Response to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) and Statements by the University Community on the Task Force on Teaching & Learning’s Draft Discussion Paper

Fall 2009/Spring 2010

The Task Force considered the feedback received from the university community on its discussion paper released in mid-July 2009. Some of the concerns raised by the community prompted revisions to the recommendations and the Task Force report. Other concerns appear to stem from misinterpretations of the recommendations, due in part to the ways in which they were written. The purpose of this document is to clarify the recommendations and to provide elaboration and updates where applicable. “Q” below refers to questions or statements received from university community members.

The Task Force’s Focus

Q: The Task Force should be concerned with the future of the LIDC only and not with reviewing teaching and learning at large.
A: When the Task Force considered the issues related to the LIDC and its external review, it became apparent that they could not be resolved without considering all of the ways in which we provide support for teaching. As well, the external review of the LIDC recommended that SFU develop an institutional-level strategy for teaching and learning and that the LIDC provide support to instructors in the implementation of that strategy.

Q: The Task Force should focus on teaching and learning support, rather than teaching and learning in general.
A: There is no disagreement here, but to make recommendations about support for teaching and learning, it is necessary to attend to the nature of these processes. Basically, the questions that the Task Force addressed were “What kinds of support do we need to promote teaching and learning in an optimal way”, and “How can we most effectively offer it at SFU?” One of the first steps in defining where we want to go with teaching and learning support is to identify the teaching and learning outcomes we desire. In planning how to accomplish this, we need to understand both the current state and the desired state.

Q: The Task Force failed to recognize that excellence in teaching is pervasive in SFU.
A: Not so. The Task Force assumed that there are many excellent teachers at SFU, as well as some whose teaching is below average. One of the working group’s recommendations was aimed at increasing the value attributed to teaching at SFU, recognizing and rewarding teaching excellence. The Task Force recommended filling the University Teaching Fellow and Program Teaching Mentor positions with instructors who have demonstrated excellence in teaching. These positions would provide accomplished teachers an opportunity to take a leadership role and to share their expertise, thereby increasing the overall quality of teaching at SFU.

Q: There’s an emphasis on teachers, not learners; teaching and not learning. Why?
A: The two are inextricably bound. Ultimately, the desired outcomes of teaching and learning support include improved learning experiences. Students’ learning experiences should improve with improvements in the quality of teaching, which should improve with the quality of teaching support.

Q: The emphasis appears to be on undergraduate (vs. graduate) education.
A: Yes, it is unfortunate that it appeared this way: there was a representative from the Dean of Graduate Studies’ office and a graduate student representative on the Task Force. Regarding the appearance of there being a bias towards undergraduate education in the recommendations, we have tried to address this problem in revisions to the report. Also, the Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies now has a representative on Council.

Q: Why did the Task Force not address structural issues such as class sizes, the number of TAs, faculty workload, etc.?
A: Although members of the Task Force viewed these issues as very important, the Task Force was not charged with addressing them, nor did it have the authority to address them. Such issues need to be addressed by groups consisting of representation from SFUFA, TSSU, and administration. One of the added benefits of having a University Council on Teaching and Learning would be that it would create a forum in which such problems could be discussed, and impetus developed to resolve them.

Q: Specific issues such as support for international teaching assistants and consideration of the millennial student were not addressed.
A: Although the draft recommendations did not prioritize specific support issues, international TA support was raised by many stakeholder groups (departmental chairs, students, instructors and staff). This issue needs to be a priority for the institution. (Note: the VPA has now made the International TA program available cost-free for students.) With respect to the millennial student, in its final report, the Task Force recommends practices designed to obtain a better idea of the needs of “millennial students.”

Q: Why did the Task Force make a recommendation about teaching evaluations?
A: Teaching evaluations came up repeatedly as an issue of concern for a majority of stakeholders during the information-gathering phase. Many respondents felt that there were severe imbalances in the ways in which teaching is evaluated, and in particular, when compared to the ways in which research is evaluated. To ensure that good teaching is adequately rewarded, we need to find valid ways to recognize and evaluate it. SCUTL’s report on student evaluations discussed a broad range of issues pertaining to the evaluation of teaching. Its report was reviewed by the Task Force’s working group, and recommendations were incorporated into those of the Task Force.

The Teaching & Learning Support System and University Council on Teaching & Learning

Note: In response to the university community’s feedback on the recommendation to create a University Council on Teaching and Learning, a temporary (Dec. ’09 to Aug. ’10) VPA’s Advisory Committee on Teaching and Learning (VACTL) has been struck in place of the Council. As one of VACTL’s first tasks, members will review the Task Force’s recommendations and advise the VPA on their acceptance. The responses below pertain to the Council, not to the VACTL.

Q: Why did the Task Force recommend the creation of a Council and “System” structure?
A: The Task Force believed that it would be of great benefit to the SFU community to create a body that would coordinate existing sources of teaching support on an ongoing basis and supply a forum for the creation and implementation of new forms of support, with input from faculty, students, and existing support units. The primary purpose is the facilitation of a communication network regarding teaching and learning.

More specifically, it is also important to note that the Task Force was guided by the committee’s terms of reference #3-5:

3. Identify mechanisms to encourage faculty and instructor involvement and innovation in educational development programs and teaching and learning initiatives.
4. Suggest an administrative structure which will foster interaction and collaboration among teaching and learning support units and ensure that their strategic planning activities are coordinated and integrated.
5. Develop a strategic planning process for addressing university teaching and learning infrastructure needs.

Q: The Council is a bureaucracy aimed at solving problems that do not exist.
A: Although some community members do not see any problems with teaching support, a large number of community members from a variety of disciplines and support units who took the time to provide feedback to the Task Force see them quite clearly. Many community members (instructors and staff) identified a need for better coordination and prioritization of teaching and learning support at SFU. The Council and the teaching and learning support system in which it is embedded were proposed to address this need. Additionally, some
problems were identified in previous reports such as SCUTL’s report on student evaluations and the annual surveys of undergraduate students. The Task Force recognized that SFU has a solid reputation as having exemplary faculty and instructors; the intent was to situate where support was needed and to provide recommendations for ensuring that future support is provided to those who are currently not feeling supported.

Q: What is the rationale for the System and Council?
A: The Task Force envisioned the implementation of a viable teaching and learning support system that would foster communication and collaboration, and recognize and respect the many important roles that contribute to effective teaching and learning at SFU. The staff components of the proposed teaching and learning support system already exist and have representation on administrative committees. However, greater participation from a broader range of support units and better coordination among the units would be beneficial.

The academic components of the proposed teaching and learning support system do not exist. Faculties, academic departments, and students do not have an ongoing forum or process for discussing issues related to teaching and learning. Indeed, a key challenge in identifying and providing appropriate teaching and learning support has been the limited consideration of students’ learning experiences and the voice of instructors (faculty members, sessionals, TAs, TMs) from the Faculties. Issues such as support for specific instructor groups (e.g., international TAs) and gaining a better understanding of today’s students (e.g., through data on student experiences such as NSSE and annual undergraduate student surveys) are important. Also of importance are input and involvement of instructors to inform priorities and directions in identifying, designing and implementing support service initiatives.

These issues have not been sufficiently addressed because there has not been an identifiable forum in which they can be addressed, or a group with the mandate to address them on an ongoing basis. There are many types of teaching support and many models at SFU, but relatively few people know about them and benefit from them.

The Task Force proposed the establishment of a University Council on Teaching and Learning (UCTL) in which each Faculty would be represented by a University Teaching Fellow (UTF). The roles of the UTFs are critical to facilitate discipline-specific support, recognize and reward local teaching expertise, and enable excellent teachers to become leaders. UTFs would contribute to communication across departments and units. Faculty input is required to address some of the issues identified by the Task Force and SFU community members, and to identify the mandate and services to be offered by a new teaching and learning support unit. A process to identify and appoint the UTFs to Council is needed.

Q: Creation of Council was a foregone conclusion, and the public event was a means to justify the decision.
A: There were several recommendations that the Task Force considered to resolve the issues surrounding the need for support of teaching and learning. It was determined that the Council was the most appropriate, expeditious, and cost effective way to resolve several of the highest priority concerns. In the end, it was determined that most of the reservations were based on a misunderstanding of the design and purpose of the Council. In response to feedback, some aspects of the recommendation were changed (e.g., the relation between the Council and SCUTL and the relation between the Council and Senate) and clarified.

It is important to note that the recommendation to create a University Council on Teaching and Learning was made in response to a significant problems pertaining to the lack of coordination among teaching support providers and stakeholders (instructors, staff, students and administrators) from across the University, the need to identify, prioritize and work on teaching and learning concerns, the need to provide support at the local level (through mentors), and the need to improve communication and awareness of available support services.

Solutions recommended by some community members in response to the Task Force’s discussion paper, focused on departments, Faculties and individual faculty members or instructor groups. Support and
prioritization by Faculty or program is not efficient or sustainable and results in duplication of effort and an imbalance in levels of service. Some issues (e.g. meeting the needs of today’s students; class size, the tutorial system) cross Faculties and need to be addressed at the institutional-administrative level.

Q: The Council seems to be a bureaucracy designed to impose policy and procedures in a top-down manner.
A: We can understand how it might appear that way from the organizational location of the Council, but its composition is actually from the community. The purpose of the Council is to bring all the main stakeholders in teaching and learning together at the same table. Many respondents to the Task Force’s information gathering suggested that we need to create ways of encouraging more involvement and input from faculty members and other instructor groups. Responses identified gaps in teaching support, and support that was not meeting instructors’ needs. Some teaching support staff indicated that they would benefit from input and interaction with instructors, to better inform their work. The Council is intended to bring people together to identify and prioritize teaching and learning support issues.

All changes to procedures or policies that are proposed would result from discussions to improve teaching and learning support. These ideas would then be discussed with Council-members’ constituencies. All recommended changes to policies and procedures would then go through the established process guiding SFU policy and procedure revisions, which would include Senate and other groups as usual.

Q: Council is a centralized effort to homogenize teaching methods.
A: Again, this criticism is based on a misunderstanding of the purpose of the Council. The purpose of the Council is to enable communication across the university between stakeholders who need and want support and those providing support. The University Teaching Fellows would be responsible for bringing forward the needs and ideas of their Faculties and working with support providers to develop solutions to address needs or resources to develop ideas. The system would be designed to bring stakeholders together to better communicate and understand what support is needed and where and to share expertise and foster new ideas within and across academic units. There is nothing in these goals that implies homogenizing teaching methods.

Q: What are the time demands on University Teaching Fellows and Program Teaching Mentors?
A: The University Teaching Fellow would be a leadership, not a support, position. The UTFs would attend monthly Council meetings and work within their Faculties and with other stakeholders on identifying, prioritizing and resolving teaching and learning support issues. Also a recognized teaching expert, the Program Teaching Mentor would have a more hands-on role that would involve liaising with new faculty members and supporting and sharing effective approaches. The responsibilities and related time demands require further consideration and discussion.

Q: How can you justify spending money on the University Teaching Fellows during times of fiscal constraint?
A: The allocation of resources within the University always is guided by assumptions about the value of investments, and Task Force feels that the benefits of supporting these positions would more than compensate for their costs. In short, it would be money well spent. It is important that stakeholders needing support and stakeholders providing support have a venue to identify, prioritize, and resolve teaching and learning support issues together. Recognizing the time required to adequately represent their faculties in this venue, financial remuneration would be offered. These short-term costs outweigh the longer-term costs of not having faculty input. (Such compensation is another step towards recognizing teaching in a manner similar to recognizing research through stipends.)

Q: Why not put more money directly into teaching rather than administration?
A: The teaching and learning issues raised by some members of the university community cannot be solved through funding alone. The Council and teaching and learning support system as a whole are designed to bring issues forward, prioritize initiatives, and collaborate on solutions. The staff representation on Council and the teaching and learning system already exist as individual administrative committees and units.
The new components are intended to address complaints that: 1) instructor (faculty, sessionals, TAs, TMs) issues are not heard or dealt with effectively, and 2) faculty members do not have a means to provide input or be involved in directions for new initiatives. The Council would attempt to 1) establish a means to bring forward the teaching and learning issues of instructors, 2) recognize and provide a leadership opportunity to faculty members known for their teaching, and 3) better involve the Faculties and faculty members in identifying priorities and working on solutions.

Q: The Council will replace SCUTL, thereby disenfranchising Senate and placing all teaching matters in the hands of the VPA. SCUTL is a coordinating body for teaching and learning at SFU.
A: In response to this concern, the Task Force has withdrawn its recommendation to disband SCUTL. It now recommends that the roles and relationships between SCUTL and Council be defined by another appropriate group. The Council is envisioned as an active working group that will plan and engage in operational matters and liaise with members of their constituencies. This type of operational work is not part of a Senate Committee’s responsibilities.

Q: Council and the University Teaching Fellows in particular will be gatekeepers or evaluators of their peers.
A: Council would not be an evaluation committee, and it would not be charged with evaluating instructors. The Council and UTFs would discuss issues such as improving the process of evaluating teaching and learning in ways that would give good teachers the credit they deserve and provide constructive feedback for all teachers. The UTFs would be facilitators and communicators, not gatekeepers and evaluators.

Q: There is little value in establishing another unit (the Council) to oversee CODE, Learning Commons and other support units.
A: The Council would not oversee any of these units. It would be a coordinating committee that brings together stakeholders needing support and stakeholders providing support to identify and prioritize teaching and learning support issues and to collaborate on the development of solutions. Existing sources of support could benefit by coordinating their resources and guarding against duplication.

Q: The Council is extreme and not needed. SCUTL could be redefined to monitor the teaching support unit without micromanaging the Director of the new unit.
A: Senate committees do not oversee administrative units. The priorities of the new teaching and learning support unit would be defined with input from the Council. Teaching and learning issues from instructors and links to institutional directions such as the academic plan would be discussed in the Council. The Director would work closely with other members of the Council to plan and operationalize support initiatives, which would be vetted through appropriate channels.

Central vs. Local and Discipline-Specific Support

Q: There is no need for centralized support or a teaching and learning support unit. Centralized units usually diminish the effectiveness of other, more collegial, mechanisms (e.g. informal peer-to-peer discussion and support.)
A: The University Council system would promote both centralized and local support. Local support would be provided by Program Teaching Mentors and, in appropriate cases, localized or “embedded” teaching support teams. However, in addition, because there are similarities in support needs across some areas, it is efficient to offer centralized support, and a body is needed to make fair decisions about how to allocate support to local units. The idea here is to share what support is offered among the various departments, Faculties and support units.

The proposed teaching and learning support system recognizes the need for local discussion and support. The Program Teaching Mentor roles are intended to ensure that this takes place on an ongoing basis in all departments.
To summarize, the Task Force is recommending a model that provides both local and centralized activities and processes. It consists of faculty-specific University Teaching Fellows, localized Program Mentors, and a centralized teaching and learning support unit and a council that serves as a venue to connect support service users and providers. The goal is to gain the advantages of each type of model while avoiding the disadvantages. The centralized support unit would provide two types of services in collaboration with the Council: (1) general services addressing needs that overlap faculties and disciplines, and (2) customized services addressing discipline-specific needs.

The Appendices

Q: To what extent are the details in the appendices binding?
A: There are two sets of documents within the appendices of the discussion paper. Appendix A to C include the terms of reference, membership and activities of the Task Force and its working groups, as well as linkages to the academic plan. Appendices D through I were created by the working groups and presented to the university community to evoke discussion about the details of some recommendations. These details are not binding. They need to be refined by a broader group of stakeholders before being implemented. For example, details related to desired attributes of SFU graduates requires discussion and consideration at many levels, as noted in some of the feedback by members of the university community.

Potential Impact

Q: Where’s the problem? The “issues” are only perceptions and do not exist.
A: We agree- SFU is an exemplary institution with regards to teaching, learning and research, which is precisely why we are challenging ourselves to be better. With additional support to the development of teaching and learning, we can become an even better institution! For the people who took the time to respond in the information gathering phase of the Task Force, the issues they identified are problems for them. Although some members of the SFU community feel that there aren’t any problems, many others feel that there are significant problems with the value attached to teaching and with the provision of support for teaching. Data collected from students and from existing SFU documents also suggest areas for improvement. For example, we know that student engagement and retention are important concerns for our future.

Q: How does all this translate to the classroom?
A: One of the biggest concerns we consistently heard was that there was a lack of support for teaching--from those who were just entering new positions to those who had been teaching for many, many years. For those who are entering teaching as a new professional, either as a TA, sessional, or a new Faculty member, teaching mentors will be available to assist with their induction period, with understanding expectations, and becoming professionals. For those who have been teaching for a few years, and are intrigued by new learning models, there are procedures and supports in place where they can access updated pedagogical and curricular ideas from their colleagues. For those who have been teaching for a very long time and may be looking to be reinvigorated in their careers, there are opportunities to serve as mentors and in other capacities that can allow them to contribute in meaningful ways. For students, this will mean more consistent course expectations, more time spent on curriculum, better supported, and more engaged faculty and instructors. Instructors can benefit from discussions with colleagues about their teaching experiences. New instructors can benefit from assistance from teaching mentors (particularly instructors in groups such as International TAs and sessionals). Instructors also can benefit from systemic changes that better recognize and support diverse teaching methods and learning experiences (e.g. team-teaching, bringing research to the classroom, learning outside of the classroom).

Q: What are the benefits to me?
A: Action on the recommendations are intended to benefit various stakeholders over time:
For students: clearly defined outcomes acquired by graduation; fully developed, recognized and integrated research, experiential, and international learning opportunities; quality instruction and learning opportunities.  

For all SFU instructors: Better support based on different groups’ needs; more recognition for excellent teaching; more opportunities for continued professional development; more discipline-specific, in-house support, the availability of mentors, support in piloting alternative teaching approaches, and opportunities for interdisciplinary interactions.

For Faculty members: increased opportunities to bring research into teaching; recognition as accomplished teachers and leadership opportunities as Fellows and Mentors; and more consistent practices (i.e., in evaluating teaching) that better recognize, celebrate and reward teaching.

For Teaching Support Staff: formal mechanisms for sharing knowledge and resources, and for interdepartmental collaboration; recognition of support service as a key component in teaching and learning; coordinated priorities and efforts.

For Administrators: better alignment and support across SFU initiatives; clearer expectations for teaching and learning and stakeholders; a competitive edge, student recruitment and retention; and a framework for a system that recognizes, supports and rewards T&L across Faculties and at all levels.

For the SFU Community: shared vision, direction and common purpose; visible recognition of, and reward for teachers and learners and people who support them; increased awareness of available teaching support; clearer expectations around curriculum, instructor and student responsibilities.

Q: It is important to consult with SFUFA and other bargaining units; there cannot be unilateral changes to policies.
A: Yes, the Task Force agrees completely and did consult SFUFA during the development of some of the recommendations. There is no intent to make unilateral changes. However, the Task Force believes that, to foster and reward good teaching, we should consider changing some policies and procedures in some cases, SFUFA and other groups would need to be involved. This has since been made more explicit in the final report.

Q: There needs to be an implementation plan and guidelines.
A: Yes, implementation is the next step. The draft recommendations were proposed for discussion with the university community before moving to implementation planning and execution.