PRESIDENT’S VOICE

I Hate Merit

Merit assessment is a deeply flawed and inequitable system, especially during a global pandemic

By Elizabeth Hanson
President, QUFA

Snow blankets the earth, the daylight returns, so it’s time for our annual/biennial festival of aggrievedness: merit assessment! This year, there are some special inflections born of the pandemic and the university’s fitful attempt to respond appropriately. I have received messages from disappointed Members, anxious Members, confused Members, dismayed Heads. What these communications confirm to me is that our merit system is emotionally intrusive and operationally opaque. That, in my view, by itself makes it oppressive. But the more I have learned about how it works, the more I’ve concluded that it is a bad system. Let me explain.

Merit assessment is something the university administration does in order to manage QUFA Members. QUFA has no stake in merit except to ensure that it is not done in an arbitrary or abusive fashion. (For instance, see the provisions in Articles 28.3.7 and 28.3.8 of the Collective Agreement (CA) that specify that you have to be evaluated only on the performance of duties you have been assigned.) In other words, 12s and 15s are not benefits that QUFA has negotiated for its Members, but whatever fairness and clarity the merit process possesses are. When QUFA and the university negotiated the COVID-19 variances to the CA, the university committed to giving “due consideration” to the effects of the pandemic disruptions on teaching and research in order to keep assessment fair. In the fall, the administration
informed QUFA that it was not prepared to say what “consideration” would mean, and would not be prepared to do so until the full effects of the disruption could be assessed. This position is reasonable, while the claim that somehow the university should immediately develop criteria to assess remote teaching, cancelled talks, and disrupted research involving human subjects would have been unreasonable, so QUFA agreed that the assessment of merit for 2020 could be postponed for a year. All Members are entitled to fairness, none is entitled to a particular merit score.

All Members are, however, entitled to annual career development (CD) increases. A great deal of confusion arises from the way that, at Queen’s, our salary model imbricates CD and merit increases. CD is a normal feature of most academic salary models, which provide for the built-in escalation of salaries in recognition of increased experience and capabilities as careers progress. This escalation is distinct from across-the-board (ATB) increases, which are intended to prevent salary from losing value against inflation. Sometimes CD takes the form of a step system that tops out at ceilings for each rank. Our salary model, which was established before certification in the mid 1980s, instead aims for a curve that was intended to move average salaries, by means of annual increments amplified by junior increments and diminished by senior abatements, from relatively low starting salaries to end-of-career salaries that were then worth 2.5 times the starting salary in constant dollars. This curve was to be achieved by adding an amount determined annually. Now that determination is achieved by a formula that prescribes both a minimum (the number of full-responsibility and continuing adjunct faculty x 1.06) and a maximum (the same number of faculty x 1.09). The point of this formula is to ensure that, in theory, there is no need for “donors”; i.e., some people don’t have to be given 7s in order for other people to be given 12s and 15s, as was the case before 1999. There is a band of possible points to acknowledge that some years may be more glorious than others.

The reality of this system is somewhat different from the theory. For one thing, as every Head knows, it feels like there is a constant scarcity of points. One reason is that that every year, I believe, the university seeks to land the merit plane precisely in the middle of the band, depriving the system of the elasticity it is supposed to have. It should be noted, however, that although the university generally has historically used restraint in giving scores below 10, there is a category of systemic donors: continuing adjuncts. Their numbers bulk up the number to be multiplied by 1.06 or 1.09, but they very seldom get merit in excess of 10. The reason is that the same clauses that protect them from being capriciously dinged with a 7 for not doing research and service they have not been assigned serve as an excuse to not give them merit above 10; the university will only evaluate them on the work they are appointed to do (teaching) and the criteria set out in 42.2.2.10 pretty much ensure that you can’t get above 10 without exceptional research or service. So, the extra points that the formula derives from their numbers are mostly assigned to full-responsibility faculty.

However, I think the source of the constant dissatisfaction the merit process produces is not a lack of points so much as the tension between its two quite different aims: to move all salaries along a predetermined curve, and to reward exceptional achievements or punish exceptional underperformance. Tightly imbricating the routine adjustment of all salaries and the identification of exceptions, the merit process necessitates universal, ongoing, fine-grained comparison, the adjudication of thousands of micro-
contests in which most people who have done their jobs well will be losers. The tensions in the system are further complicated by the heterogeneity of the work it seeks to compare: poetry books, industry-funded engineering projects, design and evaluation of programs for addressing food insecurity, musical compositions, etc. And that’s just research. Teaching and service are also supposed to be assessed and exceptional contributions rewarded, per Article 42.2.2.10, although how to assess teaching is especially tricky given the notorious biases and unreliability of student surveys. It’s an understatement to say that these achievements and kinds of work are inherently very different: it’s not so much apples and oranges, as tennis balls, porcupines, shipping containers, neon signs, and whipped cream.

However, the problem here is not only one of qualitative differences in achievements but also of different temporalities. Merit assessments occur biennially and now result in a score for each year. If the evaluation of teaching is based primarily on scores from student surveys or the winning of a teaching prize (questionable assessment practices), teaching performance falls neatly into merit time. It’s a bit trickier if what you want to present is an innovative course developed over some years but still that can be made to work. Many labs tick along, producing findings, posting preprints, and publishing papers in quantity and at speed, and principal investigators are constantly meeting with success or failure in granting competitions.

When we were negotiating the biennial cycle, an experienced senior administrator in STEM observed that we could just extend the assessment period without much effect because people tend to get the same merit score from year to year because productivity levels are steady-state. However, this is not at all true in humanities disciplines. (Giving in on this point was not my finest hour as chief negotiator.) In my field, the gold standard is still the single-authored book, and publishers caution authors against “pre-publication” in journal articles. (Usually two articles are okay.) It is not unusual for ten to fifteen years to elapse between one book and the next, and for there to come a point where you realize you have to stop accepting invitations for talks or one-off articles (which means have nothing to put under “Research” in your biennial report) if you are ever going to finish the book. When you finish, though, you are awarded with a 15! It was the humanities book cycle that jammed the biennial cycle and sent us back to the problem in negotiations in 2019.

When the parties agreed to defer the merit process for 2020, the same clash of temporalities led to dismay among some Members who had published books in 2020 and now had to wait another year for already deferred recognition. Why, several people asked, could they not be assessed now, even if others chose to defer in light of 2020 disruptions? The answer is because, as I have explained here, the money available to the system is determined based on complement, so the system requires universal comparison. Some of these people also observed that the disruptions of 2020 weren’t going to show up until several years from now. Yes for some, but that depends on the specific temporality of your work. A drop in the productivity of women as a result of the pandemic registered immediately in the sciences.¹

Students’ feelings about remote teaching will register in fall QSSETs, there were no USATs for Winter 2020, and the childcare nightmares of summer and fall 2020 will have impacted our Members’ teaching. For many, what happened in 2020 will be immediately discernible on their reports.

Nevertheless, I think there is an important intuition in these queries about how the system ought to work. If career development and the rewards for significant achievement were separate, so that CD just ticked along and significant achievement was recognized in money prizes that people applied for, then we could have proceeded as normal. Reporting to the Head or Dean would be an opportunity for a formative check-in, a disclosure about what the pandemic had done to your work, and maybe some advice about how to get past the damage. Those for whom long labours had come to fruition in 2020, or who had built an impressive portfolio of achievements, could apply for merit awards, while others took a pass. The different temporalities of research could be accommodated because what was being rewarded was always long achievement, not the fact that this year you were doing better than the person in the next office. Such awards should not go to base salary, because there is no good reason why early achievement should be worth more than later ones, a bias in our system that likely discriminates against women with children. A couple of my correspondents expressed scepticism about whether the university could in fact meaningfully “give due consideration” to the effects of the pandemic because you can’t reward work that didn’t get done. I share this scepticism. The pandemic has laid bare every kind of systemic discrimination going. While our Members will eventually get back on their feet, our merit system rewards winners in whatever lottery is running, so the lucky will get luckier. It doesn’t have to be this way, and we don’t have to call demoralization “management.”

Note


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FYI
Performance Reporting and Merit Assessment: Further Changes
Queen’s and QUFA have agreed to further amendments to the 2021 round of performance reporting and merit assessment

By Leslie Jermyn
Executive Director, QUFA

You’ll recall that instead of this being a biennial assessment of 2019 and 2020 performance, the parties agreed that only 2019 would be assessed this year; 2020 will be assessed, with 2021, in the next round in 2022. The QUFA Infosheet explaining this change can be found on QUFA’s Web site.¹

Queen’s and QUFA have agreed to further amendments to the 2021 round of performance reporting and merit assessment as follows.

2019 Reports: Deadline Extended to 15 February 2021
Queen’s and QUFA have agreed that those who owe a 2019 performance report on 1 February 2021 may take until 15 February 2021 to submit their report. Hopefully this eases the pressure on those who have struggled to balance childcare, the resumption of teaching duties, or other challenges. Those who submitted their 2019 report last year do not have to do anything further.

2020 Reports: Not Required this Year
Pre-tenure and some special-appointment Members were also expected to submit a report for 2020, though not yet for merit assessment. The parties have agreed that this is not required at this time. Year 2020 reports will not be required until 2022. Given the extraordinary events of 2020, the parties agreed that Members need time to catch their breath, process what happened, and determine how their work was impacted. QUFA will raise this issue again, and provide more guidance as we draw closer to 2022.

If you have already submitted a 2020 report, you may consider your submission to be a preliminary version, and you may revise and resubmit next year if you choose.

Heads of Units: Heads should discuss the issue of administrative merit with their Deans directly.

Faculty 180: Please be reminded that the use of Faculty 180 to create your report is optional; every Faculty must have an alternate form you can use.

Note

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ANNOUNCEMENT
Benefits Deadlines

Childcare Support Plan
The deadline to submit an application is 1 February 2021. More information and the application form can be found on the Human Resources Web site: http://www.queensu.ca/humanre sources/total-compensation/employee-benefits/childcare-support-plan

Fund for Scholarly Research and Creative Work and Professional Development (Adjuncts)
The deadline to submit an application is 8 February 2021. More information and the application form can be found on the Faculty Relations Web site: https://www.queensu.ca/facultyrelations/queens-university-faculty-association-qufa/professional-support-programs/fund-scholarly-research-and

Tuition Support Plan
The deadline to submit an application is 28 February 2021. More information and the application form can be found on the Human Resources Web site: http://www.queensu.ca/humanre sources/total-compensation/employee-benefits/tuition-support-plan
IN MEMORIAM
Sandra Casey
(1939-2020)

By Brenda Reed
Head Librarian, Education Library

Those who knew librarian Dr Sandra Casey were saddened to hear of her death on 28 December 2020, sixteen years after her retirement as Head of the Education Library. She worked at Queen’s University Libraries from 1970 to 2004. Sandy, as she was known to her colleagues, was an educator at heart with a passion for teaching and learning that led to significant contributions to the Education Library and the Faculty of Education. She was also active in QUFA and served in several leadership roles.

In the early 2000s, as the Faculty of Education’s Continuing Teacher Education division was moving online, Sandy was a member of the course design team that developed the first series of online courses. Sandy wrote the three courses in the teacher librarianship program, and she continued to teach those courses for many years. Through this teaching, Sandy became known by teachers across Ontario, and soon it was teacher librarians who had completed the courses under Sandy’s leadership who took on the teaching of those courses themselves. It seems that once you encountered Sandy’s enthusiasm for learning it was hard not to get caught up in her excitement for pursuing new interests.

Perhaps Sandy’s greatest legacy to the Education Library was the close connection she nurtured between the Faculty of Education and the Queen’s Library, and especially the professional and personal ties that she encouraged and built between the Education faculty and staff, and everybody who worked in the Education Library. Sandy strove to make the Education Library an integral part of the Faculty of Education and its programs. Her visibility and leadership in the Faculty of Education included several years as Chair of Faculty Board. In 2002, the then Dean of Education, Dr Rosa Bruno-Jofré, successfully nominated Sandy for the OCUFA Academic Librarianship Award.


Sandra Casey’s obituary can be found in the Kingston Whig Standard.¹

QUFA mourns the loss of Dr Sandra Casey, seen here at the Queen’s University Libraries staff barbecue in 2003.

Note

¹https://thewhig.remembering.ca/obituary/sandra-casey-1081341772

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GRIEVANCE CORNER
Early Resolution of Harassment Conflicts
QUFA supports the introduction of an early resolution process, but QUFA must have a place at the table

By Peggy Smith
Grievance Officer, QUFA

The university has posted a new Harassment and Discrimination Policy and Related Procedures on the Secretariat Web page for community consultation. 1 Paragraph 14 of the complaint procedure introduces an early resolution process to resolve conflicts.

Conflicts in the workplace between two or more people can often spiral out into larger issues. Supervisors and workers or co-workers who once had good working relationships no longer trust each other. People take sides, relationships fall apart, and positions harden.

For this reason, QUFA supports the introduction of an early resolution process. The language of Article 19 of the Collective Agreement (CA) reflects this joint commitment, agreeing to the use of “every reasonable effort to resolve grievances informally, amicably, and promptly.”

However, for the reasons set out below, QUFA has advised the university that, if Faculty Relations is involved in any way in an early resolution process that involves one or more QUFA Members, there must also be a place set at the table for QUFA.

Any Resolution Must Be Enforceable: No settlement or resolution is enforceable or binding unless those who have agreed to the resolution have been provided with legal advice about any rights they are giving up and the impact on their future rights that could result from the agreement. QUFA Members are provided with that advice by their union. An agreement that contravenes existing rights in the CA, or that has unanticipated negative impacts on the rights of other Members, and has not been signed off on by QUFA, can be struck down.

Know Your Rights: You may agree to a settlement that is less than what you are entitled to by law or under the CA. If QUFA is unaware of the agreement, we may not be able to grieve your right to the greater benefit at a future time.

The Agreement Should Be Equitable and Not Discriminatory: QUFA strives to ensure all Members are treated equally, regardless of personal characteristics or what department you work in. You should not be treated differently from how Members in the same situation have been treated. QUFA will help to protect your interests if we are included in all discussions.

The Bottom Line
Know your rights. It is your decision as to when to invite QUFA to the table during the early resolution process.

However, any final decision or agreement must be brought to the attention of QUFA for final review and authorization to ensure Member rights are protected. Questions and comments are welcome.

Note

1 The Policy and call for feedback is here: https://www.queensu.ca/secretariat/policies/consultation-harassment-discrimination.

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Coronavirus Vaccines vs Mutants
As the COVID-19 virus mutates, vaccination efforts increase in Canada and across the globe

By Leda Raptis
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The new coronavirus keeps spreading and killing. The original virus that appeared in China was bad enough, but alas, coronaviruses are able to slowly change their RNA sequence as they keep replicating. In February 2020, a new mutant (D614G) started to spread in Europe. The mutation is on the “spike” of the virus and does not cause any worse symptoms than the original one, but it replicates and spreads much faster. For this reason, it became the dominant strain within a few months. By September 2020, another strain arose in England. It has 17 different mutations on the spike, but one (N501Y) makes it grow and spread even faster. It showed up in Canada in December, and it is taking over quickly. Yet another mutation appeared in Brazil this past month.

How can the virus be fought? Existing drugs (Remdesivir) are not very effective. The Regeneron antibodies showed promise, but they are very difficult to mass produce and are extremely expensive. The only hope is a vaccine.

There are two categories of vaccine in use and many more in clinical trials. For the first time, a new approach has been used: to inject mRNA for the spike protein. Once injected, the mRNA will be converted into spike protein and antibodies produced to protect against the virus. There are two vaccines of this kind, by Pfizer and Moderna companies.

Another type of vaccine is a recombinant of a harmless virus (Chimpanzee Adenovirus) and the spike protein gene. Once injected, the spike protein is produced and antibodies are made against it. This vaccine is made by Astra-Zeneca, and trials showed that it is about 90% effective. It is much cheaper to manufacture compared to the mRNA vaccines, and it does not require deep freezing.

Canada has purchased both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, and vaccinations started at KGH on 14 January 2021. First to be vaccinated will be hospital workers, and residents and workers of long-term care facilities. Then, everybody else will be vaccinated, starting with older ages, hopefully around April, when one million doses a week will be available. Hopefully, by October we will all be covered.

The Pfizer vaccine needs storage at -80°C, while the Moderna vaccine can be stored at -20°C. They are both around 95% effective if two doses are given a month apart.

Since all three vaccines do not contain the whole genome, contracting COVID-19 from the vaccine is impossible. Side effects are redness at the injection site or, rarely, an allergic reaction that shows up within 15 to 30 minutes. If you have certain allergies, have your EpiPen ready!

Unfortunately, producing enough vaccine for several billion people around the globe is a Herculean task. As the virus replicates at the same time, mutations appear that are selected for quickly. The big question arising is whether the vaccine is effective against the mutant viruses. The answer, for now, is yes. However, as the virus infects and replicates, new mutations appear, and the fear is that we may need a new vaccine. Designing it and scaling it up will take a few months, and by then the virus may have mutated again. The solution is to slow down the replication of the virus, and to vaccinate as quickly as possible, to catch up. In fact, the new strain from Brazil looks like it may be able to undermine the vaccines’ immunity protection. Fortunately, this mutation has not yet been found in Canada.

The pandemic exposed a big problem: why does Canada not have enough capacity for vaccine production? Canada used to be a pioneer in vaccine research (e.g., Connaught in Toronto). Is it time to go back to the future? It will save a few thousand lives….

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HEALTH AND SAFETY
Combat Home-Office Monotony: Explore a New Trail
Walking is great exercise, especially during a global pandemic, and the Kingston area boasts a multitude of excellent walking trails to explore.

By Monika Holzschuh
Health and Safety Officer, QUFA

The new term brings more long hours in front of our computers, and the stay-at-home order further reduces what activities we are allowed to do, so enjoying the outdoors has become the highlight of my weeks. The mental and physical health benefits of spending time in nature are well documented, so let’s head out!

To combat the monotony that working at home can entail, you might want to go out of your usual walking routine and try a new hike. Here is a list of trails in and around our beautiful city, which hopefully includes at least one that is new to you.

Keep these guidelines in mind to keep yourself and others safe:

• Stay local within your municipality and region.
• Be prepared to change your destination if you find the trail or trailhead busy. Walk outside of the very active hours if you are able.
• Practice physical distancing, and bring a mask in case you cannot maintain two metres’ distance.
• Stay home if you are feeling unwell.

You are likely familiar with the waterfront trails of Lake Ontario Park\(^1\) and Lemoine Point Conservation Area,\(^2\) as well as Little Cataraqui Creek Conservation Area.\(^3\) But have you been to Parrot’s Bay Conservation Area?\(^4\) Six kilometres of trails across woodlands, wetlands, and fields around a small bay of Lake Ontario await you, just west of Amherstview.

A friend and I have recently decided to complete the Rideau Trail\(^5\) this year, and exploring a blue (side) loop, we walked around Kingston’s Inner Harbour. The trail\(^6\) starts at City Hall, heading north past the Wolfe Island Ferry dock, and then west to Wellington Street. From Doug Fluhrer Park, follow the marked trail along the Cataraqui River, around the Wooden Mill, and further north. The main trail will turn west and cross Montreal Street at Railway Street, but another path continues. You will soon arrive at a totem pole that marks the entrance to Belle Park and to Belle Island, an area that the city is currently redeveloping with plans for, among other things, more hiking trails, as well as educational resources on the history of the park and its Indigenous presence and heritage.

This trail is actually part of the K and P Trail,\(^7\) built on a railway track that was to go from Kingston to Pembroke. It was in use from 1875 on, and brought agricultural products into town, ore and timber to Kingston’s industries, and passengers to the K and P Station, now our tourist office. The line was gradually abandoned starting in the 1950s, and the last small section closed in 1987.

Another scenic section of the K and P starts just north of the 401, west of Sydenham Road, on McIvor Road (continue past the 401 west ramp to a parking lot on the north side). The trail runs adjacent to farmers’ fields at first, then climbs slightly into a forested area. The Rideau Trail turns north off the K and P there, through forest and more rugged terrain, but you can continue along the clearly marked K and P Trail for a total of 21 kilometres of the Kingston portion. The K and P Trail goes on through Frontenac County for another 55 kilometres to Sharbot Lake, and this stretch forms part of the Trans Canada Trail.

All of these trails, with the exception of Parrot’s Bay and some trails in Little Cataraqui, can be accessed with strollers.

I hope this brief article has made you curious to explore the K and P Trail, the Rideau Trail, or other trails wherever you are.

Have fun and stay safe!

Notes
\(^1\)https://www.cityofkingston.ca/residents/recreation/parks-trails/lake-ontario
\(^2\)The south entrance off Front Road is usually less busy: https://crca.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016-LPCA-Brochure.pdf.
\(^4\)https://crca.ca/wp-content/uploads/pb_directionmap.gif
\(^5\)https://www.rideautrail.org/

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