Delegate report  
2017 CURAC Annual Conference

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SFURA delegate

I attended the CURAC Annual Conference at Carleton University in Ottawa from May 24 to May 26, 2017 as the official delegate of the SFURA. Also in attendance from SFU were Jim Boyd, CURAC Treasurer; and Maurice Gibbons, CURAC Tribute Award recipient. In all, there were 68 attendees from across Canada.

The first evening consisted of registration and a reception that included welcomes from a variety of local potentates.

The two days of sessions were very well organized with suitable breaks for refreshment and lunch. The first day opened with two round-table sessions before lunch, a good way to promote discussion and to get to know other delegates.

The first round table focused on exchanging ideas about best practices. Rapporteurs from each round table served to make the discussions broadly known to all participants. Of note for SFURA were:

1. McGill has member organizations (faculty, unions, etc) that contribute an annual per capita amount (currently $6.50) for each active member to MURA, and retirees from those groups automatically get lifetime membership in MURA,
2. Some associations use Dropbox to share information among executive, for social events, for special interest groups,
3. Social media workshops for members have been popular, e.g., use of Facebook.

The second series of round table sessions were devoted individually to Health, Higher Education, and Finances. I reported to the group on our Finances table. Discussion centred on finances for retiree organizations and for retiree benefits. Some associations with defined benefit retirement plans have the university deduct retiree association dues at source. Some universities (e.g., York) have “hybrid” benefit plans; partly defined benefit and partly money purchase. The province of Ontario proposes to consolidate all university pension plans in order to ensure the viability of each. This is now in the third year of planning. Funding is adequate for maintenance but the provision for “wind-up” (that applies to corporate plans where the company fails) is problematic. Clearly there are a great variety of plans as a result of different provincial and institutional regulations, as well as the relationships among individuals and departments within each university.

The main speaker for the first afternoon was Dr. Ian Lee, Department of Economics at Carleton, who spoke on Trump and the Canadian Economy. Lee, clearly an important man judging by the time he spent expounding his credentials, presented a series of statistics to demonstrate that concerns in the USA about trade and tariffs would have been an issue even if Trump had not been elected. In his opinion, we are in for a
difficult period of negotiation and may have to give up on some Canadian traditions such as support for the dairy industry and the CRTC regulations concerning cell telephone providers.

The afternoon concluded with the CURAC AGM. Of note for us was the special mention in the Communications Committee report of the SFURA website and the recognition we give to CURAC. David Swayne (Guelph) was elected CURAC president and Michel Tousignant (UQAM) as vice-president. Jim Boyd (SFU) continues as treasurer, and Edgar Williams (Memorial) as secretary.

The Banquet that evening featured a talk by Matthew Bellamy on the rise of the beer-drinking tradition of Canadians (the highest per capita beer drinkers in the world). Your representative did his best to maintain the tradition. The highlight was the presentation of CURAC Tribute Awards, including one given to our own Maurice Gibbons for his outstanding work as SFURA Newsletter Editor and the force behind the creation of the book Remembering SFU on the Occasion of its 50th Birthday. Maurice gave a very fine acceptance speech--the best of the night, with humour, dignity, and depth.

The second day consisted of a series of individual presentations, all highly relevant to retirees. In order, these consisted of:

1. Dr. Jeff Turnbull on Health and Health Equity: Our Collective Responsibility. Jeff highlighted the deficiencies of our medical system in caring for those on the fringes of society and presented an effective model used in Ottawa (for details, see http://ottawainnercityhealth.ca). Of note, the ratio of private to public health care expenditure in Canada (including drugs, dental, medical, and ancillary benefits) is 70 to 30, in spite of our perception of universal coverage. The same ratio in Scandinavia countries is 60 to 40; in the USA it’s 80 to 20. A homeless person in Ottawa costs $200,000 each year in medical and police services. The poorest 5% of the population use 60% of hospital costs. The depth of response to his talk was illustrated by the first questioner who had trouble fighting his way through tears to ask his question. For me, this talk was the highlight of the conference.

2. Dr. William Dalziel on Successful Aging gave a light-hearted but serious look at health statistics in the senior population, referring to Victoria, BC as “Costa Geriatrica”. He recommended the usual prophylactics such as the annual flu shot, the Zostavax shingles vaccine, 1000 to 2000 mg of Vitamin D for bone health, and the newer pneumococcal vaccines (Prevnar and Pneumovax). Of Canadian seniors, 5% are institutionalized, 15% are “frail”, and 80% are healthy and independent. The “frail” ones constitute 3% of the total population and 30% of overall medical costs. Hence efforts should be made to keep seniors from falling into this category, through proper nutrition and exercise. He recommended that all adults over 60 have a bone mineral density test.

3. Dr. Yoni Freedhof on How to Stop Worrying and Love Healthy Living noted the lack of evidence for most health claims of commercial and “natural” products. He
emphasized the need for intelligent nutrition decisions, noting that The Keg’s Carrot Cake with Ice Cream weighs in at 2300 calories per serving. Yoni emphasized the need for proper sleep and encouraged people to undertake a sleep apnea test if they exhibited symptoms such as tiredness on waking, snoring, or restless sleep. He also emphasized the need for exercise and referred listeners to his website www.weightymatters.ca.

4. Dr. Rebecca Trueman of Algonquin College presented a lunch-time look at their new Bachelor of Information Technology (BIT) collaborative program with Carleton U.

5. Dr. Ross Finnie on New Evidence on Earnings of Post-Secondary Graduates showed that the myth of the unemployed or destitute graduate was only a myth. Tax-linked figures for graduate cohorts from 2005 to 2008 showed typical mean earnings of $40K to $75K after 8 years from graduation. Only the bottom 10% of graduates earned $20K or less, mostly in the creative arts. Ross called for a new curriculum and pedagogy focusing on teamwork and problem-solving given the shifting future demands for employment.

6. Dr. Tim Pychyl on Learning in Retirement described Carleton’s Centre for Initiatives in Education and its Learning in Retirement program. He drew upon research findings of Bill Kops (U of Man) describing “U3A” -- University of the Third Age, for older adults (55+). Kops surveyed Canadian universities and did follow-up studies with 18 programs, 11 of which offered U3A courses through “continuing education” departments. All were “cost-recovery” operations. I noted in the question period that such programs will always be peripheral add-ons until governments and/or universities provide base funding for such operations.

The day, and the conference, concluded with a CURAC board meeting. The 2018 CURAC annual meeting is scheduled for Dalhousie University in Halifax from May 23 to 25.

Respectfully submitted,
May 28, 2017