

Comments on the University Academic Plan Draft (Senate Discussion)

By e-mail to the Chair and Secretary January 28

I have two suggestions; neither of them are large, though the second is rather more substantive than the first.

- The first concerns the following from the top line of page 2: “well-received communications plans”. Frankly, I think this needs to be cut. I commend to you the report of the Administrative Task Force of the AAPR, where we noted the problem with strategic communication at the University. I can tell you that comment is mild indeed. I would further commend to you the Strategic Communications PIF (and I generally don’t recommend any more PIF reading than is necessary!) I think you will find that there is no way to read that and suggest our communications were ‘well-received’, that they constituted ‘plans’, or to be perfectly honest that there was any ‘communication’. I think York is in desperate need of effective communication strategies, and the past five years have failed to deliver those in quite spectacular fashion. Saying the opposite in the UAP is not only disingenuous, but is likely to work against our getting it right in the next five years.
- The second suggestion is more substantive. I note a significant emphasis on engaging with Indigenous communities. I can understand the desire, given the recent Truth and Reconciliation report, together with our massive collective debt, and I would not want to suggest that we not focus on our relationship with indigenous peoples. Two things struck me, however. The first is that I am not sure how well positioned York is to take a lead on this. That may not matter, but it might. Rather more to the point, I was struck by the relative silence in the plan on engagement with our very local community — that in Jane-Finch, or University Heights, or whatever else it is being called this week — which is also a community of persistent and systemic disadvantage. By contrast, York has longstanding connections into that community, and it is one that we are uniquely situated to serve. I wonder if we might recognize that rather more explicitly in the UAP than it is in the present draft?

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- it is misleading to assert that progress has been made in complement recovery; the document reflects a tension between innovative program development and resources: grad programs need dedicated faculty members, but faculty members do not have an automatic entitlement to teach outside their home units (Deans / Principal should allow instructors to teach, on-load, so that faculty members are not obliged to teach on overload in order to participate in the delivery of instruction for such courses)
- (agreeing with the above statement and adding) this is especially true for our interdisciplinary aspirations; SHARP may create more silos in the competition for resources; the University Academic Plan’s goals should trump any financial models
- [after requesting a vote by paper ballot] this UAP is flawed in terms of both process and content:
 - it was not a participatory exercise and the key “pillars” of the document were not the subject of consultation; the process was driven by the administration in a top-down mode; one table at the forum stressed the need to address the casualization impact on quality, but this is not reflected, in a silencing that characterizes the project
 - key academic issues are absent: academic freedom, casualization, collegial governances among them

- the main challenge – chronic government underfunding – is missing; although plans are generally upbeat they should also be realistic and forthright, and we should state how we plan to respond to Ontario’s poor record on funding (10th among Canada’s provinces)
- although the objective related to an Indigenous education strategy is laudable, it is also unrealizable given that there so few Aboriginal faculty members to properly guide and it has appeared without prior consultations
- [with regard to the goals of student success] students do feel isolated and their mental well-being is at risk; what is needed are appropriate ways for this isolation to be addressed through structured opportunities to make connections – such as a commuter student centre, coffee and food co-ops and the like; the UAP should be more sensitive to this and point to ways in which students can have a feeling of belonging to York and connected to others; focus groups would be appropriate; mental health goals are commendable, but faculty members need the skills training essential to identify distress, de-escalate situations etc.
- the UAP should be careful about words – duplication, streamlining, complexity – that may be read as coded language for course elimination and program closures; collegial governance is essential to decision-making in this regard [Chair of Senate notes that Faculties and Councils will play key roles in changes]
- the assertion that the process was flawed cannot be substantiated; inputs into this UAP include wide, intensive, continual consultations and the objectives reflect documents approved or endorsed by Senate over a longer time frame; the Deans / Principal do understand that interdisciplinarity must flourish and are committed to inter-Faculty dialogue; we cannot shy from challenges but must stress collegial strategies to address them
- it is gratifying to see the emergence of a truly made-in-York plan; in the Enabling the Plan section, three discrete ideas are held together and graduate education should be separated out; in Priority 1, the juxtaposition embedded in the line “...beyond their majors and/or enhance professional skills including an undergraduate “finishing year”, course-based Masters” should be excised
- consultations were intensive and thorough, and members of APPRC – who reflect a wide spectrum of the University – were engaged at every step of the way right through the drafting; it was noteworthy how often these consultations yielded recurring themes, and the draft respects and reflects the views expressed by the community