

To: Professor David Graham, Provost
From: Ian Irvine, Faculty Council Representative, Department of Economics
Date: November 10, 2010

Re: Core Competencies Working Group Provisional Report

In the interests of spurring further thought on the academic planning process recently initiated, I offer some comments on the present draft of the Provost's Core Competencies Working Group (WG). I am the Faculty Council representative of the Economics Department, and while I have much to say about this report as a result of having spent several hours on it, I neither want to take you by surprise by comments in Council next week, nor could I expect the amount of speaking time necessary to do a good job in presenting the concerns that the Report raises. That said, the report is ambitious, and clearly represents many hours of work on the part of those involved. Yet I believe it needs serious work if the Faculty is to be convinced that the ideas are ready for prime time. Rather than go through the Report point by point I draw attention to some of the larger methodological issues and consequences and illustrate, where relevant, the practices followed in Economics. I completely endorse the objectives of the WG – to promote in particular the language and communication skills of our student body. Low literacy and poor communication skills describe too many students in Economics.

1. While the WG report contains almost two score specific recommendations under a smaller number of headings, the prime initiatives form a much smaller group. Arguably, the two most significant departures envisaged are: a drive to develop departmental pedagogical 'maps' aimed at examining program structure, and a proposal to initiate universal streaming of all incoming students. Consider the first of these. The Report is concerned that departments throughout the University are offering unstructured programs and appears to be stating that: teaching in a program that is unstructured or lacking in sequencing is unsound pedagogy and those departments that are doing this should make good, because students are suffering as a consequence of this shortcoming. The report recognizes that some Faculties are currently undergoing program review, and (ergo?) that deficient structure more likely characterizes the remaining Faculties – Arts and Science primarily. Such an inference is likely invalid, for it supposes that Arts and Science departments have not gone through such processes, or, if they have, the recommendations on program structure have either been ignored or lie dormant. No evidence is offered in the Report on the extent or usefulness of past reviews in Arts and Science, nor is any evidence offered on the extent of improperly structured programs at Concordia, nor does the Report analyze the continual curriculum development throughout the system that is detailed in innumerable sets of minutes of Faculty Council. The current reality and decades of work on curriculum development should be addressed by the WG. Here is a very brief statement of the structure that has characterized the array of undergraduate programs in Economics for some considerable time.

Incoming students must develop a set of analytical skills in the first half of their program. This takes the form of principles courses at the 200 level, accompanied by a calculus I course and a full 6-credit sequence in statistics (Econ 221 and 222). Economics is a social science and

therefore the interaction of theory and data analysis is critical. Students progress to the 300 level when they have passed this initial hurdle. Here they begin to branch out into application, analysis of the myriad aspects of the world of economics, and take yet more theory. The 400 level sees the students fully able to understand the generality and complexity of the discipline – *by virtue of the structure they have experienced in the preceding courses and (sic) the skills they have developed*. The Honors and Specialization programs require the students to take several additional courses at the 400 level, in addition to more courses on data analysis, theory, and econometric methods.

I hope that the WG will turn its attention to the realities of Concordia immediately. I find it exceedingly disconcerting that the Offices of the Provost and Institutional Planning would make recommendations before consulting data; this practice is contrary to scientific enquiry and suggests that the higher echelons of the University do not have the methodological competencies that they wish to develop in our students.

2. The second major initiative envisaged in the report is that all incoming students will be streamed as a result of a placement test (I believe that this is the core of the Report). This appears to be partly on the assumption that departments presently permit new students to enter courses for which they are insufficiently prepared. Again no evidence is offered. Why not? You need to tell Faculty Council why the evidence is not relevant – particularly in view of the attendant cost of the proposal and its potential consequences.

Here is a brief statement of practices followed in Economics for the last decade or so.

The Admissions Office examines the credentials of every incoming student, whether originating in Quebec, in another Province or from overseas. On the basis of this analysis each student is credited with, or exempted from, certain introductory level courses in a number of disciplines, or is required to take additional course to remedy their deficiencies. At the Departmental level Economics requires every new student to go through an orientation session where the whole program is explained in considerable detail, with a view to confronting exactly the streaming issue. *Students are not permitted to register until they have presented themselves for such an orientation*. In the case of overseas students and out-of-province students who cannot arrive on campus at a sufficiently early date, Economics provides an on-line orientation. Students taking this orientation are allowed to register once they have prepared themselves.

Obviously Economics is not aware of the degree to which its experiences are mirrored throughout the Faculty. Yet the questions that are difficult to avoid, upon reading the WG Report are: “What is faulty with the current system? Is the Provost’s Office aware of departmental procedures, the linkages between departmental work and the work of the Admissions Office? Is there evidence that this new universal streaming will outperform the current streaming process? What will the new proposal cost and where will the money come from?”

The report emphasizes that the School of Extended Learning will play a substantially enlarged role - in the formation of students who are unready for admission. *Inter alia*, Concordia is a school of second chance, and one can only applaud measures that will open academic programs to a wider audience. At the same time, departments may be concerned about the resource

reallocation that such a large initiative may bring in its wake, and I encourage the WG to explore the costing associated with bringing more 'hopefuls' into the Concordia fold.

I am ignorant of the funding sources for the School of Extended Learning. So I would be relieved to know that the funding for the considerably enlarged role envisaged for it will not come from departmental budgets. I also think departmental chairs by and large would like to be reassured. A universal placement test for incoming students raises several fundamental questions about admissions practices and indeed what it means to be accepted in Concordia. First, concerning international students and out-of-province students: Will they write the exam upon their arrival at Concordia or prior to being accepted? I assume that we cannot ask international students to write upon arrival, for if their skills are found wanting and we decide they should be directed to the School of Extended Learning their student visas would be invalid on account of their less than full time status. So how will these 'outsiders' do the streaming test - in their country/province of origin or will they come to Montreal? Second, concerning our current mature entry: Will all of these students likewise be sifted and allocated either to the School of Extended Learning or to Programs proper? One reading of the Report is that Concordia intends to change its mature entry program. Am I misreading it? Third, concerning CEGEP-source students with relatively low graduation scores coming into open-entry programs such as Political Science or Sociology: Will these students do a placement test before being accepted into a program? Or will we accept them into Concordia with the explicit understanding that they are not accepted into a program of study until they are streamed either to the School of Extended Learning or to their departments of choice – such as those mentioned above? Finally, I wonder how this will all work out numbers wise. One must assume that the Report's authors believe that a very large number of students are entering ill-prepared, and *ergo* that a correspondingly large number require pre-university training – otherwise Concordia would not go to the considerable administrative cost of implementing a huge change to the way we currently do business.

I very much look forward to your answers to these issues in Council next week, as I am sure are the chairs of very many departments. Let me emphasize that I am all in favor of having students 'program-ready'.

3. The University Writing Test was abolished some two years ago, reputedly because it was not doing the job for which it was designed. The Report informs us that the main reason for its suspension was that the University could not agree upon a suitable point in a student's program where the test should be taken. Unfortunately, its abolition serves to give students whose language skills are weak a reason to avoid developing such skills. The WG suggests that most programs should have three courses devoted to language/writing/communication. Of course, a key element in such a development is again where the resources will come from. Simple arithmetic suggests that, if a significant proportion of each student cohort were put into a relatively small communication/language class the cost would run to the millions of dollars – such courses require small numbers to be effective. Departments would more likely support the initiative if reassured that the required resources would not come from their existing budgets. I suspect that Economics would be a very willing participant in such a departure, conditional upon

some reassurance regarding resources from the University. We are acutely aware of the challenges that many of our own students face in this domain – challenges that arise in many instances because English is their second language. At the same time, I draw your attention to the reduction in sections being permitted most departments across the system currently (November 2010). As someone who currently teaches a 300-student section (which I am greatly enjoying), I marvel at the optimism of the Report and its simultaneous promotion of seminar courses for first year students. How can this be achieved when departmental resources are being reduced, even in the context of expanding global enrollments?

4. Notable by its absence is an expressed concern over grade inflation. This phenomenon has attained a near universal status in North American universities. The whole university system, Concordia included, would likely benefit from confronting the epidemic (see for example “Ivory Tower Blues” by two University of Toronto professors - James Coté and Anton Allahar)¹. Grade inflation is too often a facilitating factor in a student’s search for ‘satisfactory’ grades without having to display or develop the skills we collectively deem necessary. Grade inflation does us a disservice by devaluing our common currency and, as has been demonstrated in the literature that discusses it, has led to distorting student choices. The WG should investigate if this phenomenon is widespread at Concordia, and if so how it might be addressed. The Faculty of Arts and Science (academic year 2009/10) debated the possibility of presenting course averages on student transcripts, as a means of placing grades in a more meaningful context and the issue was strongly supported. The absence of a section on grading may be symptomatic of the report’s philosophy: departmental procedures are significantly at fault when students drop out or perform poorly. The reality is that, if we take seriously the notion of Concordia being a second-chance institution for some applicants, we must live with the consequences of an assumed risk-sharing contract: being less than ideally prepared does not entitle students to slough the responsibility for success to the degree-granting institution. By the same token, it does not absolve Concordia or any university from imposing the same serious competency tests on every student. This may involve a higher non-completion rate than if marginal incoming students were not accepted. But it would be a measure of our respect for all graduating students if the concept of ‘meaningful’ grades were widely embraced.
5. On a general level, the financial implications of the recommendations remain unexplored. A driving reality underlying our collective concern about core competencies is that we accept very many ill-prepared freshmen, sometimes in the belief that scale economies can help us bridge our financial gap. The ultimate irony of this practice is that the WG proposals that aim to ameliorate the lot of students who arguably should not be at the Institution in the first instance will require very considerable resources, probably to the detriment of the large mass of good students (the Report is almost completely devoted to remediation). In this context I draw your attention to the belief expressed on page 25 of the Report – that university graduates might expect to earn a half million dollars more than a high school graduate. Caution: there is no reason to believe that, if in the past we have observed this relationship, it will continue: in the

¹ Discussion of this phenomenon in the academic literature emphasizes differential inflation across disciplines and its distorting impact on scholarships, etc.

past students who attended university were on average of a significantly higher capability than the truly marginal student being discussed in this document – a student who, even if admitted as a result of going through the School of Extended Learning, has an unknown probability of even graduating. And different ability students benefit from higher education to different extents.

6. Finally I believe that the myriad recommendations to come from the WG need to be prioritized. As things stand, the many recommendations constitute a type of ‘carpet-bombing’ approach to academic reform, and Professor Dyens’ introductory letter seems to champion such a ‘more is better’ approach. The reality of successful management is that resources are limited, that policy initiatives are not all equally fruitful, that policy initiatives must be researched and costed, that teams should be directed to implementing those policies that have the highest likelihood of success and the most favorable projected benefit-to-cost ratios. It is particularly important, in the context of a small number of likely high-cost proposals defining a sea change in the way we do business, that the myriad smaller proposals not be allowed to shadow the envisaged paradigm shift. So to conclude: the present draft of the WG Report is high on optimism and enthusiasm and contains some interesting suggestions, but, from a methodological standpoint, it is unusually and depressingly weak.

c.c. Professor Olivier Dyens, Office of the Provost; Professor Joanne Locke, Associate Dean Academic Programmes Arts and Science; Professor Brian Lewis, Dean Arts and Science; Professor Judith Woodsworth, President.