

An Open Letter Regarding Negotiations and Quality Improvements in the Colleges

To: Ontario's College Students

From: College Faculty Chairs, Paddy Musson and Ted Montgomery

On November 29, 2005, Premier Dalton McGuinty and Mr. Chris Bentley, Ontario's Minister of Training, Colleges, and Universities, announced additional funding to the college system of \$87.3 million – the “Quality Improvement Fund.”

"Our government is committed to providing a high-quality education for our students, who must compete with the best in the world," said Chris Bentley, Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities. "This new fund will make improvements that students will see and benefit from immediately -- and accountability agreements will ensure that the extra money produces results."

The government's first principle tied to the funding is that the colleges must: “Hire more support staff and faculty so that students have better access to their instructors.”

When the faculty negotiating team asked college management on how they proposed to spend the Quality Improvement Fund they replied that some of it would be spent on hiring new faculty – but only for additional enrolment. None would be spent on improving current student/teacher ratios or on reducing class size. Any quality improvements for today's students and faculty would be made only by a redistribution of existing work. None of the \$87.3 million would be used to hire more faculty to service current student needs.

The faculty identified quality improvements as their number one demand for the next contract. Faculty knew that would mean hiring more teachers to serve the current students and future enrolment. The Bob Rae Review of post-secondary education in Ontario was unequivocal in its assessment of what was wrong in the colleges – Rae described college management as “the poster child for efficiency gains” and added that the price for this focus on efficiency at the cost of quality was “a diminished ability to deliver the educational services Ontario and Ontarians badly need.” [p. 48] Rae reported that the college system “suffers from serious quality issues – teacher contact time, class size, deferred maintenance.”

The faculty are trying to do something about these deficiencies. Management continues to be focused on efficiency not on quality. Faculty hired a research firm to examine actual teacher workloads. They found that the current system was inadequate to provide teachers the time needed to properly meet student needs. Management has out-of hand rejected that survey, claiming that the teachers were exaggerating their workloads!

Faculty want a new contract that addresses the real issues of quality in the college system. The student teacher ratio has increased by 33% in the last decade. The number of students has increased by nearly 50% while the number of regular faculty has fallen by nearly 25%.

Management tells us that is fine. They are content with that. They want to spend the \$87.3 million taking in more students but not changing those trends or ratios.

Faculty say enough is enough. We will not put up any longer with the degradation of our college system. Rae reported on the problems. The government has heard Rae and has provided the first step in quality improvement funding. College management refuses to do what is obviously needed, perhaps because it would signal the truth of Rae's assessment of the last decade. Faculty have learned that management now plans to invest in a public relations firm and launch a campaign to justify their decisions. More money wasted.

Faculty believe that our contract should be settled without a strike – should have been settled already with the funding provided by the government to do exactly what is needed. However, if a strike is what management demands before it will address the quality and workload issues, then that is what will result. In 1984, College faculty went on strike over workload and quality concerns. The gains made then resulted in additional funding and the hiring of 1000 more full-time faculty. Since that time, quality has regressed and the student teacher ratio and class sizes have once again risen to inappropriate levels for college programs. This time the funding is already there for hiring additional faculty once again, for making quality improvements, for repairing the damage of the last decade.

To waste the recommendations of the Rae Review of Ontario's post-secondary system would be irresponsible. Faculty will do what is necessary – strike if we must – to see that, in Rae's words, Ontario students get the post-secondary education they deserve.

Ted Montgomery, Negotiating Team Chair, OPSEU

Paddy Musson, College Academic Division Chair, OPSEU