



Dear UGFA Member,

This newsletter provides an update on our negotiations with the Administration on a COVID-19 Letter of Understanding (LOU).

The UGFA first approached the Administration on November 3, 2020, with the suggestion that we would need an LOU to govern the conditions of a return to campus in Fall 2021. We wrote to the Provost on February 5 of this year, indicating again that we believed an LOU would be necessary for Fall 2021 and offering to write a first draft. The Provost replied that she preferred to meet to discuss our “guiding principles.” We had this meeting on February 17. Since then, the UGFA has met with the Administration three more times (March 29, April 19, and May 4). The pace of negotiations has been slow: the UGFA typically turns around draft language in two or three days, whereas the Administration typically takes a week or even two weeks to return draft language to the UGFA.

We thought we were engaged in meaningful (if frustratingly slow) negotiations, and conveyed our concern to the Administration that their communications to the campus community about what Fall 2021 teaching would look like omitted any mention of the need to negotiate outcomes they may desire. On May 6, the University updated their website to include a [“Fall 2021 at the University of Guelph FAQs”](#) page. This publicly-accessible page strongly suggests that the Administration is able to already decide and announce many of the things the UGFA believes must be negotiated.

Despite the fact that we have not settled if and how classes might be taught in person, the Administration is “confident that we will have a significant number of face-to-face teaching and learning opportunities in the fall 2021 semester at all year levels.”

Despite the fact that we have not settled how to accommodate students while addressing workload and protecting the Academic Freedom and intellectual property rights of faculty, the Administration promises that “[r]emote learners will benefit from technology improvements made in many of our classrooms, allowing students to feel as though they are truly part of the class no matter where they are.”

Despite the fact that we have not settled how the legitimate health concerns of faculty might be addressed, the Administration proclaims, “We’re excited to welcome you to campus!”

At our May 4 meeting with the Provost, we read the following statement and said we would be communicating this to our members:

*The UGFA reaffirms its position that faculty members with health concerns should not be compelled to teach in person on campus in Fall 2021 if certain public safety conditions remain. These conditions include, but are not limited to, the presence of new variants and the vaccination status of members and students. The Association also reaffirms its position that individual faculty members have the Academic Freedom on how best they will teach their courses. This Academic Freedom cannot be overridden by administrative or departmental decisions. To date, the Administration's bargaining positions seem to be in contradiction with our principles above.*

*Given this, the UGFA is making the following requests of the Administration:*

- 1. that the Administration clarify its positions regarding our principles on members' health concerns and Academic Freedom;*
- 2. that the UGFA and the Administration will jointly arrange a meeting of the WDG Public Health, in May, to answer members questions; and,*
- 3. that the UGFA and the Administration jointly present a checklist to members, by May 7, in order to help determine what would make them feel safe to return to campus.*

The Administration reacted positively to the final two requests, and the UGFA hopes that both of these items come to fruition.

Other Ontario institutions have taken a much [different approach to Fall 2021](#) than that of the University of Guelph. Brock's Provost, for example, announced on April 7 that, "academic planning is rightly within the purview of academic departments and Faculties," and that "the subject matter experts are best positioned to rule on matters of scheduling and mode of delivery." On April 9, [Wilfrid Laurier announced](#) that "We are approaching the fall with cautious optimism." Both Wilfrid Laurier and [Carleton](#) have made it clear that they do not anticipate a full return to campus until Winter 2022 at the earliest. The language used by these universities is much different than that used by Guelph, which demonstrates neither respect for principles of collegial governance nor caution with regard to UGFA members.

The UGFA believes that most faculty members genuinely want to return to the classroom. We are eager to resume face-to-face (or at the very least, mask-to-mask) interactions on campus. The UGFA also knows that many of our members have legitimate concerns about being able to do so safely. The Administration continues to insist that a return to campus will be safe because most of us will have received at least one dose of the vaccine.

This runs contrary to advice from medical professionals. Dr. Eleanor Fish, professor of immunology at the University of Toronto and emerita scientist at the University Health Network, was [quoted](#) in the Globe and Mail (April 14, 2021) as saying "I would argue — and I suspect many of my colleagues who are immunologists and infectious disease specialists who are familiar with the immune response would also suggest — that until you have your second dose, you continue to follow all the guidelines for someone who is unvaccinated." Canada's Chief Public Health Officer reminded us this [weekend](#) that full vaccination means "reduction in your risk of transmission, but it doesn't necessarily eliminate your risk." Finally, physician-epidemiologist Dr. Nitin Mohan, a public health consultant and a faculty member at Western University, is worried about lifting restrictions too soon. Dr. Mohan told the [CBC](#), "This is not to fear-monger. This is very much factual and we have evidence from previous waves."

The UGFA maintains that the Administration's desire for a "vibrant on-campus experience" in Fall 2021 must be balanced with a consideration of the physical safety, mental health, workload, and Academic Freedom of UGFA members.