



VIUFA University Budget Analysis Chair

2023-24 Report

It has been a privilege to serve the members of the Vancouver Island University Faculty Association as University Budget Analysis (UBA) Chair during the past year. It has been a very difficult year for both VIUFA and VIU, and the UBA work has been extremely challenging on several levels. I would like to thank my fellow Executive members, the members of the UBA Committee (Chris Jaeger and Sylvie Lafrenière), Brian Dick, Chris Burnley, and VIUFA staffers Laura Buechler and Neil McLeod for the wise counsel, support and grace they have all so generously provided. I will not be running for a VIUFA Executive position this year - I have accepted a secondment position for an external organization starting April 15, and while I will still be a dues-paying VIUFA member, I will not be eligible for union leave going forward. I will really miss being part of VIUFA union work and wish all the best to the next UBA Chair.

The University Budget Analysis role on the VIUFA Executive was established by way of contract language bargained during the bitter strike in the spring of 2011:

"If notice of layoff for budgetary reasons is given, the University shall:

- (a) provide to the Association any further information that the Association requests that is pertinent to the budgetary shortfall or its remedy, and
- (b) allow the Association prior to January 15th, the opportunity to make proposals to the University to avoid the layoffs. If any of the proposals are not implemented and layoffs are not avoided, the Association will be notified as to the reasons for the rejection of the alternatives to layoffs.

I believe that this year was the first year, since this language came into effect, that UBA proposals to avoid faculty layoffs were required. It was a steep learning curve for me, and I was grateful to rely on the excellent collection of analysis and insights established by past UBA Chairs. In particular, Brian Dick's work in 2022-23 provided an essential foundation for the challenges of 2023-24. I am also grateful to Gara Pruesse - herself a past UBA Chair - who worked closely with me and provided invaluable guidance.

Here is a rough timeline of key UBA events and milestones this year:

- In July 2023, VIU representatives (AVP HR Dan Vandersluis and Director of Employee Relations Patricia Elliott) began sharing information with VIUFA (President Gara Pruesse, Chief Steward Clay Armstrong, Chief Bargainer Jane Wodlinger, Staff Rep Neil McLeod, and me) on the budget crisis at VIU and proposed measures to address the deficit; VIU's [Deficit Mitigation Plan](#) mandated across-the-board 10% cuts in all areas across three fiscal years (2023-24, 2024-25 and 2025-26). We requested additional budget details for the previous five fiscal years at that time.
- On September 6, the UBA Committee met to discuss the situation and share perspectives and feedback.

- On September 20, the VIUFA team met again with Dan and Patricia to receive the Draft 2024-25 Operating Budget Primer, along with the news that at least 10 faculty layoffs were anticipated in 2023-24. VIUFA submitted several requests for additional financial data during and following this meeting.
- On October 10, the VIUFA team, along with representatives from CUPE 1858 and BCGEU 702, met with Provost Mike Quinn and CFO Emily Huner (along with Dan and Patricia). We raised questions about VIU's enrollment data and forecasting, the High School, the across-the-board nature of the proposed budget cuts, expenditures in the President's Office, and more.
- On October 11, VIU held an employee information session on the budget crisis.
- On November 21, Gara and I met with Emily, Dan and Patricia to ask questions based on analysis to date (including questions about the newly-posted, at the time, Chief of Staff position) and request more information.
- On December 15, we received in writing the official notification of potential layoffs in 2024-25 from Dan Vandersluis. This letter formally triggered the development of proposals to avoid layoffs.
- On January 12, 2024, Gara and I met with Mike, Emily, Dan and Patricia to present and discuss our proposals, and submit our [full Financial Exigency Report for 2023-24](#)*. We offered 12 recommendations comprising a conservatively-estimated \$12M in potential cost savings to avoid faculty layoffs.
- On January 23, we received [VIU's response](#)* to our recommendations. Though VIU indicated that some recommendations were "aligned" with their own intentions, they indicated that none of the recommendations would avoid planned faculty layoffs. This was very disappointing though not entirely unexpected (our CA language gives us the right to make alternative proposals, but VIU is under no obligation to abide by them).
- On January 25, we shared both our Financial Exigency report and VIU's response with the VIUFA membership.
- On March 27, Gara and I gave a brief presentation to the VIU Board of Governors about financial exigency and included a copy of our report in the agenda package.

*These documents are password-protected by the usual VIUFA password starting with "u". Please contact the VIUFA Office at staff@viufa.ca if you need the password.

In addition, I have attended VIUFA executive meetings throughout the year and served on both the VIUFA Finance Committee and the joint "Committee for the Purposes of CA 6.15" ("Targeted Labour Adjustment" strategies).

Since sharing the financial exigency report with the membership, I, along with Gara and other VIUFA Executive members and staff, have been engaged in listening and responding to critical feedback from members delivered in various ways: via email (we received email feedback from two members, both from the same department); verbally during the general membership meeting on February 21 and in one-on-one conversations; and via a "letter of concern" signed by 44 members. The critiques we received were largely directed at two particular recommendations: one regarding the Deep Bay Marine Field Station (Recommendation 6) and

one regarding discretionary research leaves for faculty (Recommendation 8). I feel badly that some members are unhappy with aspects of the UBA report, and I understand and empathize with the perspectives that have been shared with me. A certain amount of disagreement was not altogether unexpected, however, and with frequent and ongoing reflection I remain confident in our analysis and recommendations. I deeply appreciate the VIUFA members who approached me with openness, curiosity and respect to communicate their concerns.

The responsibility of the VIUFA University Budget Analysis (UBA) Chair, the VIUFA President and all VIUFA executive members is to the overall membership as a collective, and our first priority (and that of any union) is to fight against layoffs. We tried very hard to take a balanced approach when undertaking our analysis and developing our recommendations, recognizing the diversity of our membership and the varying interests within it. This work was neither easy nor straightforward and I feel certain that we did the best we could for VIUFA members, as a collective, under the circumstances and with the data available to us. The UBA work is data-driven and evidence-based, grounded in the financial information made available to VIUFA by the University, and hence limited to the extent that the information it is based upon is also limited or opaque. And the recommendations are a snapshot in time. This is the first set of “proposals to the University to avoid the layoffs” that VIUFA has produced since the financial exigency language was added in 2011; we learned many valuable lessons in the process and I hope our work supports the incoming UBA Chair and VIUFA executive, especially while financial exigency conditions persist at VIU.

There is no doubt that 2024-25 will be another difficult year. VIU's [2024-25 Operating Budget](#) is, at this point, lacking in detail and structured very differently from the Consolidated Resource Plans of the past. I hope a more detailed budget plan is forthcoming; if not, the next UBA Chair can and should request more detail. I have been impressed with our CFO's stated commitment to transparency and I was very pleased to see her survey VIU students and employees on [budget priorities](#) and plan for the establishment of a comprehensive budget advisory committee. I hope that the VIU community has more opportunities for meaningful engagement with the institutional budget process going forward.

I will miss being part of the VIUFA Executive and working with the VIUFA staff. These committed, values-driven people work incredibly hard on behalf of VIUFA members, sometimes under very difficult circumstances, to seek ethical and effective solutions to all manner of problems within our workplace. I believe that VIUFA members have excellent representation in the Executive, a large and diverse group reflecting the many faculties and roles within VIUFA. Executive members do not always agree, but a common thread in every debate is care for fellow faculty, for students and for VIU as an organization. I believe that VIUFA members, as a whole, share much more common ground than differences. And it is critical at this time, when VIU is in crisis, to pay attention to those commonalities and to support one another where we can.

I came to work at VIU in the summer of 1998 when it was still Malaspina University-College. As a teenager, I completed the first two years of my undergrad here from 1987 to 1989 when it was

Malaspina College, and worked student jobs in the Biology department and bee yard (yes, we used to have an apiary on campus and a summer home for the bees on Green Mountain!). And I attended daycare here in 1975, when my mother was a Malaspina student at the old campus on Kennedy Street and the only buildings on this campus were the Library and the daycare (in those days, the daycare was run as a teaching daycare by ECEC faculty and students). Over my many years with the Library, I have seen countless students lifted up by the caring and high-quality education they have experienced here. I love this institution and it's heartbreaking to see the damage and trouble, program cuts and layoffs we are currently experiencing. But I am grateful to have had the chance to join VIUFA's efforts on behalf of our members over the past year. Thank you, VIUFA members, for that opportunity.

Respectfully submitted,

Jean Blackburn