

## **A Framework for Planning at the University of Saskatchewan**

### **I Introduction: Evolving Expectations**

Since its founding in 1907 as a primarily undergraduate teaching institution, the University of Saskatchewan has developed into a major research university offering one of the broadest ranges of graduate and professional programs in Canada. It has done so principally to serve the people of Saskatchewan who have come to rely on the University to provide their children with a high quality educational experience and their communities with a series of programs aimed at meeting social and economic needs. The idea of service to the community has long been the driving force behind the institution. "The University of Saskatchewan belongs to the people of Saskatchewan," is not just the first sentence of the University's mission statement; it is a touchstone for our academic and financial decision-making.

Just as the people of the province have high expectations of the University of Saskatchewan, so the University has developed high expectations of itself. In the University of Saskatchewan, the people of the Province have much more than a teaching college, a research institute, or a place where young people come to train for the labour market. This University is an institution in which knowledge is created, applied and disseminated and as such it makes full use of the academic freedom required to fulfill this responsibility. Faculty members and students at the University are reminded daily that knowledge knows no boundaries and that their work will be judged by international standards. For this reason its faculty, students and support staff expect the University to provide them with the capacity and the freedom to make the fullest use of their research, teaching and artistic talents.

During the last decade it has become clear that the University is no longer able to meet all of these high, and increasingly refined, expectations. Undiminished enrollment pressures, a decline in provincial financial support, fewer faculty and support staff, outmoded equipment, and a deteriorating infrastructure have all combined to make it impossible to carry on in the same manner as before. The MacKay Commission has documented the relatively low priority accorded post-secondary education in the province, and Macleans magazine offers an annual reminder of how the University of Saskatchewan compares with institutions that have the same high aspirations.

Our purpose, however, is not to complain about past treatment by governments or to bemoan the circumstances and events which have led us to our present situation. Instead, we seek to provide a framework for action which recognizes our changed circumstances and at the same time ensures the University's future development as an excellent teaching and research institution. We believe it is time for the government of the Province, the people of the Province, and the members of the University community to acknowledge that it is no longer possible to have a University of Saskatchewan which is the same as the one that we have grown accustomed to. The University has begun to

adjust to its new circumstances by launching major fundraising activities and by proposing special tuition programs. These changes, some of which are controversial, are just the beginning of a major transition that will see the University develop increased focus, promote innovative educational and research initiatives, and begin the painful process of withdrawing support from weaker or less central programs.

Of course, much will be preserved. A commitment to high quality teaching, first class research and community service will be central to the University's future. In fact, we will have to become increasingly vigilant in ensuring that we are delivering high quality in everything we do. And this will require the development of strategies with which this University has only limited experience. But strategies must be grounded, first in vision, then in principles, and finally in a set of concrete goals. We begin with vision.

## II Vision

As we contemplate the future of the University of Saskatchewan, it is worth recalling some of the aspirations contained in our mission statement:

*The University of Saskatchewan will be a model of scholarly inquiry, a place where all who contribute to its achievements—students, faculty and staff—can take pride in their commitment to this centre of excellence dedicated to the service of the people of Saskatchewan and Canada (Mission Statement, p. 2).*

While no major research university is identical to any other, there is a sense in which every such university is the same: they all want to be excellent. There is no agreement on what "excellent" means, and even if there were, it is understood that no university can be excellent in everything. Still, universities like the University of Saskatchewan will try to excel in a manner that puts them at the forefront of the creation and dissemination of knowledge. They may reach this goal only intermittently and selectively, but that is not the point. The point is to strive to measure and be measured by high international standards.

Some may worry that, striving in this way, the University will forget its roots, will no longer be responsive to the people of Saskatchewan, and will replace the ideal of community service with that of international recognition. But this is a false dichotomy: there is no need to choose. In fact, in this information age, the future of the University of Saskatchewan lies in using the inevitable tensions between and among the local, the national, and the global to produce new knowledge and encourage innovative teaching. Our scholarship will be influenced by our environment, but it must be available to the world; our students may be citizens of Canada, but they must also be citizens of the world. Put another way, the University of Saskatchewan can only fulfill its responsibilities to the people of the Province by being actively involved in pursuits that

take its scholars far beyond provincial borders and bring to the University the fruits of national and international scholarship.

Bringing the world's work to our door and taking our work to the world is a fitting vision for a university created in a spirit of service and residing in a Province whose future, in large measure, depends on how well it can compete in a global marketplace.

Since we must make choices, it is important that we make them with this vision, and with our students, in mind. It is important, in particular, that we reward those Colleges, Departments, and people whose active participation in research and educational initiatives either generates knowledge for the world, brings the world's knowledge to the University, or succeeds in disseminating and applying knowledge within the Province. It is similarly important that we focus on those programs that provide the greatest impact on our students and allow them to experience the joys of scholarly, artistic and research achievement. The numbers of students who benefit will matter when it comes to making choices, but so will the degree to which our programs can add value to their personal and intellectual growth.

### **III Principles**

A University's principles are the means by which its core values are put into practice. Our mission reminds us what our core values are; our principles direct us toward the practices we must follow if we are to realize them.

From among the host of principles that the University affirms daily, we have selected three practices, commandments if you like, that should be our constant guide during the transition period of the next several years.

#### *1. Be autonomous*

No University can aspire to scholarly excellence without freedom of inquiry. Faculty and students must be free to choose their own problems for study and research, adopt their own methodologies, and make their own mistakes without interference from inside or outside the University. Not only must individuals be able to work in an environment of open inquiry, but the University must also be autonomous in developing its own vision and setting its own academic priorities. Governments cannot be allowed to censor scholarship; corporate sponsors cannot be permitted to stifle research. The University is a valuable institution in our society because it brings the spirit of independent inquiry and criticism to situations heavily coloured by political and economic imperatives. This does not mean that the University of Saskatchewan should reject the pleas of governments or the requests of the private sector. But being autonomous means that the University must always be free to do so. And when pleas are heard and requests are heeded, the University must take the precautions to ensure that freedom of inquiry is never jeopardized, either for the present or for the generations who follow. *The University of Saskatchewan must be autonomous.*

## 2. *Be driven by considerations of quality*

The effects of high quality research and education are not ephemeral. They enrich us over an individual lifetime and over several centuries across the world, but in ways often not immediately evident, readily quantifiable, or fully predictable. For these reasons questions of quality in research and education cannot be settled by invoking personal, private standards. There is only small comfort in the personal belief that one's manuscript, invention, experiment or course of study is valuable. Being personally persuaded is not enough. At the university, the principle test of quality lies in how well our work is appreciated outside of the institution, in short, by what others have to say. Being driven by quality means listening to others: peers when it comes to research, students when it comes to teaching, the community when it comes to service. It also means setting standards and estimating progress toward goals. It will always be difficult to know when high quality has been achieved, but it is much easier to know when quality is not really a consideration. When no one is sure what their objectives are, when there are no means of assessing whether those objectives are being met, when valuable contributions go unrecognized, and when poor work is glossed over, then it can reasonably be assumed that quality considerations are secondary. *The University of Saskatchewan must be driven by considerations of quality.*

## 3. *Be accountable*

Universities are accountable when they explain how they are using their autonomy to ensure that their quality objectives are being met. A university that is quality conscious will be accountable to its students, its alumni and the people of the Province. But there is more to accountability than quality considerations. The University of Saskatchewan is accountable for its actions, and its use of public resources, when it consults widely on major initiatives, when it plans for the future by deploying its resources strategically, and when it listens to the people of the Province and responds to their needs. *The University of Saskatchewan must be accountable.*

## **IV Goals**

We have already indicated that expectations of the University are evolving. We are increasingly aware that meeting these expectations will require changes in our institution. We are also acutely aware that we do not have the resources to meet all of these expectations equally well. It is therefore in everyone's interest that we choose our goals carefully. Below are set out those goals that we believe should be of highest priority for our University in the next decade. Pursuing them will not require a redefinition of the University; what it will require is a marshaling of energy and resources to perform traditional roles, including community service, in an enhanced manner.

1. *Improving the quality of instructional programs.* There can be little doubt that the withdrawal of resources from the University has undermined the overall quality of the

educational experience of undergraduate students—particularly students in the College of Arts and Science—during the last ten to fifteen years. Faculty members are frequently obliged to teach in poorly equipped classrooms to students who feel detached from the learning experience because it is impossible to attend adequately to their needs. At the graduate level, small programs can be compromised by a lack of resources or by the absence of a critical mass of students.

At the broadest, structural level we must begin to manage our enrollment with greater sensitivity to the educational experience we can provide. Smaller classes are required in some of our undergraduate programs; larger classes in many of our graduate programs. At the classroom level, we must make a greater investment in ensuring that the curriculum is current and that instruction is of high quality. A high quality curriculum includes opportunities for synthesis, application and integration of knowledge within and between disciplines. To achieve this, and thereby strengthen our commitment to a responsive teaching environment, the University must speed up the integration of learning technologies into the classroom, encourage the development and use of teaching evaluations, and create a teaching and learning centre in which effective teaching innovations can be rapidly diffused. We must also continue to experiment with alternative teaching formats, with coursework that transcends a narrow discipline-based focus, and with distance learning and continuing education initiatives where these complement the academic strengths of the University. In short, the University of Saskatchewan must actively embrace innovative, high quality, instructional programs at both the graduate and undergraduate levels.

2. *Intensifying research efforts.* Universities have no monopoly on the conduct of research. In government laboratories, in the research facilities of large corporations, and in institutes of various stripes, research conforming to particular organizational mandates are actively pursued. In universities, research agendas are not mandated, they are constructed by a community of scholars. As such they are changing rapidly, constantly shifting in response to new discoveries, new evidence, new problems and new needs. Participation in this community is a full-time commitment which typically lasts for the lifetime of the scholar. Those who are engaged in it are uniquely situated to bring the world to the university and take the university into the world. At the University of Saskatchewan the commitment to research and scholarship needs to be intensified. Parts of the University can, at present, be described as “research intensive”, but many parts, too many parts, cannot. The result is a University that is under performing in terms of its unique mission: to conduct research independent of political and economic directives and to bring the fruits of scholarship to the classroom, the Province, and the world.

3. *Fostering the teacher-scholar model.* Major universities, like the University of Saskatchewan, are not research institutes, degree factories, or simply storehouses of knowledge. They acquire their distinctive character by their capacity to unite scholarship with teaching. Scholarship involves the discovery of new knowledge, its integration and synthesis, and its application to new or persistent problems. Teaching requires not just the effective communication of this knowledge, but the creation of a capacity for criticism and self-examination. Given this University’s strong commitment to research,

and its equally strong commitment to a broad range of educational programs, it makes sense to place a high value on research that has an impact on the learning experience of students, and a high value on teaching that is informed by scholarly activities. This is a goal that can only be realized in the long term by appropriate faculty hiring strategies.

4. *Responding to the needs of aboriginal peoples.* In Saskatchewan, the task of responding to specific, local needs and, simultaneously opening doors to the world, is particularly pressing in the context of aboriginal peoples. Making available to aboriginal peoples the full resources of the University is one side of that equation; integrating aboriginal knowledge into the curriculum and practices of the University is the other. At the University of Saskatchewan we must dedicate ourselves to making available to all aboriginal peoples the full range of our programs and we must adopt strategies that will improve their ability to succeed. Above all, the University must appreciate the need for aboriginal peoples to have an effective, meaningful voice in their own educational experience and, in true partnership, to find in the University a place where their culture is both reflected and at work in defining and achieving the institution's objectives in research, teaching, and community service.

## V Strategies

Articulating a vision and establishing goals is one thing, realizing the vision and implementing the goals is another. To transform itself in a conscious manner, the University needs a set of instruments, a toolkit, that will establish where we are academically and move us in the direction which we consciously choose to go. The strategies sketched out below represent the beginning of an ongoing planning process. They are intended to respond to the growing demand for renewal and assist in the renewal process. Their success depends on the commitment of the entire University community.

1. *Priority Determination.* There is a broad consensus, alluded to in the first section of this framework, that the University must make some difficult choices among the wide variety of programs it presently offers. Priority determination is the investment part of that choice process. It involves the identification of priority academic areas into which the University will put its resources. Resources will take a variety of forms, including tenure track appointments, technical assistance, equipment, curriculum development, and support for graduate students. The process of identification will be open, transparent and competitive, involving the entire University community and extending, in its initial stages, over at least two years. The result will be the designation of four to six areas of academic priority in which the University of Saskatchewan will strengthen and expand its research and teaching efforts and which will be the focus of a broad communications strategy.

2. *Systematic Program Review.* In April 1994, Council approved a proposal that the University introduce systematic reviews of its academic programs, and in June 1996,

approved a framework for doing so. It is now time to implement this process. Systematic review involves a thorough consideration, on a periodic basis, of the objectives of an academic program, the content of the curriculum, the qualifications of the faculty, and the outcomes of the teaching, learning and service enterprises. Systematic program review is intended to provide a learning opportunity and a chance to improve and incorporate innovations. It is also an evaluation opportunity, a chance to assess quality in a national and international context and to determine how programs are contributing to the University's broader goals. Reviews of this kind cannot be internal. Self study may be the first stage, but ultimately the value of the process will be found in the assessments provided by students, alumni and peers, and the changes to our programs that are made as a result of these assessments.

3. *Program Termination Procedures.* Just as priority determination is the investment part of the choice process, program termination procedures are the divestment side. Most universities require ways of withdrawing resources and redirecting them, but very few have such processes. At the University of Saskatchewan there is a strong feeling that Deans, Department Heads, and faculty members require guidelines that will assist them in discontinuing programs for which demand is consistently low and in which the quality of teaching, service or research has declined. Safeguards will be necessary, and the interests of students and faculty must be given high priority, but for the sake of its own commitment to academic quality, it is now necessary to establish open and transparent means by which the University can systematically withdraw resources from programs that can no longer contribute satisfactorily to the mission of the institution.

## **VI Conclusion**

The University of Saskatchewan has now experienced more than a decade of financial difficulty unprecedented in the post-war period. Recent decreases in provincial funding have resulted in the elimination of almost two hundred faculty and staff positions, greatly increased tuition, and pressures to generate additional revenues by introducing "cost-recovery" programs and strengthening fund-raising efforts. Grossly inadequate capital investment over many years has left our physical plant crumbling and our research and teaching infrastructure outmoded and ineffective. Staff reductions and the lack of investment in infrastructure have caused a palpable decline in the ability of this institution to deliver instructional programs of high quality, to compete in research, and to provide the services which the people of Saskatchewan have come to expect. At the same time, there has been no significant diminution in enrollment pressures and, if anything, public expectations have increased. This new reality provides the impetus for change.

Change is always difficult for public institutions, and in responding to the new realities the University of Saskatchewan must make difficult choices if it is to preserve quality. This document is intended to provide a framework within which these choices will be made. It rearticulates our values and offers a vision for our future development. It

reaffirms the principles that should guide this development, identifies important goals we should be striving for, and outlines three key elements of an implementation strategy. The goals we have identified will undoubtedly change and so will the strategies discussed above. This framework is open-ended and is intended to foster new developments. It is a framework which we believe will enable the University of Saskatchewan to develop its unique role as this Province's research university, while preserving and enhancing its traditional core undergraduate teaching and service responsibilities.