Saint Mary's University
smufu
Faculty Union

SMUFU President: Annual Report
October 2026
Búi Petersen, President

Dear Colleagues,

This last year has been eventful. In addition to collective bargaining, we have also had to deal with significant change in the university's senior administration, with a new President, Provost, and VP Finance & Administration all being appointed in 2025. The relationships we have with the university's senior administrators are critically important, and the new administrators appeared to all strive to build positive relations with SMUFU. While the sudden departure of Dr. Shannon Dea only a year into her term as Provost still puzzles us, I am pleased to report that the subsequently appointed Interim Provost, Dr. Sam Veres, appears equally interested in maintaining positive relations with SMUFU.

As I communicated in my email to all members just after Dr. Dea's departure, we are continuing to stress the need for open and complete communication from the senior administration. Full transparency and accountability are necessary for building the trust necessary for collectively addressing the challenges that lie ahead for the university. This is a message I keep repeating in all the various meetings I have with senior administrators.

The new collective agreement, signed in March 2026, includes a series of Memoranda of Understanding requiring further discussions between SMUFU and the Employer on issues such as Librarian work responsibilities and workload, laboratory instruction, improved tenure and promotion appeals procedure, technologically mediated courses, and possible adjustments to benefits. This work is ongoing, and we will communicate an update when there is something more specific to report. On the benefits, we have been working closely with the SMUFU Employee Health and Life Trust. On this note, I want to express my thanks and gratitude to Bob Konopasky for his work and dedication to the Trust since its inception.

One of my priorities since becoming SMUFU President has been to build greater solidarity with other labour unions, both within SMU and with the labour movement at large, locally as well as nationally. I believe this to be very important work because it is only through such solidarity that we can improve working conditions for all workers. Since we can be sure that other unions would show up to support us on the picket line should we ever end up in a strike or lockout, it is important that we also try to show up for others. In accordance with this priority, I attended the Canadian Labour Congress convention in Winnipeg in May 2026, and we had a strong SMUFU delegation (about 6 current members, plus a couple of retired SMUFU members) at the recent demonstration in Halifax protesting the Federal government's plans to constrain unions' right to strike. It is only by standing together with other unions that we can hope to protect workers' rights, which we should never take for granted.

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More locally, we are in the process of building closer relationships with other unions representing workers at SMU. We are already in discussions with CUPE 3912 about how we can work together to improve the working conditions of our more precariously employed faculty colleagues, and as part of this work, I attended the CAUT Contract Academic Staff Conference that was held in Halifax at the beginning of October. Our plan is to start having regular meetings with the other SMU unions in the near future.

Beyond labour relations, I want to speak to the challenges universities are facing everywhere, but particularly in Nova Scotia. While the most recent fiscal challenges may have been triggered by a decline in student enrollment, especially international students, we should not forget that the ultimate root of the problem is a historical lack of public investment in public education, something that has only become worse in recent years. Because of this lack of funding, universities have turned to a business model relying on students as paying “customers”, with international students becoming an especially important source of cash. We are now seeing how fragile this business model likely always has been.

The lack of public funding also means that students are burdened with very high tuition fees, with Nova Scotia having among the highest undergraduate tuition rates in Canada. In addition to making university education unaffordable for many, this also often forces student to compromise on their studies by taking a significant amount of paid work while attending schools, impacting the amount of time they are able to dedicate to what is supposed to be full-time study, and with many students taking significantly longer to complete their education.

SMUFU is currently participating with other Nova Scotia faculty unions in a campaign, named Education is our Lighthouse, intended to raise the public awareness around the post-secondary funding issue with the goal to increase the appreciation of among the general public and politicians of why post-secondary education is so important. Not only are universities and other post-secondary institutions important actors in their local communities, but they are also critical for Nova Scotia’s cultural fabric and essential for building the province’s human capital necessary for developing a diversified economy. This campaign has only recently been launched, and you should expect to hear more about it in the near future.

To close, I want to extend my thanks and appreciation to our staff, Nora Melanson and Zachary Wells, my fellow members of the SMUFU Executive Committee, as well as all the members serving on our various committees. You are what makes it possible (and sometimes a joy) for me to serve in this role.

In solidarity,

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