Clarification Regarding the Teaching Buyout Protocol

It has come to my attention that some members of faculty have concerns about the recently published protocol on teaching release (http://www.mcmaster.ca/vpacademic/documents/Protocol_on_Faculty_Recovery_for_Teaching_Release-Nov2014.pdf). In particular, faculty members are concerned about Scenario 3 in this document which deals with the case in which a faculty member wishes to buy out part of their teaching commitment using research funds. In order to address what appears to be some misunderstandings about the intent and application of this protocol I am writing to provide further clarification. This note is being sent to Chairs and Directors and will be posted on the Provost’s web site. You are of course welcome to discuss this and circulate to your colleagues as you see fit.

Let me first indicate that Scenario 3 in this document copies, without any substantive revision, the teaching buyout guidelines that were adopted by the Provost/Deans group in April 2010. This is therefore not new guidance but has rather been in place for some years. It is also important to note, as outlined in the first paragraph of the protocol, that the document constitutes “guidelines with the Responsible Executive ... having the discretion to alter these arrangements in special circumstances”.

This scenario provides a baseline for the situation in which a faculty member wishes to use research funds to be relieved of some of their teaching duties. It is predicated on the notion that faculty members carry a range of responsibilities, research and teaching being primary amongst them. Many faculty members carry out large research programs while carrying a full complement of teaching and service commitments. For this reason, the cost of teaching buyouts should, in some cases, represent the total cost of that portion of a faculty members teaching commitment that is being relieved. There are a variety of reasons why setting this as starting point makes sense. Perhaps the most compelling is that this is essentially the formula that we use when calculating the cost of out-of-Faculty teaching. Thus, for example, when a member of the Science Faculty dedicates one third of their teaching to offering a course to Engineering students this is valued at one third of their total compensation. This recognizes that in hiring faculty members the Science faculty expects them to teach and do research but that the funding of faculty positions is driven by student enrolment. In other words, this approach values the complete commitment of a faculty member to teaching and research.

It is important to recognize that Deans have the authority to alter the terms of Scenario 3 if they see fit. There will certainly be situations in which it is in the best interests of the Faculty for a professor to dedicate a larger that normal portion of their time, for a specified period of time, to research as a result of taking on a major project. In this case it is imperative that the professor discusses this with their chair or director and gets approval from the Dean prior to a proposal that would require this kind of adjusted commitment being submitted. The Dean can then decide if this is of sufficient priority to the Faculty to support and what level of buyout charge is both warranted and allowable within the grant. What we are saying is that the onus is on the faculty member to demonstrate the institutional value in having a reduced teaching commitment at a rate below the nominal buy-out rate. What this protocol explicitly prevents is a faculty member obtaining a grant and, after the fact, expecting that some of their teaching be replaced by a sessional lecturer, the cost of which is paid from the grant.
It should also be noted that, and this is also stated explicitly in the protocol, that “there are certain research awards that come with a requirement for reduced teaching load. Provided that the Dean is made aware of and agrees to such commitments at the time of application the university will honour all of these for our recipients”. A common example of this involves NSERC Industrial Research Chairs but there are a variety of others.

As a research-intensive member of faculty myself I am comfortable that this protocol creates a reasonable balance and sufficient flexibility to maintain McMaster’s position as a research-focused student-centred university. We must never lose sight of the imperative that teaching by research-active faculty is one of the most important things that distinguish us from our competitors. This protocol rests the authority with Deans to decide how best to enable their most research-engaged colleagues to reach high levels of research productivity. It champions the notion that a reduced teaching commitment is a privilege earned only by taking on a commitment to research that is well beyond the norm and only when it supports the strategic goals of the university.

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