

Jan. 28, 2014

Fran Walley, Chair
Planning and Priorities Committee of Council

Dear Professor Walley

On behalf of the Academic Programs Committee, I wanted to inform you about the results of the two discussions held regarding the TransformUS reports.

Much of our discussion concerned the Academic Program report, its recommendations for overall changes in program directions, and its likely impact on committee workload.

During our first discussion, committee members raised a number of concerns about task force recommendations.

- Regarding the recommendations to delete the three-year degree and post-graduate diplomas, it was noted that some of these programs are directed at mature students and at Aboriginal students; it is an important credential in some communities, particularly in northern Saskatchewan, and for some students (for example, parents studying part-time). To unilaterally disengage from these programs could prove to be a disservice to an important demographic for this university. It was suggested that in many cases these programs could be considered as early exit points rather than as programs in their own right.
- Regarding interdisciplinary programs, the Task Force noted that when they are resourced, they succeed. It was challenging to determine what resources were being allocated to them, and it was likely difficult for the Task Force to understand how these programs function. It was virtually impossible to assign teaching and research effort by faculty teaching in the interdisciplinary programs through the templates. Interdisciplinary programs are celebrated in the university as they are able to take advantage of the breadth of programming offered here and they equip students to succeed in an increasingly complex world. Moreover, interdisciplinary research is becoming the norm where large teams of researchers are expected to tackle research problems. However, interdisciplinary programs continue to be challenging at the University of Saskatchewan; structural changes may be needed to remedy this problem within and between colleges.

- The university is working on a distributed learning strategy based on the principle that students should be able to “learn where they live”. Many believe that these goals are very important for rural and remote communities. If the university wants to succeed with this strategic initiative, there will need to be central support for the distributed learning programs through eMAP and CCDE in particular.
- A problem with program-by-program review is inability to see the connections between programs. The university needs to look at each ranking individually to determine its basis, to be aware of the limitations in the ranking structure, and to not make mechanistic decisions. For example, some intellectually rigorous programs such as Mathematical Physics and Bioinformatics enroll small numbers of academically superior students.

During the next discussion, the committee focused on what impact the task force recommendations would have on its workload and how its review of programs could be informed by the TransformUS templates and approach.

As a committee of Council, our concerns are the quality of programs, the diversity of programs, their alignment with university priorities and their budgetary implications. Committee members discussed whether the review mechanisms and procedures now used would be sufficient in the future, both in terms of assisting colleges with their own review of programs, and providing committee members with sufficient information about programs to make sound recommendations to Council. It was suggested that the committee could discuss issues raised in the report in a pro-active way, with the goal of providing assistance to colleges in dealing with overarching issues such as interdisciplinarity, what distinguishes an honours program, the features of minors and certificates, and so forth. It was noted that there is now a great deal of information about programs available to APC and to the university as a whole, which may make it more feasible to conduct “best practices” reviews of programs offered across the university, such as honours programs. This information could guide program creation, revision and overall administration.

It was also suggested that the committee should reexamine its review processes for program proposals. There should be some recognition of the importance of not continuing to add programs beyond what the institution can support. Given the ad hoc nature of the work done by APC, dealing with programs sent from colleges as they are ready, we anticipate more discussions about these issues.

Over the last year, the Academic Programs Committee has routinely asked colleges proposing new programs to make sure these are reviewed within a three- to five-year schedule, to ensure they are meeting the goals that were outlined in the program proposal.

A subcommittee has now been established to review the criteria for program evaluation and approval and the APC worksheet to ensure these processes consider the university signature areas, the third integrated plan, and the impact of program costs. In particular, the report of this subcommittee will provide recommendations as to how APC can evaluate a proposed program’s cost, and how to measure a program’s success. The issues

raised by the TransformUS task force will contribute to this review. For example, niche programs will need to align with university priorities to be viable; for interdisciplinary programs, it will be important to ensure that there will be resources available to sustain growth, and so forth.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Roy Dobson, Chair

Cc: Members of the Academic Programs Committee
Brett Fairbairn, Provost
Crystal Maslin, Office of the Provost