

# Teachers lament the malaise affecting colleges

 [thestar.com/opinion/star-columnists/2017/11/20/teachers-lament-the-malaise-affecting-colleges-cohn.html](http://thestar.com/opinion/star-columnists/2017/11/20/teachers-lament-the-malaise-affecting-colleges-cohn.html)

11/19/2017

By [Martin Regg Cohn](#) Ontario Politics Columnist

Mon., Nov. 20, 2017

Students returning to class after the [longest strike](#) in the history of Ontario's college system must wait awhile longer before cracking open their books: OPSEU has suggested its 12,000 unionized instructors start the day with a [20-minute talk](#) about their walkout before restarting any teaching.

It's understandable that teachers want to speak their mind after walking the line these last six weeks. It's debatable whether nearly 500,000 students will be of a mind to hear them out, or feel very understanding when forced to listen to a labour lecture from the front of the class.

Caught in the crossfire, they're now a captive audience, suffering in silence. Students might be tempted to tune out, or turn the page, but there are bigger lessons to be learned from the impasse: Our college system is ailing, and the concerns of teachers are symptomatic of a deeper malaise.

Here's a preview of what some of them are thinking, based on an overflowing inbox of more than 100 emails. That's as unscientific a sample as any letters page, but they are messages worth reading and heeding.

A common theme: our province's 24 college presidents have no business contracting out the heavy lifting of labour relations to a [belligerent employer's council](#) that relies on high-priced lawyers to deploy bully-boy tactics. Province-wide bargaining is a mismatch for colleges of different sizes and specialties, and the employer's demand for a forced vote on their final offer only provoked union members, prolonging the strike by at least a week.

"A great deal could be said about the misplaced idealism of some faculty and the malfeasance of the merry minions of mendacity in college management," wrote Howard Doughty, a longtime Seneca teacher and OPSEU member.

Like many instructors, Doughty worries that the dispute merely magnified an "existential crisis" facing the college's "discount department store model" . . . in which the curriculum is commodified (and) students are redefined as 'customers.'

Jeff Short lamented the "mutually assured destruction," but took some consolation from past columns describing the problems he sees as a teacher: "If this strike had not happened, the dismantling of the system would have continued in secrecy."

## You might be interested in

Former professor Earl Silver noted colleges are "not required to produce graduates that are in sync with the marketplace." But he also fretted that the union went too far by striking for "academic freedom," saying it is "a ruse and is not the real issue."

Excessive reliance on temporary teachers who make up the majority at Ontario's colleges was the biggest *cri de coeur* from faculty, many of whom argued precarious work should have remained the union's focus.

"You are absolutely correct, the precarious work argument was a valid negotiating point for the union. But for the union to hold up a settlement over [academic freedom](#) (essentially taking management away from college management) is a travesty," argued Rick Henry, a college professor.

Jan Bradley saw it from both sides, as both parent and precarious employee.

“I am one of the ‘vulnerable’ employees — have been for over 10 years — but am also the mother of an apprenticeship student . . . . Even with this support I know that all the students are suffering and we have all grown weary of the spin and the lies . . . . Thank you for drawing attention to the real victims, the students. And thank you for articulating what many of us walking the line have been struggling to put into words.”

Retired college professor Patricia Spindel complained that administrators discourage any failing grades for paying students, because “bums in seats” and “funding units” are required for cash flow: “Colleges have become the worst kind of academic factories. That is the reason for this strike.”

Colleges get far less than universities per student, and less per capita than their counterparts in other provinces, which explains their endless “university creep,” argued teacher David Keindel. “Make no mistake, the only reason colleges are blurring the lines and adding degrees is financial,” he wrote.

“You nailed it with respect to the colleges’ obsession with aping universities,” added teacher Steven Litt. “Degree programs are ‘the new sexy’ at colleges . . . . That’s attention and resources drawn away from fixing the declining, decidedly unsexy bread and butter programs — the two- and three-year diplomas.”

Chuck Barsony wrote that as a teacher, “I agree with your observation that the union is trying to get the colleges to appear to be in the same league as the universities. We are not. Universities teach students the ‘why.’ Colleges are intended to teach the ‘how.’”

It’s not just the long-term problems that will be on the minds of teachers this week, but the short-term challenge of saving this semester. Colleges will be extending classes, but can that really make up for so many lost weeks?

“I taught in the college system, I’d never pretend that there were five weeks of slack time in the schedule,” wrote Ian Thurston. “This is lost forever.”

The last word, however, goes to Elizabeth Edwards, a nursing teacher with a persuasive manner: “I may not always agree with you but . . . often, I assign your columns as required reading for my nursing students.”

That got my attention. Edwards explained that academic freedom is perhaps “not the right term but it’s the best we have.” While faculty don’t do pure research, they need protection from managers who can “change marks without consulting a teacher.”

At which point Edwards demonstrated her marking prowess: “Oh, and one more thing. I mark a lot of assignments and I noted a spelling error in your column yesterday.”

Busted.

**Martin Regg Cohn’s** political column appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. [mcohn@thestar.ca](mailto:mcohn@thestar.ca), Twitter: [@reggcohn](https://twitter.com/reggcohn)