Update on the Daycare Committee – Spring 2003

In the last AWA newsletter, I provided an update about the University Daycare Committee on which I served between May and December 2002, taking over from Naomi Krogman as AWA’s Daycare Liaison. In brief, this committee was struck to evaluate daycare at the University, was chaired by Janet Elliott (Engineering), and was comprised by representatives from a broad cross-section of the University Community. The committee explored the apparent crisis in the availability and affordability of daycare at the University and then made several recommendations in a final report. Our investigation echoed previous work here and elsewhere which has suggested that the crisis stems from chronic underfunding that causes low staff wages, high staff turnover, high parent fees, and demand for high-quality care that vastly outstrips availability. These conditions are already believed to affect the retention and recruitment of excellent students, staff, and faculty at the University, a situation that will worsen without remedial action.

The Committee’s report, which was submitted to the University administration in December 2002, made eight recommendations. In brief, these were to (1) adopt our policy statement, (2) bring the Hospitals and Community Daycare into the fold, (3) formalize agreements with University-affiliated centers about how admission for University families would be given priority, (4) centralize some administrative tasks, currently duplicated at all five centers, (5) increase the amount and scope of a contingency fund available to the centers, (6) establish a standing committee to advise on daycare issues, particularly low staff wages, (7) devise a system to offset the rising cost of childcare for parents, and (8) create new facilities to increase the number of spaces available. Following review by the Provost's Advisory Committee, the Strategic Initiatives Group, and the Executive Planning Committee (EPC), the University made a formal response to the report (as a memo from the EPC to DAC on 17 April 2003) which was foreshadowed in an 4 April, 2003 article in Folio. That article headlined the University’s acceptance of the report’s associated policy and made much of the University’s positive and progressive advances. However, careful reading of the details of the memo conveys a mixed message. Whereas it committed the University to make several helpful changes (Recommendations 1-4), most of these were conceptual, even ‘symbolic’ as AAS:UA representative, Yasmeen Abu-Laban later characterized them. Less evident were the substantive changes needed to address the crisis in daycare that continues to exist on campus. In particular, no resources (people or funding) were provided to centralize administration (Recommendation 4), there has been no expansion in the scope or value of the contingency fund (5), there is no mandate for an ongoing committee to address caregiver salaries (6), there is no provision to offset costs to parents, even student parents (7), and no commitment, now or in future, to address the space deficit within University budgets (8). In short, not much of substance seemed to have changed.

Whence from there? While acknowledging and appreciating the positive steps forward, DAC formally expressed its disappointment with the extent of the University commitment in a memo of 29 April 2003 and our Chair, Janet Elliot, met with the
Administration on May 1. Following insightful and prompt feedback from the AWA executive, I expressed our disappointment more strongly (in a separate memo to the chair of DAC and University Administration) by identifying the discrepancies named above. I also emphasized the equity issue contained by the disproportionate hardships borne by young women, whether they need or provide childcare. Our new daycare liaison, Laurie Adkin, amplified these concerns, also with feedback from AWA’s executive, in an excellent guest column in the 2 May 2003 edition of Folio. Doug Owram, outgoing VP academic, responded to our combined expressions with a second memo on 13 May 2003 in which he suggested that lack of detail, but not commitment, in the first communication was responsible for some of our concerns. He expanded on several positive actions already underway to develop a website for campus childcare, centralize the waiting lists, increase spending (albeit very modestly for now), plan for renovation and redevelopment of existing space, explore new funding models to increase capacity, and invite more participation in the ongoing Advisory Committee. Time will tell how much substance supports these positive words.

All up, I am buoyed by the attention this important and perennial issue – the care of our children – has received in the last year. Through it, I have felt inspired by the quarter-century tradition of support for childcare the AWA has provided. I am encouraged by the new efforts of the University and I am hopeful that more will follow. But I also recognize that the need for action and advocacy is not over and I am delighted to pass the reigns to Laurie who has already done much to raise awareness about general and specific daycare issues. Laurie brings to this position as much passion, commitment, and knowledge concerning campus childcare as anyone I’ve met in this year-long process. I am confident that she will keep this issue at the forefront of AWA and University affairs in the important year ahead. Thus, I hope that current and future members will enjoy carrying this torch, as their time and expertise afford, and reaping the many benefits of a community that invests in its children. In so doing, I believe we will contribute tangibly to a prosperous and prominent future for the University.

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