

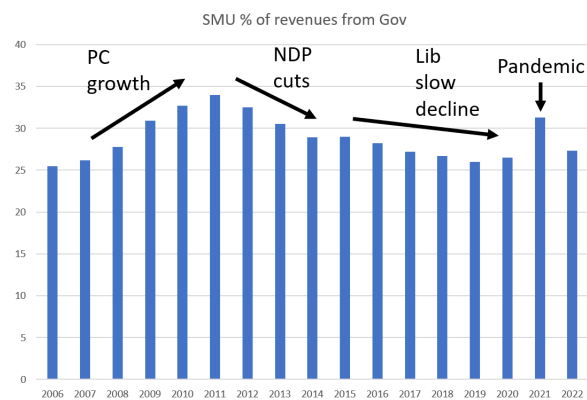
SMU Town Hall is cringy at best, propaganda at worst

Three years ago, as the covid-19 pandemic was still in its' early days and we all craved updates and information, the concept of the online SMU Town Halls was born. I think I speak for the majority of the SMU community when I say that we were thankful for these connections to each other, although virtual, and we welcomed important updates and information related to the pandemic and our new work environments.

Fast forward three years later, and we just had our first hybrid Town Hall. Covid wasn't once mentioned. Many in the room and online might remain thankful for these one-hour events. Some might actually learn something, but I view these as ongoing highly orchestrated messaging events that are intended to serve as cringy pep rallies at best and a forum to disseminate the employer's propaganda at worst.

Prefacing this most recent Town Hall event, with approximately 80 staff and faculty in person and informed that over 180 were online, we were informed that the majority of the event would be a Q&A and not much by way of presentations. The President then followed with a lengthy dialogue involving a mixture of congratulatory messages, pats on the back for our quick response to housing needs in the face of the recent forest fires, and excessive 'shout outs'. The tone then swiftly pivoted to what keeps Rob up at night; our finances. We ended with little time for questions, online questions vetted by a moderator, and those in person in the room either speechless, or not wanting to speak openly into a microphone in a setting like this.

The regular cast of characters of course all chimed in. The narrative, replete with copious 'quite frankly's' informed us that our finances are dire and that we should expect to put up with less, see cuts coming and positions possibly not being filled. The President complemented this narrative, informing the audience that our bleak financial outlook is largely a result of a decline in provincial funding, and that we once received 40% from the province, but now only receive 26%. Our SMUFU fact-checkers quickly noted that we have never actually received 40%. We went back to 2006, a time when we received less than we do now. Why is the employer telling us this narrative when it is, 'quite frankly', entirely untrue?



This put the entire display in question. What else is inaccurate? How dire is the situation and what are we to understand about the employer's intent for this Town Hall?

I want to address a particularly egregious comment that the President made with regards to the Fred Smithers Centre for Student Accessibility. He commented that an example of our 'organization's' commitment to EDIA, the Centre, which had been the Fred Smithers Centre for Students with Disabilities, had been renamed to something 'less offensive' and with less negative connotations. Many of us in SMUFU were utterly dismayed that someone leading a University could say such a thing. Disabled is not a dirty word. Disability is a source of pride and community. This ableist framing, by the President of a University, no less, does harm. How can a person with a disability feel when their very being has been informed to the entire University in a negative context? July is Disability Pride Month, an opportunity to honour the history, achievements, experience of the disability community. We don't need more struggles added to the barriers brought forward by the language perpetuated by our President.

As academics, it is in our blood to critique, to assess, to fact-check and to seek improvements. We are hard-wired to seek out what was inaccurate or incorrect in a narrative brought forward. This commentary is not intended to be about critiquing and nit-picking to be provocative. As a Union, we should be gravely concerned about the state of our Institution. Where are we headed as an institution of higher education? Is our integrity waning? Do we continue to sit by and enable propaganda and misinformation, and offensive narratives to be pushed at us in this way? Perhaps SMUFU should have a post-Town Hall session to deconstruct, evaluate and assess the messages we have been fed?