Representative on the SFUFA Executive.
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