March 19, 2015: Open Letter to Dr. Max Blouw and Pamela Cant

I am writing in response to the recent staff cuts at Laurier, news of which continues to circulate, as in the OCUFA report published today. It is because the initial shock of the news may seem to have subsided that it is imperative that we recognize the long-term implications of what happened last week. My purpose here is not to debate the financial/budgetary issues, but rather to criticize the process by which these decisions were implemented. My observations pertain to the treatment of those directly affected–our colleagues whose positions were made redundant–and to the implications for the working environment and morale at Laurier in the wake of these losses.

The fact that there was no warning and no consultation at the departmental level indicates a complete disregard for the whole Laurier community—students, staff and faculty. The fact that our valued and trusted colleagues were informed and then asked to leave, after handing over their passwords and keys, was insulting and hurtful to people who have shown strong commitment to their work at Laurier. While this mode of dismissal is common enough in the corporate sector, it is shameful and reprehensible that a university would resort to treating its employees in such a callous way. There is no justification for such practices in a collegial organization. The fact that the cuts targeted some of the most vulnerable members of staff (many of whom are women, and let go no less in International Women’s Week) underscores the insensitivity of this process.

The timing could not have been worse. For administrative staff in academic departments, and the manager of the Writing Centre, this is a critical point in the winter semester when students’ needs are at their highest and we are about to hold the March Laurier Day, a major recruitment event. Clearly there were financial advantages for the University Administration to initiate these lay offs when they did, but they have shown a complete disregard for the complex and collaborative processes that constitute the day to day work that happens on the ground. Good working relations are what make Laurier function. The Administration seems to believe that you can simply remove essential people who have been actively engaged in a wide range of responsibilities and not have an impact on the whole community. It cannot be ‘business as usual.’

Finally, I would like to stress what I see as the implications of these decisions, the process, and the timing. Dr. Blouw acknowledged in his public letter how “distressing” this is for the employees whose jobs have been affected. But it is important to underscore that this also tears apart the very fabric of the community left behind. Dr. Blouw claims that Laurier “has a long history of coming together as a community to successfully adapt to change,” but I can say I have never seen anything like this in my many years at this institution. These decisions and the manner in which they were implemented have hurt everyone, generated a climate of fear, resentment, and anger, and severely undermined the level of trust that we need in the university and its administration if Laurier is to continue to succeed. From a human point of view, I do not see the administration’s actions as “the path to a sustainable and successful future.” Now Laurier employees have a new set of expectations about how they may be treated if their jobs are reevaluated or declared redundant. This is not about people who refuse to accept change; what it demonstrates, rather, is poor leadership. As a senior faculty member and someone who has demonstrated my commitment to the Laurier community for twenty years, last week was the first time I truly felt ashamed to work here.

Sincerely,

Maria DiCenzo

Professor

Department of English and Film Studies