Reviewing the Structure of Academic Programming at McMaster

In June 2015 I asked an esteemed committee of colleagues under the guidance of Dr. Gary Warner to undertake a review of the three Arts and Science Faculties at McMaster, the purpose being to determine if the structures and processes currently in place best served our students and to recommend alternative approaches for consideration by the community. This review pointed to the need to provide greater flexibility for students in pursuing their interests, the ability for students to change direction without losing too much ground and the interest in providing more cross-disciplinary and integrative course and program offerings. These suggestions received strong support during the town hall and Senate meetings which followed the release of the Warner Report. During the course of these discussions a number of possible impediments to evolving a more student-centred approach to learning were suggested. Some of these are cultural and linked to changes in the ways that young people interact, engage and learn. Some of these are structural and linked to the ways that the university organizes learning through programs, courses and pedagogy. Additional considerations include the changing nature of work and career trajectories for our students once they graduate along with the nature of each student’s non-curricular experiences and how they build a portfolio of capabilities that draws on both formal and informal learning. We must also consider the changing nature of students entering the university as a consequence of increased participation rates making post-secondary education more accessible to students from a wider range of socio-economic backgrounds. The latter has led to a significant increase in the fraction of our students who are the first in their families to reach university (so-called first generation students) as well as increased participation by students coping with chronic mental health challenges. All of these issues challenge us to think deeply about how to adapt the structural framework that underpins the academy in a way that supports students as they explore, learn and grow.

The last time the university undertook a thorough review of academic regulations was in the early 1990s. It is therefore time that we examine both the regulations that govern our academic programs and related processes and procedures with a view to optimizing student potential. This work will be divided between two groups working in parallel. The first of these will consider the academic regulations and related processes across the university. The second will look in more detail at the Warner report and consider its recommendations with regard to the three Arts and Science Faculties.

Committee on Academic Structures for Student Success (CASS)

I will chair this group with the support of Andrea Thyret-Kidd who will serve as project manager. The committee will attempt to understand the impediments, both real and perceived, to enabling student success. We will consider the kinds of structures that are needed to enable students to move effectively towards their goals as they mature and learn. We will also consider how communications and mentoring can help students find their way through the university. It will be important to understand how academic regulations at the program, Faculty and university levels restrict or support student progress. In principle academic regulations should be simple, easy to administer and transparent to all – three aspects that are intricately linked. It should also be possible, using current technology, to encapsulate these into an academic calendaring system that is interactive and intuitive. The focus of this work will be on our undergraduate programs. However, where pan-university regulations impact graduate education this will also be considered.
Programming in the Arts and Science Faculties (PASF)

A second committee, under the leadership of Susan Searls-Giroux, will look in more detail at the Warner report and consider its recommendations with regard to the three Arts and Science Faculties. Andrea Thyret-Kidd will also sit as a consultant to this committee to ensure good communication between the two groups. While flexibility in program offerings and student pathways is important for all students at McMaster this is particularly important for students in the Arts and Science Faculties. Programs in the professional Faculties are more tightly defined and cohort based. Students generally have fewer electives and choices to make. Rather, they typically choose a program or a specialization which then determines most of their courses. In the Arts and Science Faculties students need to make considerably more choices as they proceed. This can be confusing and stressful. Moreover, students will, and should be able to explore options, change directions and move towards their major(s) through a process of refinement rather than a single choice. This committee will also consider the merit of breadth requirements that would mandate the extent to which a student must consider issues and subjects outside their core discipline. An additional consideration is that the link between program and career is looser in these Faculties so the focus of each program is on developing a coherent set of competencies and capabilities that graduates can apply to a wide range of career options. These should be clearly articulated to students so they understand the pathways that will be open to them. Students should also have some opportunities to explore areas of interest through so-called Discovery Credits that are not counted towards their overall GPA. This committee will build on the work of the Warner committee to explore these areas in greater depth and to propose new approaches to enhance student outcomes.

As part of this process and following the recommendations of the Warner report we will immediately establish the Joint Arts and Science Committee consisting of the Provost and the three Faculty Deans. This group will provide a strategy perspective and overall guidance to the new PASF committee. The deans will then be better placed to implement the recommendations coming from this group.

Once the membership and more precise terms of reference of these two ad hoc committees is set we will post them to the Provost’s web site and invite members of the community to make committee members aware of their thoughts and concerns. Of course, whatever recommendations these committees make will be subject to further scrutiny by the McMaster as well as through normal governance processes.

Faculty Mergers

I would like to take this opportunity to address one critical issue that arises from the Warner report. This concerns the possible merger of the three Faculties. Some of the pros and cons of such a merger are laid out in the report and these were addressed at some length in the two discussion meetings that followed the report’s publication. While there was a strong consensus to make programmatic changes along the lines outlined in the report, there was no consensus on the issue of a structural Faculty merger. I have met with the three Faculty Deans and we have agreed that we will not pursue the idea of a Faculty merger at this time. Rather we will pursue the directions outlined as Scenario 1 in the Warner report which speak to greater collaboration and student mobility amongst the Faculties. If this approach fails to result in the desired improvements, and this is seen to be due to preservation of Faculty-based siloing, then a Faculty merger may still be considered at a later date.
Related Challenges

In addition to the work just discussed we are about to embark on the process of upgrading the Campus Solutions module within Mosaic from version 9.1 to 9.2. The other Mosaic modules are already on version 9.2. However, Campus 9.2 had not been released by PeopleSoft in time for us to incorporate it into the initial Mosaic development program. We are aiming to make this transition in the Spring/Summer of 2017. In order to limit the impact of this upgrade many of the advanced features available through Campus 9.2 will be introduced gradually once the new version is installed and stable. This will enable Mosaic to be tailored to the academic regulations and processes once they have been updated and approved.

All of the initiatives just outlined will be taking place within a framework of some uncertainty, particularly as concerns provincial funding. We are awaiting a commitment from the province regarding the tuition framework beyond the 2016/17 academic year. We are starting to prepare for the application of net tuition billing starting in 2018. We will be asked to renegotiate our Strategic Mandate Agreement (SMA) with the province sometime this Fall. Finally, we are anticipating substantial changes to the funding formula for universities although neither the nature of these nor the timing is currently well understood. Some of these changes may entice the university to consider changes to the way we structure and offer academic programs. For example, there is the possibility the new funding formula may financially reward universities for offering experiential learning opportunities to students. We also anticipate that over time, the university’s Strategic Mandate Agreement will include McMaster specific deliverables linked to funding based on the university’s distinct strengths. While the way in which this evolves will not be known for some time, developing simpler and more flexible approaches to programming and student achievement will better enable the university to adjust to and take advantage of whatever changes are made.

As we embark on this important academic program review process I welcome your feedback on this review and appreciate the support of the McMaster community through engagement in these discussions.

David Wilkinson

Provost and Vice-President (Academic)

July 2016