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UVM faculty pushes for better pay

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Coming on the eve of negotiations for a new contract, the news conference wasn't exactly a display of saber rattling. But it was something like a show of force by the University of Vermont's full-time faculty union, which regaled a room full of people Wednesday with brief speeches, handouts and statistics underscoring distress in the teaching ranks.

The union's main message was that spending on tenure-track faculty has come up short in the face of UVM's growth in enrollment, resulting in excessive workloads and compromised educational quality for undergraduates.

The administration later said that UVM is ahead of schedule in expanding its tenure-track faculty in keeping with a 10-year strategic plan.

Noting that negotiations for a new faculty contract would begin this afternoon and staying mostly mum on the administration's bargaining stance, UVM spokesman Enrique Corredera said: "That is really the time both sides will have an opportunity to put their proposals on the table."

The union -- United Academics, representing about 700 full-time teachers, researchers, librarians and others -- seized an earlier opportunity to discuss some of its proposals.

One proposal was for the creation of a "faculty investment fund" -- a small percentage of UVM's salary base that would be reserved for new faculty hires in the departments that have borne the heaviest burdens under the higher enrollment. The fund would help address one of the union's key complaints: that growth in tenure-track faculty since 2001 (14 percent) has lagged behind enrollment growth (28 percent), with UVM relying more on part-timers and adjunct faculty, and with full-timers sometimes overworked. According to the administration, the student-faculty ratio was about 14 to 1 in 2002 and now is about 15 to 1; the stated goal is 16 to 1.

When the number of tenure-track faculty doesn't increase in proportion to enrollment, union president David Shiman said, "it affects the quality of academic life and each faculty member's professional and personal life, as more and more demands are made on them." His summary of those demands: "work harder, teach more students, get more grants, publish more."

Without revealing its own proposals, the administration did signal its view of the "faculty investment fund."

"We don't see a need for the establishment of a separate fund or source of revenue to fill new tenure-track positions," Corredera said, adding that new positions are built into the strategic plan, which calls for a net increase of 84 by 2013. He said 61 will have been added by next fall. Improving faculty and staff salaries, he said, is "a crucial element" of the administration's strategy.

United Academics' three-year contract expires June 30. Corredera pointed out that bargaining for the last two contracts has resulted in settlements satisfactory to both sides, and that "we feel pretty good" going into this negotiation.

Ross Thomson, associate professor of economics and the union's chief negotiator, said the United Academics' bargaining team had "a clear mandate" from members, based on three surveys and extensive consultations.

Even as tuition has risen 27 percent to 31 percent in the past five years, Thomson said, the share of that revenue going to faculty salaries has dropped 12 percent.

He acknowledged that the salary gap between UVM and peer institutions had diminished under the first contract, but he said a gap persists and the union will seek to reduce it and ask the administration to commit to a principle of convergence "over time" with salaries in national markets.

He said the union would push to add tenure-track faculty and to establish clear standards for what a faculty member has to do to keep a job or gain tenure.

While Shiman and others endorsed President Dan Fogel's vision of UVM as a "premier small research university," they warned that the quality of teaching -- the one-on-one faculty engagement and accessibility that UVM sees as a draw for prospective students -- can only suffer if tenure-track faculty growth doesn't keep pace with enrollment increases.

Two professors -- Judy Cohen (nursing) and Nancy Welch (English) -- detailed understaffing in their departments. Two supportive students said policies benefiting or stressing the faculty have the same effect on them.

They were all preaching to the choir, mostly. Union supporters nearly filled the room at the Davis Center.

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