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SFU OFFICE OF THE VICE-PRESIDENT, ACADEMIC AND PROVOST

8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC   TEL: 778.782.3925   vpacad@sfu.ca
Canada V5A 1S6   FAX: 778.782.5876   www.sfu.ca/vpacademic

MEMORANDUM

ATTENTION Senate   **DATE** April 25, 2013

FROM Jon Driver, Vice-President, Academic & Provost   **PAGES** 5

RE: Evaluation of Educational Goals
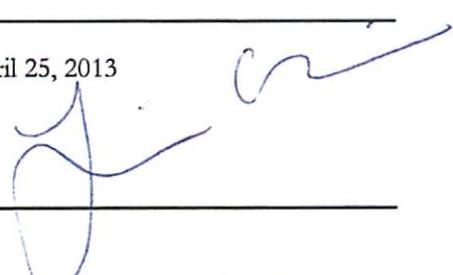
I wish to propose the following motion to Senate, supported by, and in the context of, the discussion that follows the motions.

That the quality of academic programs at SFU be enhanced through the following practices and processes:

1. each academic unit will develop a public statement of educational goals for each academic program prior to its next external review, commencing with reviews in the spring term of 2014;

2. commencing with reviews scheduled for spring term 2015, each academic unit will include in the self-study for the external review an evaluation of the success of the unit in meeting the educational goals of its program(s), using methods and evidence selected by the academic unit;

3. resources for the development and evaluation of the statement of educational goals will be provided by the Vice-President Academic, together with assistance from relevant support units;

4. SCUTL will oversee these processes, and will report annually to Senate on their implementation and impact;

5. a thorough evaluation of the costs and benefits of the above practices and processes will be made for Senate in 2017 after the third year of implementation, and Senate will determine whether and on what basis they should be continued.

Introduction

Over the last eighteen months the University has been considering a proposal to move towards more formal definition and assessment of learning outcomes (LOA). The history of this proposal was presented in a document that Senate discussed in February 2013. At that meeting, Senate also debated at some length a rationale and proposal for the development and assessment of learning outcomes. Following that meeting I prepared a further proposal for Senate's consideration that responded to various concerns and critiques. I withheld the proposal from the March 2013 Senate agenda at the request of faculty members who wanted

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more time to consider the proposal and its implications. I posted the proposal on a website, requested comments, and organized three open meetings where I presented the proposal, responded to questions, and listened to comments.

Having considered the comments and discussion that have taken place over the last year, I have concluded that, while some academic units have already begun to implement course-based learning outcomes and assessment processes, either as a component of program accreditation or voluntarily, not all academic units are currently equipped or prepared to do so. However, if we do not implement LOA processes across all units at this time, I am convinced that we must still do more to clarify the purpose of academic programs to students, and to demonstrate to the broader community that we are evaluating our ability to deliver what we promise. Having considered the discussion about the learning outcomes proposal, I suggest that the University should take a somewhat different approach to understanding the performance of our students in relation to the goals of academic programs.

Concerns about learning outcomes and assessment proposals

My reasons for suggesting a different approach are as follows:

1. Although some units have already developed learning outcomes and assessment processes, and other units are currently doing this, not all units see a course-based LOA approach as the right way to proceed. The term "learning outcomes and assessment" is seen by some as implying a pre-determined method that does not capture the full value of a university education, and would prevent individual academic units from developing a means of self-assessment that is consistent with their disciplines and the educational goals of faculty members. The modified proposal provides much greater autonomy to academic units to develop their own approach.

2. Some faculty members have expressed concern that centralized collection of information about student performance in relation to a set of formal learning outcomes could result in a number of deleterious consequences, including: teaching to a narrow set of outcomes; preoccupation with "marketable" skills; emphasis on easily measurable phenomena; development of an unnecessary bureaucracy; use of student performance data to evaluate individual faculty members; loss of creativity in teaching; reduction in student responsibility to learn; workload increases for faculty and support staff; and unknown financial impacts. The modified proposal seeks to address these concerns.

3. Many faculty members believe that the LOA proposal was driven solely by the move to become accredited with NWCCU and they are concerned that the University will be required to conform to standards imposed externally. The modified proposal addresses these concerns by making it clear that academic units will be free to develop processes and practices that are suited to their disciplines, programs and educational goals, and that faculty members within these academic units will have control over such processes, practices and associated information.

A rationale for this change in our practices

I believe that the University should address the following two questions clearly and publicly:
- What are we seeking to achieve through delivery of our academic programs?
- How well are we meeting those aspirations?

These questions need to be addressed for four reasons.

First, there are benefits to students in providing clear, accessible information about the educational goals of academic programs in a comprehensive university. Such information tells intending students about the

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purpose and value of their proposed course of study; and it helps current students map individual course content onto a more general set of program goals.

Second, a clear statement about the goals of an academic program provides continuing faculty members with a focus for discussion about curriculum content and structure. Such a statement is also helpful for incoming faculty members or temporary instructors.

Third, assessing performance against the educational goals of an academic program allows us to demonstrate to external stakeholders that we have well-defined program goals, and that we can link our performance and the achievements of our students to these goals.

Fourth, there is ample evidence that definition and assessment of post-secondary education goals are widespread in many jurisdictions, and are increasingly regarded as the best measure of educational quality and effectiveness. Examples include: the Bologna Process and Tuning project in Europe; the Quality Assurance Agency in the UK; the Tuning USA project and Degree Qualifications Profile sponsored by the Lumina Foundation; USA regional accreditation standards; the Australian Qualifications Framework and the associated Learning and Teaching Academic Standards project; and the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board in Ontario. Most recently, the OECD has sponsored a project (Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes) to determine whether learning outcomes can be evaluated on an international scale, focusing initially on economics and engineering.

Process

In suggesting that we need to do something in regard to the questions posed above, I believe that there is widespread support for the general proposition that we should clearly state the goals of our academic programs for the benefit of students and for others who have an interest in the value of post-secondary education. I am therefore proposing that Senate approve a process for ensuring that each academic unit develops a statement of its educational goals prior to its next external review. "Educational goals" should be considered broadly as the anticipated benefits to students from participation in an academic program, and thus may include knowledge, understanding, skills, competences, experience, attitudes, ethics, and professional development. Such a statement would provide a framework within which discussions about curriculum could take place, and would enable the unit to map its courses and curriculum structure against the general goals that are identified. I anticipate that some units would also decide to apply this approach to some or all regularly offered courses, but this issue would be left to the discretion of each unit.

All academic units currently undergo an external review on roughly a seven-year cycle. I am therefore proposing that Senate approve a modification to these reviews, such that a component of the self-study document will be an evaluation of the success of the unit in meeting the goals of its program(s), using processes and practices selected by the unit. This proposal would allow a diversity of methods to be employed, with these methods being evaluated by external reviewers who are colleagues in the same disciplines. SFU already has a number of processes in place for assessing various aspects of its programs, and many of these are already incorporated into external reviews. These include: teaching and course assessments by students; assessment of learning outcomes in some programs; assignment of grades by instructors; evaluation of course syllabi; curriculum review and revision; internal and external surveys of students and alumni; surveys of employers; performance of students in externally evaluated competitions; success of students in a wide range of post-graduate activities. An evaluation of performance in relation to educational goals would likely draw information from many of these sources, but academic units could develop other methods if that was seen as appropriate at the unit level.

With this modification in place, the SFU external review process would ensure that each academic unit has for each program a well-defined statement of educational goals that are the subject of self-assessment and external review, resulting in useful feedback to the unit that would be incorporated in the action plan that follows the external review. This in turn would provide evidence of the quality of SFU programs to our students and to external colleagues and stakeholders.

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Resources and workload

The process proposed in this document is tied to the cycle of external reviews, so that changes will be undertaken by only a few academic units each year. This will spread both the workload for academic units and the need for support and resources from central sources.

The estimated workload of faculty and staff within each academic unit will vary depending on local decisions. The minimum workload required is set out in the following table, together with resources that would be available to supplement the work within academic units. It should be noted that some academic units undergo external assessment or accreditation by their disciplines, often in programs that prepare students for membership in a profession. When such accreditation requires that the unit assess learning outcomes (or some similar equivalent to educational goals), no further work should be necessary for the SFU external review.

Action	Academic unit	Central support		
1. Prior to external review, develop statement of educational goals	Consult; write drafts; ratify	Staff support from TLC. Financial support from VPA for temp hires or faculty buy-out during development.	Workload spread over seven year cycle. In addition, regular curriculum management and new initiatives would proceed normally.	Continuing access to staff at TLC and to teaching and learning grants
2. External review self-study	Evaluate performance against statement of goals. Gather supporting evidence. Drafts, consultations and revisions.	Staff support from TLC. Financial support from VPA for temp hires or faculty buy-out during development.		
3. Action plan resulting from external review	Process already in place; little additional workload	No extra support needed		
4. Implementation of recommendations of external review	Modification to courses, curriculum or data gathering	As this process is already in place, units would draw on the same resources that are currently available.		
5. Prepare mid-review report	Process already in place. Some additional workload in describing changes made and gathering data to assess effect of changes.	No extra support needed		
6. Prepare for next external review	Review statement of educational goals. Review previous recommendations, action taken, and effect of changes.	No extra support needed, unless major revision of educational goals is planned – see point 1 for resources.		

Coordination and Assessment

Because external reviews are managed through the office of the Director of Academic Planning, we will modify the external review process to ensure that external reviewers are aware of the need to comment on the unit's educational goals and its success in meeting those goals.

Provision of resources to academic units will be the responsibility of the Director of University Curriculum and the Director of the Teaching and Learning Centre, who will work with academic units to define resource needs. The VPA will budget for financial support for each academic unit as required at various stages of the cyclical process.

Introduction of these initiatives will take place over a number of years, so the first few years will be an opportunity to test and refine implementation processes. Given the mandate of the Senate Committee on University Teaching and Learning (SCUTL), the VPA will prepare an annual report to SCUTL on the progress and results of this initiative. SCUTL should include this information in its annual report to Senate. After three external review cycles, an assessment of this initiative will be undertaken under the direction of SCUTL in order to assist Senate in deciding the future of the initiative.

The VPA will continue to manage external requests for information about the quality of SFU programs and SFU's internal quality assurance processes. When required, the VPA will prepare reports using information from self-study documents, external reviews, action plans and mid-review reports to demonstrate that the University is accountable to its students, to colleagues in other institutions, and to the general public with regard to the stated educational goals of its academic programs.

Timeline

Units that will be reviewed in 2013/14 will be asked to include their statement of educational goals in the self-study (due for completion by December 2013). External reviewers (spring term 2014) will be asked to comment on the educational goals and to provide advice on appropriate methods for the unit to undertake a self-assessment of those goals.

Units that will be reviewed in 2014/15, 2015/16 and 2016/17 will be asked to include a statement of educational goals and a preliminary self-assessment in the self-study (due for completion by December 2014, 2015 or 2016). External reviewers (spring 2015, 2016, 2017) will be asked to comment on the educational goals and on the results of the preliminary self-assessment, and will also be asked to provide advice on the further development of the methods of self-assessment.

By the end of spring 2017, three cycles of external reviews will have examined both the educational goals and the self-assessment processes. We will therefore have information on the process from approximately 15 academic units. A review of this initiative will begin in spring 2017, with a report and recommendations to Senate no later than September 2017.