

IPRM and the Brantford Campus: Some Observations of the Impact of Laurier's Program Prioritization Process on the Evaluation of Academic Programming at Brantford

Executive Summary

This document engages with the spirit of critical thinking to draw attention to aspects of the IPRM classification process that we feel are highly problematic. While we recognize, and appreciate, the vast amount of time and energy that fellow faculty members have dedicated thus far to the process, Brantford faculty remain deeply concerned that the *process itself* is structured in such a way as to hinder sound academic decision-making. We feel it is our duty to voice these concerns. To support our statement of concern we provide two distinct types of analysis. The first is to identify, and provide alternatives to, the underlying assumptions informing the IPRM process. Specifically, we argue that: (a) Substantive and political questions about academic programming cannot be answered through standardized templates and a reliance on quantification; (b) Collegial and transparent governance processes are valuable; (c) Laurier is not in significant financial crisis that would justify circumventing established collegial academic decision-making processes; (d) The IPRM process is contributing to a sense among faculty that we are a liability rather than one of the University's greatest assets. The second type of analysis points directly to concerns with the IPRM data collection process. Based on the experience of Brantford faculty members thus far, we contend that the template is highly problematic for the accurate representation of programs on the Brantford campus. To support this assertion we provide the example of cross-listed courses, which are used by all programs at Brantford. As it stands, the template treats course codes associated with a single cross-listed course as two separate courses. This has the effect of vastly over-representing the number of courses offered by each program. Since this course count is used to establish other counts, including the number of tenured and tenure-track faculty who teach courses in a program, it also provides an inaccurate representation of the resourcing of Brantford-based programs. Based on this analysis, as faculty we feel compelled to express and document our concerns about the limitations and unreliability of Laurier's version of program prioritization known as the IPRM.

Motion

Given such significant concerns, the following motion is being proposed at the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences.

Be it resolved: THAT the concept, method, data collection and analysis of the Integrated Planning and Resource Management process is so fundamentally flawed that this body has no confidence that it will provide reliable information upon which sound academic decisions can be made. As such, this body calls for the immediate cessation of the activities of the IPRM and the return of academic decision-making to the Senate, its rightful place as established by the WLU Act.

Context

Over past months the Ontario government has initiated a variety of measures relating to the delivery of post-secondary education in the province. We have all likely heard mention of this litany of programs and policies: the Differentiation Framework, the Online Learning initiative, the mandated shift to 2-year Bachelor of Education programs, Strategic Mandate Agreements, and, of course, funding for 'program prioritization processes' through the government's Productivity & Innovation Fund. How to make sense of all this amidst our already packed teaching, research and service schedules is difficult. The Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA), however, has noticed one important commonality—all these measures are intrusions into established academic decision-making processes at Ontario universities. At Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU), for example, the province's own WLU Act establishes Senate as the institution's sole academic decision-making body and assigns to faculty majority representation on that body and its committees. It is troubling that the province appears to be circumventing its own University Acts by enacting this latest array of initiatives without at least first putting these academic matters through Senates, its own duly-constituted academic decision making bodies. We are concerned that the circumventing of established academic structures for decision-making can be seen at WLU in the form of the Integrated Planning and Resource Management (IPRM) initiative.

Objective

The following document engages with the spirit of critical thinking to draw attention to aspects of the IPRM classification process currently being undertaken at WLU. We recognize, and appreciate, the vast amount of time and energy that fellow faculty members have dedicated thus far to the process. While we feel these efforts are praiseworthy, we remain deeply concerned that the *process itself* is structured in such a way as to hinder sound academic decision-making. We feel it is our duty as faculty members to voice our concerns.

Please note that the IPRM is evaluating both academic and non-academic programming at WLU. The following focuses only on the process to evaluate academic programs.

Whether or not you are in agreement with the IPRM process, engaging in critical thought about the exercise of program prioritization through the IPRM model is of great significance given that this is a priority-setting exercise for the University. The process will result in committees producing 'prioritization recommendations.' These recommendations will classify all academic programs into one of five categories: (1) enhance, (2) transform with additional resources, (3) maintain or transform without new resources, (4) transform with fewer resources, (5) phase out or minimize. Decisions made during this classification process have the potential to substantially impact resource allocation across the University. As stated on the WLU IPRM website: "Once [the report] is approved, an implementation process will be developed to put into place the recommendations that come out of the IPRM process." Moreover, at the recent Financial Town

Hall (held on January 17 at the Brantford campus), Vice-President Finance Jim Butler stated that the results from the IPRM could be used to inform strategic budget cuts in future years.

Given these potential consequences, faculty at WLU's Brantford campus felt it was imperative to take a closer look at this classificatory process. A variety of academic approaches and disciplinary perspectives offer critical insight into the challenges of classification and quantification. To choose one, for decades scholars in the area of science and technology studies (STS) have contested the belief that knowledge production is a neutral activity that simply involves the collection of data, and the reporting of 'facts.' Rather, these scholars have identified myriad ways that social, political, and economic contexts influence knowledge generation. Applied to the case under discussion here, the argument is that the IPRM is not simply an objective, rational, neutral process that discovers which academic programs are working well, and which are not. While we understand that our colleagues have undertaken such work with good intentions, we remain concerned that, despite best intentions, the process itself is structured in such a way that is highly problematic for academic decision-making.

In this document we provide an analysis of the classification method itself to bring to the forefront the underlying assumptions informing the process in order that these assumptions can be fully and properly debated. *This exercise highlights that the process could be different.* In other words, if different assumptions were adopted, a different process is possible. Secondly, we scrutinize the specific method of collecting data to provide a basis with which to evaluate the rigour of the quantitative results. Both of these analyses—at the level of identifying fundamental assumptions and at the level of examining the specifics of data collection—enable us to assess the value, strength, and accuracy of the IPRM process.

Analysis

The following analysis of the WLU IPRM process draws directly from issues, questions and concerns raised by faculty members at Laurier's Brantford campus who are engaged with the process, as well as York University professor Craig Heron's (2013) analysis of program prioritization titled *Robert Dickeson: Right for Ontario?* published by OCUFA. Heron's paper examines Robert Dickeson's *Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services: Reallocating Resources to Achieve Strategic Balance* (1999) that describes how to undertake program prioritization in universities and colleges. Although the IPRM at WLU is not exactly the same as the Dickeson model, this approach was the starting point in developing the IPRM process and still provides its underlying frame. While we recognize that changes have been made to the model, we would argue that these are tweaks rather than significant challenges to the fundamental approach proposed by Dickeson.

(1) Challenging Fundamental Assumptions

We take issue with the fundamental assumptions underlying the IPRM process. What we present below are *some* of the key problems we have identified with its conception.

a. Substantive and political questions about academic programming cannot be answered through standardized templates and a reliance on quantification.

First, we would like to draw attention to the problem of the IPRM treating as ‘technical issues’ what are, in fact, deeply important substantive questions. This model does not allow us to decide what our priorities are, and to acknowledge that not every department will have exactly the same priorities. These are political questions, and they need to be decided democratically through the Senate process. It is not just that the IPRM reduces everything to numbers and standardized qualitative questions; it is that the process turns very serious questions about the future identity of our institution into technical procedures that produce answers outside of democratic debate and decision-making.

b. Collegial and transparent governance processes are valuable.

As it is currently set up, the IPRM requires members of departments and programs to fill out templates about their own programs. This is done in isolation from information about how other programs are filling out the template. Numerous requests by Brantford faculty have been made at IPRM Town Halls, to Institutional Research, and to IPRM committees, to see other program’s templates. These have all been denied. Why are faculty at Brantford concerned about this?

First, and most simply, it does not align with the stated objective that the process will be transparent. Second, the program evaluation rubric published by the IPRM committees indicates that programs will be evaluated, in part, based upon how their ‘numbers’ compare to other programs. Coordinators and chairs have been directed to these rubrics as a guide to complete the template properly. However, coordinators and chairs have no access to other program’s data or to University averages for the various categories. Given this, how is it possible for a program to the rubric criteria regarding, for example, ‘enrollment in the program is high relative to other programs’ if they do not know what the demand is for other programs? Thus, program members are left unable to speak to key aspects of the very criteria by which they are to be assessed.

Third, there is no clear reason given why members are not allowed to see other templates, creating the sense that there is something to be gained by the evaluation committee to keep departments and programs working in isolation from one another. This has led to a pervasive sense of fear. Having established five possible categories that programs may be classified into, then stating that this categorization will be used to make resourcing

decisions, inevitably produces a state of competition where programs are positioned to feel as though they must 'fight' to stay out of the bottom category. The basis for this fear is clear. Of the approximately 240 academic programs being evaluated it has been stated that 5-15% of these—somewhere between 12 and 36 programs—are set to be allocated to the 'phase out or minimize' category. Such numerical determinations, before actual program evaluation takes place, seem arbitrary. Moreover, in the absence of knowing how others are filling in their templates, programs are placed in a position of strategizing to stay out of the bottom category, thereby creating a culture of competition and potentially affecting the accuracy of results.

Again, we understand that the IPRM committee members have not have intended to create a culture of competition amongst their fellow faculty members. Rather, it is the very structure of the process itself that creates this sense of competition. The a-priori assumption is that faculty will not, and cannot, work together (and with University Administration) to make well thought-out and reasoned decisions related to academic programming that takes account of budgetary constraints.

Further, we challenge the view that faculty are not effective at making decisions regarding academic programming that include reconsidering (and in fact cutting) programming. This is simply empirically false in the case of Laurier Brantford. Examples abound of faculty responding to administration's stated 'needs' by undertaking substantial program re-design and redevelopment. Contemporary Studies recently divested itself as the campuses 'core' program and transformed itself into the new Society, Culture and Environment Program. A new, trim and efficient Brantford Foundations program was created to serve as the new core. A languishing Environment & Society Option was deleted. The Leadership program recently addressed its enrolment situation by putting its degree program on hold and concentrating on its Option. Enrolment concerns also drove the recent transformation of Journalism into Digital Media & Journalism. Many other examples can be offered. All of this happened within established structures where collegiality and cooperation led to excellent academic decisions which will benefit the institution, our students, and our community for years to come.

The implications of a more competitive model on morale are significant. Faculty members feel as though they are not trusted and valued to use their expertise to make competent decisions about curriculum, despite the fact that they were hired for that very reason, and the University Act requires it. Moreover, this lack of confidence in collegial processes, and the development of competitive procedures, pits faculty members against one another for the survival of their programs. Within this context it is impossible for faculty members to engage in honest conversations with each other about what is working, and what is not working.

c. Laurier is not in significant financial crisis that would justify circumventing established collegial academic decision-making processes.

The Dickeson model was developed to assist universities in the United States that were in significant financial crisis. These universities were required to make major financial changes in order to keep their ‘doors open’. It can be argued that, under such dire circumstances, there may be sound reason to circumvent regular collegial academic decision-making processes. This is not the case for Laurier. As recently reported by Vice-President Finance Jim Butler in a Financial Town Hall (January 17, 2014) Laurier had a *budget surplus* of 2.6 million dollars in 2013-2014. Even if, as the University Administration is currently arguing, there is a structural deficit that needs to be addressed, the University is by no means in a position of such significant financial crisis that its very existence is threatened. Therefore, there is no reason to circumvent regular collegial processes for academic decision-making as governed by the Senate. We have the time to do things well and through established and proven channels.

d. The IPRM process is contributing to a sense among faculty that we are a liability rather than one of the University’s greatest assets.

As Heron (2013) points out, on numerous occasions in his book Dickeson discusses faculty in fairly negative ways highlighting his assumption that faculty are often the central reason why costs continue to increase at universities. Heron observes that Dickeson “peppers his text with disparaging remarks about professors who are myopically specialized and self-interested, who are overly egalitarian, who are hopelessly mired in tradition, who never reconsider old programs, and who circle the wagons to block any change.” (p. 3). This approach tends to emphasize the notion that faculty are primarily a liability—that faculty cost a great deal and work in ways that are counter-intuitive to efficient decision-making models (i.e., they employ egalitarian methods and so forth). While it is clear that faculty salaries are one of the largest components of a university’s budget, we would argue that this is because faculty are also one of the most significant assets of the University.

Faculty are hired because they are experts. This expertise attracts students and acquires research funding. Faculty are also tasked with ensuring that sound decisions are made about curriculum and all other academic matters. Although Dickeson (and perhaps others) view the collegial and egalitarian mechanisms of academic governance as inefficient, faculty members at Brantford are deeply committed to the principles of inclusion and the importance of debate in order to make these sound decisions. We know such processes take time. The standard is to achieve excellent decisions which will, in turn, create a culture that attracts students and research funding, thereby significantly contributing to the success of the University. The IPRM process is engendering a sense within faculty at Laurier Brantford that we are a liability rather than one of the University’s greatest assets. This has had significant implications for the morale of the faculty workforce, and we regret to say

that it has resulted in a sense of being devalued. If it persists, this feeling could lead to the withdrawal of loyalty, commitment, dedication, and passion—something that can only limit the success of the University. We appeal to our colleagues and the University Administration to take these expressions of concern and unease seriously.

(2) Collection of Data

It is our opinion that there is no single standardized template that can be used for collecting and classifying data on academic programs that will fairly represent the wide variety of programs currently offered at Laurier (or any university for that matter). For this reason, it is not surprising that those in charge of making decisions regarding the collection and classification of data have been generally unresponsive to requests for changes—if they alter their approach to better represent one program, this will surely have the effect of more poorly representing another. However, as it stands, the standardized template is highly problematic for programs on the Brantford campus.

We draw attention to this issue because the assertion has been made that there is no way programs can ‘stack the deck’ in terms of advantaging their own program over other programs. One of the statements provided in support of this claim is that if there is an error in the template, that error will affect all programs *equally* because the template is standardized. The experience of Laurier Brantford faculty is that this is simply not the case—the current template unequally disadvantages programs at Laurier’s Brantford campus.

Given Brantford’s specialization in interdisciplinary programming, programs at Laurier Brantford have *made strategic use of cross-listed courses* to increase efficiencies by avoiding duplication of courses with interdisciplinary topics that fit the aims of more than one program. The result is that students are offered a wider range of courses than could otherwise be afforded and course sections have higher enrolments than would be the case if each program duplicated the course in its own program. Yet, the way that cross-listed courses are being dealt with in the IPRM template *makes cross-listing appear to be a liability*. The significance of this concern for Brantford-based programs cannot be overstated. Consider that in 2012-2013 the percentage of courses that were cross-listed in Brantford interdisciplinary programs were as follows: Human Rights, Human Diversity: 56%; Leadership: 38%; Journalism: 34%; Law and Society: 32%; Contemporary Studies: 30%; Criminology: 30%; Health Studies: 11%.

The problem is that the IPRM templates have been created by treating both course codes associated with one cross-listed course as two separate courses that exist independently of each other, rather than as one course with two course codes associated with it. Thus, for instance, CC/LY302 is not treated as one course which is owned and staffed by Criminology (CC), but rather it has been recorded as two courses, CC302 and LY302, which are then assumed to be owned and staffed by the Criminology and the Law and Society (LY) programs respectively. This is not an accurate representation and has effects that generally place Laurier Brantford

programs in a poor light. Please see examples below for further explanation (numbers in parentheses refer to corresponding rows in tables in the IPRM template).

(a) **Overstatement of the “Tenured and tenure-track faculty members who taught courses in the program” (2.6).**

This number includes *all* faculty members who taught a particular course regardless of the program they were formally appointed to. To illustrate we will again use the case of CC/LY302. The Department of Criminology staffs this course and thus the faculty member who taught the course is appointed to Criminology. However, since LY302 is listed as a separate course, the faculty member is also counted in the template as being appointed to the Law and Society program. But this is not the case. Despite having two course codes, there is only one faculty member who taught that course, and that member is appointed to only one of the two programs. The effect is that programs appear to have more tenured and tenure-track faculty than is actually the case. These programs therefore appear to be better resourced in terms of the full time faculty complement than they actually are.

(b) **Understatement of the “ratio of total number of majors (headcount):number of tenured and tenure track faculty members who taught classroom-based and online courses in the program” (2.5)**

Given that the number of tenured and tenure-track faculty in Brantford programs are over-counted, the ratio of majors to faculty members also appears lower than it actually is. The effect, again, is to make programs appear much better-resourced than they actually are, while also making invisible the efficient use of cross-listed courses.

(c) **Overstatement of the “number of courses required to offer a program” (3.6).**

Since cross-listed courses are counted in both the program that owns and staffs the course and the program that cross-lists the course, when extended to the whole campus this double-counting of cross-listed courses is likely to lead to a massive over-counting of the number of course sections offered in each program, as well as the number of course section offered on the Brantford campus as a whole.

As is clear from the example above, faculty at Laurier Brantford are significantly concerned that the way the IPRM template has been constructed leads to an inaccurate representation of our programs. This is one example of many that Program Coordinators and Department Chairs have identified and reflects how the IPRM does not do justice to Laurier Brantford’s special mission to deliver interdisciplinary programming. Many of these concerns have been brought forward by coordinators and chairs to the attention of Institutional Research and IPRM committees. A few

issues we have identified have been addressed; however, significant concerns, such as the issue of double counting cross-listed courses, remain.

Conclusion

The aim of this analysis was to use the experiences of Laurier Brantford faculty with the IPRM to draw attention to aspects of the process that we felt were necessary to consider. The points made above, combined with mounting evidence produced by colleagues grappling with Dickeson-based processes at other universities, have led us to be significantly concerned about the limitations and unreliability of the program prioritization process at Laurier, constituted as the IPRM. As faculty we feel compelled to express and document these concerns, with the sincere hope that those in a positions of authority will engage seriously and thoughtfully with the analysis we have presented.