

Problematic perceptions of part-time profs

by Jeremy Dickson

Some of the best teachers at UNB are part-time instructors and congratulations to UNB for making part-time professors eligible for the new Student Union Faculty Award. This inclusion is obviously a step in the right direction, but for the well being of many part-time instructors who desire permanent teaching positions, is it enough?

Perceptions and relationships between full-time faculty members and part-time UNB instructors vary between departments, but should these two groups' relationships range from those who feel genuine respect for each other to those who feel they are treated like second class citizens? This type of love/hate relationship between full-time and part-time faculty members at UNB is unfortunately evident and should be a cause for concern.

Why are some part-time instructors at UNB apparently treated like gold while others have to fight extremely hard to win even the smallest of battles? The answers aren't clear, the solutions to the problems aren't easy, but the perceptions need to change if any progress can be made to level the playing field.

The students at UNB who have nominated many part-time instructors for the Student Union Faculty Award have taken the first step, but more needs to be done according to some part-time professors.

"Some of the best teachers I know are part-timers. If they weren't deeply committed to teaching, they would have gotten a job at a call centre. The money would be better!" says one part-time instructor at UNB.

Holding a part-time status in any field, whether as students, workers or teachers, unfortunately places many people in vulnerable positions while those of supposed higher authority often make uneducated assumptions about a part-time person's ability, motivation and character.

"I've talked to a lot of part-time instructors and a common theme is that we often feel disrespected by some full-time faculty and by administration. Unlike the stereotype that we are fly-by-nighters, most of us take teaching very seriously and organize our work lives to accommodate what we love to do – teach," says another UNB instructor.

It is unfortunate, judging by these remarks, that in 2006 the lines of status between full-time and part-time are still creating an environ-

ment fuelled by stereotypical views, misconceptions and disrespect, but this is the reality of the situation for some UNB faculties.

Some immediate concerns for part-time instructors include low stipend pay, lack of office space or one that is shared with many other people, no personal telephones, negative perceptions as to ability, contract and pay delays and not being eligible for most teaching awards.

Some part-time professors, on the other hand, have been treated fairly well but are still troubled by some of the issues.

Steven Peacock, of UNB's English department, has been lucky enough to have good office and telephone access, but he recognizes that problems exist and is deeply concerned with low part-time wages and part-time instructors' exclusions from most awards.

"I can't really complain in the sense that within the English department I've been very well-accepted by the tenured faculty and I feel very much a colleague, but whether this is the case in other departments I don't know. I'm a little lucky in that I do have access to a phone and office, but this has been a problem for other part-time people within the English department," says Peacock.

Other instructors unfortunately don't share Peacock's good fortune. "I have never had my own office at UNB," says one unlucky instructor, "and even this year, I am sharing with another person. I have made a

lot of friends that way but it's much harder to get work done! There's no question we are treated as second class citizens."

Coping without an office or phone is one thing, but many part-time instructors have to juggle families, second jobs to make ends meet, research, write books and publications and somehow find time to have a life in between. On top of this there is the constant stress caused from never knowing if a contract will be granted, extended or renewed.

"I've had a great year, met some wonderful students and we've learned a lot together, but I am always worried about getting a new contract. I am a good teacher and researcher but that has not been enough to land me a permanent position at UNB. At this point I am only slated for one course at UNB for next year. I have to find work at UNBSJ or wherever else I can. We don't make much money for a course (just over \$4000) so we need to find other jobs," explains a part-time instructor.

The problems don't end here. When contracts end so do some necessary privileges.

"Even for those of us who routinely work at UNBF or UNBSJ, as soon as our contracts end, we no longer have access to e-mail or WEB Ct or in some cases, borrowing privileges from the library. All this kicks in when we have a new contract signed. It makes it very hard to do course preparation when we don't

have use of some of these things," says a part-time professor.

Some feel the low wages and lack of benefits are the university's way of saving a buck or two and some feel the fiscal ratio of student dollars brought in don't correspond with the part-time wages put out.

"It's much cheaper for the university to have some of us on stipend than to hire us and pay us a real salary and benefits. There is a constant rumour about budgets being slashed and stipends would be the first to go. We have to live with these worries constantly," says a teacher.

"For most courses, I am sure the university must make a profit or at least break even. It would only take a few students to re-coup the \$4200 they pay me. When I teach classes of 40-60 students, the university would have to make money," says the teacher.

Peacock also agrees that low wages are an issue. "You're vulnerable in contract work and no one is going to care about your retirement or pension plan. I think the pay is absurdly low and the university needs to be dedicated to undergraduate teaching and that isn't often what drives departments," says Peacock.

"There is often more of an emphasis on research and graduate work, but the last time I checked UNB is a comprehensive university that does offer undergraduate programs so I think UNB might want to rethink the way it treats part-time people. There is room for improvement

and better financial treatment. We can't do anything in our graduate programs unless we have solid undergraduate people coming out and part-time instructors play an important role in this," says Peacock.

Another common misconception between full-time faculty and part-timers involves research and awards.

"One of the arguments full-time faculty make as to why we shouldn't be eligible for teaching awards is because they're expected to conduct research and we're not. The assumption is that we have more time to devote to teaching. Hogwash! Most of us do not lead simple, undemanding lives. We have other jobs likely equivalent to the research and administration time requirement for full-time faculty," says one part-time instructor.

It is really hard to imagine that part-time instructors don't conduct research because they aren't required to, but one professor believes that research does suffer for part-timers.

"I wouldn't be surprised if research suffers because we don't have money to go to conferences or take research trips and we spend an awful lot of time doing side jobs or lining up contracts for next year," says an instructor.

Steven Peacock says he understands the enormous pressure on tenured faculty to maintain levels of research and still teach at a standard as well, but he is also sympathetic to part-time instructors.

"I'm teaching three courses this term on top of one last term so that's a fairly heavy load and because the pay is so low I have to do other things to survive so let's call that my research," says Peacock.

So it is obvious there are many concerns for part-time instructors at UNB, but all of this might change if a union designed specifically for part-timers could be implemented. There have been some recent meetings on the issue but unfortunately the process is currently at a standstill.

"Unlike at STU, there is no part-time union at UNB to protect and rally for resources and rights," says one instructor. "We have been in talks recently to start a union but things are moving slowly," continues the instructor. So why is it taking so long to create a union for part-timers at UNB?

Some part-time professors feel that because their job security is so unstable, few are willing to risk the backlash that might come from the

creation of a part-time union.

"I guess part of the problem in forming a union is having people who are willing to step forward and work for it. There is always a worry that this will not be well received by the university and then we run a danger of not being re-hired. Few of us can risk this," says another instructor.

All risks aside, if a part-time teacher's union could be accepted at UNB would instructors feel safe to join?

"I would be open to a union, absolutely, because I've seen that at other universities it is a voice that is respected by the senior administration," says Steven Peacock.

However, because part-timers have to take on other responsibilities it leaves little time to create or help in the creation and development of a union.

"We don't have much time for forming a union because of our other jobs. Some of us are regulars and other part-time instructors are just passing through so the work of unionizing would probably fall to the non-transitory instructors," says a professor.

UNB may eventually get this new union but even when a union is in place, as it is at STU, the work to maintain it is often an ever easy. Dr. Kathleen Burke, a part-time instructor's representative and History professor at STU, believes the research criteria for part-time instructors and hiring practices at STU need to be examined.

"At STU, part-time faculty are not expected to do research, nor are they paid for time to do it, however, one of the criteria for hiring and promotion of part-time faculty is research, and this is something that should be dealt with in the next round of negotiations," says Burke.

If part-time instructors at STU have the same problems finding time for proper research as those experienced by part-timers at UNB, how then can they be judged fairly for positions and promotions based on research criteria? Maybe those who wish to create a part-time union at UNB can learn from the mistakes made and hopefully corrected by other union models.

It will likely be an uphill battle for part-time instructors in all faculties at UNB to get the respect they deserve, but with this year's Student Union Faculty Award recognizing part-timers and the rumblings of a new part-time faculty union, maybe the future is a little brighter.



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