

# AUSU Report on Retrospective Changes at Athabasca University and the Impact for Students



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## Overview

In January of 2016, several motions were carried at the Faculty of Health Disciplines Faculty Council meeting that resulted in the following changes to the BN programs at AU:

- Remove the statement that a pass mark is 60%<sup>1</sup>
- Add the statement that students receiving 2 failing grades in one or more nursing courses will be automatically withdrawn from the program with no opportunity to re-apply<sup>2</sup>
- To amend the program requirements to show a minimum of a 2.3 GPA is required using all AU courses used toward the degree<sup>3</sup>
- Increase the total number of residency requirements from 45 credits to 51 credits, with the addition of BIOL235 which must be taken at AU<sup>4</sup>
- Add NURS316 as a required course which must be taken at AU<sup>5</sup>
- Add NURS317 as a required course which must be taken at AU<sup>6,7</sup>
- Decrease the credits allowed from Humanities/Social Science/Science from 6 to 3 required credits.<sup>8</sup>
- Change the course pre-requisite for NURS250 from a GPA of 3.0 to a GPA of 3.3
- Add BIOL235 as a pre-requisite for NURS250 and NURS400

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<sup>1</sup> Approved by APPSC on March 15, 2016

<sup>2</sup> Approved by APPSC on March 15, 2016

<sup>3</sup> Approved by APPSC on March 15, 2016

<sup>4</sup> Approved by APPSC on March 15, 2016

<sup>5</sup> Approved by APPSC on March 15, 2016

<sup>6</sup> Approved by APPSC on March 15, 2016

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that at the Faculty Council, course numbers NURS326 and NURS327 were used, but APPSC approved NURS316 and NURS317. For the purpose of this report, I am using the course numbers approved at APPSC although they differ from the FHD minutes.

<sup>8</sup> Approved by APPSC on March 15, 2016

All of the above changes were to be applied as of September 1, 2016 to BOTH new students as they enrolled into the programs, AND to existing students; already enrolled in a program at Athabasca University.

In the subsequent weeks and months, AUSU became increasingly concerned with:

- AU's lack of communication with students about the changes.
- The financial impact on students directly resulting from these changes.
- The authority of the Faculty of Health Disciplines and of APPSC to enact these changes retrospectively.
- The reason for the changes, both real and perceived. While AUSU was assured that the changes were in students' best interest, it was minuted that the reason for the changes was to reduce the number of students in the program without imposing a quota.
- The ethicality of imposing prerequisites, regardless of authority, while knowing it would require students to leave the program or retake courses.
- The short notice to students and lack of opportunity to prepare for the changes.

In an effort to communicate the concerns and views of students, AUSU's Executive team met with the following stakeholders between January and May to discuss these concerns:

- Dr. Margaret Edwards and faculty members from FHD
- AU Academic Affairs Committee
- Dr. Cindy Ives, Interim VPA at AU
- Dr. Alain May, Associate VP of Student and Academic Services at AU
- Peter MacKinnon, AU Interim President

In each meeting, AUSU relayed the student perspective and shared that it was felt students were being mistreated. We also expressed concern that while AU was saying that these changes were implemented to aid student success in passing the NCLEX professional exam; there was no evidence to support that the changes would result in a higher pass rate on the NCLEX for AU students. AUSU remained concerned that some of the changes were made with the aim of reducing the number of students in the program, which was minuted at FHD Faculty Council as the rationale for some of the program changes.

While AUSU does not dispute any of the proposed changes or the authority for AU to make these changes for any future enrollments to the BN program, we do oppose any changes applied retrospectively that are detrimental to students.

AUSU asked for proof of the research done to show that these specific changes would have an impact on the AU NCLEX pass rate. We asked if alternative changes, less detrimental to students, could be implemented to support students and gave suggestions such as:

- Changing or adding course material to existing courses
- Offering NCLEX prep courses
- Reviewing the instructors or training provided in current courses to address concerns with learning outcomes and student success in certain AU courses, such as NURS401 and NURS441.

AU was not supportive of investigating these suggestions and continued to take the position that these changes were in the best interest of students.

In June of 2016, at the FHD Faculty Council meeting, a motion was carried to:

“Add a cumulative grade threshold of 3.0 as a pre-requisite requirement for clinical courses NURS 401, 435, 437, 441 effective September 1, 2016.”

Essentially, the effect of this motion was that students in the program would now have the grades from their transfer courses, along with their AU grades combined to form an average grade threshold (AGT) and this would be used to determine their eligibility to enroll in core program courses. It was mentioned during the meeting that this change would affect approximately 20% of students currently enrolled in the program.

The following day students began to be informed that they would now need to bring up their AGT in order to continue in the program due to this new pre-requisite. There was no opportunity for students to prepare for these changes and many of them were negatively affected. When AUSU raised the issue of AGT with AU Administration, we were surprised that no one outside of the Faculty of Health Disciplines was aware of this change. We spoke widely about the detriment of this change to students, and how it clearly went against AU policies on transfer credits and GPA calculation. In a webinar hosted by FHD for students to learn about the changes, the program director stated that they were calling the calculation AGT rather than GPA and by doing so they did not have to follow AU policy on GPA.

Following the new developments related to AGT, and hearing from more students than ever; AUSU's President attended GFC in person on June 15 to represent AUSU. We were alarmed that Dr. Edwards' report on delegated authority to GFC was blank, despite the AGT change and all of the concerns from students in her faculty. While there was no requirement for her to report this

to GFC, this information should have been communicated to the governing body in the interest of transparency. We attempted to initiate a discussion about retroactive changes and requested multiple times for AU to make a commitment to address retroactive changes in AU policy. President MacKinnon stated several times during the GFC meeting that a policy referencing retroactive program changes is not necessary, because AU does not perform retroactive changes. AUSU challenged the response of the Interim President, based on the retroactive changes that had been approved and implemented, affecting students in the Faculty of Health Disciplines.

AUSU's efforts to this point had not resulted in any fair resolution for current students. The AUSU Executive team decided to write letters to the Nursing Education Program Approval Board, the interim Chair of the AU Board of Governors and to AU's interim President. These letters described the detriment of the changes brought forward for students and urged action. We also began to submit FOIP requests for information that would hopefully lead to an understanding of what work was done by AU leading up to these changes, how many students were affected and what the root cause or motivation for the changes is.

A response to our letter from Peter MacKinnon explained that the administration was now requiring the Faculty to bring forward AGT to APPSC for further approval and we were assured that its implementation would be halted until then and that students would not be required to meet the new AGT yet. This letter also indicated that no further action to remedy the retrospective nature of the other changes would be undertaken by AU, and a further meeting with him confirmed that AU felt that proper procedure had been followed for implementing retroactive changes.

AUSU consulted with legal counsel to gain advice on a further course of action, and were advised that pursuing a judicial review is a recommended next step against the changes applied retrospectively. After discussing the situation with our Council and receiving unanimous support, we once again wrote a letter to AU Interim President, Peter MacKinnon on September 7, 2016; informing him that our next step is to seek a judicial review on the matter of retrospective program changes.

As of September 27, 2016 this situation remains unresolved. Our council has agreed to move forward to a judicial review if necessary; and we unanimously passed a motion to create an internally restricted fund for initial advocacy efforts against retrospective program changes at AU. While there have been preliminary conversations with AU administration as a result of the most recent letter, no formal response has been received. We are hopeful that a judicial

review will not be necessary to ensure fair treatment of students, but are prepared to initiate one if needed.

## Impact on Students

As of September 21, 2016 we have documented contact from over 50 individual students on this topic. This does not include the dozens of conversations that we have had informally via social media, by phone or in person. From students, we have recorded the following themes:

- Overall, there is a large amount of confusion relating to the program changes, who they apply to and what the actual impact is. AU's communication plan was severely lacking and remains so today.
- Students were advised that if they were at a certain point in their program before Aug 10, 2016 they would be exempt from having to take some of the extra courses. They weren't informed of this until April which gave them almost zero time to get to where they needed to be in the program. The information was communicated in Mid-April, so students missed the registration date to start courses May 1. The best they could do was start a course June 1 and try to have all of their grades in the system before August 10. This means a total of 71 days to complete multiple courses.
- In an effort to meet the Aug 10, 2016 deadline, some students took extended absences from work, borrowed money and made other sacrifices to try to complete courses before Aug 10.
- Students reported feeling abandoned, misled and manipulated by AU.
- Several students discussed leaving AU altogether and stated they would never recommend the program to anyone.
- Students who didn't make the Aug 10 deadline discussed the impact of paying for and taking three extra courses. This would come at a cost of approx. \$2100 for an Alberta student, higher for students elsewhere. This doesn't include the cost of time for taking the extra courses as well.
- The AGT pre-requisites are absolutely crippling to some students. We have documented cases of students who were at the end of their program, and were told they were unable to register for their final two practicums because their AGT was too low, while they would have been fine prior to the changes.
- The introduction of the AGT in June was a tremendous blow. Literally overnight, the Faculty changed the way they calculated GPA (to the students' benefit and detriment) by including the students' marks for the courses used as transfer credits to AU. Students who were informed of the new GPA pre-req's in April who had done calculations to ensure they

were able to continue, woke up on June 10 to find that the rules had changed once again.

- There is widespread fear among students that more changes are coming. Many wonder if they should remain in the program at all for fear of more changes on the way.
- Students reported that they were afraid to disclose their name, call their advisor or request follow up. Many of them said that they had witnessed students being punished or discriminated against for appealing grades, following up with tutors or reporting lapses in service standards.
- Some students believe that there is a tendency for tutors to hold back in posting grades prior to the deadlines to enroll in clinical as a way to delay students from being able to register in specific permission only courses.
- The addition of pre-requisites has resulted in students being unable to graduate as they had planned. This results in loss of income.
- Some of the pre-requisite changes have caused students to be unable to take as many courses as needed to qualify for student loans. This was acknowledged by AU, but the students were left without options.
- Some students have no choice other than to retake courses that they had already passed in order to raise their GPA to the new standards resulting in significant financial strain and delayed progression in the program.

## Conclusion

AUSU Council unanimously agrees that the issue of retrospective changes applied to the detriment of students could be the most important advocacy topic during our time as student representatives. On behalf of undergraduate students at AU, we are concerned with the precedent set by these program changes and how they may be considered in future program changes both within and beyond Athabasca University. It is our position that AU must uphold the agreed upon program plan that each student received at the time of their enrollment; which is consistent with statements made on the AU website and the FHD website as well. We remain committed to representing the students who elected us and are confident in our ability to affect change on their behalf.