

Jan. 27, 2014

Fran Walley, Chair
Planning and Priorities Committee of Council

Dear Professor Walley

Thank you for taking the lead role in coordinating feedback on the TransformUS reports on behalf of committees of University Council. Our members were pleased to know that their thoughts and questions would be entered as part of the consultation process.

On January 15th, members of the Teaching, Learning and Academic Resources Committee (TLARC) engaged in structured discussions of the TransformUS reports, based largely around the questions provided by the Planning and Priorities Committee.

In order to inform the discussion, members were provided with supporting materials. Specifically, tables were prepared that summarized quintile recommendations for clusters of teaching and learning activity in both central units and across colleges. In addition, key themes related to the mandate of TLARC were provided for consideration.

Although the Academic Task Force Report was included as part of the discussion, the primary focus was on consideration of the recommendations made within the Support Services Task Force Report (SSTF). What follows is a summary of TLARC's responses and suggested considerations with regard to the development of an implementation plan.

Reactions and Insights: (Unless otherwise noted, these reactions pertain to the SSTF report)

- The recommendations led TLARC members to the belief that the SSTF did not view the support of teaching and learning as being important.
- SSTF chose to rate almost everything in the units reporting to the Vice-Provost Teaching and Learning (VPTL) as well as the VPTL office itself as either Q4 or Q5. We strongly feel that this is the wrong direction for the university to take, however well-intentioned the task force recommendations might have been. We agree that the University would lose a great deal of progress made in the last ten years if it acted on those recommendations. TransformUS is about aligning resources with strategic priorities, and the SSTF recommendations related to teaching and learning units seem to run counter to the University's own strategic priorities. We have seen in the Teaching and Learning Foundational Document, the Learning Charter, and the funding invested by PCIP over the last several years

to build up the University Learning Centre (ULC) and the VPTL that these resources and services are a strategic priority of the University. How then can units like the ULC, Media Access and Production (eMAP), the Centre for Distance and Continuing Education (CCDE) and the Office of the VPTL be considered not to be a strategic priority?

- Academic resources are the technical supports and services used for teaching and learning by students and faculty. The academic resources in eMAP, CCDE, the Library and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) are at risk in the SSTF recommendations. The functions within these units are particularly important for distance education, for example the resources needed by colleges like Nursing and Medicine that offer their program at off-campus sites. Cuts to distance program distribution affects not only the outreach and engagement mission of the university, but also disproportionately affects the learning opportunities of individual in rural and remote communities, including Aboriginal peoples.
- Support services focused on research activity appeared to receive more favorable quintile rankings as compared with services provided to support teaching and learning. It was suggested that these quintile placements reflect the climate of increased research intensiveness and an increasingly complex and competitive research environment; however, it was also suggested that teaching and learning can be nebulous in nature and, in comparison with research grants and journal publications, are hard to quantify. The ripple effect of the work done by ULC/GMTCE to improve teaching and learning is also hard to measure.
- The recommendations regarding teaching and learning support services do not appear to align with or reflect the university's stated priorities. This would include (but not be limited to) such things as the Learning Charter and a number of directions captured within the "Innovations in Programs and Services" focal area of IP3. The Third Integrated plan states "Utilizing investments made in the University Learning Centre, the Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching Effectiveness, the office of Institutional Planning and Assessment, in Student and Enrolment Services Division, and the Vice-Provost Teaching and Learning over the past two planning cycles will be critical to our success" in innovation in academic programs and services, yet it is these offices which have been identified by the SSTF as targets for reduction or elimination.
- Members of TLARC are confused as to whether the SSTF intended to send a message to the campus that support services (including teaching and learning) are best organized in a centralized model or best delivered in a decentralized model. Both (and sometimes conflicting) messages were detected. Over the last two planning cycles, a number of college-level support activities for teaching and learning have been pulled out of colleges and made available to students across campus through initiatives such as the ULC (writing help, math help, and so forth). These types of initiatives need the kind of specialized staff that centralized units are diverse enough to support. We have similar concerns about university investments in technology, which some of the SSFT recommendations seem to suggest should be decentralized to colleges. Students today expect that the university will provide core services to all students, regardless of their college. The distributed approach will lead to inconsistent and uneven services.

- If the presumption is that the university can do without certain support services in teaching and learning or that services can be offered somewhere other than centralized units, then this leads to the conclusion that SSTF believes teaching and learning support work can be returned to colleges, to be done by faculty members themselves. This is the way the university operated twenty years ago. TLARC members question whether faculty have the time and capacity to engage in such things as faculty development work for themselves, their graduate students and their colleagues. If this is the correct conclusion, there are implications for workload.
- Contrary to statements made in the report, there is high demand in some colleges to use instructional development services. As one example, colleges with accredited programs have external professional obligations to utilize learning outcomes in their curriculums and so are using these services intensively when revising their curriculums.
- Regarding the position of the Vice-Provost Teaching and Learning, it is important for teaching and learning to have a voice at this institution. The other missions of research and outreach have similar voices and can advocate for these issues both within and outside the university community. Without the VP TL, there is no voice for teaching and learning.
- There also appears to be a disconnect within the SSTF report. In its comments on the Office of the Provost (030) the task force notes the “huge range and number of responsibilities, many direct reports” of this office, and suggests “reconfiguration at the senior admin level to assign some responsibilities elsewhere”. However, the position of Vice-Provost Teaching and Learning was created three years ago for exactly this reason, to assume some responsibilities and direct reports previously managed by the Provost himself. It should also be noted that it was only in January 2013 that a permanent appointment to the Vice-Provost position was made.

TransformUS process observations:

- The focus of the templates was on individual unit/program functioning, which may mean that the methodology discouraged template writers from speaking to coordinating and collaboration across campus. This means that a separate process must be undertaken to accurately determine whether statements about lack of coordination are as real as suggested in the SSTF report.
- The middle and upper administrative perspective was missing from the SSTF report yet these are often the groups of people who have a solid understanding of the need for teaching and learning support units.
- Although there is reference in the template to the Strategic Directions and the Third Integrated Plan, the university priorities established by that plan were apparently not taken into account by the task force in its recommendations. Concern was expressed that administrative units may have had a false sense of security when completing their templates that the task force would be familiar with university priorities when evaluating services.

Suggestions for consideration in the implementation plan:

- Members of TLARC do not believe that the university can grow its enrolments entirely on the basis of students it draws to the Saskatoon campus. Consistent with the strategy work that has already been set out; distributed learning approaches will be required. In addition, TLARC was not convinced that support for distributed learning could be effectively or successfully provided by a single college or all colleges individually for themselves.
- As part of the reorganization of teaching and learning functions that is likely to emerge from the TransformUS recommendations, we suggest that it will be critical to define common and core services.
- Members of TLARC think it is imperative that appropriate benchmarks be established to guide expectations around the roles of teaching and learning support service providers (e.g., what outcomes do we expect from an instructional designer). Similarly, however challenging, it is clear that better metrics are required for teaching and learning support services in order to effectively demonstrate value and impact.
- A review of the perceived duplication of services or confusion of services between ICT and eMAP should be part of the implementation plan.
- While all administrative offices need to ensure they are useful and effective, it is not realistic to believe that the university can discard the number of academic and administrative leadership positions as the SSTF seems to be recommending while remaining an effective organization.

Yours truly,



Jay Wilson, Vice-Chair

Cc: Members of the Teaching, Learning and Academic Resources Committee
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