

Academic Planning Summit

January 16, 2015

Title of Session: Great big ideas for the future of higher education

Faculty Facilitator(s) Bryan Dewsbury & Peter August

Note taker name Chris Barrett

Check one:

Morning Breakout 1 **Morning breakout 2**

Afternoon breakout **Afternoon breakout 2**

Ideas proposed/Recommendations

Bryan Dewsbury, an assistant professor of biological sciences, and Peter August, a natural resources science professor, facilitated this session. About 35 people attended.

This session focused on how to foster a “no-boundaries” education. There is a concern that students are merely customers seeking only degrees and not an education while faculty are relegated to silos (departments) that fight for budgets and power that do little to help student learning.

To facilitate the discussion, the session opened with the YouTube video “Designing a University for the New Millennium” presented by educator David Helfand at TEDx WestVancouverED.

(<http://youtu.be/DZQe73IXZtU>) Mr. Helfand is president of Quest University Canada, which features a non-traditional administrative structure and unique curriculum. The university seeks to encourage holistic learning through:

- A single goal of educating students and not getting distracted by conflicting goals of economic development, curing cancer, creating companies, providing experts for 24/7 news, etc.
- Calling instructors “tutors” rather than “professors” and eliminating all faculty ranks to keep the focus on teaching. This also eliminates a system where higher faculty ranks are “rewarded” with smaller teaching loads.
- Assigning faculty offices by lottery rather than discipline to foster conversations among faculty of different subjects.
- Eliminating lectures and limiting all courses to seminars with no more than 20 students.
- Establishing a block schedule where students take courses in series. This allows students and instructors to focus exclusively on one course at a time. It also facilitates the ability for field trips or other experiential learning.
- Eliminated departments to foster collaboration and avoid fights for budget and power.
- During of sophomore year, each student develops an individual plan to answer a big question he or she is interested in and define the courses and experiential education experiences that will answer that question. At the end of four years, each student completes a project that rivals a master’s thesis and presents to the entire university.

During a discussion, audience members made the following key observations and recommendations:

- Departments create barriers at URI and encourage fights over power and budgets. They also physically keep faculty separated by discipline.
- Rather than departments, can URI could create clusters such as those implemented by the College of Business Administration
- A discussion about holistic or “non-bounty” learning is not as simple as disciplinary vs. interdisciplinary. There is no interdisciplinary without disciplines.
- Our freshman and sophomore undergraduates “discover themselves” intellectually by identifying themselves with a major (discipline). Advocating for interdisciplinary learning will be falling on deaf ears.
- The physical location of faculty offices does have an impact on communication. However, just because two people sit next to each other does not mean they talk.
- URI Honors Program courses do an excellent job of encouraging cross-disciplinary and holistic learning.
- An eatery for faculty that offers high-quality, low-cost meals could encourage faculty to speak to faculty outside of their disciplines.
- Faculty and administrators often make rules focused on keeping the 10% of students who are very unlikely to complete college in line. Yet, these rules unfairly restrict the learning of the remaining 90%.
- About 25% of students double major but URI does not make it easy for them administratively.
- Any change will likely come slowly and incrementally.

Notable Issues, Questions, Challenges:

During a discussion, audience members noted the following challenges to holistic learning:

- Despite wide agreement among educators at URI and elsewhere that education should encourage interdisciplinary teaching and research, society seems to favor some disciplines, especially STEM, over others.
- General education courses – in theory the definition of holistic learning – are often at URI narrowly focused on an introduction to a discipline.
- Some education does require a narrow focus. For example, learning to play a violin is going to require a class tailored to the violin and a long length of time.
- Administratively, URI does not make it easy for faculty from different departments to co-teach a course.
- The URI system of promotion and tenure often rewards faculty who undertake research in narrow, specific areas. Broad research is not respected.
- Some students need structured curricula otherwise they will get lost.
- URI needs to ensure academic rigor of courses.
- There is an attitude at URI that research comes first, teaching second. Long-time professors perpetuate this attitude.
- Streamline the bureaucracy of double majoring.

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_____ Afternoon breakout _____ Afternoon breakout 2

Ideas proposed/Recommendations

Bryan Dewsbury, an assistant professor of biological sciences, and Peter August, a natural resources science professor, facilitated this session. About 12 people attended.

This session focused on how to foster a “no-boundaries” education. There is a concern that students are merely customers seeking only degrees and not an education while faculty are relegated to silos (departments) that fight for budgets and power that do little to help student learning.

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During a discussion, audience members made the following key observations and recommendations:

- Some felt that universities have “lost their way” and deemphasized their original mission, education, in favor of research, economic development, etc.
- Some felt that graduate education no longer emphasizes teaching but rather discourages it. It is considered prestigious to win fellowships that do not require teaching and students often go through extensive effort not to teach.
- The URI promotion and tenure system favors discipline-specific research. Broad-based research is not respected or acknowledged. This should be addressed.
- Some URI faculty lack a passion for teaching and constantly seek course release time. Yet, no one ever wants research release time to dedicate more time to creating a new course or curriculum. Again, the promotion system emphasizes research over teaching.
- It was noted that faculty, in large part, set the promotion and tenure system. It is up to the faculty to take the lead to change it.
- A block schedule like that at Quest and/or 4-credit courses may allow students and instructors to more fully engage in learning.
- J-Term is a good place to study how focusing on one course at a time may help both student and instructor

Notable Issues, Questions, Challenges:

During a discussion, audience members noted the following challenges to holistic learning:

- Research is often emphasized over teaching because research delivers dollars to the University. Teaching does not in the same way.
- Implementing a block schedule would require a wholesale rearrangement of the University’s course schedule.
- Implementing 4-credit courses requires a bureaucratic process
- The concepts that work at Quest, a roughly 300-student school, may not translate to URI and its 14,000-student body.
- Co-teaching is actually more work for faculty because now they must coordinate with another instructor.