

14<sup>th</sup> April 2022

Dear Academic Dean Cassidy and Sector Deans – Dean Bennett, Dean Carrier, and Dean Cole

Since the College first announced its intention to launch a “Pilot Project” for online teaching for the Winter 2022 semester, the Union has posed many questions concerning both the process for the Pilot Project and the pedagogical approaches being used. As per clause 4-3.14 c) of the Collective Agreement, the College must provide the Union with information prior to taking decisions regarding changes to working conditions following the implementation of new pedagogical methods. The Union has posed questions regarding the “Pilot Project” in official CRT meetings as well as via emails to all of the Sector Deans involved. To date, the College has provided no direct response to the Union.

In addition to the questions raised by the Union, many departments had also been awaiting more information on the Pilot Project to inform their discussions about pedagogical practices in their disciplines. The memo on “Blended Learning Pilot Project” that was sent to all faculty on March 2nd seems intended to address this. As elected representatives of Dawson faculty, we would like to draw your attention to several concerns we have about the information provided in the memo, as well as raise a number of outstanding questions.

First, it goes without saying that the DTU supports and advocates for the academic freedom of teachers. However, as clearly stated in our Collective Agreement, the individual teacher operates within the framework of the department, which has autonomy over and responsibility for pedagogical practices. While we recognise the desire to encourage individual innovation, it is important that pedagogical practices be guided by the policies of their departments, which are composed of disciplinary experts, to ensure equity for students. Given the vast implications of the expansion of online teaching, it is imperative that departments be given the time and information necessary to assess the pedagogical suitability of various forms of online teaching for their disciplines.

While no doubt unintended, the memo seems to imply that objections to the Pilot Project were based on a lack of understanding about online teaching, or a lack of information about it. In addition to the experience all teachers had with remote emergency teaching during Covid, Dawson has had an active E-Learning Community of Practice for some years now. The main obstacle to in-depth pedagogical discussions of blended learning in Departments was not lack of understanding/knowledge among teachers, but rather the very short time between the announcement of the project in October 2021 and its implementation during the current semester. Looking to the future, we welcome the intention to hold broad consultations with faculty and students, and we look forward to receiving more details on the intended timeline for these.

While the memo provides some information regarding the scope of the Pilot Project, such as the number of participating sections in each sector, it is woefully lacking in specifics. Given that the College laments the lack of understanding and information about online teaching among faculty, it has a responsibility to be more forthcoming with such information so that departments can have the well-informed and rigorous discussions necessary to assess the suitability of 'blended learning' for their discipline.

The following are the main questions for which we believe Departments still need answers:

### **Departmental Autonomy**

- Were there any proposals accepted from Departments that had taken positions that they would not participate in the online Pilot Project? If so, was there any discussion with the Department regarding those proposals, and what format did those discussions take? Relatedly, if there were such cases, what was it about these proposals that was so innovative/valuable that the College believes it warranted intervening in Departmental decisions?
- Can the College confirm that the process for any future implementation of online teaching will preserve departmental autonomy over pedagogical practices by allowing enough time for departments to implement their own approval processes?
- Since part of the stated purpose of the Pilot Project is to inform the development of a policy regarding online teaching, will departments have the opportunity to contribute to the development of that policy?

### **Pedagogy**

- The memo lacks detail regarding the pedagogical criteria on which online components of courses were approved, or not. What are some concrete examples of criteria used? This is crucial not only for deliberations at the level of departments, but also for individual teachers who are considering submitting proposals for any future rounds of the Pilot Project.
- There is no question that asynchronous learning serves important pedagogical purposes: every course already includes a component of independent student work at home as part of its ponderation. What are some concrete examples of asynchronous teaching and learning activities that have been approved as part of the Pilot Project? How are these activities distinct from homework? It would be useful to have examples from various disciplines.
- What are the implications for ponderation when in-person contact hours are replaced by asynchronous activities during which the teacher is not actively present with the students? In the College's view, how do asynchronous activities meet ponderation requirements?
- The original call for proposals indicated that no evaluations or assessments should take place during any online component of the course. Can the College confirm whether this is indeed the case, and whether it will remain so for any future implementation of online teaching?

- How will the pedagogical approaches used in the Pilot Project be evaluated? Have the criteria been discussed with participating departments to ensure that the pedagogical approaches are being assessed in terms of their appropriateness for the specific discipline? How will the results of the evaluation be communicated with individual teachers and departments to facilitate the development of pedagogical approaches and policies in the future?

### **Student Experience**

- The memo showed a breakdown of approved courses by Sector, which is quite helpful, but it would be useful to know which disciplines specifically are participating in the Pilot Project, as well as how many sections were approved in each participating Department, so as to facilitate the necessary discussions. Could this information be made available?
- We have heard reports from students that many of their courses are online this semester. Are there any programs or courses for which students have no option but to be online for a portion of their course?
- Has the College considered whether there are implications for students' R-scores when some sections of a course include online components while others are entirely in-person and the reference group for R-score calculations includes both?
- On what criteria will the student and teacher surveys be based, and who will see the results?

### **Working Conditions**

- What arrangements are in place to facilitate the logistics of the online components for teachers, especially in the event that they have in-person classes on the same day?
- Are there any instances in which a teacher's working conditions have been entirely modified to be online? What accommodations have been made in these instances to allow those teachers to participate in departmental activities?

The memo appears to draw certain conclusions about the courses being offered this semester, in particular that they “*demonstrate the reflection, innovation and creativity that teachers have brought to the design of their courses as they explore different ways to achieve learning objectives. These blended courses will certainly stimulate and engage Dawson’s students, helping them to engage more deeply with their learning and expand their learning experiences.*” Since these courses are currently in progress and have not yet been evaluated, it would seem premature to make such claims.

If the College is committed to developing new forms of pedagogy, it must do so in a spirit of transparency and collaboration that allows departments the necessary time to reflect, discuss and develop policies as appropriate.

The DTU Executive