

OPINION

Toward a better university

How do we revive the 'SFU spirit'? Change our attitudes to one another, says a faculty member

BY HECTOR HAMMERLY

When someone reaches the age of 60, he presumes to have acquired a little wisdom, if nothing else, from surviving life's storms. When he is a tenured full professor less than six years from retirement, he assumes he can speak his mind without fear — as long as he doesn't engage in libel. So, if nothing else, humor an older man (twice as old as when he helped start SFU in 1965) by reading what follows.

OUR UNIVERSITY COULD BE a better, friendlier, no-nonsense institution if administrators, faculty, staff and students made a few improvements in policies and attitudes. I will address the challenges and possible solutions affecting each of these groups.

Administrators: The administration shouldn't try to squeeze every loonie, in often unkind ways, from the SFU community. Two examples: 1) traffic and security have been fining us at the drop of a hat, sometimes for "violations" that apply only off-campus. In-

stead, 'warn first, fine later' should be the policy, one that modern technology makes easy to implement; 2) administrative plans have been afoot to demand a portion of SFU authors' book royalties. When one considers that the university contributes little or nothing to this type of intellectual property, and that the purchasing power of faculty salaries has been going down for years, such a policy-in-the-making doesn't seem justified at all.

The administration ought to be firm in demanding from the provincial government sufficient funds to ensure that student scholarships and all SFU salaries at least keep up with inflation, rather than fall further and further behind.

A clear but flexible policy on SFU grades is needed. Many students don't understand on what basis grades are assigned. Some faculty members seem to be very subjective and proceed rather haphazardly about this. The new policy shouldn't come from the top, but be designed with the full participation of students

and faculty. A guideline booklet on this for faculty and students seems essential.

The administration should accept the fact that they don't own anybody. (Plantation days have been over since the American Civil War!) Two examples of this ownership attitude:

1) the administration has been determined, for years, to control faculty members' free time, restricting severely the time they can spend on other activities. However, if professors perform competently their university duties (teaching, research and contributions to their departments, the university and the community), they should be free to do whatever they wish, for however long it takes, the rest of *their* time.

2) not long ago, a professor was told by a very senior administrator, in a pathetic example of arrogance, that the professor was "just a screwdriver" at SFU. I believe human beings are infinitely valuable and should be treated as such.

When a professor is an incompetent teacher, an unproductive scholar, or both, the administration should — for the sake of the students — take decisive action. In virtually all cases I know of, it hasn't. The competent teacher who is an unproductive scholar could be exempted from scholarly output, but be required to have a much heavier teaching load. The incompetent teacher who publishes a lot belongs in a different kind of university, one that doesn't care much about teaching (in the Ivy League, perhaps?). Someone who can neither teach nor do research should not be an academic at all.

Fairness and helping anyone being mistreated should be the norm at all levels of the university. I know of three faculty members who were treated very unfairly, for political rather than academic reasons, for over two decades. It was impossible for them to get the merit salary increments they deserved. They also had considerable difficulty getting well-merited promotions. During that long time, not a single one of a long string of deans, vice-presidents or presidents ever dealt in any significant way with their unfair situation.

Most non-confidential decisions should be made bottom-up, from the grassroots, including students — not top-down. SFU should be a model democratic institution. For most purposes, we should invert the power pyramid.

The most important people at SFU are not administrators, faculty or staff. They are the students. Without them, there would be no SFU. However, administrators set the tone for the whole institution and, as you can see from

the above, the tone they have set in the past could use considerable improvement.

Faculty: We need to do our very best as teachers and researchers, settling for nothing less than excellence.

We should put students first in our planning and our availability to them.

No strong 'SFU spirit' will develop unless we communicate much more, among ourselves and with students. Often, even at the lowest, departmental level, there isn't much communication.

Staff: They must be congratulated: they are overworked and they certainly don't get salaries worth mentioning at high school or college reunions.

Students: Some seem to lack dedication; I doubt very much that they're trying their best. Perhaps they lack a definite purpose.

A few are negative toward their professors. Many classes turn out to have one or two students who either ask hostile questions or sit in the back and smirk, especially when the professor makes a mistake. Students: most professors are doing their best to help you. Give us a break!

Most SFU students are intelligent and well-motivated. Most are ready to work hard — and it's

a great pleasure to teach them.

Conclusions: Right now, the only people who seem to have a strong 'SFU spirit' are our athletes. In my opinion, the 'SFU spirit' will spread and be greatly enhanced when we all aim at helpfulness, fairness, excellence, democracy and greater and better communication at all levels, especially in informal groups, both large and small.

This is a good university that still has potential for greatness. In the early years, funding was more than adequate and a spirit of creativity, of willingness to try out new things, pervaded the campus. That spirit is largely gone today. We have "matured." My concern is that by now we may have over-ripened into a traditional university like hundreds of others in North America.

While we face a funding challenge now, there are many things we can change for the better without spending a dime. Let's not settle into an administrative straitjacket in an academic rut. Let's all give each other the necessary freedom and encouragement to reach our respective potentials, as human beings, students, staff, faculty and as a university community. ♦

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committed: where he is reasonably happy?

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