Collective bargaining in Canada, as in the U.S., traditionally involves two key actors, management and labour, with the government acting as regulator and protector of the public interest (Dunlop, 1958; Kochan & Katz, 1988). In a unionized university or college setting, therefore, one round of bargaining occurs primarily between university administrators and the faculty union or association. This arrangement however, while conventional, disregards the interests of a third key stakeholder: the student. As a result, one issue that arises when academic associations go on strike, is “what about the students?”

Students are “collateral damage” in the face of an academic strike in that the action likely causes unintended or incidental damage to their program of study. Concerns over details important to students, such as the length of the school year, summer jobs and internships, licensing exams, international visas, and additional living expenses are subordinate to bargaining, yet create stress for students (Albas & Albas, 2000). However, in the face of rising student tuition as a share of university operating revenue, i.e. from 13.2% in 1976 to 29.2% in 2006 (CAUT, 2009), an interesting question is what role, if any, the student should play when classes are cancelled or put on hold due to a strike. If tuition is paid up front by the students, what is the fiduciary responsibility of a university? As stated by a student website (YorkNotHostage.com) during the 2008 strike at York University, “a work stoppage has severe and unacceptable consequences for York University’s 50,000 students.”

This article will examine Canadian university students’ legitimacy to any claim in the process of board-faculty collective bargaining, as well as the potential roles in, and influences over the bargaining process. In light of the calls by students for more participation in university governance (Jones, Shanahan & Goyan, 2001), increasing levels of tuition, overall contribution to operating costs, the
potential impact of a work stoppage on students, and the high rate of unionization of the Canadian university professoriate, we present a number of potential means for student involvement in collective bargaining: (a) representation on boards of governors; (b) membership on board or faculty union negotiation teams; (c) direct participation as a third party at the table; (d) observer status at the table; (e) student consultation and participation on drafting committees; (f) unilateral student proposals; (g) end-run tactics; (h) public pressure tactics; and (i) student referenda on bargaining agreements. Each of these possibilities will be examined in detail.

The article concludes with recommendations, as well as questions for further research.

References


