FACULTY STRUCTURE TASK FORCE

Sommes Nous Prêts?
A Discussion Document for the Simon Fraser University Community

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dr. John Waterhouse, Vice President, Academic, established the Faculty Structure Task Force in October 2005. Its mandate was to review Simon Fraser University’s academic structure and its strategic vision for the future and answer the following question:

Is Simon Fraser University's current academic structure one that best reflects our qualities and strengths and one that will enable us to most effectively and visibly advance our strategic goals?

The Task Force was created in consideration of the following factors:

i. the changing internal and external social, political, demographic, fiscal and intellectual context;
ii. the presence of Simon Fraser University now in three different cities – Burnaby, Vancouver and Surrey – with additional programming in Kamloops;
iii. the presence of programs that crosscut existing departmental and/or Faculty boundaries;
iv. the emergence of several significant academic areas that might be better profiled to further develop these strengths, profile them externally, and more visibly define the character of Simon Fraser University;
v. the differential and unprecedented growth of some Schools and some Faculties;
vi. the creation of the Faculty of Health Sciences and the initial moratorium on academic unit realignment until after the Faculty had established its own research and program areas;
vii. the tripling of the number of academic departments and schools since Simon Fraser University first opened and the increasing number of small new independent programs, all of which share the same administrative and academic structure; and,
viii. the overall visibility of Simon Fraser University and the way in which its academic structure communicates effectively or ineffectively, our values, academic strengths and priorities as we move to an increasingly competitive and demand driven model for student recruitment and retention.

One of the key contexts that did not influence the creation of the Faculty Structure Task Force was crisis. In the vast majority of significant university restructuring exercises internationally, there has been a context of crisis: whether fiscal crisis, crisis of reputation, or crisis of vision. None of these are in play for Simon Fraser University.

Simon Fraser University’s academic structure has been substantially reviewed at several junctures in our history. The first major review occurred between 1976 and 1978, and culminated in the production of The Report of the University Review Committee which included 150 recommendations for action. The first recommendation was for "The Senate Committee on Academic Planning [to] review the advantages and limitations of the present structure of all Faculties in order that the integration of the departments involved
within the University be optimized.”¹ This review concluded that, "drastic changes in Faculty organization at this time would be premature and perhaps ultimately restrictive". The next major reconsideration of the Faculty Structure was derived from the work of the President's Advisory Committee on University Priorities. This led to the decisions outlined in President William G. Saywell's address to the University community on September 20, 1984 - "The Future of Simon Fraser University". The address painted a picture of financial constraint and strategic opportunity. By its end, the Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies had been disbanded and a new Faculty of Applied Sciences had been born.

Broadly defined the Academic Structure is understood by the Faculty Structure Task Force to consist of the formal arrangement of elements that define our relationships and activities and which group individuals for the purposes of research, education, and governance. Academic structures may be hierarchical and/or lateral; may be functional and/or relational; may be latticing and integrative or individualizing and distinguishing. In most respects, the structures of academic organization share aspects of all these features. We describe six core structural building blocks that can be used to shape the academic activities of the University: Academic Program, Department, School, Faculty, College and Institute or Centre.

While size is typically related to hierarchical arrangement within a Faculty, there is no agreement on the optimal size of Departments, Schools or Faculties. Programs, Departments and Schools, as primary units of disciplinary organization draw together researchers and students, and should be of sufficient size to provide for meaningful engagement with colleges working in similar areas of inquiry, provide for sufficient quality and quantity of academic programming, and be able to enable the unit to contribute to the overall progress of the discipline. A structural element can become so large as to confound patterns of communication, governance, opportunities for inter-collegial engagement, program clarity and identity, strategic planning and collegial and disciplinary identity. Conversely, a structure can become so small that the same issues confound its viability as an independent entity. At the small end, there are also the additional issues of lack of complement resources to offer the appropriate range of curricular offerings, to develop a meaningful core research agenda and contribute in meaningful ways to knowledge development in the discipline. The Task Force recognizes that there is no single answer to what constitutes the ideal department or faculty size. Department and Faculty size is intrinsically related to the overall size of a University, its combinations of disciplines, its strategic objectives, its pedagogical and research orientations and its defining characteristics. This is not to say that size does not influence or determine core aspects of our abilities to meet our core objectives or to realize our strategic direction.

Structure provides for disciplinary identity, for academic programming cohesion and organization. It enables the channeling of resources, faculty, staff and students, and physical relationships. Our structure is inseparably linked to the constellation of policies and procedures that enable us to manage our activities and that reward and inhibit us. Our academic organization communicates to our communities, both internally and externally, the priorities of the University, what we value and the ways in which we define and differentiate ourselves. Our structure creates the framework for the flow of our communications, our interactions, and our innovation. However, the structure does not dictate or determine the totality of the activities and decisions that define our lives as members of a University community.

Further, structure alone does not create organizational success. Strategy, leadership, resources, and people all play critical roles in influencing and shaping an organization’s success. However, different structures

¹ Source: "Report of the University Review Committee, Simon Fraser University, May 1978. Presented from George Suart, Co-chairman of the University Review Committee. Submitted to Pauline Jewett, President.
may facilitate and enhance the ways these factors play out and create conditions that facilitate success. There is no one right answer to the question of structure, rather there are various configurations that might lead to better recognition and actualization of our values, strategic priorities and vision of the university in the future.

The values and goals of the University are not without some inherent tensions. These tensions may be differentially balanced across disciplinary areas. We do not view the function of a university structure to eliminate tensions. The Faculty Structure Task Force has identified and explored six primary tensions at play within the University:

i. the tension between stability and adaptability,
ii. the tension between disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity,
iii. the tension between multiple campus diversity and a cohesive identity,
iv. the tension between regional responsiveness and international presence,
v. the tension between learning and curricular flexibility and streamlined programming, and
vi. the tension between knowledge conceived within a framework of inquiry, explanation, and discovery of phenomenon and knowledge conceived in a framework of its application, adoption, and potential for commercialization.

With the exception of Carleton University, Simon Fraser University has the most modest academic structure (in terms of the number of Faculties) for an institution of our size or larger in Canada. We have arrived at four general impressions from a review of Canadian academic structures:

i. The universities vary little in terms of the labeling of Faculties. There exists at most Canadian universities a Faculty of Arts (or Arts and Science, or Arts and Social Science), Education, Business (or Management), and Science.
ii. The Faculty of Arts (or its various incarnations across the country), with a few exceptions, typically holds the greatest proportion of enrolment by significant margin within Canadian Universities.
iii. The Faculty structure suggests immediate substantive differences between the universities. Closer examination at the Department, Program or School level, however, may reveal much greater similarity than first revealed by the larger Faculty classification.
iv. Several Canadian Universities give significant prominence in their academic structures to exploratory first year programs and integrative learning opportunities.

There is a consistent articulation from 1965 to the present day of Simon Fraser University’s core values. The Faculty Structure Task Force has chosen to represent these core values under four broad descriptors: Innovation and Excellence, Integration (includes interdisciplinarity), Engagement, and Adaptability / Flexibility. We note that the mandate of the Task Force is not to write a strategic planning document for Simon Fraser University's future: it is to assess whether our academic structure will enable us to succeed in the vision developed by others. We have therefore chosen to represent what we understand, based on our review of existing documents concerned with planning SFU’s future, as the direction and vision of Simon Fraser University through a summary portrait of the University in the year 2025.

The discussion paper provides an overview of the current and evolutionary shape of Simon Fraser University, our initiatives in campus diversification, the current demographic context and future projections, the current resource challenges and evidence of new financial realities, the changing intellectual environment in which we are situated, and evidence of our achievements in pedagogical
innovation. The Task Force recognizes that we must, in the face of change, retain our foundational core that is deeply rooted in discipline-based inquiry. The traditional and stabilizing forces of core disciplines have historically buttressed the university against external forces and interests that might otherwise challenge its intellectual autonomy. We must preserve this fundamental independence of the university. We must also embrace the critical importance of having the capacity to respond to the emerging frontiers of knowledge development both inside and outside of traditional disciplines. And we must recognize the need to engage and respond to a changing intellectual environment with shifting demands from contemporary society.

In consideration of the changing environment within which Simon Fraser University has evolved, the Task Force believes that Simon Fraser University has succeeded. We have strong foundations to build upon as we strive towards our future. We have successfully navigated through a changing intellectual environment. We have increased our international reputation for the ways in which we integrate ourselves into, and engage with, our communities. We have been able to attract an outstanding student, staff and faculty complement of increasingly international character. We have successfully participated in and defined many emerging frontiers of knowledge and we have made significant contributions to the established disciplines. Our academic structure has nourished and preserved the primacy of discipline-based knowledge creation and exploration as well as educational programming. The Task Force concludes that Simon Fraser University should be proud of its accomplishments and progress to date. We have effectively evolved over our 40 year history.

The University is a remarkably different institution than in 1965 in terms of its size, differentiation, breadth of programming, diversity of research, and engagement with its community. Within the last decade alone, student enrolment at Simon Fraser University has increased by 31%. We have four different campuses spread across three cities and we have, since inception, tripled the number of academic schools and departments and doubled the number of Faculties.

We have, to date, operated primarily in a supply driven enrolment environment. This is dramatically changing. To meet our growth goals and to respond to a significant shift toward a demand-driven enrolment market, the University must ensure that our research and program strengths are highly visible to prospective students and that we are meeting the increasing needs for graduate educational opportunities.

Within the changing intellectual context we can see pressures and opportunities for expressing and deepening our research intensification. The world in which we live is becoming increasingly complex, interconnected and multi-dimensional. New research questions are emerging, entire areas of knowledge are being generated and the pace of knowledge development is occurring at break-neck speed. Simon Fraser University has established a reputation for research excellence. We must expand upon this past success and further intensify our mandate for, and commitment to, research, capitalize on our strengths, and engage students more fully in our research program, particularly at the graduate level.

Within the financial context, the University is confronted with a substantial proportional reduction of operating funding from the Provincial Government. Within the short period 2000/01 to 2004/05 the proportion of the operating budget from the BC Provincial Grant dropped from 69.2% to 53.9%. To continue to sustain high quality educational programming and excellent research facilities, the University has had to increasingly diversify its funding strategy. There is every indication that such diversification will become increasingly important in the future. We must therefore ensure that the University’s reputation for excellence be strengthened, that we are highly visible to prospective contributors to the
University and that our programs resonate with their interests. We must ensure that students recognize our distinctive programming opportunities and attest to their high quality. We must expand our international reputation to assist us in our financial diversification strategies. We must engage in research that will attract support from provincial and federal research investment programs and other contributors. In securing the financial viability to remain one of the best comprehensive research institutions in the country we must remain absolutely and fundamentally committed to the intellectual autonomy of the University, to honoring our core commitments and to fundamentally preserving the raison d’etre of a University to engage in knowledge conceived within a framework of inquiry, explanation, and discovery of phenomenon.

The Task Force believes we must pursue the opportunities before us so that we will excel in our future, prevent crisis as external contexts unfold, and secure for Simon Fraser University a legacy appropriate to the illustrious beginnings of this institution. The opportunities we see before us are those that relate to curricular innovation, interdisciplinarity, strategic academic strength, organization effectiveness, visibility and governance reform.

We have examined the tensions inherent in a university and the values and commitments that have defined Simon Fraser University and which continue to frame our understanding of what we will be in the future. We have thought about the contextual forces that are shaping our world and which present opportunities and challenges for the University in contemporary society. We have reviewed the ways in which other universities have sought to define themselves through their academic structure and the reasons why some have engaged in restructuring exercises. We have traced the history of the academic structure at Simon Fraser University and examined where our strategic plans are directing us.

The Task Force is of the view that in important and fundamental ways our academic structure has effectively supported our success and the Task Force does not see a demonstrated need for university-wide restructuring. The Task Force does believe, however, that there are opportunities before us and changing contexts foreshadowed that must be considered and which may have implications for the academic structure in some areas. In particular, the Task Force has identified four issues that we believe require further discussion with the University community:

i. Some curricular initiatives seem to be inadequately supported by the current academic structure.

ii. A variety of models of interdisciplinarity and approaches to the development of strategic strength are deployed at Simon Fraser University. Some academic areas might further advance the strategic goals, values and profile of the University if they were considered for further development under these frameworks, or if they adopted a different framework.

iii. There has been a tripling of the number of academic units since the University opened in 1965 and there are an increasing number of very small academic programs. There is reason to explore whether the equivalent administrative structure employed by all is effective for academic, collegial, administrative, financial, and managerial purposes.

iv. There is an opportunity to explore the creation of an incubator for combining interdisciplinary research programs with the creation of innovative academic programming.
The Task Force believes that collectively in considering the above four issues and in determining how we should proceed on each of them, we can secure for ourselves the future that collectively we are defining, and indeed we will emblemize our motto: "Nous Sommes Prêts!"

If it is ultimately determined by the Task Force and Senate that we need to proceed with a further process for any or all of the areas raised above, we propose that the process be guided by the following principles:

i. The University’s academic structure should continue to enhance and support innovation, excellence, integration, engagement and adaptability in teaching and research.

ii. The University’s academic structure should address the three primary opportunities and challenges before us: it should position us to succeed in a demand-driven student enrolment environment; it should be financially viable within a diversified fiscal environment; and, it should advance our distinctiveness and strategic strengths.

iii. The University’s academic structure should ensure that we continue to effectively transmit our values and our academic strengths so as to increase the University’s profile in strategic areas and feature the unique contributions that we have to offer.

iv. The University’s academic structure should recognize the tensions that exist, keep balances where these are appropriate, enhance those that are productive and minimize those that are inhibiting.

v. The University’s academic structure should allow for responsiveness within a framework of stability. It should reaffirm our commitment to the liberal arts and sciences, to professional and applied programming, and to the fundamental value of discipline based inquiry and to the opportunities afforded by interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches.

vi. The University’s academic structure should enable us to engage with, and respond to, increasingly diverse communities and student populations with needs that will change as the intellectual and economic contexts change.

vii. The University’s academic structure should consider our multi-campus presence and ensure the sustained viability of the distinctiveness of each campus while simultaneously contributing to a unified identity for Simon Fraser University as a whole.

viii. The University’s academic structure should foster the implementation of the University’s strategic plans, though it must also be able to accommodate supplementary strategic goals as they develop in the future.

ix. The University’s academic structure should incorporate the increasing number of academic programs into structures that will ensure stability, provide the ability for the units to advance themselves to the fullest extent, provide engagement for its members, and minimize the risks of under-representation in priority setting and budgetary discussions.

x. The University’s academic structure should retain or enhance managerial and administrative effectiveness and efficiency particularly as it facilitates and supports effective planning, communication and decision making, collegial governance, and resource utilization.
xi. Any proposed change to the University’s academic structure should be based on carefully considered analysis of the reasons and need for change, its impact on other academic units and their members, and the way in which it addresses each of these principles.

xii. The process for examining the University’s academic structure should be one defined by its respectfulness of members of the University community, its transparency, and its opportunity for meaningful collegial engagement throughout.

In summary, the Faculty Structure Task Force recognizes the important ways in which we are successful at Simon Fraser University, the way in which we are positioned to achieve our future aspirations, and the way in which, for the most part, the current academic structure of the university reflects our qualities and strengths and has enabled us to evolve successfully over the past 40 years. The Faculty Structure Task Force also holds the view that there are opportunities for strengthening and positioning the University for the future. We want to position ourselves to creatively pursue the growth and opportunities that will emerge as a result of change, and in a manner that ensures not only our continued vitality but our continued relevance to the educational mission of post-secondary education in Canada and in the world. If we establish effective structures that are both permanent and adaptable we will not only avoid the crisis that otherwise could potentially accompany further shifts in the intellectual, fiscal, or demographic environments; but we will have secured for SFU a legacy appropriate to the university’s illustrious beginnings in a time of urgent transformation—a transformation which SFU was able to imagine not as crisis but as opportunity. We will be able to reaffirm our legacy – Nous sommes prêts!