



# The Academic Agenda 2005: Questions of Balance

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For good reason, the language of “balance” has been creeping into the dialogue around the future of universities. The speed with which our environment is changing, and the speed at which we are responding, has led to concerns that our institution is somehow out of kilter, tilted, or off-centre. Change is one thing, but change that distorts mission and converts the university into something unrecognizable is not to anyone’s taste.

The idea of balance comes in many forms. There is the concept of equilibrium, in which harmony is produced by forces working smoothly together often following written and unwritten rules. Change consists of moving from one equilibrium to the next. Balance can also consist of a fragile consensus based on contradictions and radically different perceptions of reality. This kind of balance is sustainable only if those contradictions never play out. So, the contradiction between less public support for universities and more regulatory requirements is a balance based on two different realities that have yet to be reconciled. A balance can also mean a meeting of equal forces and a resultant standoff. Here conflict is exposed, listening is minimal, and there is virtually no interest in reconciliation. The famous balance of terror phenomenon of the Cold War is a dramatic illustration.

I want to suggest a different concept of balance for understanding our current situation at the University of Saskatchewan, one with an older heritage. This is the sense of balance that is rooted in moral philosophy and is Aristotelian in its inspiration. In Aristotelian terms, we recognize that there are extreme positions on virtually all matters, positions of deficiency and of excess, and that these are to be understood but avoided. The morally justifiable course lies somewhere down the middle. In this context, a premium is placed on prudence, care. There is a right course; this is not a matter of inventing any outcome we like. But finding that course means engaging in a dialogue around where the balance might lie.

There are those for whom the idea of balance in the university context is not especially attractive. They are the radical reshapers, the revolutionaries, those who seek to create a new university for a new age. At the moment many are mustered on the side of the market arguing that universities must meet market tests, justify their existence in market terms, survive without public support, abandon areas of study for which there is no demand, commercialize all research. But there are also those who would reshape the university as a tool of history, helping to advance particular societal interests. Whatever our attitude to the agenda of social change, the idea of achieving balance is not prominent among those who would recruit the university in the struggle.

The idea of balance I want us to consider suggests moderation and careful experimentation. Not so careful that we are left behind, but not so reckless that the idea of balance is itself sacrificed. There are various dimensions of university life that cry out for attention to balance. I will talk about some of the ones that we are familiar with, and some that are less central in our thoughts, but which need to be.

## **Teaching and Research**

I am well aware that the emphasis placed on research performance by the University leadership in the last several years has created the impression in some quarters that we do not care about the quality of teaching at this university. It is said that teaching does not factor in tenure and promotion decisions and that we fail to recognize our most effective teachers. What we need, by implication, is a resetting of the balance in the direction of more attention to, and more honouring of, the teaching mission.

Undoubtedly, we could do more to celebrate the many wonderful teachers we have. And there is no doubt that we need to draw attention to those parts of campus where innovative teaching approaches are being introduced. Clearly our students want us to evaluate teaching more effectively and to take ameliorative steps where these are necessary.

But as for putting more emphasis on teaching, understood as undergraduate contact hours, I do not see how we can do more. In fact, we almost certainly must do less. The review teams from our Systematic Program Reviews all marvel at the amount of resources we put into teaching, the number of sections we offer, the time spent in undergraduate labs, and the centrality of the classroom to our educational effort. They marvel, but they don't necessarily approve. They tell us to reduce the teaching expectations of research-active faculty, to allow new faculty to establish their research, as well as their teaching, and to invest in alternative teaching formats.

Like it or not, we are a teaching-intensive university. We have achieved a remarkable level of success in the quality of our undergraduates by pouring resources into the classroom. And, local mythology to the contrary, we take teaching performance seriously. The only person denied tenure at this university during my time here was denied on teaching grounds. This year, our most vexing case at the University Review Committee, one that involved a recommendation for cessation of employment, was a teaching case. I believe we take our teaching seriously, even though we are not leaders in teaching innovation or the scholarship of teaching.

We are not, on the other hand, a research-intensive university, even though that term continues to be widely employed. The judgement of the *Framework for Planning* document of 1998 is, by and large, still true. There are pockets of research intensiveness, but there are many areas in which we are significantly underperforming relative to our counterparts in other medical-doctoral institutions.

On the positive side, the research revenue generated by full-time faculty has doubled in the last ten years, even though our faculty numbers remain about the same as they were in 1995. The problem is that every other university has improved at the same time, so we would need to double again on all of our research-related indicators to reach the average level for our medical-doctoral peer group. Such a move would improve our claims on indirect costs, Canada Research Chairs, and more important perhaps, the provincial funding mechanism. Put another way, if we were to double our research capacity, it would result in about a \$5 million increase to our operating budget.

Our research has been and continues to be out of balance given the mission of this university in the province. This mission is not to be a trade school and not to be some elite college. It is to be a driving force in the development of the Province by providing quality higher education. That can happen only when teaching and research are both given prominent play and connected closely to one another. I recognize that the balance may have changed over the years. The appropriate balance between teaching and research in the 1950s is not the same as it is now. It may have been

possible then, but it is not possible now to have tenure-track faculty members who are teaching-active but not research-active. This is no radical doctrine. The University tenure and promotion documents expect our entire faculty to be strong teachers and strong researchers.

Critically, this balance should not be achieved by allowing some members of the faculty to do nothing but research while the teaching mission is managed by others. There can, and should, be differential expectations, but just as all should be research active, so all should be teaching active. And I mean undergraduate teaching. Undergraduate teaching is a central mission of this university and no individual or department can opt out of it. For that reason, I make no apologies in criticizing departments whose undergraduate teaching is weak in terms of numbers and dedication.

We need balance. For most of us this means a greater attention to research and more creative ways of managing our teaching responsibilities. For others it means more and better teaching.

### **Liberal Arts versus Science, Technology, and the Various Professions**

No one can fail to observe the investment this university has made and continues to make in scientific installations. The federal government's innovation agenda has allowed us to catch up in terms of scientific facilities in ways that were, frankly, unimaginable ten years ago. Our conspicuous successes, the Light Source and VIDO for example, should not deflect from the steady progress of our faculty whose successes in CFI competitions have produced new opportunities for them and their graduate students.

In the fury of academic acquisition set off by the innovation agenda, there has been a growing concern about the social sciences and humanities. With a granting council significantly smaller than the other two, these disciplines have been effectively shut out of CFI and underrepresented in the Canada Research Chairs program. Along with other Vice Presidents Academic, I have called upon the federal government to revisit its allocation of Chairs and to increase its allotment to the social sciences and humanities. At the U of S, Steven Franklin (Vice-President Research) and I have already moved one chair from NSERC to SSHRCC and may very well move another, in a small attempt to recognize and respond to the imbalance.

Achieving a balance between liberal arts on the one hand and science, technology, and the professions on the other, is critical to our success. Put another way, we cannot build strong professional programs without a strong liberal arts and science curriculum. The liberal arts represent liberation of the individual by study, innovation, and longing – a never-ending pursuit premised on the need for personal autonomy and intellectual satisfaction. But the liberal arts must be more than that, and at this institution they have been. Humanists and social scientists at the University of Saskatchewan are tightly connected to their communities. No where else have universities enjoyed more success in the development of research partnerships, for example, whether it is the CURAs sponsored by SSHRCC or the collaboration between U of S researchers and the *StarPhoenix*.

But the impact of the liberal arts also lies in collaboration with the professions. Among those who take professional education seriously, including people in the accreditation business, a background in and appreciation of the liberal arts is critical. The College of Education requires it; reviewers in Commerce have demanded it; and leaders in Engineering are investing in it. What the liberal arts have to offer – the ability to communicate effectively, knowledge of contemporary

issues, an understanding of ethical responsibility, and a critical mind – is exactly what professional graduates must possess if they have any hope of success.

It is my sense that the imbalance that we observe is not between the importance of a liberal arts education and the importance of other things; it is between credentialism and education. There is no denying that students are looking at credentials as a way of seamlessly entering the job market. Jane Jacobs points to the 1960s as the period in which universities decided that providing credentials, and the implied quality assurance that go with them, was as appropriate a goal as providing a high-quality education. And it hasn't been all bad. For the professions, academic credentials hold out the promise of performance and the guarantee of content knowledge. For students, they signal to employers a level of competence that employers expect will be correlated with skills.

But we have to ask ourselves whether we have let things get out of hand. Since the 1960s, we have been in a period of profound credential inflation, paralleled by grade inflation and recommendation inflation. Increasingly job access depends on the acquisition of an appropriate credential, and what counts as an appropriate credential has been expanding. More and more programs are being accredited – Nursing and Kinesiology are among the latest – and I often regret that Deans have to worry so much about the demands of accreditation bodies.

It is interesting to speculate whether the expansion of available credentials is demand or supply driven. Are employers demanding more credentials? That's not clear to me. What is clear is that we are supplying them and we are supplying them for the job market. More degrees are now available than ever before, with the implication that our fundamental degrees, bachelors degrees in the arts and sciences, are not especially valuable unless they are stepping stones to something else. Ironically, as I indicated earlier, accrediting bodies are increasingly asking that students who acquire professional credentials possess as a core requirement the skills associated with the liberal arts and sciences. Professional standards are important, but universities cannot forget that their main job is to educate and stimulate. As Yeats put it, education is not the filling of a bucket; it is the lighting of a fire.

If students want to gain experience and maturity while they study, and there is no reason why they shouldn't wish to do that, we need to find ways of making it possible by allowing them to acquire skills and pursue dreams at the same time. Some universities in Australia have found a way to combine the study of business, for example, with the study of languages in ways that strengthen both. At the University of Technology Sydney, students can take two degrees – one in business or nursing or engineering or whatever, and one in international studies – simultaneously. The international studies program requires spending an entire year in another country where the spoken language is not English.

These kinds of programs are not for everyone, but notice that they allow students to experience much more of the university than what is offered in only one corner. And students who avail themselves of these creative options graduate with a credential and an education. Across Australia, BA programs are booming after years of decline. We need to consider that our students don't come to us looking only for a ticket to a job; but they don't come looking simply for enlightenment either. We need to artfully construct programs, across college lines if necessary, to give them the kind of experience they are looking for.

## **Bottom-up and Top-Down Governance**

At most universities, there is nothing worse than being accused of top-down decision making. Saying something is “top down” is like putting a hex on it, condemning the idea to a slow death by bureaucratic pummeling.

In the spirit of balance, I do not intend to make a case for top-down decision making. I want to make the case, instead, for the judicious mixture of top-down and bottom-up. You won't be surprised to hear me say that I believe that the Integrated Planning process has achieved that balance, but I realize that in some quarters at least, it has been experienced as disempowering. From the departmental level, it might seem rather remote, and its products – the integrated plans of colleges and units, the University's Integrated Plan and the multi-year budget – may appear disconnected from life at the chalk face.

Connections have to be strengthened, people have to be more engaged, and the purpose of it all has to be clearer. In short, we have to get better at this. We have to get better because we are going to be at this for a long time, and these plans, none of which will be fully implemented in precisely the ways we had thought, will eventually reshape us. I believe that those who have participated in this round of Integrated Planning have felt empowered by the experience. After all, their comments, criticisms, and ideas are the basis on which we are moving forward.

I acknowledge that those who have come upon the process in its latter stages may find it discouraging and confusing. But there have never been more opportunities to get involved, the decision-making process has never been as open, and the stakes have never been higher.

For us to get better at strategic planning, we will require more cooperation and more data. Ideas will have to be tested out more thoroughly, resources will have to be allocated on a firmer data base, and we will have to get much better at devising indicators of success. In short, the process must get more rigorous. That doesn't mean it must become more top-down.

## **Inputs and Outputs**

President MacKinnon has often remarked on the singular fascination of *Macleans* magazine with input measures. From the number of PhDs teaching students to the size of first-year classes and the size of library holdings, *Macleans* worships at the altar of resources. The more that goes in, they seem to be saying, the more that will inevitably come out.

But it doesn't stop with *Macleans* and the other league tables. The federal government has made us all sensitive to inputs, particularly money. The more funds that can be raised from the granting councils, the more indirect cost money we will receive, the more research chairs we are eligible for, and the greater our graduate support. Of even more significance to the U of S is the formula through which we are funded by the Province. For three years now, our funding has been based on “activity”, the numbers of students we teach being by far the most important. So far, no one has asked whether these students have learned anything.

The balance between input measures and output concerns is beginning to change. Alberta has created a Quality Council to monitor just what the province is getting for its multi-million dollar investment in higher education. The Rae Report in Ontario clearly anticipates a similar quality assurance body for universities in that province. In Australia, the Quality Council is in the final

stages of an assessment of all universities against their declared objectives. Concern with quality and with assessment is coming hard and strong.

In principle, this resetting of the balance should be welcomed, particularly in the area of the student experience, but note that it will have significant effects. This isn't just a matter of new performance measures. For one thing, the slow shift to assessment of outputs is taking place at the level of colleges, departments, and whole universities, not at the level of individuals. Yes, individual faculty members are still accountable to their peers for the quality of their work, but governments can't deal with individual faculty members; they must deal with institutions as a whole. That means that, among other things, surveys of all our graduating class will likely become mandatory and areas in which performance is poor will come under close scrutiny.

More positively, perhaps, we can expect to see a significant movement in the direction of an assessment of learning outcomes. It is not just a matter of determining whether or not students are satisfied with their overall university experience; increasingly, we will be asked exactly what skills and knowledge students actually acquired in their program of study. I think we should welcome this development. It will oblige us to discuss these matters with one another and perhaps to spend more time in designing the curriculum to achieve these outcomes rather than designing it to suit our own disciplinary expectations.

But I have another reason for welcoming a stress on learning outcomes. In all of the attempts I have seen to identify appropriate outcomes for graduates, there is a very strong emphasis on the qualities associated with a liberal arts and science education. Again and again, those fashioning outcomes say they want students to be able to think critically, to write well, to be numerate, to speak with confidence, and to problem solve in a team environment. You may say, with some justification, that we do this already. If so, these qualities are by-products of an education that is geared toward the mastery of content. And content matters, as I've said on other occasions. But what matters more is the imparting of excitement and the skills required to successfully pursue our interests over a lifetime.

Of course, there are dangers in resetting the balance between inputs and outputs. The shift to a focus on outputs will renew the struggle to define the purpose of the university. And while I have no difficulty with that struggle in principle, I would not be happy if the result were a narrowing of our educational mission. For example, in the research area, there is no question that the price of increased federal research support is an expected increase in licences, patents, and spin-off companies, depending on who you talk to. Federal inputs are expected to generate practical outputs. This is a sensible expectation for much of the research we do, but not for all of it. We need balance. Universities engage in research that has very little immediate payoff, and even applied research can lead to scientific breakthroughs.

Output measures are coming, and we should organize to make the most of the opportunity. But we should resist the natural inclination of governments, students, and donors, all of whom have specific expectations, to literally determine the role of universities in society by defining outcomes. There is plenty of room to get the balance right.

## **Faculty-Centred and Student-Centred Academic Life**

Several years ago, Donald Kennedy, former President of Stanford, argued that the only way to ensure a high-quality undergraduate education was to make the student the centre of everything we do. Others, in similar Research One universities, make the same point. Frank Rhodes, former President of Cornell, puts it this way: "I believe the university's core business is learning, and the most basic part of that learning is the education of undergraduates."

I sense that at our university, this sentiment takes the form of an emphasis on teaching as a moral vocation. That is certainly part of it. We cannot put students at the centre of all that we do without privileging, nurturing, and celebrating teaching. For many students, me included, the lasting value of an undergraduate education consisted of those one or two inspiring professors who simply allowed your spirit to take flight. For them, I will always be grateful.

But as a university, being student-centred means more than recruiting and supporting dedicated teachers. Being student-centred means focusing on the entire student experience, outside the classroom as well as inside. It means paying attention to the learning outcomes I just mentioned, and that in turn means taking collective responsibility for the curriculum.

It may be just an impression, but I sense that our attention to the academic curriculum at the undergraduate level seldom rises above particular programs and more often than not focuses on particular courses. We have fostered a potpourri of courses and neglected the requirement of integration. Our strongest efforts are made inside the classroom as instructors work to convey material so that students might build on it in subsequent courses. Evidence of success in these endeavors is collected entirely at the level of individual courses. Our reviewers have told us that by far, the weakest part of the SPR process is the data regarding student responses to their entire program of study. Neither they, nor I, have confidence that we spend enough time on the curriculum as a whole.

The implied fragmentation in our teaching and learning efforts is made worse by the growth of free-standing programs, institutes, schools, and centres. These are natural responses to the confining character of much disciplinary work these days, and I do not wish to resist them as means of better pursuing our academic impulses. But if we break into multiple pieces for purposes of research and specialized graduate programming, we need to be even more dedicated to the creative design of undergraduate education. According to Rhodes, "Simply stated, faculty members must recapture the curriculum. They must collectively determine a list of educational objectives and then design an effective way to achieve them."

This means that we must come together to discuss undergraduate education with undergraduate students. In 1998, at the first of these talks, I lamented the absence at this university of a forum in which these kinds of conversations could take place. Seven years later, things have not improved. That is why I have been arguing that serious consideration should be given to the creation of an Undergraduate Council at which the quality and character of undergraduate education would be the only thing on the agenda.

Such a council could undertake and champion the kinds of innovations and ideas I expect to emerge from the Teaching and Learning Foundational Document. Remember, others are well advanced in their consideration of first-year seminars, capstone courses, research in the classroom, appropriate formats for course delivery, service learning, and the use of tools such as PAWS. Our progress is fitful at best. Right now, we have no place to discuss these matters or propose changes to current practice, and it shows.

If we create such a creature as an Undergraduate Council, we must be prepared to talk about the concerns that go beyond the classroom. These include credit transfer, alcohol use, safe environments for students of all sexual orientations, programming in residences, the environment for international students, and so on.

We are not a learner- or student-centred university; we are faculty-centred university. And while faculty members are central to our achievements as an institution and bear a special responsibility for the teaching and research missions of the University, in the end we must judge ourselves on the basis of our students, graduate and undergraduate. I am suggesting that we reset the balance a bit more in their direction.

## **Work-Life Balance**

Finally, a tender topic: work-life balance. The last year has seen a spate of books and articles appear devoted to the pressures associated with pursuing a career in academic life. Many of these same books and articles imply that it is impossible for two people living in partnership and taking care of children to do so successfully. Indeed, two people pursuing full-time employment of any kind where children are involved face serious stress.

I do not intend to provide advice on life's choices and challenges in this respect, but I do wish to acknowledge them and to indicate that they need our attention as a university. Obviously, we can't solve the core of these problems, some of which go to the heart of the organization of the economy. We can however confront the fact that in academe we have sometimes made them worse than they have to be.

First of all, I believe that we as academics put too much stock in volume and probably publish too much. Too many marginal articles are produced by weak journals so that academics can get tenure and publishers can sell their products to libraries. And many of these articles are unread, let alone unreferenced.

As a social scientist, I have always resisted the idea of citation indexes as a way of measuring "impact", but I have come to the view that we need to do something to discourage our colleagues from simply churning out their work as opposed to nurturing it and producing something that makes a difference. Happily, the standards for tenure and promotion at this university require a consideration of the "quality and significance" of the work. That's a start, but we have to take this seriously and not lapse into the lazy conclusion that more means better.

My second suggestion, equally quixotic perhaps, is that we finally face up to the fact that we are drastically over-governed here at the University of Saskatchewan. There are too many committees doing redundant work, meeting too often, churning up the time and energy of our colleagues. Too many people are involved in allocating merit money, deciding on sabbaticals, sitting on review panels, and reconsidering program proposals that have been considered elsewhere in detail.

I used to think it was paradoxical that we had created all of these committees, insisted on them in fact, and then couldn't find people to sit on them. Now I think it is a shame. Everyone wants checks and balances, but we are contributing to the destruction of our work-life balance when we insist on doing administrative work because we don't trust administrators.

Yes, the situation is bad at all universities, where it seems to take forever to make changes, but I truly believe that it is worse at this one. I won't go on about it, but if we wish to spare ourselves some time for family and recreation, then we should stop kidding ourselves about the great usefulness of much of the administrative work we do. I believe we would be well advised to commit ourselves to reducing our self-imposed administrative burden and getting on with academic work.

## **Conclusion**

Leading a university is a balancing act, as I'm sure the President will readily acknowledge. I have mentioned only some of the aspects of that life that need balancing. There are others, including the appropriate balance between public and private contributions to the university and the appropriate balance between regulation and academic independence. But those are topics for another time, and perhaps another Provost.

If you wish to borrow a videotape of Dr. Atkinson delivering this address, please contact Amber McCuaig in the Office of the Provost and Vice-President Academic (966-8484 or [amber.mccuaig@usask.ca](mailto:amber.mccuaig@usask.ca)).