



Representing Faculty, Librarians & Veterinarians

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Academic Integrity Committee Communication

How real is the structural deficit invoked by the Administration to justify both the Program Prioritization Process (PPP) and the proposed budget cuts? What kind of vision for the future of the University of Guelph informs the choices to implement the PPP and to cut college budgets? The Academic Integrity Committee (AIC) poses these questions in light of recent comments by the Administration's American consultant, Robert Dickeson, and of a recent presentation by another American consultant, George Mehaffy.

Because the University of Saskatchewan is currently undergoing program prioritization modelled on his book, a Saskatoon radio station (CJME NewsTalk 980) interviewed Robert Dickeson who referred to the University of Guelph as the "best Canadian example" of such prioritization. This interview suggests that actions based on the PPP have already been taken: "Guelph was able to become more efficient in a number of aspects. They were able to eliminate some programs that no longer had enrolment, they looked at ways to save money through restructuring, and they improved some administrative processes." In fact, the University of Guelph Senate has not approved the elimination of any programs. While the Administration stated on multiple occasions that the PPP would not lead inevitably to program closures, Dickeson's comments make clear that this has always been the intention.

Dickeson's assessment of Guelph's financial situation in this interview is even more striking: "They were in good shape financially but they could see the handwriting on the wall. They could anticipate that there might be cuts or there might be problems or there might be issues if the same old funding formulas rocked along and there were changes in the demographics." Do these statements align with the Administration's claim of a \$32 million structural deficit? Or do they suggest that the Administration has chosen cut-backs and austerity when other choices are possible?

<http://cjme.com/story/guelph-applauded-transformation-using-same-process-u-s/243546>

The AIC reminds UGFA Members that the Financial Advisory Committee's analysis of the university's audited Financial Statements from 2006-2012, sent to you at the end of October, casts serious doubt on the existence of a structural deficit.

<http://www.ugfa.ca/userContent/documents/Newsletters/FAC%20Financial%20Statement%20Analysis.pdf>

But even if the university faces financial challenges, should cutting academic programs be the response? A recent article for the New England Center for Investigative Reporting points to the soaring number of non-academic administrative and professional employees at US colleges and universities. In this article Richard Vedder, economist and director of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity, comments on claims by senior administrators at American schools that they are doing everything possible to keep costs down: “I wouldn’t buy a used car from a university president,’ said Vedder. ‘They’ll say, ‘We’re making moves to cut costs,’ and mention something about energy-efficient light bulbs, and ignore the new assistant to the assistant to the associate vice provost they just hired.” The AIC asks Members to consider whether similar trends can be seen at Guelph. <http://necir.org/2014/02/06/new-analysis-shows-problematic-boom-in-higher-ed-administrators/>

Beyond debate over the financial situation, however, the more fundamental questions concern the future of the University of Guelph as an academic institution and the quality of the education it will provide. The implementation of the PPP was accompanied by vague suggestions that this would encourage “academic innovation” and the “transformation of curriculum.” What this could mean, and what educational vision informs the budgetary decisions, was suggested by the recent presentation on campus by George Mehaffy, Vice President of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU).

Mehaffy is a champion of the “Red Balloon Project,” an initiative of the AASCU named for a contest sponsored by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), which aims to “re-imagine and then to redesign undergraduate education for the 21st century.” Despite its stated goal to “better engage students in authentic learning experiences,” the Red Balloon Project is driven by the idea that technology can reduce the costs of post-secondary education by reducing reliance on faculty members. Celebrating the growth of the private sector in higher education, it assumes that competition for money will foster innovation. In the brave new world imagined by the Red Balloon Project, university courses will be offered predominantly in on-line formats and will no longer be designed solely by professors but by teams including graphic artists, media technicians and pedagogy specialists. In arguing against the autonomy or indeed the value of individual faculty members, Mehaffy invokes the superiority of the “collective wisdom” of the internet which he sees as embodied in Wikipedia. Indeed he refers scathingly to the concept of expertise, embodied in the academic with a PhD, as “medieval.”

<http://www.aascu.org/programs/RedBalloonProject/>

http://www.csuchico.edu/vpaa/vpprae/docs/pdf/The_Red_Balloon_Project_Concept_Paper_8-26-11.pdf

http://www.fhsu.edu/teacher-scholar/resources/Current-Issue/medieval_models.pdf

The Administration's sponsorship of Mehaffy's presentation suggests a deeply troubling vision of the future of education at the University of Guelph. Given that scholarly expertise is deemed unnecessary, faculty would teach more. Instruction would become primarily on-line and contact between students and professors would diminish, with an accompanying decline in student engagement and the quality of education. Moreover the development and control of curriculum would shift from faculty members to administrators influenced, presumably, by governments and by corporate interests.

The AASCU, like the National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) with which Mehaffy is also associated, is not Canadian. Mehaffy's arguments are based on the American context, not the Canadian context. Moreover his comparison group, like those who have embraced the NCAT model, consists of institutions with mediocre rankings in the United States. Why would these be appropriate comparators for the University of Guelph? If the Administration has abandoned the idea that Guelph is one of the top comprehensive universities in Canada, UGFA Members have not.

Given the Administration's repeated reference to models imported from the United States, the AIC concludes this communication with a quotation from a recent report by the American Association of University Professors regarding the implications of program closures at American universities resulting from measures of financial exigency. Decisions made at Guelph, whether to prioritize revenue generation in the OVC or to slash the budget of the College of Arts, have similar implications:

Program closures on the scale we have recently witnessed represent a massive transfer of power from the faculty to the administration over curricular matters that affect the educational missions of institutions, for which the faculty should always bear the primary responsibility. ... Increasingly, administrators are making budgetary decisions that profoundly affect the curricula and the educational missions of their institutions; rarely are those decisions recognized as decisions about the curriculum, even though the elimination of entire programs of study (ostensibly for financial reasons) has obvious implications for the curricular range and academic integrity of any university.

<http://www.aaup.org/report/role-faculty-conditions-financial-exigency>

Members who have opinions or information to share regarding the PPP, the budget cuts or the Administration's initiatives to transform education at the University of Guelph are invited to contact:

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