University Response to Initial Candidacy Evaluation Report
August 12, 2011 Self Evaluation Report and October 12-14, 2011 Site Visit

Submitted by
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Submitted to
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)
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Dr. Sandra Elman, President
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities
8060 165th Avenue NE, Suite 100
Redmond, Washington 98052
USA

Dear Dr. Elman,

Simon Fraser University hosted the Commission's evaluation committee, led by Dr. Paul Reichardt, from October 12 to 14, 2011. Members of the evaluation committee visited each of SFU's three campuses in Burnaby, Vancouver and Surrey, where they met with students, faculty, senior administrators and staff. The evaluation committee was well versed in the details of SFU's Report and demonstrated keen interest in SFU's programs, plans, people and infrastructure.

We were particularly pleased to discover their interest in, and openness to, those institutional differences that arise from SFU's Canadian context. The reviewers' compliments on SFU's "legendary" commitment to academic freedom, on its welcoming, attractive campuses, and on the breadth, depth and quality of our community engagement are sources of genuine satisfaction and pride for our University. We also found it reassuring that the areas of institutional performance about which the evaluators express concerns tend to align with those on which we expected comment and which we have begun to address.

We note the evaluators' reservations about the status of SFU's mission statement. While the Self Evaluation Report was being prepared, I was engaged in a year-long envision>SFU process that has now resulted in a new vision and mission statement, which was approved by SFU's Senate on November 7, 2011 and Board of Governors on November 24, 2011.

SFU has consolidated its four core themes into three, now articulated as "engaging students," "engaging research," and "engaging communities." As restated, the earlier core themes "teaching and learning" and "student experience and success" have been combined as "engaging students."

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SFU's Vision and Mission

To be the leading engaged university, defined by its dynamic integration of innovative education, cutting edge research, and far-reaching community engagement.

➢ ENGAGING STUDENTS
  • Equipping students with the knowledge, skills and experiences that prepare them for life in an ever-changing and challenging world.

➢ ENGAGING RESEARCH
  • Being a world leader in knowledge mobilization, building on a strong foundation of fundamental research.

➢ ENGAGING COMMUNITIES
  • Being Canada’s most community-engaged research university.

The recommendations and concerns of the evaluators are providing us with important guidance as we implement improvements intended to address their comments as well as issues identified by our Core Theme Teams during our first internal assessment process while we developed the self-evaluation. SFU is already developing processes to address the evaluators’ recommendations, as noted below.

Recommendation 1: Meaningful, assessable and verifiable indicators
The committee recommends that the University develop a manageable set of meaningful, assessable, and verifiable indicators for assessment of its core themes, programs and services and ensure that it has the capacity to collect, assess, disseminate and utilize the data for institutional improvement (Standards 1.B.2; 2.C.1; 3.B.3; 4.A.1; 4.A.5; 4.B.1).

As part of SFU’s regular planning cycle, a senior-level planning team is revising SFU’s University Planning Framework (UPF) to restate and refine its major institutional planning objectives in light of the Board’s approval of the envision>SFU Report, the results of SFU’s Self Evaluation Report, and the recommendations of NWCCU’s Evaluation Report. In addition, the UPF will take account of modifications to the Academic Plan and Strategic Research Plan, which are due to be updated in the coming year. The revised UPF will identify priorities, specific actions to implement major planning goals, and a comprehensive set of high-level indicators linked to SFU’s core themes. It will also include internal targets and external benchmarks where these are considered to be appropriate and useful.

Work also is underway to complete key new strategic plans that will feed into the UPF. These include strategic plans in areas of Sustainability, Community Engagement, Government Relations, Alumni Affairs, Human Resources, Marketing and Communication, and International Activities. We expect all of these plans to be in place by the time of SFU’s next scheduled review, and that they will contribute to the overall University Planning Framework document.
**Recommendations 2 and 3: Learning outcomes**

The committee recommends that the University establish and assess student learning outcomes across the institution and use the results for continuous improvement (Standards 2.C.1, 2.C.2, 2.C.5, 2.C.10).

The committee recommends that the University clearly articulate its "General Education" program as an integrated course of study related to the institution's mission and assure that it has clear and assessable student learning outcomes which are effectively communicated to students and stakeholders (Standards 2.C.9, 2.C.10, 2.C.11).

SFU introduced its Writing, Quantitative and Breadth (WQB) requirements in 2006, as well as programs to upgrade students' writing and numeracy skills prior to taking "W" and "Q" courses; these requirements form the core of our "general education" requirements. We believe literacy and numeracy are the foundations of an educated and informed life and of effective citizenship. Those who are unable to express themselves well will not be able to communicate ideas to others, nor will they be able to define, develop, and understand complex ideas themselves. Educated people should also be able to understand and critically evaluate arguments in which quantitative information forms a key element; they also should have the ability to formulate and to advance such arguments. Finally, educated people should be at least aware of the differing content and modes of inquiry of the sciences and applied sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities.

Although learning objectives have been set for most individual courses designated as W, Q or B at SFU, many lack specific learning outcomes. As the evaluators noted, SFU has not until now identified or communicated clearly to its students overarching learning outcomes for these "general education" requirements. Initial foundational work to do so is now under way through the office of University Curriculum and Institutional Liaison. It is expected that WQB learning outcomes and a process for assessing them will be established as part of the wider learning outcomes assessment project (below).

The Vice President, Academic has established a Working Group to consider how learning outcomes and meaningful, assessable and verifiable outcomes will be established for courses, programs, and the University. The Working Group is chaired by an Associate Dean from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, SFU’s largest Faculty, and is composed of representatives from across SFU academic areas, the office of the VP, Academic, the Teaching and Learning Centre, and the office of Institutional Research and Planning.

The Terms of Reference for the Working Group call for it to:
- Draft principles to guide the establishment and use of learning outcomes for curricular assessment at SFU.
- Identify academic units that currently use, or are in the process of developing processes for assessing learning outcomes.
- Identify the curricular assessment processes (regular and off-cycle) currently used in academic units.
- Review best-practice processes for establishing a learning outcomes assessment process, and recommend the most appropriate process for SFU.
- Recommend appropriate timelines and milestones for implementing learning outcomes assessment at SFU, bearing in mind the timeline for accreditation with NWCCU, the importance of a communication plan, and the need to take a consultative approach.
- Recommend how an ongoing process of learning outcomes assessment and curricular review could best be incorporated into current structures and processes at SFU.

The first phase of their work will be completed by the end of summer 2012. It is anticipated that key elements of the work (e.g., the guiding principles) will be presented to SFU’s academic community and its Senate during this period.

**Recommendation 4: Deferred Maintenance**

The committee recommends that the University develop more aggressive and comprehensive short- and long-term plans for addressing the institution’s deferred maintenance needs (Standards 2.F.5 and 2.G.1).

SFU’s predicament with respect to deferred maintenance is similar to that of other public post-secondary institutions of our size and age in British Columbia. In the absence of additional government funding, deferred maintenance must be addressed by re-allocating internal resources. Of course, this involves painful trade-offs affecting other critical areas. However, we agree with the evaluators’ recommendation that SFU needs to develop more aggressive and comprehensive short- and long-term plans to address it and we have begun working on these. As your evaluators noted, SFU’s capital planning must be done in conjunction with BC’s provincial government and is affected by numerous constraints.

Pressure is being exerted on government by SFU and other BC research universities through the Research Universities’ Council of British Columbia. It should be noted that potential sources of revenue such as increasing tuition above 2% per year or issuing new debt are prohibited by the Province. Donors are generally uninterested in funding deferred maintenance.

As the evaluators indicate, our planning for deferred maintenance is being reviewed and many of the cost estimates cited in our *Self Evaluation Report* are a reflection of this work. We will be updating our capital plan, including plans to address our deferred maintenance, as well as expand our physical plant; that plan will recognize the essential participation of government in successfully improving our capital infrastructure. We hope to complete the plan by mid-2012.

In addition, we have developed an annual program to renovate areas identified by our community as of particular importance to the campus environment. Renovations include classroom upgrades, renewal and updating of study space, and washroom improvements. We have also reinstated to the office of the Vice-President, Academic annual funding for renovations needed to address other academic needs. We continue to press government at every opportunity to invest in the ongoing maintenance of essential educational infrastructure.

**Conclusion**

In general, the Evaluation Report highlights the need for SFU to clarify and simplify its objectives, ensure its indicators provide meaningful, assessable and verifiable means of
measuring its progress, and communicate to the University’s many communities how these advance its vision and mission. These will be priorities as SFU progresses towards accreditation.

In closing, we thank the NWCCU evaluators for their thoughtful engagement with SFU and its culture, and for the essential contribution their Report will make to our ongoing work to fulfill SFU’s mission and make real our vision of what SFU can be.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Petter
President and Vice-Chancellor

c. Accreditation Steering Committee
Glynn Nicholls, Accreditation Liaison Officer