SFUFA
THE FACULTY ASSOCIATION OF SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Response of the SFUFA Executive to the Draft Recommendations of the Task Force on Teaching and Learning

The Executive of the Faculty Association in consultation with its Advisory Council recognizes the considerable work that some of our members and others from the university community have put into this report. We welcome the initiative insofar as it recognizes the importance of teaching which, along with research and scholarship, is integral to the mission of SFU. We also welcome measures that offer increased support for maintaining and improving the quality of teaching, such as teaching mentors in each Faculty.

At the same time, we have serious concerns about the following aspects and implications of the report:

- the perception that teaching at SFU is deficient
- an apparent move towards the centralized standardization of teaching evaluation or methods
- the emphasis on monitoring and evaluating teaching as distinct from supporting it, and particularly new forms of bureaucratic evaluation that might add to heavy faculty workloads that jeopardize the ability of faculty to focus on the core functions of teaching and research
- expenditures on new layers of bureaucracy
- unilateral changes to policies that should be negotiated with SFUFA
- the minimal reference to existing units that support teaching (e.g. LIDC, the Student Learning Commons).

Our response outlines points of agreement with some qualifications as well as suggestions for improvement. It should be noted that any agreement with statements in the recommendations is without prejudice to any position that SFUFA might take in negotiations regarding these points at some future date.

Agreement

- We are in basic agreement with the wording of the five points of the vision statement outlined in *Recommendation #1*[1]. We agree that it is appropriate to say that SFU "supports", instead of "requires," pedagogical innovation. Pedagogical innovation does not exist for its own sake but "to enhance our practices [presumably as teachers] and student learning." We want to emphasize, however, that pedagogical innovation need not be a *constant* expectation of every faculty member.

- *Recommendations #2[2], #3[3], #4[4], #5[5], and #6[6]* strike us as sound in the main. We would like to add the following points in response to the detailed recommendations in Appendix D:
  - The "graduate attributes" should be realistic. Every student, not just the most gifted, should be able to achieve them.
  - We believe that academic units should be responsible for a "regular critical review" of their curricula to identify learning outcomes for courses. This should not be the province of a centralized policy.
  - The final draft should explain more clearly what it means by "integrating an explicit research requirement across all undergraduate degree programs." Presumably, most courses at SFU already have a research component.

- We believe that the principle in point 1 of *Recommendation #7*[7] that "achievements in any one category (teaching, research or service) cannot make up for a failure to fulfill the minimum expectations in another" (Appendix E, p. 1) is reasonable. We agree with the idea that TPCs should provide individual assessments for teaching, research and service in addition to their overall assessment. At the same time, we recognize that circumstances may dictate that within an academic unit or for an individual faculty member adjustments to the normal weighting of teaching, research, and service may be necessary. In these cases, adjustments must be determined in consultation with the faculty member and the criteria of evaluation must be clearly communicated to the TPC.

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[1] Establish and communicate a vision statement and principles to provide direction and common purpose around teaching and learning at SFU.
[2] Identify and promote a set of attributes that every SFU graduate should possess or be able to demonstrate.
[3] Ensure a student-centered focus by reviewing and defining learning outcomes across all levels of the curriculum (in class and out of class) with respect to SFU graduate attributes, to ensure curricular coherence and connectivity, and that syllabi for all courses include clearly-stated information about expectations and responsibilities of instructors and students.
[4] Determine mechanisms to fully develop, recognize, and integrate research, experiential, and international learning opportunities into the curriculum.
[5] Support the piloting of alternative approaches to interdisciplinary and theme-based learning opportunities, such as peer-group learning, clustered curriculum groupings across departments on topical issues, team-teaching approaches, first year experiences, and semester cohort groups.
[6] Review existing curriculum and learning opportunities to identify, expand, develop, and celebrate those features that facilitate student engagement, constructive feedback, early investment in learning, and effective mentoring.
[7] Increase awareness of policy provisions that address the importance accorded teaching and implement further initiatives that value teaching.

- In the exposition of *Recommendation #7* in Appendix E, we generally concur with points 4 to 9 inclusive. In particular,
  - we trust that "faculty administrators" will welcome the opportunity to demonstrate "engagement in teaching," but we believe that this should be a requirement only for administrators with the appropriate academic qualifications.

- We agree in general with *Recommendation #9*[8], but we emphasize that all the processes relevant to *Recommendation #9* are covered by policies negotiated with SFUFA and that with respect to *Recommendation #10*[9] standards for teaching and learning are directly related to faculty workload and thus any changes in these standards require negotiation with SFUFA.

- We agree with *Recommendation #14*[10] and with the detailed suggestions of implementing it in Appendix H. We encourage expanding the communication network beyond SFU. High schools, in particular guidance counsellors, should be made aware of all initiatives to enhance teaching at SFU. These initiatives demonstrate SFU's continuing commitment to excellence in teaching, an important point that must be emphasized in recruiting students.

Suggestions for Improvement

- *We recommend that the final draft of the Recommendations appear in a more concise, and user-friendly format*. The almost 60 pages of the Discussion Paper and Appendices make for cumbersome reading. To analyze the TFTL's thinking one must regularly navigate at least two documents at a time.

- *We recommend greater clarity for the final draft*. Plain language should replace obfuscatory expressions so that students and faculty and all other "stakeholders" can understand what the TFTL intends to say. For example, by "the client" does the TFTL mean "the student"? What does the TFTL mean by courses that have "historically difficult content" and what is the link between these courses and "opportunities for 'no-instructor present' group learning"? What are "sustainable mentoring platforms"? (Appendix D, pp. 5-6) These are only some examples from one document. Careful editing of all other documents is necessary.

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[8] Ensure that instructional effectiveness is given appropriate consideration during hiring, renewal, salary review, and tenure and promotion process.
[9] In consultation with SFU instructors and other stakeholders, ensure that appropriate teaching and learning standards are articulated institutionally and in all units.
[10] Pilot the development of an internal university communication and community plan for teaching and learning while details pertaining to other recommendations are worked out.

- The recommendations appear in the form of imperatives, but they do not state who is responsible for implementing them. *We urge that the final draft clearly identify who will be expected to do what*.

- *We urge that the final draft add a discussion of the financial costs that the proposed changes may entail and an explanation of how these costs will be met.*

- The Discussion Paper and especially Appendices E and G do not recognize that many of the envisioned policy revisions require negotiation with SFUFA. We call attention to the following policies: A11.05, A12.01, A30.03. *We insist that the final draft clearly indicate the necessity to negotiate revisions to specific policies as laid out in the Framework Agreement between the University and SFUFA and that the proposed implementation timetable listed on p. 13 of the Discussion Paper be revised accordingly. We welcome any improvements to the procedures for evaluating teaching, but we request that these improvements be subject to negotiation with SFUFA.* The negotiation of policy changes may have the affect of decelerating the proposed timeline.

- *We request that the final draft clearly recognize the role that existing practices (e.g. external reviews of academic units) and structures, specifically LIDC and the Library Student Learning Commons, will play in support for teaching.*

- *We expect substantial faculty involvement and consultation in effecting changes to existing teaching support structures or in creating new teaching support structures.*

- The recommendations appear to be directed primarily at undergraduate teaching, even though a few references to graduate students, graduate and postgraduate courses, graduate student supervision, and excellence in teaching at the graduate level are scattered throughout the Discussion Paper and Appendices. The titles in Appendix I that differentiate between types of university instruction mention only undergraduate education. *If the TFTL intends the recommendations to benefit primarily undergraduate instruction, we recommend that the final draft explicitly state this. If the TFTL conceives of teaching and learning at the graduate level as integral to its recommendations, we urge that it develop in the final draft of the Discussion Paper a specific section with accompanying recommendations for instruction at the graduate level.*

- We are disappointed that the Draft Recommendations and Appendices have overlooked teaching faculty (lecturers) as a vital "support for teaching as a profession" (Discussion Paper, p. 5), given their expertise in the scholarship of learning and teaching. *We urge that teaching faculty be recognized and utilized in promoting the value of teaching at SFU.*

- Recommendation #8[11] as presented in the Discussion Paper (pp. 5-8) and in Appendix F is so vast and complex that it defies comprehension as a single recommendation. *We recommend that Recommendation #8 be broken down into several, more manageable recommendations that deal separately with the various components (e.g. administrative structures, teaching support personnel) of the Recommendation.* As currently elaborated, Recommendation #8 gives the impression that there will be more levels of bureaucracy and fewer people actually doing anything to benefit classroom teaching and learning. If our recommendation is accepted, we trust that the revisions will be subject to further consultation.

- *We oppose the creation of a University Council on Teaching and Learning as outlined in Recommendation #8,* although we recognize the need to improve the existing structures that support teaching. We base our objection to the UCTL as conceived of in the Discussion Paper and in Appendix F on three principles: academic freedom, subsidiarity (the preferential option for decisions to be taken and executed at the most local level), and fiscal prudence. The proposed UCTL is not simply a support mechanism for teaching; it is meant to "plan," "evaluate," "coordinate," and "monitor" a wide range of aspects relevant to teaching and learning (Appendix F, p. 1). We feel that these functions undermine both the academic freedom of faculty to teach their courses according to their own expertise and judgment as well as the responsibility of chairs (and equivalents) and their academic units to take decisions about their curricula. Consequently, we oppose any centralized effort to homogenize teaching methods. The Draft Recommendations do not adequately recognize the creative imagination and spark of genius that informs, for example, course design, the application of technology, and innovation in teaching on the part of individual faculty or academic units. A centralized body cannot plan or direct imagination. We believe that the job description of the University Teaching Fellows and of centralized Program Teaching Mentors will adversely affect their workload and seriously compromise their responsibility to research.

  Given SFU's serious financial situation, we believe that the university cannot afford creating a new centralized administrative structure. The creation of the UCTL strikes us as fiscally imprudent, therefore, especially when the infrastructure of teaching at SFU is uneven and requires refurbishment and technological upgrades and when the SFU Library, one of the most vital components of support for teaching and learning but not adequately recognized in the Draft Recommendations, is currently cutting its collections budget by 20% and anticipates a further cut to this budget.
  Although we are well aware that the material conditions for teaching and learning are uneven throughout SFU, we do not believe that teaching itself is in a crisis. If "SFU is well known for the value it places on teaching" (Discussion Paper, p. 1), this is in large part owing to the intelligence, imagination, expertise, and dedication of its faculty. As an alternative to the UCTL, we make a more modest proposal. *We recommend the*

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[11] Establish a new, more highly integrated, coordinated and extensive teaching and learning support system that tightly links teaching staff within and across units and with support staff to enhance teaching and learning.

appointment of two or more teaching mentors per Faculty.   These teaching mentors will serve as a resource for faculty *when they require* help with teaching and will be charged with the task of transforming scholarly teaching into the scholarship of teaching. They would continue to teach but at a reduced load in order to free up time to assist faculty and to carry out research relevant to university teaching and learning.

- *We urge that a revised discussion of Recommendation #11[12] clearly distinguish between on the one hand program and course evaluation and on the other the evaluation of instructors*. Faculty are evaluated regularly for teaching, and faculty evaluation is defined both in frequency and nature in the salary review policy as well as in policy governing contract renewal, and in tenure and promotion. There are obvious policy implications to adding evaluations of "teaching effectiveness within the program" and with "new actions toward a more consistent and systematic approach to teaching and program evaluation." Any changes require negotiation with SFUFA.

- Presumably, especially thanks to *Recommendation #9[13]*, new and continuing teachers at SFU already "possess the knowledge and skills necessary to teach effectively," to quote from *Recommendation #12[14]*. *We recommend that the latter recommendation be rephrased to read*: **Ensure that SFU provides enough support and professional development so that new and continuing teachers can, when appropriate, develop their knowledge and skills to teach effectively**.

- *Recommendation #13[15]* echoes the second part of *Recommendation #7[16]*, specifically point 5 in Appendix E. *We recommend, therefore, that the TFTL consider deleting Recommendation #13*. A potential problem with this recommendation is that teaching awards will become a measure of teaching and everyone will be expected to have them. Without some real creativity, it seems unlikely that the playing field will be level or that those who teach primarily required courses or under a number of other circumstances where the skill and excellence of the instructor is less evident than in some other situations will be recognized. Finally, we point out that teaching excellence and innovation can be mutually exclusive. Faculty can be (recognized as) excellent instructors by virtue of their respect for students, their ability to communicate complex ideas effectively, etc. This has everything to do with the talents and professionalism of faculty and nothing to do with innovation or course design.

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[12] Evaluate programs, courses and instructors regularly and systematically for teaching and learning effectiveness.
[13] Ensure that instructional effectiveness is given appropriate consideration during hiring, renewal, salary review, and tenure and promotion process.
[14] Ensure that SFU provides enough support and professional development to ensure that new and continuing teachers possess the knowledge and skills necessary to teach effectively.
[15] Ensure that teaching excellence and innovation, whether demonstrated by an individual or program, is publicly recognized with awards, special recognitions and incentives.
[16] Increase awareness of policy provisions that address the importance accorded teaching and implement further initiatives that value teaching.