

## Mount Royal Faculty Association

### Feed back on Academic Plan Draft 2.1 and the “Implementation Plan for the Academic Plan in Conjunction with the Institutional Strategic Plan: 2015-2020” (Draft of 18 November 2015)

Submitted December 21, 2015

#### Introduction: a Note on Process

We remain concerned that the revised Academic Plan is a top-down document. Although it has its genesis in the previously approved Institutional Strategic Plan (*Learning Together, Leading Together*), the draft Academic Plan (2015) introduces considerable detail regarding strategies for implementation and includes several new ideas. In the past, Academic planning has been a widely consultative practice, where faculty and staff have had input in the formation of the plan, not just in providing comments after the plan was written. The current consultation framework, which asks faculty and staff to comment on a finished document, makes faculty and staff seem reactive and critical rather than constructive and visionary.

Faculty would have valued opportunities for input into the writing and formation of the revised Academic Plan *before* the document was presented in draft form in September 2015. While we appreciate that the consultation process has been extended beyond what was originally envisioned, the period is still relatively short. As well, the two forms of consultation open to faculty, the online blog and the feedback sessions in December, have their own problems. According to feedback from our membership, some individuals, especially those in precarious employment positions, are nervous about posting in a public forum. The December feedback sessions were scheduled in what is probably the busiest week of the academic year, and low attendance reflected this fact.

The MRFA is also concerned that the academic plan “reset” document circulated by the Provost indicated that there would be discussion of draft v 2.0 at the December 17 GFC. This did not occur.

#### Overview

There are still some significant issues which the writers of the draft Academic Plan should address before it goes to General Faculties Council for approval. These issues will be addressed in the context of the plan’s numbered sections, below.

1. Unnecessarily short timelines (The current Academic Plan is dated 2012 to 2017, yet the draft plan is supposed to be approved in winter 2016).
2. Bargaining outside the Collective Agreement (many sections of the draft plan refer to matters which are the purview of negotiations).
3. Homogenization of teaching approaches and programs (There is an assumption of homogeneity in the draft plan, in spite of the diverse programs MRU offers to students).

4. Working groups have been selected, have begun, and are completing work before the draft plan has been approved. Thus, the university community's ability to provide input on the draft plan in a way that could meaningfully influence the final version is badly limited. The working groups, which should have been approved as part of the academic plan, have been created and are starting work without a formal mandate from GFC.
5. The Provost has said that the impetus for the 2015 draft Academic Plan is budgetary, but the budget projections of the academic plan (2015) have been called into question by recent funding decisions from the provincial government. The new provincial funding context led to a revised 2015-2016 budget with a 3.9 M surplus (which has now been allocated to a variety of initiatives), and the budget projection for 2016-2017 is relatively balanced and stable. In spite of this, the claim is still that we need to find "efficiencies" and strive for "sustainability." What is the real driver underlying this push for greater efficiency, if not continually-decreasing operating funding?
  - If efficiency is still the reason for the plan's cost-cutting initiatives, there should be a clear definition of what is meant by "efficiency." Then, the plan should explain, where appropriate, how each initiative achieves improved efficiency. Perhaps the word "efficiency" is part of the problem, since it implies an assembly-line approach to education. There is no demonstration of savings produced by the "efficiencies" mentioned in the draft academic plan.
  - It is now being claimed that the problem is that projections indicate labour cost increases will exceed grant and tuition increases, and therefore MRU's financial sustainability has been questioned. We have yet to see a clear explication of labour cost projections as they relate to the overall costs of running MRU. Over the past thirty years, salary increases have averaged out to almost exactly match inflation. What is really driving the labour costs right now is the movement up the grid of a large group of faculty hired when we transitioned to a university and created the TSS pattern. This is a short term labour cost increase. As well, the proportion of administrative salaries has also grown.
6. The academic plan has repeatedly been referred to as a "living document" that will be subject to regular updates. If it will be perpetually in flux, how can it be used as a reliable, robust planning document? How can progress towards achieving milestones/goals be measured over multiple years?

## Responses to Specific Sections of the Plan

### **II. University-wide degree-level expectations and capacities**

Mount Royal has spent considerable time creating learning aims, General Education cluster requirements, and program-specific requirements, yet it appears that a new model is being created: one that, to the best of our knowledge, has not passed through General Faculties Council. The four learning aims approved by GFC, and included in the *Academic Plan 2012-2017*, are

1. Intellectual and Practical Skills
2. Integrative and Applied Learning
3. Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical, Natural and Technological World
4. Personal and Social Responsibility

The draft Academic Plan (2015), however, has five competencies. While two of these competencies are overwritten and therefore hard to read, the five competencies are

1. Essential Intellectual Competencies
2. Practical and Life Competencies
3. Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical, Natural and Technological World
4. Personal and Social Responsibility
5. Integrative and Applied Learning

The wording at the beginning of section II reads, “following consensus among all Faculties (approval at GFC), each department will map its programs to these Expectations and Capacities, and further map each program component to Program Learning Outcomes” (4). There are a few problems with this approach.

- a. GFC is being asked to approve the draft Academic Plan (2015), which implies the approval of the five competencies, yet the five competencies are subject to the approval of GFC. GFC is therefore being asked to approve something on which it has yet to vote (or to receive a detailed rationale).
- b. The approval of the five competencies brings into effect an implementation exercise which will take considerable time and energy on the part of DAGs and departments.
- c. Something as vital to the profile of MRU as learning outcomes, aims, or competencies should be discussed and developed by faculty during an institution-wide consultation process (as were the learning aims developed in 2010).

### **Section 2.1 Personalized Learning**

This is a worthy goal, and personalized learning is at the heart of an MRU education. However elements in the implementation of this goal are either problematic or counter intuitive.

Strategy Three: “Explore innovative uses of technology in delivering courses that result both in efficiencies and better performance by students” continues a popular assumption that technology is a panacea for everything from poor student performance to large class sizes. While technology is an important tool for learning, it is not the panacea some think it to be, and it has its own costs, problems and limitations. The draft plan assumes that technology is a preferred mode of learning

for students, but is this actually the case? Is there evidence to show that students want more opportunities to use technology in the classroom?

Strategy Four: “Explore the limited use of larger classes/lectures supported by teaching assistants or markers.” This section is in direct violation of the *Post Secondary Learning Act*, Section 85.3, which states that “Each academic staff association shall have the exclusive authority, on behalf of the academic staff members, to negotiate and enter into an agreement with the board of the public post-secondary institution” and section 87.4:

An agreement between the board and the academic staff association of a public college shall, with respect to the employment of academic staff members, contain provisions respecting at least the following matters:

- (a) terms and conditions of employment;
- (b) teaching responsibilities;
- (c) vacation leaves, leaves of absence and sick leaves to be allowed;
- (d) salaries and remuneration to be paid and the establishment of salary and wage schedules for that purpose;
- (e) procedures respecting the settlement of differences between the parties arising from the interpretation, application or operation of the agreement;
- (f) conditions and procedures governing reassignment, suspension or dismissal by the board;
- (g) procedures respecting the negotiation of future agreements, including procedures for the final resolution, by compulsory binding arbitration, of disputes that may arise during the negotiation of future agreements.

The Faculty Association believes that exploration of the use of teaching assistants or markers constitutes bargaining outside of the Collective Agreement because it has the potential to create a new category of employment not currently a part of the CA. New categories of faculty employment should be negotiated between the Board and the MRFA Negotiations Team.

In addition, the Faculty Association fears that the creation of marker and teaching assistant positions will have a negative impact on our highly competent, long-serving, and committed contract faculty, by either (a) taking away employment altogether, or (b) removing them from positions in which they have responsibility for teaching whole sections and employing them in secondary positions as markers or teaching assistants.

The MRFA is not opposed to public discussions and broad consultation on matters of workload. But initiating such discussion through negotiations will ultimately help to ensure that recommendations arising from public consultations are considered in future rounds of collective bargaining.

## **Section 2.2 Student Engagement**

There are many references in the draft plan to “high impact practices” yet these are not adequately defined. The language of this section is highly prescriptive, using words such as “ensure,” and “must.”

2.2.1 “Ensure each program has one or more high impact learning experience(s) embedded in the program.” This is curriculum development by administrative fiat. Who will ensure compliance, and is compliance even necessary? We need more information on the validity of high impact practices before we commit to having them in every program.

2.2.1. Action 2 “Increase the number of faculty members attending workshops at ADC . . . regarding high impact teaching practices.” After the plan is approved by GFC, it seems as if faculty will be made to take workshops to learn about high impact practices. While professional development opportunities are welcome, and ADC contains acknowledged learning specialists who have, and continue to be, a great help to faculty, enforced P.D. is problematic.

2.2.2 Strategy 1: To use the language of the draft Academic Plan, this section constitutes its own “iron triangle” (quality/access/cost). Although class sizes may increase, markers and teaching assistants may be brought in to help teach, and faculty will in general see an increase in P.D. responsibilities, the plan states that “we will ensure that student interactions with faculty remain at a high level” and that “faculty must understand that this is a priority in evaluating their teaching” (6). Again, student interaction is at the heart of what we do at MRU, and the MRFA values that interaction as an essential part of our lives as faculty. But to use the “iron triangle” analogy, you cannot expand one side of the triangle without changing the triangle as a whole. If, for example, faculty have larger classes and do not have as many contact hours with students because TAs are teaching tutorials, faculty/student interactions will likely suffer. Marking our own students’ work is a critical aspect in our ability to know our students on an individual basis and to provide personalized learning/mentoring. In broad strokes, the initiatives being considered for budgetary reasons and “efficiency” are not obviously compatible with the goals of personalized learning and to a teaching/learning environment that fosters a high degree of instructor-student engagement and attention

### **2.3 Intellectually Engaged Learning**

Again, the language here is highly prescriptive, using words such as “every,” and “at least” for items that may vary across disciplines and faculties. When, for instance, the draft plan states that “every student will have the opportunity to enrich their academic experience through participation in research projects during his or her time at Mount Royal” (7), it underplays the cost of such programs (grants, faculty time, facilities).

#### **Section 2.4.1 “Increase the number of spaces available.”**

This is a laudable goal, but the MRFA agrees with President Docherty’s comments at the December 15 budget presentation: such expansion can only happen if there is an increase in full-time staff and faculty. It is a lamentable fact that, although MRU made gains in its number of full time faculty until 2012-2013, we are now down to nearly the same levels of full-time faculty as

we were in 2009-10. This is partly due to the Government’s budget decisions, but we are currently in a position where we have 379 full time faculty and 384 Contract faculty, and contract faculty teach the majority of courses. We cannot afford to make this ratio worse by expanding student spaces without proper funding levels from the Government. “Sustainability” requires a well-supported, majority full-time faculty complement. Without such a complement, program, curriculum, course development, and review are compromised.

**Full-time Faculty and Full-time Students**

	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
Full-time Faculty	387	401	404	415	405	379
Full-time students	10,443	10,670	10,551	10,479	9,930	---

Source: “Mount Royal University: Trends-At-A-Glance,” September 2014

**Section 2.4.3, Strategy 3 “Move thoughtfully toward year-round course delivery”**

The timelines for this item have working Group 2 reporting to Deans’ Council by May 31, 2016. This is a very tight timeline for such a major change. Also, this discussion is best held under the aegis of collective bargaining. While public consultation may be highly desirable, because this will lead to recommendations to bargaining, the process should be undertaken with the consent and at the direction of the bargaining teams.

**Section 2.5 “Facilitate Student Success”**

The draft plan does a good job of outlining possible directions for facilitating student success. There are resource implications here, but students are our core focus and their success should be supported and encouraged. At the same time, we recommend a thorough costing process to ensure that the institution chooses the most effective options while still keeping within budget.

**Section 3.1 “A Healthy and Productive Work Environment”**

The MRFA considers Working Group Five to be deeply problematic. Issues regarding faculty work should be negotiated through the collective bargaining provisions specified in *The Post Secondary Learning Act*. The MRFA will, should its Negotiations Committee recommend, take part in consultations about faculty work, but any such discussions should be initiated through negotiations.

In saying this, the MRFA stresses that the Negotiations Team consults widely with faculty before each round of collective bargaining and actively solicits feedback on the Collective Agreement. The Negotiations Team is therefore the logical group to begin a discussion of how to talk about faculty work, and to negotiate the terms under which that discussion takes place.

### **3.5 Teaching and Learning**

The draft plan calls for “a manifesto on teaching and learning innovation for a new era of students and revenue sources.” This idea needs to be more fully developed before it is introduced.

### **4.5 Learning Outcomes and University-Level Competencies**

This section again mentions the “MRU Competency Clusters” and says that we will “build consensus” around these clusters and also “ensure broad support among faculty and students.” This wording is problematic because we have not yet discussed the clusters in any detail. We are being asked to vote on a plan which introduces the clusters and then to ensure broad support for something we have not yet discussed.

### **4.6 New Program Priorities**

The list of new programs mentioned here provides an inspiring sense of the future direction of MRU. We caution, however, that these majors should not be introduced without thorough analysis of resources. We will need additional faculty and funding to support these programs.

### **4.9 Sustainability in the Curriculum**

We would like to see more detail here, as Sustainability should concern us all. Once the plan has been approved at GFC, Sustainability would be a good candidate for a working group which includes MRU staff, faculty, and administration.

### **4.10 Alternative Delivery Models**

Along with section 4.1, this section mentions the articulation of credit and non-credit programs. A number of issues need to be addressed, including the role of the collective bargaining process in negotiating the interplay between credit and non-credit programs; potentially variable rates of tuition; and possible differences in pay and academic rank for faculty who might be teaching in what could be essentially the same program.

### **Conclusion**

We would like to thank Dr. Kathy Shailer for the opportunity to comment on the draft Academic Plan (2015). The MRFA believes that many elements of the plan require further study and that some elements are best addressed through, or are directed through, the Collective Bargaining process. Although we have areas of concern in the plan in its current form, we are committed, as always, to the continued health of Mount Royal, its staff, faculty, and students. Our comments are meant to inform the planning process and to produce a document that best represents the long term goals of the institution.