

# KNOW YOUR CA

## Merit

By Elizabeth Hanson  
Department of English

and Sam Kalb  
Stauffer Library

Article

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To understand how merit pay functions, it is first necessary to understand how and why salary increases are awarded to full-time faculty and continuing adjunct faculty, as well as librarians and archivists at Queen's.

Members in these categories receive an annual salary increase that is quantified in the annual salary letter, in most cases as a figure in the vicinity of 5% to 6%. This increase actually consists of two separate increases. The first is an *Across-the-Board (ATB)* increase that is a percentage of present salary (for each year of the current agreement, it is 3.2%) and, as the name suggests, it is the same for everyone. This increase is also sometimes referred to as *Scale*.

The purpose of the Across-the-Board increase is to maintain the value of salaries primarily by ensuring that they keep pace with the cost of living, but they also serve to hold Queen's salaries at a level competitive with those of comparable universities in the province. The key word here is *maintain*. Without this increase, our salaries would actually decline in value over time.

The second component is called *Progress through the Ranks (PTR)*, and this is where Merit comes in.

### Faculty Member Merit

At Queen's, as at most universities, academic salaries are framed to reflect professional development over time, rather than just to compensate the work of an individual in any given year. In other words, over the course of our career, we are compensated for the expertise we gain and bring to our positions, in much the same way that those in other careers charge a higher per-hour rate as they become more senior and acquire skills and knowledge to help them do their job better and more efficiently. This is accomplished for faculty members through the PTR mechanism outlined in Article 42.2.2.

The foundation of this mechanism is "Floor F," a fictional dollar amount (\$53,369.00 in 2008-2009) that increases annually at the same rate as the Across-the-Board increase. Every year, faculty members receive (in addition to the ATB increase) an increase that is a percentage of "Floor F" and that is intended to move their salaries upward along a curve that goes from initial hiring to retirement. At Queen's, this PTR component is applied differentially according to annual Merit assessments.

As a result of the annual Performance Review (see Article 28), each faculty member is assigned a certain number of points, with 10 being the mode (or most frequently assigned score)

mandated by the Collective Agreement. Each merit point is worth 0.5% of "Floor F," and a score of 10 is thus worth 5% thereof, or \$2,669.00 in 2008-2009. This amount is supplemented or diminished according to a system of *Junior Increments and Senior Abatements*, which apply at salary levels that are also determined with reference to "Floor F" (see 42.2.3). For example, a faculty member earning 2.2 x "Floor F" (\$117,411.80) in 2008-2009 would see his or her Merit / PTR increase diminished by 1.9% of "Floor F," or \$1,014.00.

Junior increments and senior abatements are part of a salary model created by a joint QUFA-Administration task force in 1983. The idea behind the increment / abatement model is that a dollar is worth more early in one's career—when it can be invested, used to pay off debts, provide a higher base salary for increases, etc.—than it would be worth later on. At Queen's, therefore, salary does not increase in a straight line, but rather it in theory rises faster at the beginning and more gently at the end of a person's career.

This complex PTR / Merit system thus does two things at once: it moves *everyone* along a salary curve that rises from hiring to retirement (PTR), and it *differentiates* individuals in the course of that movement, according to assessments of their performance (Merit).

These performance assessments are based on the faculty member's Annual Report, which in

Departmentalized Faculties is evaluated first by the Head of Department and then by the Dean, who recommends a merit score to the Vice-Principal (Academic). The Dean assesses faculty members directly in non-Departmentalized faculties.

Merit scores can be between 0 and 7, 10, 12, 15, or 20. However, the vast majority of scores are 10 or 12. In 2007-2008, for instance, 10 faculty members received a score of 7 or below, 65 faculty members received a 15, and 2 faculty members received a 20. Meanwhile, 695 members received a 10 or 12. Greater weight is given to teaching and research than to service, so one must normally excel in at least one of the former to achieve a 15 or a 20, and a significantly better-than-average performance to receive a 12. The recipients of scores of 15 or 20, and the reasons for them, must be disclosed to Members of the unit.

There are a number of complexities and problems with this system. While the number of points in the system is elastic (see 42.2.2.8), it is not infinite, and Heads may feel that they are not allowed enough points to recognize the work of their department members properly. Underpinning this problem is a more subtle one, however. The system is designed to make differentiation among faculty members reasonably difficult. In my judgment, this is a good thing, founded on the recognition that the vast majority of faculty members are alike in working hard and doing their jobs very well. We are not an aggregate of stars and lie-about, but a community of distinguished teachers and researchers, brought together through rigorous hiring practices and sustained by vocational drive in a prestigious research university. This means that the faculty member who receives the modal score of 10 (the *average* of all scores given is actually about 10.5) is not *average* in the normal, evaluative sense of the term, but in most cases

an active and distinguished practitioner of his or her discipline who is meeting the high standards expected of all Queen's faculty. It can be discouraging to department Members and Heads alike when, in the annual ritual of differentiation, high-performing and hard-working faculty must be labelled as merely the norm against which others can be seen to be meritorious.

It may seem, as well, that most of the differences in question are monetarily trivial (the difference between a 10 and 12 this year is worth \$533.00), too small to be worth not only the grief but the considerable number of professor-hours that go into filling out annual assessments and, if you are a Head, evaluating them and negotiating them, an onerous task in a large unit. Certainly, I want to pause over this point and invite everyone to weigh the time involved in the process.

However, it should also be noted that what a merit point is actually worth varies considerably depending on when in an individual's career it is earned. Merit increases compound over time, since the amount of all subsequent ATB increases will be larger because of it. Thus, the *enfant terrible* who burns out may stand to do much better than the individual who publishes a magisterial work late in her or his career, although both may have equal and considerable impact on their fields.

Merit scores also make a difference with respect to the anomalies process, since you can only be found to be anomalous in relation to those with the same average merit history, a fact that might make it worth your while to grieve rather than walk away if you feel that you have been improperly evaluated. Thus, while it might be healthy to think as little as possible about merit, it may not be wise, and for Heads it is impossible. One difficulty with any grievance is that, because all scores are arrived at

comparatively, and one's colleagues' evaluations are confidential, it is impossible ever to know whether one has been fairly treated and for Heads to demonstrate fair treatment.

Queen's faces many problems more serious than those that the merit system produces. However, I think we might be able to find other means to recognize extraordinary achievements and save ourselves time and aggravation. One way might be to go to a system where faculty members are evaluated every three years, perhaps in a rotation, and for the purpose simply of keeping tabs on how people are doing. Individuals who have done something unusually important, like publishing a book or a distinguished series of articles or winning a major teaching prize, could apply to a bonus pool for a one-time, substantial, monetary award that would not be added to the base salary and, so, would not compound. A procedure like this might reflect our culture and working reality better than the time-consuming, mildly discouraging, and somewhat arbitrary system we have now.

#### Librarian and Archivist Merit

In the case of librarians and archivists, the merit component is separated from the PTR in the current salary model. Junior increments and senior abatements were eliminated in the current agreement and replaced by a sliding scale of PTR awards depending on the Member's current salary. Librarian and archivist PTR increments are calculated as a percentage of the General Librarian / Archivist Floor: 4.3% for Members with salaries less than 1.25 times the Floor; 3.5% for Members at less than 2.0 times the Floor; 1.5% for Members at less than 2.1 times the Floor; and 1.0% for Members with salaries greater or equal to 2.2 times the Floor.

The value of a merit point for librarian and archivist Members is a fixed

amount (increased by scale 3.2% for the current year). Academic merit scores that can be given are: 0, 1, 2, 3, or 4 points, with 2 merit points being the nominal mean academic merit score, equivalent to the faculty merit score of 10. The maximum number of merit points that can be added in a year by the Vice-Principal (Academic) is not more than a number equal to one-third (1/3) of the librarian and archivist complement on 1 May of each year.

Currently, 12 additional merit points are available for meritorious performance beyond the norm. During the past three years, no

Member has received more than 3 merit points in any given year. In the current year, a third merit point was worth \$410.00.

*Elizabeth Hanson can be reached at [hansone@queensu.ca](mailto:hansone@queensu.ca)*

*Sam Kalb can be reached at [kalbs@queensu.ca](mailto:kalbs@queensu.ca).*



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*Know Your CA is edited by Robert G. May. He can be reached at [mayr@queensu.ca](mailto:mayr@queensu.ca)*