David Graham
Vice-President Academic & Provost
University of Ottawa

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> "As the protagonist in David Lodge's most recent campus novel, *Deaf Sentence*, explains to a graduate student who complains that her supervisor is never available: 'He probably just doesn't have enough time… He's probably too busy attending meetings, and preparing budgets, and making staff assessments, and doing all the other things that professors have to do nowadays instead of **thinking**' (94)." *The Slow Professor. Challenging the Culture of Speed in Academy*, Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber (U of T Press, 2016: 4, our emphasis).

Dear Mr. Vice President,

By way of this letter, we wish to bring to your attention the urgent need for additional support staff. At present, professors are overburdened with bureaucratic, computer, and accounting tasks that fall outside their remit. These tasks reduce the time we can devote to the three pillars of our profession: research, teaching, and public service.

Major changes made by the University of Ottawa in recent years, much in line with other North American universities, have affected not only the working conditions of professors, but also the reflective nature of their work. Many of the associated changes have become a source of stress for them[1] (Appendix A, attached to this letter, provides numerous examples of these impacts).

Initially, we were willing to accept that these structural changes, once fully implemented, might eventually help us in our work. It is now clear that they won't and that they are signs of a more fundamental problem. It relates closely with the organizational culture that has come to predominate in recent years. We have noticed a gradual increase in the amount of time we spend on basic administrative and coordination tasks like translating, formatting, and sending letters, as well as submitting grades, managing grant applications and research expenses reimbursements, converting currencies, reserving rooms, creating posters, and so on.

Adding to the challenge is the fact that many of these tasks are done online, requiring us to familiarize ourselves with new software platforms. This requires considerable effort, which in many cases is a waste of time as systems frequently change. In the face of these administrative, software, and financial mazes, our initial reaction has been to turn to support staff only to learn that they too are also overwhelmed by these challenges and the need to find a way forward.

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[1] This finding is national according to a study carried out by CAUT (Cantano, 2007)

Given that all administrative decisions must now go through the online system, forms that until recently only required select information and a signature now require complete information including information that is not easily at hand and that must be searched out or asked of our students. In cases of the latter, we have to write to students or arrange appointments with them to get the information.

In the past, we brought research-related bills to the proper coordinating officer, who would do the necessary work and simply have us sign any necessary documents. Now, we spend hours trying to remember which of the forms we need to use, locating the form, understanding how it works, and filling it out — all while trying not to forget anything. We also have to understand the accounting and computer systems to navigate cryptic financial statements and questionnaires that come up on our screen when we ask for research expense reimbursements.

Central administration claims that the University of Ottawa is running a deficit. But do they realize that professors are spending considerable time filling out forms? University leadership wants professors to apply for research grants in order to improve our rankings and to retain promising students by offering them research assistant positions. Do they know that the demanding bureaucratic procedures put in place discourage rather than encourage them to go down that route?

How can anyone justify the fact that professors are spending more time on paperwork and using various electronic systems? Even a conservative estimate of the costs associated with using only the CONCUR system (e-travel) within the Faculty of Social Sciences yields the following:

- Minimum of 1 hour/request x 3 requests/year x 251 professors = 753 hours.
  - 753 hours x $82/hour (based on an average annual salary of $150,000/year) = $61,746
- Maximum of 2 hours/request x 4 requests/year x 251 professors = 2008 hours
  - 2008 hours x $82/hour = $164,656
- **Average: $113,201 per year**

Considering that, on average, members of support staff earn less than $75,000 per year, which is well below $113,201 per year noted above, it is certainly not cost-effective to ask us to do this work.

It is important to note that members of support staff – also under increased pressure since the restructuring of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (FGPS) and the more general aforementioned restructuring was completed – have not been replaced during periods of illness in certain faculties. Yet, medical leaves of absence are on the rise:

> For many weeks now the Faculty has faced a high level of absenteeism within our support staff due to medical leaves. Because of the uncertainty associated with medical leaves it has been difficult but, be assured that we are working arduously at finding solutions (Nicole Ouimette, Chief Administrative Officer, Faculty of Arts, July 20, 2017. See Appendix B).

The decision not to replace support staff can only have a very negative impact on other members of support staff (as well as professors) who inevitably face an increased workload. Students also suffer as they are confronted with closed doors and longer response times.

The new culture within the university focuses on work quantity rather than work quality in terms of number of publications, grants, students supervised, and so on. The flawed culture we presently see is part of a private sector logic:

> In the past two decades, our work has changed due to the rise in contractual positions, expanding class sizes, increased use of technology, downloading of clerical tasks onto faculty, and the shift to managerialism – all part of the corporatization of the university (Berg and Seeber, 2016: 3-4).

We believe this is extremely dangerous when it comes to the development and the transmission of knowledge, not to mention the health of professors as well as their collegiality. Universities are places of free and critical thought; they are the pillars of any democracy worthy of the name.

In conclusion, we ask you, as Vice-President Academic & Provost, to show leadership in the face of the current situation by **hiring staff able to sufficiently support all professors so that they can devote their time to *their* work** — the work they were trained to do and that they agreed to do by accepting professor positions at the University of Ottawa.

In anticipation of a favourable response, we thank you for attending to this matter.

Respectfully Yours,

Dominique Bourque, Ph.D
Direction intérimaire I Interim director
Institut d'études féministes et de genre
Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies
Professeur agrégé I Associate professor
Département de français

Chantal Laroche, Ph.D
Professeure titulaire/Full Professor
Programme d'audiologie et d'orthophonie/
Audiology and SLP Program
École des Sciences de la réadaptation/School of Rehabilitation Sciences
Faculté des Sciences de la santé/Faculty of Health Sciences

Andrea Martinez, Ph.D
Professeure titulaire/Full Professor
Institut d'études féministes et de genre & École de développement international et mondialisation
Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies & School of International Development and Global Studies
Faculté des Sciences sociales | Faculty of Social sciences

Dominique Masson, Ph.D
Professeure titulaire / Full Professor,
Institut d'études féministes et de genre et École d'études sociologiques et anthropologiques /
Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies, and School of Sociological and Anthropological Studies

Donatille Mujawamariya, Ph.D
Professeure titulaire,
Directrice de l'URECS
Faculté d'éducation

Denise L. Spitzer, Ph.D
Professeure titulaire – Professor
Directrice adjointe intérimaire et responsable des études supérieures– Acting Associate Director and Graduate Studies Coordinator
*Institut d'études féministes et de genre-*Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies

Ivy Lynn Bourgeault, Ph.D
CIHR Chair in Gender, Word and
Health Human Resources
Telfer School of Management

Christabelle Sethna, Ph.D
Full Professor
Feminist and Gender Studies
Faculty of Social Sciences

Luisa Veronis, Ph.D
Associate Professor,
Chair of Graduate Studies
Geography, Environment and Geomatics
Faculty of Arts

cc :   Directors of all units and departments within all faculties.
       Deans of all faculties.
       Association of Professors of the University of Ottawa (APUO).

APPENDIX A
CONCRETE EXAMPLES

Online Tasks

Since 2015, restructuring the University website, adding and installing major software (VirtuO, Concur/e-travel, Console, uoCampus, Brightspace), and recently abolishing the FGPS have all weighed heavily on our already busy schedules as we learn, adapt to, and perform new tasks.

Take, for example, the issue of submitting student grades in December 2016. Unable to respond effectively to our questions concerning related processes (previously done by clerks and coordinators), the technicians were also too busy to help in person and then unable to see that we followed their detailed instructions to the letter for the simple reason that we all do not have the same computers, same software, same security, and so on. As a result, many of us manually entered grades without knowing that this task was not mandatory as emails on the topic suggested. One colleague entered 300 grades one-by-one for a first year class.

Another example involves the computer system meant to take charge of several tasks previously performed by FGPS personnel. Many of us believe that the system is impractical and the closure of the FGPS misses the mark:

> The new system to register graduate students who are going to defend is painful. It adds more work and unease to the whole process.

> The consequences of closing Grad Studies are still not worked out. I have a student who has submitted her PhD in X and I just received an email as to why I haven't contacted the external examiner; of course, according to the rules, the supervisor is not supposed to be in contact with the external examiner, but no one seems to know if that still applies and if so, whose responsibility is it?

> I can concur with the difficulties for students presenting their theses – the interface for the program is not only not user friendly nor intuitive, there seem to be some significant delays in getting the forms up. For example, I went in to finalize a student's submission and there was nothing on my dashboard so I had to send a series of messages including screen shots of what was available to me to get something on my dashboard. As for expense reimbursements (aarrgghh), I am 'lucky' in the sense that my research staff shield me from the worst of that, but then again, I am using research staff time to do administrative as opposed to research tasks – and those rules constantly change, often with little notice, and they suffer criticism and complaints from those they pass the forms along to down the line. Anyway, I concur with the sense of displeasure with the increasing administrivia we have to deal with.

The closure has led to an increase in our workload as well as that of the support staff in the various units. This includes performing additional administrative tasks pertaining to graduate studies, supporting graduate students through stressful bureaucratic procedures, learning to use off-the-shelf software, and increased work on student evaluation committees.

The new computer system forces professors and support staff to waste precious time navigating from window to window and from program to program. While we could previously use our specific trainings to do our work, we now all feel like we are working in unfamiliar territory. As one support staff member summarized the situation: "I am sorry that uoCampus is so complex. We are also strongly affected by it."

Support Staff

Recently, a research management service within one of the University's faculties spent three months looking for $5,000 in donations that a professor had obtained for some of their academic work. This professor had to write several emails and knock on several doors before the money was found. One visibly exhausted employee was forced to admit that "unfortunately I cannot help you", adding that the professor should "please complain to management about the situation, because we can't take it anymore."

In a message received this winter from Financial Resources Office and entitled "E-Travel (Concur) *has gone* paperless!," we were given the following good news: "Faculty and staff members who submit expense claims in Concur no longer need to send their original receipts to their financial office." In other words, these receipts must now be submitted electronically. However, in order to do away with the physical copies of the receipts, they must first be digitized. Who will do this work? The "support" staff is now so overwhelmed by new tasks resulting from the closure of the FGPS that no one is asking for digitized receipts.

Concerning support staff, one of our colleagues quite rightly noted that

> It would be useful to do a gender-based analysis. Not only have professors seen their administrative workload grow, support staff members (almost exclusively women) now find themselves overloaded with work. The new way of doing things is profoundly unfair for everyone and for administrative assistants in particular. This is not incompatible with the request for additional resources, but rather strengthens the request.

What about the decision not to replace staff on maternity leave? What does this mean for the working conditions of those who remain behind? Moreover, what message does it send to the entire department and to the students who witness such practices about how the university views maternity and women? Because of such practices, will women feel additional pressure when they become pregnant? And will the rest of the staff become worried when they hear news about a co-worker being pregnant?

The same challenges exist when a unit coordinator becomes seriously ill and is not replaced for the summer. Who should do their job? What impact does this have on the quality of work that must be done in spite of everything? Can you imagine the impacts of delays, gaps, missed deadlines, and errors on the students, the professors, and the administration?

Other Working Conditions

Recent increases in class enrolment in some faculties will only further limit the time we have to contribute to the advancement of knowledge. We must remember that this is a university's primary mission and that it is only possible when there is time to debate ideas. Yet, in many departments we are now so consumed by our new responsibilities — stuck behind our screens — that we barely see one another except only briefly in the corridors or when gathering for administrative meetings. Work overload and isolation undermine dialogue and reflection. They also increase the risk of internal divisions and conflict.

The isolation in which we find ourselves also negatively affects our students, particularly since they also find the current situation very frustrating. Below is a message from a student who manually completed and printed a report, and had her director fill out her section, only to be told that she had to start all over again using the online process:

> As discussed earlier, I have completed my progress report through the online system and now need for you to go online and approve it. This is quite frustrating, as I was given no warning that the process would change and could possibly now face delays in registering for next semester and, consequently, receiving my scholarship funds. Overall the system is not user-friendly. It is difficult to learn, even the most basic function like checking my balance. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to register, as I'm assuming the problem was that I've not yet filed my Progress Report, but that might not even be the issue! The new system, in my view, is a disaster and total waste of money on the part of the university.