

Sprouts continues to grow

Volunteer run café bounces back from near-bankruptcy

BY TREVOR RECORD
News Staff

Perhaps you have seen it, tucked away in the corner of the SUB basement. As a relatively new student, I had not. Sprouts, a café serving local organic food, seems out of place when compared to the corporate dining facilities present on the main floor of the SUB. I went in to find homey decorations, tables transported from the 70s, and Le Tigre playing over the store sound system. I had a thick goulash with a piece of bread; the soup was surprisingly spicy, but satisfying. The soup is always gluten-free and vegan, and increasing demand for gluten-free baked goods means that there is often such foods available.

With lineups reaching the back of the store at times, it's hard to believe that at one time

We are living proof that there is a demand for local and organic food at UBC.

—Martin Gunst,
Sprouts President

Sprouts was on the verge of bankruptcy. A year ago they were staff-run and almost all of their volunteers had left. Last January they were \$40,000 in debt. Now Sprouts is entirely volunteer-run, and the team managed to pay off half of their debt by last April.

I met with Martin Gunst, the president of Sprouts, in the AMS kitchen where all of the cooking for Sprouts takes place. He told me that they anticipate their remaining debt will be paid off by this upcoming April. They have managed this even whilst keeping low prices—impressive for a café serving local organic food.

"One of our mandates is to increase food security at UBC," Gunst said. "An aspect of this is to keep costs as low as possible; this includes prices in the store and the price of membership to our Bulk Buyer's Club."

When I inquired about Sprouts' plans, I was informed that they currently have five initiatives. The first is the Sprouts store, which is the primary focus of the organization. The second is the Bulk Buyer's Club, a co-op that allows members to purchase large quantities of local organic food directly from distributors with only a small (five per cent) markup. For those unwilling to pay for a membership or buy produce in bulk quantities, Sprouts holds a market in the SUB every Monday. They also put together "Community Eats" every second



After a rough 2007, Sprouts has increased revenue and seen lineups this year. DREW THOMPSON PHOTO/THE UBYSSEY

Friday, a free or by-donation meal open to all students, which uses food that would otherwise be thrown out by local grocers because of appearance. Finally, they offer a Sprouts catering service, which is their newest initiative.

Gunst has hopes that Sprouts will be a catalyst for change at UBC. "I should hope that our success will serve as an example for

all food services at UBC," he said. "We are living proof that there is a demand for local and organic food at UBC. We can't keep up with the amount of food that our store requires; we sell out of soup, bread, and baked goods every day."

Perhaps as a natural result of an organization run entirely by volunteers, I was left with the

impression that Sprouts was, more than anything else, a group of friends doing what they loved. Store coordinator Jeremy Taylor isn't just another volunteer, he is also Gunst's roommate. "It's a great place to work, you get to meet great people, and eat great food." Taylor said, "I have a friend who works here that doesn't even go to UBC." ☪

Trials and tribulations of TAs

BY KALYEENA MAKORTOFF
News Staff

Students from all faculties are familiar with teaching assistants at UBC, but are often critical of the experience. While experts like Carl Wieman continue to inform the academic community on specific areas to be improved, the university is attempting to repair these "dismal aspects" of the university experience through a variety of initiatives.

"TA training has not been a priority at the university until recently. That can be said of a lot of things regarding teaching and learning. Coming into this role I've noticed a ton of initiatives that are mostly new to really address that problem," explained Alex Lougheed, Alma Mater Society (AMS) VP Academic.

"One of the big problems with TA training on campus is that there currently is no centralized training program; it is up to departments to decide how much they want to train their TAs. Which makes sense, that's the way the academic part of the university is structured; it is very much departmentally focused."

Although Lougheed said he was a strong believer in the departmental model, he explained that this structure "makes it really hard for central administration to say: 'this is a new priority for us, we want to change the status quo.'"

In one attempt to solve the problem, UBC is providing monetary resources for depart-

mental TA training through the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund. In order to receive funding, individual departments must apply, providing details of intended training programs.

"The process that we have is that we send a call for proposals for departments to apply for funding...and in order to be successful, they need to present a program that has particular attributes," explained vice provost and associate vice president academic affairs Anna Kindler.

Departments may receive anywhere from \$2500 to \$10,000 depending on the design of their programs and the number of TAs to be trained.

Recently, the Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth (TAG) changed its approach to TA training by abandoning the general centralized structure and began collaborating with departments. TAG programs are not mandatory, but have attracted a greater number of TAs since making the switch to departmentally specific training.

Although providing a potentially useful program, TA improvement relies on the individual to take part in these skill development workshops and training sessions outside of what is provided by their faculty.

Maria Petrucci, a history TA of five years, has noticed the positive effects from the training. "We have people from TAG speaking, like experienced TAs, professors that have relations with TAs and use TAs all the

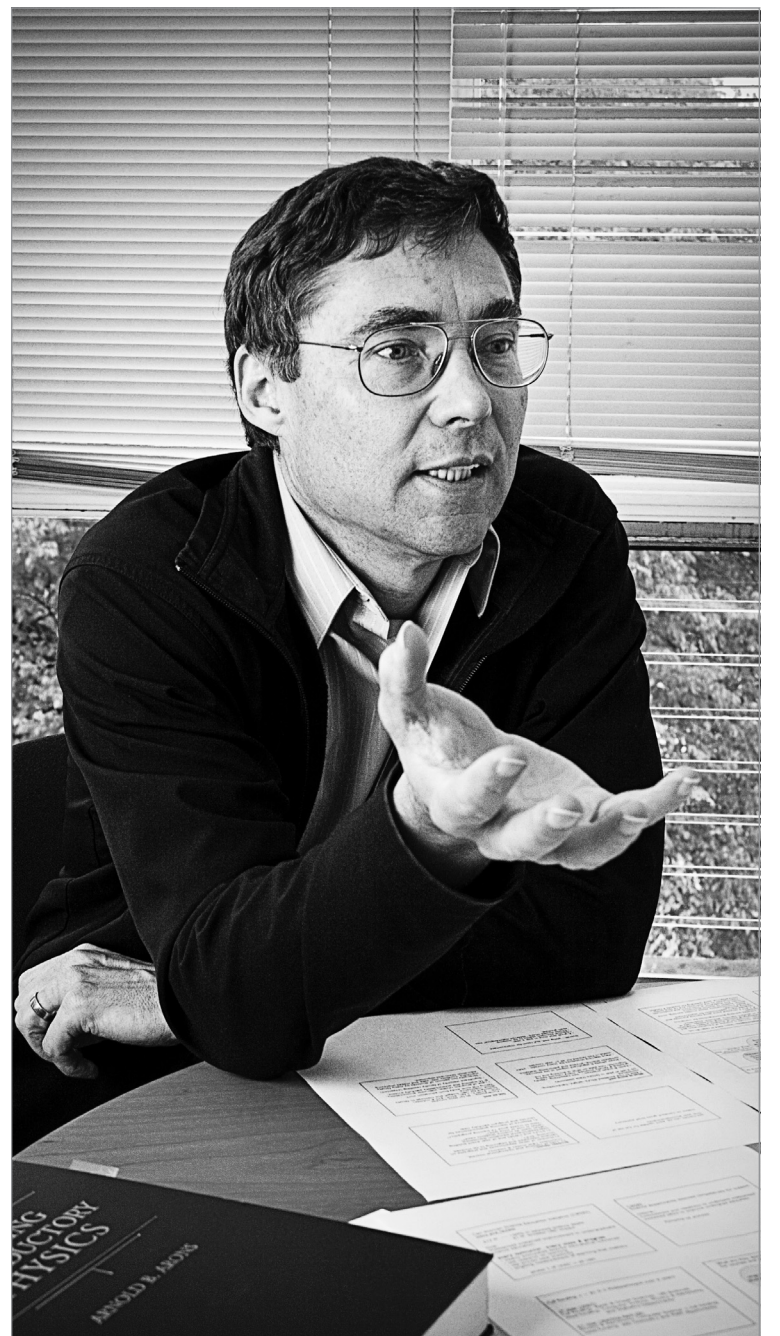
time, so I think it's been a great program. And it improves really, every year, but it improves the quality of the TA that are teaching in certain faculties."

While students may complain about TA experience Petrucci suggests that they may misunderstand the role of teaching assistants. "I believe that TAs are the first line of defence and offence...when something goes wrong with the student, the first to be accused, probably, is the TA because you don't go to the professor and say 'you haven't done this or you haven't done that.'"

You go up to the TA because he is the only one that can help you, or can be a mediator between the professor and you, and I think that's something that students do not really get.

The TA should be an instrument that will help them to improve their technique, whatever class they're taking. And, according to my experience, I think that's very little taken into consideration by students maybe because they don't know, or they think that the TA is the same as a professor."

But Petrucci does not deny that a lack of experience can translate into a lack of quality. "In the first three years I was a TA, I didn't know what to expect. I mean, I'm just a student who goes there and try to teach my peers. So you may make huge mistakes that you're not aware of. But with the experience and training I think you can improve in your quality." ☪



Nobel-prize winning professor Carl Wieman has highlighted TA training as an area in need of improvement at UBC. JORGE AMIGO PHOTO/THE UBYSSEY