In June 2008, as part of the University’s commitment to developing our strategic goals in the areas of teaching and learning, the Associate VP, Academic established a Task Force on Teaching and Learning. The Task Force was charged with obtaining input about teaching and learning at SFU and making recommendations about how it can be enhanced.

- Task Force’s Public Site: [http://www.sfu.ca/tftl](http://www.sfu.ca/tftl) contains a list of Task Force members and Terms of Reference
- Email for comments and queries: teachinglearning-tf@sfu.ca
- Mail list to join for news updates: teachlearntf-news (instructions on our website)

This document provides an overview of the Teaching and Learning Task Force’s activities, and reports on the findings of its recent information-gathering initiatives.

The purpose of this report is to give members of the SFU community a sense of the kinds of feedback about teaching and learning that the Task Force has received so far, to solicit additional input, and to stimulate discussion.

Themes & Issues Raised by SFU Community Members

In the Teaching and Learning Task Force’s recent information gathering phase, it sought to scan the teaching and learning environment at Simon Fraser University. Specifically, it attempted to identify and document existing teaching and learning support within the Faculties and Administrative units, and to identify gaps and areas in need of improvement.

Several themes and key issues emerged, which centred on the extent to which and how SFU creates, values, supports and celebrates effective teaching and diverse meaningful learning experiences. Summaries of these issues appear in latter pages of this report. We found that many members of the University community expressed the following sentiments:

1. Teaching and learning should be better showcased at SFU. Do you agree, and if so, what could we do to improve their visibility?
2. Teaching and learning should be valued and rewarded at SFU more. Do you agree, and if so, what could we do to accomplish this?
3. More should be done to evaluate and enhance the quality of teaching and learning at SFU. Do you agree, and if so, what more could we do?
4. We should provide students with richer learning experiences. Do you agree, and if so, what more could we do?
5. Members of the SFU community should be more aware of available support for teaching and learning, and additional support should be provided. More attention should be paid to curriculum development. Do you agree, and if so, how could we more effectively accomplish these goals?
6. SFU’s communication about its expectations about teaching and learning should be improved. Do you agree? If so, what could be done to improve communications? Are expectations carried out and evaluated? What processes should be set in place?

Do these resonate with you? Have we identified the key issues? Are we heading in the right direction?
Join the Teaching and Learning Task Force and other members of the SFU community in the upcoming Community Participatory Events. After a short presentation, participate in a small group discussion around one of these themes. This will help us to focus on key issues, clarify our directions and identify our working groups.

Or if you are unable to attend, email teachinglearning-tf@sfu.ca with your feedback or questions.

Activities to Date

• Identified stakeholders.
• Developed an overview of teaching and learning, and available SFU support and services.
• Drafted a statement of vision and principles.
• Developed and reviewed an inventory of relevant documents and existing teaching supports.
• Created a public webpage, news mailist and other web resources. See http://www.sfu.ca/teachlearn
• Interviewed a selection of instructors, learners, staff, and administrators from SFU’s three campuses.
• Invited all SFU instructors to participate in an online survey.
• Compiled information in a manner appropriate for several working documents.
• Planned a series of public forums (Community Participatory Events).

Upcoming community events will help identify issues that will be discussed in working groups and amalgamated in a discussion paper that will be distributed to the SFU community. Input from the consultation will lead to final recommendations that will be submitted to Jon Driver, VP Academic, in summer 2009.

Draft Vision Statement & Principles

SFU does not currently have a vision statement for teaching and learning. Thus, the Task Force has drafted a vision statement and principles for community review and refinement. The final version will be included in our recommendations report:

Simon Fraser University creates, values, and supports diverse, meaningful learning experiences. Teaching and learning are central to our culture and practice. We support, develop, and reward effective teaching and learning.

1. Teaching and research are central to the University’s mission and are equally valued and rewarded as scholarly activities.
2. Teaching and learning are visible, celebrated and showcased.
3. Our students have access to rich learning experiences and benefit from the relationships among research, teaching, and learning.
4. We engage in inquiry about teaching and support pedagogical innovation to enhance our practices and student learning.
5. Our teaching is continually evaluated to promote and ensure the highest quality of teaching and learning.

The Information Gathering Process

During October and November, Task Force Members embarked on an information gathering initiative by interviewing stakeholders, running focus groups, inviting stakeholders to complete questionnaires, and conducting an online survey. Current and prospective student perspectives were assessed through informal surveys and focus groups.

The main questions contained in the information gathering instruments were:

1. What teaching support and support for teaching currently exists or existed across SFU for instructors?
2. What teaching supports are being used/not used by instructors and why?
3. What teaching supports work well/not well?
4. What teaching support is missing, desired or needed to aid instructors?
5. What do various stakeholder groups identify as barriers, possibilities for advancement and suggestions?
The information gathered was aimed toward an environmental scan. We did not assume that the information that we gathered in this manner would provide a representative sample of responses. Rather, we assumed that it would alert us to issues that we should raise for discussion in the Simon Fraser Community.

Several documents stemming from the information gathered are being drafted to provide more details for interested community members and to capture suggestions for working group use.

Summary of Issues & Topics for Further Discussion

Note: Details, examples of initiatives and supports and respondent suggestions will be available in other documents on our website http://www.sfu.ca/tftl in early February (members of our news updates maillist will be alerted).

SFU’s Teaching & Learning Environment and Culture

The Changing Landscape

The learning activities, tools and environments students expect from a university have changed and continue to do so. Respondents reported expanding class sizes, declining numbers of faculty members and TAs, increasing numbers of Sessional Instructors, and a reduction in courses.

Some reported that increased workloads result in redesigned activities for reasons of efficiency rather than learning. These changes influence the quality of teaching and may discourage students from choosing SFU.

The Value and Rewarding of Teaching at SFU

Many respondents commented on the value attached to teaching and learning within their programs, department/schools, Faculties or SFU as a whole. A few departments were reported to value and recognize teaching through communications and messaging, showcasing and celebrating teaching and learning, and establishing formal structures, incentives and awards. However, more common observations included:

• University administration and their programs have not provided expectations for teaching or recognition of teaching, as evidenced by the tools that are used for teaching evaluations, workload planning, promotion and tenure, and available support.

• The pursuit of excellence in teaching is not reflected in policy decisions, or when it is, the policy is inconsistent with practice.

• Research is valued more highly than teaching, rewarded disproportionately, and adequate teaching is sufficient. Teaching is not valued as highly as grants and publications in promotion and tenure decisions and some Lecturers described feeling like second-class citizens and marginalized within their department or Faculty.

• There is little compensation or recognition for course or program development, team-teaching or being a program coordinator; publishing in teaching is not considered to be “research” for purposes of promotion or salary.

• Teaching is valued more at other universities; expectations for the quantity and quality of teaching have diminished over time at SFU.

The Tension between Teaching, Research and Learning

Tenure-track faculty members must allocate their time between teaching, research and service and the balance is an issue. Instructors who were not involved in research tended to value teaching more than instructors and graduate students who are engaged in research, as compared to TAs, TMs, Lecturers, and Sessional Instructors who are not graduate students.

In terms of the relationship between teaching, research and learning, there are no formal mechanisms, but rather an assumption, “that faculty research should translate into teaching”. The means by which students benefit from the relationships between teaching, learning and research, varies widely depending on school/unit: some teachers use research issues as a focus for some teaching, or use a research problem to drive the course, or as a case study.

Current policies that permit faculty members to obtain teaching reductions to devote more time to research may contribute to the sense that teaching is not valued at SFU. “Students pay for hours and are not getting them.” Students lose out on good teachers and sometimes on the opportunity to learn from people they really wanted to work with.
Expectations about Teaching and Learning

Whereas it is expected that an individual's research is publicly reviewed, the act of teaching is subject to less scrutiny. Thus, there is a tension between the stated need for University level standards and individuality with regard to what is taught and how it is taught.

Unclear expectations about teaching and learning appear to have broad implications. A diverse curriculum and a variety of learning experiences and teaching approaches demand consistent availability and quality of teaching supports. Clearly defining expectations for teaching and supporting them may effectively improve learning outcomes.

Teaching Development, Enhancement & Support

Current Approaches

Respondents to the Task Force information gathering process (interviews, focus groups and a survey) indicated four primary ways in which instructors currently improve or develop their teaching.

1. Responding to student feedback gathered through course questionnaires. The content and timing of course questionnaires seems to be primarily designed to provide feedback for administrative purposes (i.e., promotion and tenure, contract renewal, merit increases). Desired: acquire timely and relevant feedback toward improving and developing teaching and learning. Recommendations to redesign the questionnaires echo recent recommendations by SCUTL.

2. Engaging in informal or formal conversations with colleagues about teaching. Opportunities vary depending on the department or Faculty. Desired: instructors want more conversations and occurring at various levels in the university.

3. Engaging in activities related to curriculum development or revisions; opportunity to discuss with colleagues. Few opportunities are available. Desired: more opportunities for engagement and discussion.

4. Participating in workshops and other types of sessions organized in their units by teaching support staff or offered by a centralized unit. Desired: basic how to kinds of support for teaching; discipline-based, more locally offered support and work with colleagues to develop teaching.

Missing Supports

Overall, there are very few formal mechanisms to improve teaching within the departments. Three main ideas emerged from the interviews and questionnaires: Peer reviews, mentoring, and incentives. Some instructors and departmental chairs expressed an interest in peer reviews, where dialogue, feedback, and follow-up could occur toward enhancing teaching. Constraints include a lack of expertise and resources, mechanisms for implementation, and culture.

Informal mentorship occurs in pockets across the university. There appears to be a desire for a more formalized and perhaps institutional process, particularly for new instructors.

Respondents indicated that the low recognition or reward for teaching within a Faculty or department means that there is little incentive to devote significant effort in this direction.

On the other hand, a person may be intrinsically motivated to pursue teaching development, but due to workload pressures, is unable to do so. Incentives such as allocated time may be needed. Lastly, even when a person is already a strong teacher or has acquired tenure, there is no extrinsic motivator to continue to improve teaching and no consequences for doing so.

Another disconnect in the system is the availability of computers and instructional tools and yet, the lack of support to acquire knowledge about why, how and when to use them and in many cases, classroom technology to support them.

Some instructors and staff are frustrated that they cannot acquire necessary equipment or tools and resources, explore new technologies, receive instructional support and have functioning equipment or appropriate physical teaching spaces. Staff are equally frustrated with not being able to address these needs. In the end, this affects students’ learning experience.

Evaluation of Teaching

A highly charged topic, the evaluation of teaching effectiveness elicited comments by many respondent groups: The criteria and tools we use for evaluations and the lack of support for Tenure Promotion Committee chairs to understand how to evaluate teaching were raised as issues by faculty members, TPC chairs and administrators.

Experimentation and innovation in teaching may result in lower teaching evaluations; this is particularly of concern as student evaluations are the main or only measure of teaching success. Graduate students are concerned about negative student evaluations, which can affect their hiring prospect for future faculty positions.

Many respondents felt that student course evaluations are not the best measures of teaching ability. Emergent subthemes included:

1. Some student feedback is useful for improving teaching, but,
2. Some student ratings are based on issues other than learning.
3. The evaluation forms need updating, to be put online, and to be customized for innovative learning models and particular subjects, and
4. Instructors need the evaluations sooner than they currently receive them.

On the other hand, student input should be genuinely considered in course revision and instructor performance evaluations, as noted in the SCUTL report.

Better processes and means for evaluation are needed. There is a lack of clarity about what is being evaluated and what that means. In some cases is it the only means for identifying expectations around faculty development.

Course evaluations are also viewed as an equalizing tool where it can become a time to raise concerns about a faculty member one is concerned about or to support members with less than strong research record.

How do you measure teaching and how does one determine which instructor induced more learning, especially learning that is retained for years to come?

Additional or alternate means to the student questionnaires are needed as well as non-punitive approaches. However, supports and structures are unavailable: there is no mechanism for in-class observation or other “expert” evaluation of teaching for promotion and tenure.

The potential use of teaching portfolios or dossiers is problematic in that infrastructure-level support is lacking and current supports do not have the expertise on portfolios to educate, provide discipline-specific examples and work with faculty members on their development and TPC chairs on evaluating them.

Lack of Awareness or Use of Supports

There appears to be a lack of awareness by Instructors (and many support providers) of available teaching supports. Communication is spotty at best and assumptions are being made that the knowledge is being shared.

Frequently opportunities are not taken, as reflected by low enrolment or participation. The lack of time to (re)develop and be creative and the reward structure are commonly stated reasons. Rewarding research over teaching takes away time on teaching development as well, the extra time needed to try something new such as not lecturing is not recognized or allocated by administrators.

Survey results suggest that teaching supports are available when wanted, whereas for the most part, interview and questionnaire respondents indicated that not much is available at the institutional-level and little to nothing exists at the Faculty level.

Most support activities appear to be ad hoc or haphazard with few structured initiatives as described by the respondents. There also appears to be discrepancy between what administrators and support providers believe is being offered and what instructors perceive as available.

Related were comments about different types of support for instructors who, 1. Are strong, but wanting to improve, 2. Really want to improve but do not always know where to go for help or even what kind of help they need, and 3. Have received no teaching training and do not know what they do not know.

Specific Instructor Group Issues

The majority of instructor responses and input were by faculty members. Although many of the noted issues apply to other instructor groups, some are group specific.

SFU has several groups that are engaged with teaching, but a better focus on these groups and related support are needed: The “outside of classroom non-traditional learning staff!” need to feel part of this. Some opportunities available to faculty members are not available to graduate students. In some cases new faculty members will be mentored by someone in their area while other new faculty members receive very little in the way of support for the course they would teach when they arrive.

Some departments have increased their reliance on Sessional instructors to meet demands, but this group has been and continues to be the least supported Instructor group at the university. Sessional instructors were observed to have no preparation, are not sure what services are available to them and may be left completely on their own. At times, Sessional instructors feel that they are poor second cousins who are not recognized in departments as teachers. In sum, a proper infrastructure is missing for this group (and was commented on by several respondents across the different stakeholder groups).

TAs and TMs benefit from TA/TM day, but it is viewed as insufficient. Attending TA/TM day takes away from the actual course and is thus, sometimes discouraged by the instructor. Teaching support needs to feed down to the TA level and additional teaching development needed.

Other noted challenges include the perception that language ability/training/experience is not taken into account when assigning TAs. New TAs need more time for preparation and for Instructor to help, which is not accounted for. Although the International TA program has been cited as a very useful program: the cost and messaging by the hiring professor (if his/her emphasis is on research) may limit attendance. TAs are being stretched to the maximum and a reduction in TA numbers results in not meeting minimal needs.

Most Sessional instructors and TAs who were interviewed seemed unsure of how their course fit into the overall learning development of their students. The learning
Available Institutional Supports

Pockets of formal or informal teaching support may be found within departments and Faculties. Many supports and services available across the university were positively acknowledged. Both general supports and those embedded within Faculties were noted to be beneficial. The diagram on p. 8 depicts institutional-level supports and highlights.

Some instructors noted that they were not using some services because they were not needed, instructors did not know what could be provided, or what was offered did not fit with instructor needs and past experiences.

Other issues related to centralized non-discipline specific supports, were timing and focus of offerings, limitations with available help on teaching and learning technologies, diverse staff backgrounds and experiences, approaches to providing support, presentation and outreach. From the support-side, several issues emerged:

- Consolidation of information would be useful to avoid duplicated projects and efforts in other parts of SFU. A concerted effort in bringing people in similar projects together would be beneficial.
- Current support systems seem to work for many but not for instructors who do not contact units when help is needed.
- Perception that the Faculties consider the resources within are nice to have and that their instructors are meeting the requirements of good teaching. There is no requirement for them to make time in their schedules to acquire teaching and learning support. Interest in teaching is sincere, but given the many demands, discussions about teaching are rarely prioritized.
- The ability to facilitate all of the needs of students is curtailed by the high cost associated with ordering support items. Often staff are forced to limit AV services based on the total number of students registered in a class (HC, non-credit program).
- Units would benefit from increased communication and collaboration with other units and in some cases dependencies or linkages require better planning and coordination.
- There is a serious gap in SFU’s infrastructure related to the increased use of digital technology. Little or no support is available for instructors to get needed advice (with respect to digital it is weak), on copyright clearance for digital material, and training and awareness (about rules in a general way so that one can recognize the rules).
- Instructors may not know what they do not know (e.g. about infringing and procedures on acquiring clearance, course design possibilities) and means to provide education are needed.

Both instructor and teaching support groups frequently remarked on the lack of institutional mechanisms to foster a community around teaching and learning. This includes coordination, planning, communication and aligning resources and initiatives to better support and recognize teaching and learning at SFU.

Students’ Experiences

A multitude of different learning experiences are offered to SFU students, though instructors noted that expectations about student learning could be clearer, particularly at the institutional level. At all levels (department, Faculty, institutional), formal communication and appropriate supports require improvement to better support learners’ experiences.

Many supports were noted to be available to students (e.g. Student Learning Commons, SUCCESS, departmental initiatives, mentoring, peer support). Although some respondents indicating that international students receive insufficient support in their learning and teaching (e.g. assistance with academic culture, EAL, etc.) and departments are unable to assist them due to a lack of funding.

Although most comments about learners’ experiences revolved around the classroom, members of the Task Force recognize that the learning extending beyond the classroom such as co-op, field school, student orientation, etc. require greater attention.

Student Readiness

Students’ English language skills have become an increasingly difficult problem for academic programs and instructors where time is being taken away from actual learning of the subject. Not all students whose language skills are problems are ESL or EAL students. This issue has been raised in recent Undergraduate Student Surveys (IRP, 2007 & 2008).

The University’s acknowledgement of preparation deficits is important and is being addressed. However, students themselves need to assume responsibility for their learning and SFU’s expectations of their commitment to learning made clear.

Providing Rich Diverse Learning Experiences

Although curriculum development occurs, curriculum design and related learner experiences vary across the
university, partly due to a lack of understanding about SFU’s expectations and possibilities for different student learning experiences.

Additionally, trying to teach differently to provide students with richer learning experiences is constrained by the existing structures and processes. For example, the workload and credit system does not enable team-teaching within or across disciplines or a course with multiple sections taught by different faculty members.

Some members of the Vancouver and Surrey campuses observed that policies and decision-making are Burnaby-centric. This affects teaching supports and learner experiences in credit, non-credit, innovative and non-traditional programs.

Further challenges or concerns reported about providing rich diverse learning experiences:

- Inconsistencies across programs in terms of time, intensity and standards
- Different approaches to teaching and learning
- Teaching development may be desirable or needed, but not available
- Lack of consideration of students’ busy lives, and
- Lack of funding.

Recruitment

Student experiences may also affect recruitment. Prospective students indicated that the level of teaching was very important when choosing a university.

It was suggested that to gain a recruitment edge, SFU needs to show that teaching and learning matters, student have valuable experiences, and we have innovative programs; additionally, to identify what else students and parents attend to about teaching and learning.

Lastly, two areas which warrant further examination are 1) student success and its correlation with effective teaching and 2) how this ties in with evaluation.

Institutional Mechanisms and Linkages

Several issues raised in previous sections relate to the lack of institutional mechanisms and linkages.

Though a lot is being done to encourage and support teaching, a mechanism and a structure are missing to enable an instructor to take advantage of what is available. Some structures are in place but they are unknown to some instructors and staff.

Since expectations about teaching and learning at SFU are unclear, the tools and mechanisms toward meeting expectations are ineffective and there is no institutional plan, guidance or shared directions. The effect is extensive: on the instructional/learning environment, teaching and learning supports, rewards and incentives, teaching evaluations, curriculum development, etc.

Concerted efforts are made to develop programs, but there is a disconnect between offerings and perceived need and effectiveness.

A desired model of support appears to include discipline-specific support at the Faculty and Department levels coordinated with centralized support at the university level.

Initiatives on teaching and learning supports appear to be reactive rather than proactive which raises the question, “What does the institution do for up-front investment to the individual (ranging from parents to administrators)?”

Although time and investment may initially cost, remarks indicate that upfront effort saves time later, improves efficiencies and integration. It appears that some of the challenges which have emerged could be addressed through innovative changes to the way we attend to people with some up front investment.

The importance of fostering collaboration across Faculties, among support units and between Faculties and support units is vital. SFU could better capitalize on the sharing of experiences, knowledge and expertise by fostering a community behind teaching and learning.

Without a community and communication among support staff, they are becoming ghettoized, less engaged and less informed. In some instances, lines appear to be drawn between staff and instructors, support units and departments.

Proposed solutions require developing a model of support that is embedded within the university infrastructure to focus energies, increase visibility, coordination of activities, deal with how-to’s, celebrate and form policies. Critical is top-level buy-in that is meaningful and backed by actions. Communication, publicization and perceptions matter.

In terms of campus-specific issues and general access, Surrey and Vancouver have been cited to have better facilities and support service. However, there is a cross-campus challenge of knowing where to go for support and what advice to provide.

Integrated descriptions of what is available are lacking. References to and entry points to online services are scattered. It is difficult to discover what is available, who the provider is, and where the help is. There is no single, integrated, online “portal”.
Inventory of Teaching Support At SFU
Information gathering exercise of the Teaching & Learning Task Force: Fall 2008

University Archives
- Archival collection of primary source material
- Copyright licensing agreement (custom courseware and print materials, not digital)
- Support for use of archival materials in assignments
- Advising learners how to find and use archival materials
- Advice on copyright issues

Library & Student Learning Commons
- Subject collections
- Course-specific guides, materials, reserves, repositories
- Library instruction
- Support for assignment research & writing
- Literacy skills

Writing Coordinators
- Situated in Faculties
- Practical, theoretical & applied support
- Innovative approaches
- Exemplary showcases

Continuing Studies
- Administrative logistics for non-credit programs and courses
- Program-specific skills
- Access to space and equipment

Institute for the Study of Teaching and Learning in the Disciplines
- Discipline based teaching inquiry
- Teaching inquiry projects
- Faculty teaching scholars

IT Services
- Provisioning of learning/social technologies
- Specialty software
- Wired/wireless access
- Lecture recordings
- Provisioning of A/V & multi-media equipment
- TechHelp for instructors

CODE
- Administrative logistics for distance & online courses
- Copyright clearance
- Instructional design & help
- Help using learning/social technologies
- Media production & editing

LIDC
- Teaching workshops, events
- Educational Consultants
  - May be situated in Faculties or in Service Unit
  - LIDC or CODE funded
  - Course & program curriculum design