

SEPTEMBER 26, 2008

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University of Vermont Faculty Union Approves New Three-Year Contract with UVM Administration

Burlington, VT – Late Thursday, September 25, 2008, United Academics' full-time faculty members overwhelmingly ratified a new three-year contract with the UVM administration. Almost 50% of all eligible full-time members participated in the ratification vote, returning a clear 214-to-1 vote of confidence and appreciation for the union and its negotiating team. United Academics had reached a tentative contract agreement with the University of Vermont after approximately 150 hours of negotiations spanning eight months, finally settling on mutually-agreeable language on September 4th.

The negotiating team was composed of Beth Mintz, (Sociology), Mary Peabody (Extension), Thom McEvoy (Rubenstein School), David Shiman (Education), with Ross Thomson (Economics) as chief negotiator.

The new contract will run until July 2011. It provides increases in parental leave, family leave, professional development funds available to faculty, and faculty salaries, which continue to lag behind comparable universities in the area and nationwide.

Beth Mintz, a Professor of Sociology and member of the UA negotiating team, said that she thinks "the new contract is terrific. Parental leave and family leave are among the highlights," and that on these issues, UVM now has "by far and away the best policy in the country."

Peter Spitzform, an Assistant Professor of the Library System and a member of UA's Delegate Assembly, added: "From my perspective, one of the most notable gains in this contract is that most – if not all – distinctions between tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty have been eliminated. In particular, the phased retirement only pertained to tenure-track faculty in past contracts, but is extended to all faculty with this contract. Of special note are the new parental leave provisions, which give 15 weeks (one full semester) of paid leave. The administration was proposing that the new benefit only pertain to tenure-track faculty, or faculty with multiple years of work at UVM. In the end, the benefit has been much more widely granted."

The new contract holds employees' contributions to health care costs at present percentage rates, for both active and retired faculty. Early administration proposals had increased retiree health care costs precipitously, a move United Academics fought vigorously.

Tony Bradley, a Professor of English whose impending retirement made that proposal especially worrisome, was particularly pleased with United Academics' success on holding down retiree

health care costs. “I think the administration didn’t want a public campaign,” he said, referring in part to the recent controversy surrounding UVM’s implementation and management of its wildly expensive PeopleSoft software package. “They knew we’d fight them tooth and nail – and shame on them!” he added.

Salaries for full-time faculty also received a substantial increase – 15% total over the next three years, broken down into 5% each year. UA negotiators and members felt adamant that faculty salaries at least keep pace with the ever-increasing rate of inflation and skyrocketing cost-of-living. With these increases, UVM’s administration showed its commitment to bringing faculty salaries into accord with comparable universities in the area and across the country. UVM competes with local and national universities to recruit the best and brightest new faculty, and all parties agree that closing the wage gap will help with those efforts.

UA’s lead negotiator, Ross Thomson, a Professor of Economics, reflected upon the lengthy process of negotiation and the contract reached by both sides. “I’m gratified,” Thomson said, “to see the administration and the union working so closely together to achieve our common goal of making UVM the premiere small research university in the country.”

But even with this progress, hurdles remain. Workload issues remain a sore point for both sides. The administration has increased undergraduate enrollment dramatically while correspondingly growing the size of the tenure-track much more slowly, if at all, in certain fields. In this environment, course sizes increase, the faculty’s advising loads rise, and the amount of time and individual attention faculty can spend with students decrease, though each of these have long been the hallmark and gold standard of the small-university experience.

Looking ahead, Steve Finner, a higher education consultant for United Professions AFT-Vermont, sees even more challenges for the part-time faculty at UVM, who will begin negotiations with the administration this winter. “For the part-time faculty,” Finner says, “the biggest challenges are the continuing practice by the administration of counting Continuing Education courses separately from department-assigned teaching.” Finner explains that for part-time faculty, “you can, and often do, end up teaching a full-time load without full-time pay or benefits.” Another challenge Finner sees is the thorny issue of health care benefits for part-time faculty, many of whom, as he notes, work full-time teaching jobs for the university.

The problem of how the UVM administration counts Continuing Education courses has been noted by the Vermont Legislature, which held hearings on the topic earlier this year. Following the hearings, the Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs Committee even went so far as to write a letter of concern to UVM President Daniel Fogel. What accord can be reached between the union and the administration on this contentious issue remains to be seen.

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INTERVIEWS ARE AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST.