

VANCOUVER ISLAND UNIVERSITY

FACULTY of ARTS and HUMANITIES

Response to Draft Academic Plan of Aug. 16, 2010

Submitted by Dr. Steven M. Lane, Faculty Dean (Sept. 23, 2010)

**Introduction and Context**

First of all, thank you to the members of the Academic Plan committee for their hours of time put into meeting, and drafting sections of this draft Plan. We certainly appreciate now having something to consider and debate as the Academic Plan moves from a small group to the larger VIU community. Even more, we look forward to a next draft.

Let us take the document for what it is: a draft with many “voices”, written by several interested committee members and others, which focuses rather unevenly on the various sections, and with a range of recommendations from the very general (as perhaps expected in an Academic Plan) to the very specific. The very conditions of composing the draft Plan have caused some of its weaknesses. We believe that the occasion for feedback, and the revising and re-writing that will follow upon the eight public sessions on the Academic Plan, will result in a much more consistent, coherent, logically-supported next draft.

We believe that the values of a university, which are embedded even in this draft here and there, should guide the process:

- Reasoned, respectful, inclusive debate
- A commitment to understanding the institution and its culture(s)
- Using the past to inform future directions, no matter how bold we want to be
- Avoiding statements that smack of absolutism, or claiming to know something we do not or cannot
- Conclusions (recommendations) supported by evidence and experience, and, where appropriate, debated further

The Faculty of Arts and Humanities has a long history of engagement in just these kinds of debates, and has been intimately involved in every stage of institutional evolution since 1969.

Two large “context” values loom behind the document, as well, and perhaps have not been thoroughly explored yet. The first is **funding assumptions**: what do we assume is an appropriate “mix” of programs that will be cost-neutral, or even contribute to the institutional “bottom line” (either through large numbers of students paying regular tuition fees; international or other student cohorts paying a higher tuition fee; contract activity; or other), and those programs that must be offered even though they appear to be “subsidized”, in a sense, by the others? In other words, what “business model” does VIU adopt? The second is **student profile**:

currently we enroll 70-80% of our students from our geographical region – is there any assumption that this will change? In what ways, and how much? If not, do we retain our value of “open access”? and if we do that, do we still need to consider caps or quotas on programs’ admissions?

**A word on process** – as noted above, there are some distinctive features about this draft and its preparation. We hope that a next iteration is more even in its treatment of the various issues, and is complete. Having adequate time for meaningful input is always good for ensuring faith in the process. We hope that the next drafts of the Plan consider a range of responses, as appropriate: some directive recommendations, but a number of recommendations that identify key issues and mechanisms for resolving those issues.

### **Comment on Specific Recommendations**

**Vision** – this is good, but open for debate and discussion. We should be able to refine and adopt soon.

**Building a Unique Identity** – This is a noble goal, but falls short on two counts: 1) of the five cross-disciplinary themes, all are good, and all of them illustrate the kinds of things that universities encourage if not stand for; however, five strikes us as too many, and presented as they are, potentially too prescriptive – what will be the expectation of how departments and programs address one or more of these? Is there room for the current list to be collapsed, i.e., all seen as dimensions of, say, “Key Issues”, or “Global Awareness”, or “Citizenship”? and 2) the range of diverse programs (ABE, trades, degrees, etc.) is identified as part of our unique identity, and we agree – but how do the five themes operate in programs of short duration, or with mandated curriculum? It seems quite clear that the suggested approaches to building identity require much further internal discussion.

**The Learning Experience** – I do not think there are many who would dispute that student success is highly valued at VIU, and therefore anything that demonstrably contributes to that success is a good thing. Similarly, the notion that education can be “transformative” is probably something highly regarded by most of us who have ourselves been educated.

When we get to some of the conditions for learning, there is important material in here related to the expectations of our changing student population, and certainly we in the Arts and Humanities would welcome additional technological infrastructure, for example, in our aging buildings.

There is, however, a lack of knowledge of this place displayed in the opening to this section (p. 34) – VIU is not a “traditional” university, has a pretty good record of student satisfaction, and ought to be interested in *identifying, retaining* and *enhancing* the very things that have led to that success. These are the things that make us distinct from “traditional”, research-intensive universities, and therefore an important component of our current institutional identity. In fact, recent trends in post-secondary education highlight attempts by the big universities to improve the

quality of undergraduate teaching – they wish they could be more like us in this endeavour!

And while there are numerous good ideas for features of the learning environment, we would like to see *reading* and *writing* as among the various literacies that are mentioned. Dr. Daniel Burgoyne of the English department has submitted a more detailed rationale for the place of reading and writing instruction as a mode of learning within disciplines; further, we believe reading and writing skills are invaluable in reaching the objectives of *interdisciplinary* study, as well. Finally, we insist that these skills are fully compatible with – indeed, necessary because of – the increasing presence of various technologies and communication media in our students' everyday lives.

**The Academic Community** – It appears that the Academic Plan committee spent more time on this section than on any other. In fact, the detail regarding tenure/rank/title, scholarship, faculty evaluation, and a number of academic values makes one wonder: what problem or problems are these intended to address?

The elements of evaluation, tenure, faculty recognition, and rank and title are interrelated at many institutions. However, adopting one or more does not necessarily lead to adopting the whole package.

Let us remind ourselves that periodic evaluation of faculty was dropped from the collective agreement because management realized the workload involved was not adequately resourced. Faculty, by and large, have no problem with the notion of evaluation *per se* – it's what the evaluation will be used for, and how the evaluation will proceed, that are at stake. Ensuring high quality instruction is a good value.

What is more puzzling is how tenure, or academic rank, are *required* in order to ensure that same value. (We would be teaching our first-year students to watch out for the *non sequitur* in their analysis of arguments.) Obviously, this is a contentious, even divisive issue here at VIU, with many taking the view that our successes are in part *because of* a “non-hierarchical” academy, while others similarly argue that a system of rank is not *necessarily* incompatible with collegiality.

What would be *innovative* would be for VIU to avoid adopting the traditional structure and create one that supports our values. And let us separate the need for an academic “title” from the issue of academic “rank” – these two items are quite different, and there is a different urgency to each.

Let us not be naïve – the topic of rank is also illustrative of a shift in decision-making at VIU: some matters formerly settled by negotiation between VIU and its bargaining groups may now be settled at Senate. But keeping to a prescriptive path on academic rank in the Academic Plan runs the risk of creating a huge battle, where one could be avoided. First of all, the Senate should recognize that the matter has been put to a vote in the VIUFA at least twice, and twice a system of rank has been rejected. Then, the process or venue for deciding on such a system needs to be agreed upon: is it collective bargaining? Or Senate?

The Academic Plan committee's adoption of Boyer's model of scholarship is fine, as far as it goes – at least it goes some way towards recognizing the diverse activities undertaken by faculty in different Faculties, departments, and programs. As always, though, the wholesale adoption of someone else's set of criteria seems to sell us short: surely we can adapt the model of scholarship to our own situation? In other words, it's the beginning of a discussion, not the final recommendation.

**Programs** – Of the specific recommendations for change affecting four existing Faculties, and creating two new ones, much has already been said and written. Further, we recognize that some adjustments may be necessary in order for existing Faculties to meet the tests of "Faculty" as outlined in the *Universities Act*. All of these recommendations require much more discussion, costing, and consultation before they are considered. Let us put a few comments on the record regarding the recommendations that would most directly affect our Faculty.

Faculty of Arts: combining Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences is supported by a three-point rationale: "provide increased trans-disciplinary synergies", "enable economies of scale", and "rationaliz[e]...overlapping programs". First of all, I think we do very well on the first score, and have done for years. Second, there is no sense of where these "overlapping programs might be. But most important is that there no analysis of costs/savings to support the notion that there might be savings.

Let us be clear that we are not outright opposed to reorganization. What a provocative recommendation like this raises, rather, is questions like "why these groups? Why not create a Faculty of Arts and Sciences? Why not consider reorganizing along other lines (separate the fine and performing arts and design from Arts and Humanities, e.g.)? Or, with all the emphasis on interdisciplinarity in this document, why not create a Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies? Or General Studies?" The Faculty of Arts and Humanities would welcome the opportunity to engage in these discussions.

Faculty of Indigenous Studies: this suggested structure arose as a response to a particular question – how to provide for Aboriginal governance under the new Senate structure? To recommend a new Faculty would require much more consultation, with both faculty and external communities. Further, we fear creating such a Faculty would actually make Indigenous Studies more of a "silo", and not more integrated into VIU curriculum and values. As it stands, therefore, this recommendation appears to be the wrong answer to what is a legitimate question.

In response to this recommendation, the department of First Nations Studies came to our Faculty Council to request of other departments expressions of their support for FNAT to remain in Arts and Humanities, no matter if a new "Faculty of Indigenous Studies" is created or not. The Faculty Council passed a motion to that effect:

*"Given the history of the development of First Nations Studies in this Faculty and the opportunities for collaboration and enrichment of knowledges and diversity its*

*presence has engendered, we support the continuance of First Nations Studies in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities.”*

Several of our nine departments outside FNAT are now considering their own responses to this request.

Faculty of Graduate Studies: this is certainly something to consider and perhaps work towards as graduate activity at VIU increases. Given our current need, however, and our financial situation, creating this Faculty now seems a poor investment.

The recommendations pertaining to the Faculties of Adult and Continuing Education and International Education assume new roles for these groups, and those roles are not fully articulated or consistent with other parts of the document.

**Academic Support Services, Administrative Infrastructure** – the assumptions expressed in these sections need to be better supported and quantified. Just as on the instructional side, there need to be better measures of what we need, and how much, before we simply assume that everything is under-resourced. Evaluation, as a value, ought to permeate all activity at the university.

## **Conclusion**

If we boil down the draft Academic Plan to some of its broad principles, the Faculty of Arts and Humanities can support the developing Plan. The key will be aligning the current categories with a consistent set of responses. We believe the levels of response look like this:

- Reorganization – yes, let’s consider this, but gather the information, consider the costs of all kinds, and have consultation
- Program integration – we have participated in lots of multi-disciplinary activity over the years, and are always keen to consider new ways to collaborate across departments and Faculties
- Scholarship – we are active and engaged, and therefore look to appropriately adapt the models suggested to our own context
- Evaluation – as stated above, the notion of evaluation is widely supported, in all areas and at all levels of the institution; who will do it, what it will be used for, and the cost/workload implications need further discussion
- Tenure/etc. – these are hot buttons because they affect working conditions, and change to a “traditional” structure threatens, in the eyes of many, the very identity of VIU
- “Program prioritization” – while a necessary undertaking in order to make better, more rational decisions, no one should think this will be easy, or painless