

President's Message: Workplace Wellness & Academic Credibility

Julia Wright, DFA President, 2019-20

In my [second President's message](#), I expressed some frustration with the upper administration's use of "loosely framed surveys" instead of engaging in meaningful collegial governance. This month, we asked a faculty member with academic expertise in survey design, Professor Karen Foster, to give us her thoughts on the BAC and Workplace Wellness surveys—you can read her very useful piece later in this newsletter.

Here, I want to turn to this larger discourse of "Workplace Wellness." I suspect a fair number of us bristle at both our employer asking questions that are properly asked by our physicians and the implication that we need to be reminded of what we generally consider "common knowledge." The complaint I've heard the most from my colleagues is this: "I know I should, but I can't because of my workload."

Well, that's kind of the point. Bluntly, Workplace Wellness began in the corporate world to support two goals: **1. reduce healthcare costs; 2. boost productivity.** In other words, the purpose of Workplace Wellness is to get more done, more cheaply, without hiring more people.

Corporate models are often spawned in the US where there is no universal healthcare, so [reducing healthcare costs](#) is big business. But recent studies suggest Workplace Wellness doesn't actually make much of a difference: see, for instance, [this Canadian piece that's nearly six years old](#), and a recent *Scientific American* article that raises questions about "[the Workplace Wellness Industry](#)." A 2017 article on the industry in *Health*

Matrix: The Journal of Law-Medicine also raises serious concerns about some "vendors" "[disregard\[ing\] clinical guidelines](#)."



The emphasis on [boosting productivity](#) suggests why reducing workload is rarely featured in the conventional rhetoric of Workplace Wellness. So, here at Dalhousie, we have a "[Work Well](#)" Strategy, not a "Reasonable Workloads Support Excellence" Strategy. We are enjoined to participate in "[Walktober](#)," not encouraged to report teaching schedules that extend for four hours or more without a break. Workplace wellness is about helping us work longer hours, take fewer sick days, and endure.

I'm not opposed to people finding support to be healthier, of course, and if you're fine with getting it from your employer then it's good that the administration is able to provide some resources. But the seminars can be poorly designed to meaningfully assist us. Some are run over long periods on weekdays, even over multiple weeks, so they're inaccessible given our schedules, for instance.

Corporate-world boosterism can also be incompatible with standards of academic as well as clinical rigor. In May 2017, the administration offered seminars over three half-days "On Being Positive," including instruction on "the Losada Line and the Positivity Ratio." This appears to be based on [an article](#) that was partially retracted (my thanks to a colleague who tracked this down and shared

the information back then!). You can find a link to the authors' correction at the top of the online article, and it reads, in part,

The hypothesis tested in this article was motivated, in part, by the nonlinear dynamic model introduced in Losada (1999). . . . This model has since been called into question. . . . [T]he modeling element of this article is formally withdrawn as invalid and, along with it, the model-based predictions about the particular positivity ratios.

This session was run again in 2018 and, yes, you will also find it in this year's [calendar](#).

The Workplace Wellness industry also pushes "[Wellness Champions](#)" and Dalhousie's administration has picked up on this fad, too—it's mentioned in the latest Workplace Wellness survey. One company that supports this concept has [the torturous slogan](#), "We bring wellness to your workplace & champion the belief health comes from within." (*If it's within, why do they need to bring it?*) But this company is in the business of sending consultants. The other "Champion" model is to get existing employees to do the work (adding to workload...), and of course that's where our administration is going.

If you look at corporate Wellness sites like [this one](#) or [this one](#), you will find a lot of elements we've been seeing at Dalhousie over the last five years: Wellness [champions](#), a [survey](#), and various low-cost activities, such as [a workplace garden](#), [no-equipment exercise](#), [online tools](#), and so on. While there's not a lot about it on Dalhousie webpages, these sites say it over and over again: the explicit

goal is to reduce healthcare costs and increase productivity.

Given the kind of work we do, does any of this make us more productive? If the upper administration wants faculty to increase "research productivity" (as a way of pulling Dalhousie back up the world rankings, [as Senate has recently heard](#)), then a concerted effort to ensure reasonable class sizes might be a lot more effective than healthy-living seminars we don't have time to attend—and smaller classes could help our students, too.

If we get sick for a few days, it doesn't affect how much work we do: if we're teaching, the prep and marking don't change and we likely have to do extra work to adjust for missed classes; in other contexts, our colleagues may have to pick up our work for a while; research deadlines and peer-review standards are also unaffected by a nasty cold. For short illnesses, our work generally gets redistributed—not reduced.

Instead of Workplace Wellness surveys, champions, and half-day seminars, the academic mission could be better served by more attention to the practical ways in which we could be supported. This could include not only addressing workload creep, but also ensuring prompt access to accommodations for those of us who need them: an assistive device, an appropriate classroom, a reasonable amount of time to deal with a family crisis or loss.

Instead of jumping on the corporate bandwagon, let's use evidence, reason, and compassion to determine what will do the most good.

Please contact me anytime, Julia.Wright@dal.ca, or the DFA office at dfa@dal.ca.

Fighting BAC with Facts

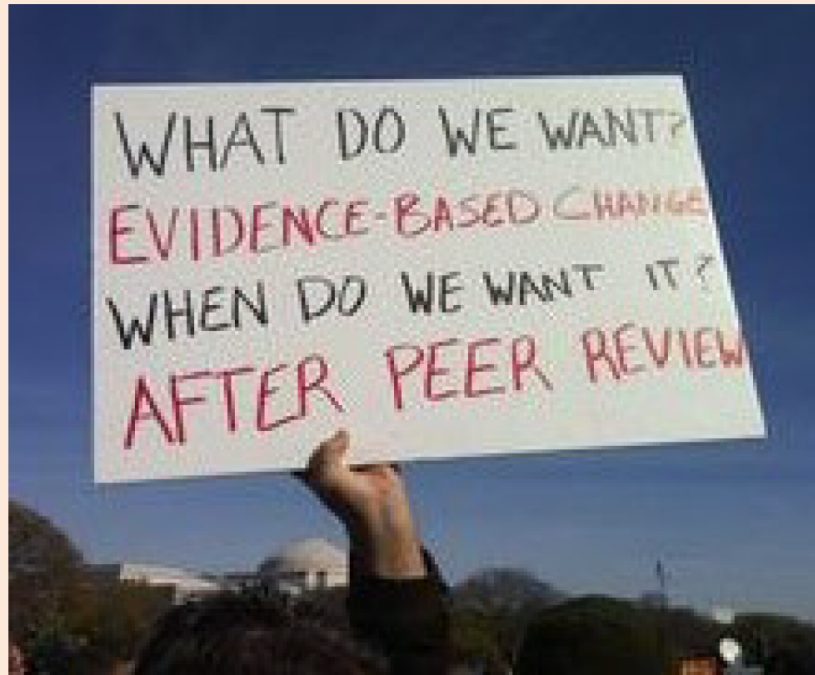


Photo taken from <https://irelandafternama.wordpress.com/2010/11/08/an-academic-protests/>

Join us to learn more about the budgeting process at Dalhousie and how you can contribute to collegial governance on this important issue.

Speakers:

Dr. Julia Wright, DFA President

Dr. Dave Westwood, DFA Past President & President-Elect

Dr. Darren Abramson, former DFA President (2017-18)

Wednesday, Dec. 4, 2019
11:30 am to 1:00 pm
Dalhousie SUB 307

DFA
Dalhousie Faculty Association

Lunch provided. RSVP to
Kristin.Hoyt@dal.ca by
Wednesday, Nov. 27, 2019

Leading Indicators: A note on how the BAC and Wellness Surveys frame and constrain faculty and staff feedback

Karen Foster, Associate Professor, Sociology & Social Anthropology, and Canada Research Chair

I am a sociologist and I design, conduct, analyze and teach about social surveys. Like many of you, I recently participated in two surveys of Dalhousie employees: the Budget Advisory Committee (BAC) survey, and the *Your Voice* Workplace Survey conducted by Narrative Research for Dalhousie.

Neither of the surveys were abjectly awful. There are general principles of survey design, some of which can be broken with the right justification, and both surveys follow most of the rules and justifiably break some of them.

But each survey also delimits what can and cannot be said by participants, and creates, by design, ambiguity in the data. The ambiguity can be exploited to suit the aims of the surveys' designers.

BAC Survey

The BAC survey does this in a fairly obvious way, with its paternalistic skill-testing series of questions at the outset ("you may even learn something!"). It is common practice to test the knowledge of research participants before testing their opinions. It is not common practice to *correct* their thinking before gathering their opinions. This sways respondents' answers. It would be one thing if we were dealing with very straightforward facts: is the earth round, or flat, for example. But the BAC survey is dealing with subjective, political knowledge. It presents selective facts and tests our knowledge of them in order to set the terms of reality.

The reality it seeks to present to us is one in which funding to faculties has increased, not decreased. It doesn't matter whether we see the impacts of these increases in the form of lower administrative burden, better teaching ratios,

nicer facilities. All that matters is that the numbers grew. We are supposed to feel satisfied about this.

The survey tells us that the lion's share of the university's budget is "fixed", and not in our control. BAC only influences 15% of the budget, we learn. This is arguably meant to make us feel like dissent is rather pointless.

Moreover, the survey tells us the budget pays mostly for faculty and staff. (The fact that our mission is to research and teach, and these are faculty responsibilities, suggests that faculty salaries ought to be the vast majority of costs, but the figure—"up to 80%"—is presented as if it is too much.) We do not get a view of how administrative costs, or new building costs, have changed, as if these things should not be up for debate.

The framing of this survey is also connected to facts which themselves are disputable. As the DFA President, Julia Wright, recently [pointed out](#), the latest BAC Report provides charts that suggest that faculty complement is growing, when it is shrinking relative to enrolment; and that we have fifteen Faculties, when there are actually only thirteen (including the College of Continuing Education).

Finally, the BAC survey can be taken by anyone with the link, as many times as they want to take it. Survey administrators can hunt for duplicates on the basis of IP address (but good luck if we are all completing it on university computers). It is sometimes acceptable to make a survey unrestricted in this manner, e.g. when you have no list of respondents to which you can assign

unique IDs / URLs. However, BAC should have access to such a list.

Your Voice Survey

The *Your Voice* survey more subtly frames and constrains the data it collects. For one, it does not consistently distinguish between our experiences with our colleagues and support staff at the departmental level, faculty level, and upper-level administrators. It reads like a survey of non-university workplaces, which tend to have very different structures and employment relations.

The survey asks some thoughtful questions, but they are often vague enough that the same person could answer them in two or more very different ways if they have different levels of the organization in mind. It also asks questions that are so specific, they leave no room for what might be more important points. For example, we are asked to select our level of agreement with the statement, “the leadership in my faculty are effective.” I may find my faculty’s leadership effective in pursuing its goals, but what if I do not support those goals? How do I answer? (For the record, FASS—I mostly agree with our goals.) When these responses are aggregated, I fear they will give us a Rorschach ink blot. They will mean whatever the reader (and more problematically, the writer) wants them to.

The *Your Voice* survey collects data on our experiences with structural aspects of our work (effectiveness of leadership, communication, burden/responsibilities etc.) alongside very

individual-level behavioural data (e.g., our exercise and sleep habits). The cynical respondent might conclude that the university is going to blame our bad experiences on us—we feel burnt out because we do not climb the stairs, not the other way around. The fact that we do not get to quantify the behaviours of our administrators suggests that their actions will not be connected to our experiences with the same specificity as our own.

This problem is linked to the menu of wellness supports we can indicate our interest in. Many of us do not need counselling on time management, resilience training, or cannabis (?) to improve our lives. Those of us on limited term contracts probably need job security. Those of us on the losing end of the gender, race or disability pay gaps might need a raise. Those of us who are in shrinking departments in desperate need of new hires need... new hires!

Taken together, all of the *Your Voice* questions direct our thinking to how free and supported we are, as individuals, to take responsibility for our own health and wellness. We are entrained to think only about work and wellness in the crudest ways. Unless we get very creative in the open-ended questions (and I encourage you to do that), we do not get much of a chance to give data that could connect our experiences to the structural forces that shape the university. And so we cannot expect an analysis that will connect these phenomena, nor can we count on the data to help point us toward a better workplace.

DFA Holiday Open House

Please join us for
hors d'oeuvres & egg nog

Thursday, December 12, 2019
11:30 am - 2:00 pm
DFA Office
1443 Seymour St, Halifax

DFA
Dalhousie Faculty Association

Monday, December 16, 2019
11:30 am - 1:00 pm
Program Room B (Rm 218)
MacRae Library, Truro

PLEASE RSVP

by Thursday, November 28 to
Kristin.Hoyt@dal.ca or 902 494 3722

Corporate Coup d'Etat: DFA Public Screening

Join the DFA for a private screening of the documentary [Corporate Coup d'Etat](#)

Tuesday, January 7, 2020

Halifax Central Library

Paul O'Regan Hall

6:30 pm - 9:00 pm

A democracy should protect its citizens, especially the most vulnerable among them, but increasingly the United States is failing to do so. This investigative and persuasive documentary blends the insights of philosophers, authors and journalists with the experiences of citizens of the Rust Belt in the U.S. Midwest, where the steel industry once flourished, but where closures and outsourcing have left urban areas desolate and hopeless. It's here that Donald Trump finds some of his most fervent supporters, as he's not considered part of the hated Washington establishment.

Journalist Chris Hedges, argues that the crisis predates Donald Trump's election by many years. Like his source of inspiration, the Canadian philosopher John Ralston Saul, Hedges regards Trump as the symptom rather than the disease. Decades ago, U.S. democracy began selling its soul to big corporations. Lobbyists and corporatism took control in Washington, gradually undermining the will of the people. Journalist Naomi Klein recently described Trump's administration as a "corporate coup d'état". Hedges and Ralston Saul argue that the real coup took place long before. (synopsis from www.whitepinepictures.com)

This screening is brought to you by the DFA as part of our Public Speaker Series.

Dr. Robert S. Rodger Lecture Series

February 4, 2020

Speaker: Ray Larkin, QC

Dalhousie SUB McInnes Room

7:00 pm to 9:00 pm

Refreshments will be served. Please RSVP to Kristin.Hoyt@dal.ca

Ray Larkin, QC, has been selected as the 2019-20 speaker for the Dr. Robert S. Rodger Lecture Series, established by the DFA in November 2018. With more than 40 years of experience representing the DFA, Ray has supported us and our Members through several arbitrations, provided counsel on day-to-day issues, and has been the DFA's chief negotiator for three rounds of collective bargaining. His keynote address will be followed by a panel on collegial governance.



Research You Can Use

[Injection lets people with peanut allergy go a little nuts](#) (Stanford)

[Melanoma rates drop sharply among teens, young adults](#) (University of Washington)

[That sick feeling might actually be an emotion](#) (University of Oregon)

[Exploring neurotoxins without animal testing](#) (University of Queensland)

DFA Office Hours

7:30 am – 3:30 pm

Monday to Friday

Drop in during office hours at
1443 Seymour Street in Halifax, call
902-494-3722 or email dfa@dal.ca.

 dfa.ns.ca  [@dalfacultyassoc](https://twitter.com/dalfacultyassoc)  [dalfacultyassoc](https://facebook.com/dalfacultyassoc)

Feedback or news we can use? Contact DFA Communications Officer Catherine.Wall@dal.ca

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