

It's Our Preference

Response to the Administration Negotiation Team's Article 41 Proposal July 11, 2008

Introduction & Context: Article 41 guarantees faculty preference for classes, during both the regular academic year and the summer sessions. On June 30, the Administration's Team presented a proposal to significantly limit the full-time faculty's summer preference to only 3 credit hours. They argued that preference needs to be more fair to all faculty who teach at Western. Specifically, graduate assistants and part-time faculty need to have more opportunity to teach in the summer, and so we -- the full time faculty -- need to have less opportunity. In other words, we must give up half of our preference for teaching in the Summer Sessions. Their explanation included the point that in many cases, part-timers are more qualified to teach classes than full-time faculty. They also asserted that because Western has a contract with the graduate teaching assistants, we of the WMU-AAUP have to change our contract to make sure that they get the classes they need. (Please note that under Michigan labor law, it would be illegal for Western to negotiate a contract with one group that invalidates a contract they have already signed with another.) During the same meeting, they proposed to eliminate the 5 year limit on one year renewable term appointments because it would make it more convenient for them to manage Western; this proposal in itself would be a horrible blow to tenure.

On July 2, we rejected all of their changes to Article 41 and asserted instead that the text of Article 41 must remain unchanged from the way it reads in the current Agreement.

What follows are the specifics of our explanation to the administration team for rejecting their proposal.

Statement on Our Preference: Why are we proposing the original version of Article 41? Because we see the administration's preference proposal as an assault against our union, as an attempt to dismantle our contract, jointly constructed over multiple negotiations, and co-operatively maintained over many years, by responsible administrators and the WMU-AAUP. This broad assault characterizes not only the reduction of full-time faculty preference, but multiple other proposals made recently by the administration. We see all these proposals as detrimental to our students and the parents of our students because they are part of a process of degrading the instructional quality and long term reputation of our university.

Given the rather strange explanation the administration gave for weakening the preference article -- suggesting that the quality of education is harmed by having full time faculty teach courses rather than part timers -- we have to assume that the real reason is simply to lower the costs of instruction by increasing the number of lower paid instructors during the summer sessions.

Most departments already have guidelines that assure fair distribution of summer courses to full-time faculty according to our preferences, without the one size fits all approach suggested by the administration's version of Article 41. With our entire faculty already getting relatively poor pay, the administration, by limiting our preference for summer

classes, is lowering full-time faculty income still more. The administration persists in wanting to move work from unit faculty to still lower paid non-unit, part-time faculty.

Certainly, no one wants to denigrate the important contributions of part time faculty to our university. Indeed, it was over the objections of the WMU-AAUP that the administration, in the 1990s, abruptly took away part-timers' access to benefits and denied part-time faculty any protections. The administration has no large scale interest in the well-being of part-time instructors; instead, it is only in this area of summer teaching, where profit margins can be markedly increased, that the administration claims to be watching out for the interests of part-time faculty. But they are sacrificing our interests, our preference, in making this dubious claim.

The attempt to save a few dollars by sacrificing long term relationships with established faculty, by decreasing services and lowering production standards, is a disastrous policy. Such practices degrade the standards of our university, and students will see through it. This process of squandering our resources and reputation has already led to declines in student enrollment. These practices need to be changed, not exacerbated. We need a stronger commitment to more full-time faculty.

Successful businesses, when facing economic difficulties don't cut costs in ways that would endanger their reputation. Instead they find ways to improve quality and service, and make sure everyone is aware of the improvements. Cuts that hurt quality, sacrifice long-term relationships, and decrease services, lead to business death spirals, a series of

downsizings, in which each decline is followed by still more stringent cuts. That is not the Western that we, the faculty, are working to create and preserve. We believe in strengthening the Western Michigan University brand by expanding excellence, not by saddling up. Expanding excellence is the pathway to recovery from the problems we are facing.

We are disappointed by the administration's proposals in general. We perceive them as anti-union and detrimental to faculty, as oriented towards destroying agreements achieved over years. What's worse, if enacted, they would lead to a lowering of instructional quality. Many of these proposals are unacceptable. No negotiating team would recommend them, and even if they did, our faculty would never ratify them. We have come to the table this summer ready to solve problems. Almost none have been solved; many have been exacerbated. At this rate, it's looking like a long hard process ahead. We ask that the administration team change its tone, its method of conceptualizing the issues, and its proposals, in an effort to move us toward common ground.