

Response to Academic Plan Department of Economics

March 11, 2011

Context

The Academic Plan was made public by the Provost's Office on February 2. On February 11, the Department was invited to submit responses to a set of seven questions to be emailed to the Chair of the Academic Plan Working Group by March 15. On February 18, a supporting document that described financial aspects of the Academic Plan was revealed to the Concordia community.

What follows represents the Department of Economics best efforts to formulate a considered response to the proposals suggested by the Academic Plan. The document was put together by an *ad hoc* committee of the Department. The document was circulated throughout the Department for commentary and suggestion, but with a limited time frame for response. This time constraint points to one of the major problems with the adoption process – the urgency being imposed on the academic community. Given the current governance crisis at Concordia, it seems to us unwise to rush (or even appear to rush) such an important document through the various stages of consultation and deliberation. It would seem wiser to slow the process to ensure that the community is able to appreciate what is being proposed and the overall implications.

Our response is organized in two parts. In the first, we present five concerns and reservations concerning the Academic Plan as currently formulated. Our responses to the Provost's questions are given in Part B and reflect the reservations elaborated in the first part of the document.

In the name of collegiality and to prompt discussion, we intend to circulate the document widely. It will appear on a web site organized by the Faculty of Arts and Science, on the CUFA web site, on the Department of Economics web site (with other related documents).

Part A Response to the Academic Plan

We group our concerns under general headings.

1. *In emphasizing generic institutional objectives, the Academic Plan effaces the Concordia personality. Faculties and Department are invisible. The document is administrative in spirit, bureaucratic in detail.*

The goal is that Concordia be viewed as one of the top five comprehensive universities. This goal is to be attained by working to promote five key general objectives: Expand our Research Strength, Promote Program Quality and Innovation,

Build Support for Student Success, Increase Experiential Learning and Community Engagement, and Improve Academic Administrative Support and Leadership.

Under *Expand our Research Strength* there is money in the form of fee remissions for graduate students [spread across which Faculties, with what overall objectives for each Faculty?]; with 5 additional course remissions per year for new recruitment, some internal money for research support, new CURCs and an improvement in library capacity to support research activity [with no new funds]. There is no mention whatsoever of particular Faculties, with their own particular needs and objectives.

Under *Promote Program Quality and Innovation* the major funding initiatives involve the repositioning of the Centre for Learning Studies and stipends {10k each) to create Teaching Chairs. Program review procedures will be streamlined and result in savings from fewer course offerings in some areas. The pursuit of program development in interdisciplinary areas “consistent with Concordia’s strategic objectives” is the third focus of this area: see Point 2 below.

We will *Build Support for Student Success* in two ways: by offering a \$100 cash award per program for top students on the one hand and taking major steps to help ill prepared students on the other; see Point 3 below.

The fourth major objective to *Increase Experiential Learning and Community Engagement* will engage the University, working within existing government programs, in finding opportunities for students and graduates in local, national and international. Such initiatives will give Concordia a “competitive edge” in attracting students.

The document it must be said does brim with suggestions on how to *Improve Academic Administrative Support and Leadership*: seminar training for Department chairs and program directors, development of transparent procedures for assigning faculty workload, improved IT to achieve greater administrative efficiency, better external communication.

2. *During the fall, two other documents appeared, one on Core Indicators, the other on Core Competencies. Previously, there had appeared other documents on signature areas and strategic mission. To what extent will these documents drive the implementation of the Academic Plan?*

The *Core Indicators* document has not been well received by (among others) the Economics Department. It is an attempt to measure Concordia’s institutional progress along the different elements of its mission. The attempt is laudatory for the reasons given in the document. Nonetheless we were worried that indicators would have a wider role: “indicators are intended to assist in the objective adjudication of competing requests for scarce resources.” From this point of view, indicators are not mere diagnostics that could point to an issue within the University, but are presumed

to carry sufficient weight/significance to assist in the *objective adjudication* of requests for scarce resources. Given this intended use of these indicators, we took a careful look at their actual content and circulated a document that appears on the Department web site. While in a recent letter from the Provost (March 3, 2011), it appears that the Administration has accepted the argument that, at least the current list of indicators may be inappropriate to guide internal resource allocation decisions, the hope appears to remain that a list of indicators designed to carry out this function does exist. We feel this hope is misguided.

Two general points are worth repeating here. The first is that some precise measures only make sense when like Departments are compared. So productivity in the Economics Department at Concordia should be compared with that of the Economics Department at the University of Victoria, not say with Communication Studies or Chemistry at Concordia. The proposed institutional indicators (and the hoped-for future set of indicators) effectively do the latter by aggregating data in a process, which may be useful for some purposes but certainly not for allocating resources among Chemistry, Communication Studies and Economics. The second worry is that some of the measures are primarily subjective. Measures of student satisfaction for example can be misleading and should be interpreted with care.

We also have serious reservations concerning the *Core Competencies* document. Since some of its recommendations appear in the Academic Plan, particularly in actions suggested to support Objective 3, we are concerned. The issues that worry us are discussed in greater detail in Point 3.

Concordia's strategic mission and signature areas of research are mentioned at several points in the Academic Plan. A discussion of these should be part of the proposed plan; otherwise, we will remain in the dark as to their precise content. A document, which at least specifies, if not discusses and justifies, the signature areas should be included in the academic plan. The use of a document defining our key areas of research, whose construction is overseen by the Administration, does give this plan a definite 'central planning' flavour. This is unfortunate. It is our firm belief that the appropriate unit to support is not centrally designated 'signature' areas, but rather Departments, and this decision should be based on the performance and promise of those Departments as gauged against like Departments at comparable institutions.

3. *The Academic Plan appears to be adopting some of the key features of the Core Competencies document with little discussion with the Concordia community of their consequences that appear to involve major changes in how we admit students to our academic programs and how we monitor their progress through the programs.*

Objective 3 of the Academic Plan, *Build Support for Academic Success*, incorporates some of the suggestions of the Core Competencies document in actions numbered 3.3 and 3.4. The main proposal is to adopt a "dual-stage simultaneous admissions" where students are admitted first to the University and then to a program of study. Students

who don't qualify for their first choice programs will be assessed and advised of any preparatory courses required for admission to a program that could still be open to them. The process of testing, advising and giving courses would fall under the aegis of the School for Extended Learning. Indeed, the second largest item in resources set out in the Academic Planning Initiatives grid is reserved to "increase the use of TA-sponsored skill development for new undergraduates."

The initiative is in part a response to the reality that we accept a good number of mature students (non-CEGEP grads 21 or older than) who may not be ready for university studies. The SEL will identify those students who need preparatory training and discipline-specific training.

In a document we circulated last fall (it can be found on our web site) we argued that the Department could in fact handle the problem if it were given resources for say tutorials. To us it seemed a better alternative than creating a pre-program pedagogical layer managed by the SEL that however well intentioned may not be interesting to students.

Moreover, the Core Competencies document came with extra baggage that we didn't like at all and several of its proposals seem to re-appear in the Academic Planning document as action 4 in Objective 3. Here each program is to "take responsibility for teaching the full range of skills that students should possess" with some assessment of progress in this direction at "key program milestones." All this insistence on core competency (other than discipline competency) is considered part of faculty responsibility; the planning document leaves open the surveillance issue (although the students will be able to express their opinion on the common course evaluation form).

These initiatives need more discussion, certainly at the unit level.

4. *The objectives as worded in the Academic Plan seem considerably grander in intent than the resources available for their achievement. A more modest statement of goals with resources suitably aligned would lend greater credibility to the Plan. Perhaps the academic units could be part of the academic planning process.*

To *Build Support for Student Success* one proposed action is to identify and reward high-achieving students and students who show extraordinary progress. We are all on side. Then we learn that the action is supported by \$100 cash award per program. The annual resource implication is \$6000 on a planning grid of \$2.5 million on a University budget of \$340 million. There does not appear to be much room to manoeuvre.

We learn on p. 16 of the measures for success of the *Improve Academic Administrative Support and Leadership* that the University has 27,200 full-time equivalent students per year and the plan is to maintain this number and continue to increase it by 2% of the weighted version of this number per annum by increasing the

number of “top graduate students and undergraduate students in targeted areas and increasing retention of current students.” So we see the point of the money allocated to support graduate students and at least the rationale behind the “dual-stage simultaneous admissions” proposal.

As a Department we would have been happy if these numbers were translated into objectives for us so that (a) we could have determined what resources were necessary to achieve feasible growth in graduate enrolment, and (b) how we could deal with the retention issue as we face it. (We recently asked for extra tutorial funds to reduce tutorial size from 100 to 50; the answer is no, since the student experience money has apparently been allocated to the SEL.)

5. *The time line for considering the draft Academic Plan proposal is tight. The consultation process is flawed.*

The draft was available Feb, 2. The complete grid with dollars was circulated Feb. 18. The consultation process for providing feedback has included the provision for online commentary, Open to Question forums, Faculty Council meetings and Senate discussions. These latter mechanisms, we must be frank, are top-down discussions of fixed duration with little opportunity to elaborate points, let alone discuss. Access to the online comments was restricted There was no Departmental consultation throughout the process until Feb, 11 when we were given several weeks to respond to seven questions formulated by the Provost.

At the Faculty of Arts & Science Council meeting on Feb. 18 it was decided to create a web page so that each Department could take some measure of how others were reacting to the proposals. We have until March 15 to post responses.

The final Academic Plan is scheduled to be brought to the Board in May after consideration by the Senate in April.

Part B Responses to the Provost’s Questions Concerning the Implication of the Plan for the Economics Department

1. *Which actions promise to have the greatest positive impact on the faculty experience in your department? Which seem likely to prove the most challenging to implement, or unlikely to make a significant difference? Why?*
 - The presence of a greater number of graduate students with better funding who would be able to work in a more focused way on their studies would certainly make for a more dynamic graduate program.

- To be able to offer course remissions beyond what we currently are able to offer would be positive. We believe in incentives for above average performance.
 - Any suggestion that we must monitor student progress along dimensions other than those required by the discipline would be hard to implement.
2. *How would you answer the same questions for the student experience in your department?*
- Graduate students with better funding would have a positive impact on each other.
 - Our undergraduate students want to pursue studies in economics and not be monitored for progress in developing other skills.
3. *What is the single most helpful administration action we might take to improve the faculty and/or student experience at Concordia?*
- To sensitize administrative structures to the particular demands of research excellence in economics.
 - To fund smaller tutorials for our core undergraduate courses.
4. *What priority academic actions, if any, are missing from the draft plan?*
5. *Is there anything in the plan that would obstruct or hinder efforts in your department or unit to achieve your strategic objectives?*
- If the University's strategic mission areas are not aligned with our own, there may be some difficulty in recruiting faculty.
 - The plan has the flavor of top-down direction with its designated favored research areas (i.e. signature areas, interdisciplinarity). We tend to support a more market-oriented approach to this issue and distrust the central planning approach that permeates the document. It is felt in our Department that this approach can not be conducive to promoting our own research efforts.
6. *What is your department's or unit's response to the ratio of resources that are estimated in the forthcoming planning to be dedicated to research, teaching and learning, and administrative-oriented initiatives?*
- The ratio seems appropriate. It is the allocation that worries us. We repeat: resources allocated to the SEL could have more impact if leveraged within the Department.
7. *If we are not able to secure additional funding for the priority activities identified in the plan, how do you recommend proceeding-not undertaking the actions identified in the draft plan? Finding ways to fund priority actions by shifting existing resources?*

- As this response has underscored we would have preferred a more inclusive approach that would include Departments more directly. Good leadership would direct and motivate a more bottom-up approach that would be slower but could have as an outcome a plan that unifies rather than mystifies. As matters stand, the Core Indicators will come later, we don't have a good handle on the implications of Core Competencies for the Department and we truly don't understand where Economics fits in the research agenda characterized by signature areas. Of course, it remains a good idea to direct more money to graduate students; what's the plan, however?