

Help Wanted

Students and administration alike must deal with the province's labour shortage.

A feature by Tom Wagner, Jon Taves and Sean Steels
Photos by Mike Otto

Alberta's booming economy has been a mixed blessing for the province. Some employers can't find the people to fill their openings, while some employees are making out like bandits with rising wages. Housing is nearly impossible to find, construction projects are delayed and costly, and there has never been a higher demand for workers.

Just as with any other institution or company in Alberta, the current labour shortage has affected the University of Alberta's ability to continue on with normal business and, in particular, to maintain old buildings and construct new ones. Though the shortage hasn't significantly affected every profession, it's come down hard on many jobs at the University.

"In some areas, there are shortages, and in other areas, there are surpluses," Joan Schiebelbein, director of Career and Placement Services (CaPS), explains. "I think what's important about this time is there are severe labour shortages in probably more areas than there have been in the past and fewer surpluses that aren't as severe as they may have been in the past."

Unfortunately, some of the most severe shortages are in the trades, which has strongly affected the construction of new projects around the University, making them cost more and take longer.

"Cost of labour's going up, availability of labour's going down, and productivity of labour's going down," says Don Hickey, University Vice-President (Facilities & Operations). "All three of them end up costing more money and add time to projects."

The University has been forced to deal with these issues in a number of ways. One of the major problems is that many of the older buildings on campus are beginning to show their age, and their mechanical and electrical systems are starting to break down. Because of a lack of labour, however, many of these projects have been put on hold.

"We can only do so much a year, and if you don't have the labour, some stuff gets postponed to the next year," Hickey explains.

The increased costs have also forced a change in the plans for the construction of new buildings, such as a reduction in scope, in order to offset ever-increasing costs. However, the labour shortage hasn't affected every sector of construction and maintenance at the University equally. While both deferred maintenance, such as replacing buildings' roofs and the construction of new buildings have been severely affected by the labour shortage, routine or preventative maintenance hasn't faced the same problems.

According to Kyle Marshall, President of the Lister Hall Students' Association (LHSA), the University has managed to provide adequate levels of maintenance in residences despite the labour shortage.

"The maintenance workers here do their best. Of course, with the labour shortage in Alberta it's tough for them to take care of every problem in the residence at a very fast speed," Marshall admits. "[But] things tend to get taken care of within a reasonable amount of time."

Much like the University though, students are increasingly having to deal with inflated costs of everything from rent to services in part because of the ever-rising cost of labour.

"Certain residents will complain about getting a \$50 charge for getting a box removed from a hallway," Marshall notes. "The reason we're given for that being is that that is out of the realm of the normal duties that a housekeeper should be doing. However, that's a pretty astronomical cost for something that seems so small."

Overall, however, the U of A has actually been quite successful in managing labour costs for preventative maintenance while still providing services. Unlike construction or deferred maintenance, which are handled by outside contractors, preventative maintenance is done by University staff.

According to Schiebelbein, this has worked in favour of the University, which up to this point has been fairly successful at attracting workers because of the many relative perks of working for it. Apart from the competitive pay and benefits, the University also has an advantage over many other employers by offering jobs in the city.

"One of the issues with a lot of trades is that for a lot of the big projects that are happening where there is a high demand for labour, people are having to work away from where they live," Schiebelbein explains. "I think sometimes people find it attractive to be able to find work where they live, and so, this is something the University can provide."

FEATURE CONTINUES ON PAGE 14

