

INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING PLAN

University of Calgary

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Submitted to the Academic Planning Committee
by the
Learning and Instructional Development Sub-Committee (LIDS)

Policy Statement

The skills of analysis, evaluation, and synthesis will become the hallmarks of a good education, just as absorption of a body of knowledge once was.
The ecology of the university depends on a deep and abiding understanding that inquiry, investigation, and discovery are at the heart of the enterprise ...
- Boyer Commission Report

Preamble

This document is an extension of the Academic Plan and its principles and actions that directly relate to learning. The Learning Plan is intended to extend understanding of learning concepts and terminology. It is not an implementation plan.

The Learning and Instructional Development Subcommittee (LIDS) was commissioned by the Academic Program Committee to formulate a Learning Plan. This mandate is embedded in the Academic Plan (Action Item #4):

Commission the Academic Program Committee and its Learning and Instructional Development Subcommittee, to develop an Institutional Learning Plan, which will propose, among other things, ways in which flexible, independent, and computer-enhanced learning could be used in research-based undergraduate and graduate programs (Raising our Sights, p. 7)

The Boyer Report (1998) places “teaching at the heart of the scholarly endeavor” (p. 47). The implication is that to be a scholar includes effective and inspiring teaching. Thus, to be fully engaged in the community of inquiry one must be a scholar, which includes being both a teacher and learner. It follows then that this must include the study of the teaching and learning process. Professors should be actively engaged in the study and enhancement of the quality of their teaching and the creation of a scholarly culture.

Current Institutional Plans and Priorities

The University of Calgary is “a place of education and scholarly inquiry” (U of C Mission Statement). The distinguishing elements of scholarly inquiry are the construction and dissemination of knowledge. The University of Calgary is committed to integrating this process into the educational experience of its students.

In support of this undertaking and as established in the Academic Plan, the Learning Plan starts from the premise that the University of Calgary is a learning-centered university.

Learning-Centred university. A fundamental role of the university is to educate students to appreciate the complexities of the natural and human worlds in which they live and to prepare them to engage actively, thoughtfully and productively both in their careers and as citizens of their communities. Recruiting excellent students and providing them with a fulfilling educational experience are keys to our broad mission and to our success as a university. In short, the programs and experience we offer must be appropriate to the needs, aspirations, and futures of our students, and must meet society's need for qualified people in many areas. (Raising our Sights, p.2)

More specifically, the Academic Plan identified action items that have relevance to the Learning Plan. They are:

- Implement undergraduate curriculum redesign(Action item #2)
- "... develop inquiry-based learning opportunities ..." (Action Item #2)
- "Provide appropriate professional development opportunities for new and continuing staff" (Action Item #3)
- "Define the role of distance and distributed education techniques in helping us engage responsively with our communities" (Action Item #5)

Another institutional initiative that must be addressed is Curriculum Redesign. It is important to identify curriculum redesign as a continuous process and, therefore, a central theme of this document. The purpose of the undergraduate curricular redesign initiative was to "realign undergraduate curricula to serve learner needs for the knowledge era" (Strategic Direction and Plan, 1996). Seven curricular features and eight core competencies consistent with the University's emphasis on the enhancement of quality within a scholarly culture largely shape curricular redesign.

The curriculum redesign features are:

- A clearly identifiable field of study
- A defined interdisciplinary component
- An international component
- An experiential learning component relevant to the program objectives
- Integration of research
- Provision for broad and extended faculty-student interaction at the program level
- An explicit program syllabus, which sets out in advance the knowledge and skills to be acquired in a program of study

The core competencies are:

- Critical and creative thinking

- Analysis of problems
- Effective oral and written communication
- Gathering and organizing information
- Logical calculation
- Abstract reasoning and its application
- Insight and intuition in generating knowledge
- Interpretive and assessment skills (adopted by GFC, January 1997)

A current priority for the University of Calgary is inquiry-based learning. The University Planning Committee (UPC) established inquiry-based learning as a priority in the fall of 2001. The initiative builds on the foundation of the University's established position as a research university and offers a distinctive approach to teaching and learning. An inquiry-based learning experience is problem or question driven, typically has a small-group feature, includes critical discourse, requires self-direction, is frequently multi-disciplinary, and incorporates research methods such as information gathering and synthesis of ideas. Thus inquiry-based learning encompasses the goals of curriculum redesign, particularly the integration of teaching and research, the facilitation of student-faculty interaction, and interdisciplinarity. Inquiry-based learning should be seen, not as a new direction, but as a new and more inclusive vocabulary that situates the goals of the curriculum redesign process in the context of communities of inquiry.

No less important are the features and competencies of curriculum redesign, which should be seen as integral to the inquiry process. The competencies and inquiry are reciprocal: in one sense the core competencies are necessary prerequisites for inquiry; in another sense, the process of conducting critical inquiry in the context of an engaged learning community is the way in which core competencies are nurtured and developed.

Finally, appropriate professional development opportunities for faculty, staff and graduate students are currently a high priority within the University. Faculty development is supported through the Learning Commons' programs, seminars, workshops, and consultation services. These professional development programs are essential for an institution dedicated to instilling scholarly inquiry in a learning-centred university. Professional development for professors also includes the resources required for them to maintain their research programs.

An increasingly important element of professional development is associated with new and emerging learning technologies. These include distance, distributed and classroom enhanced learning technologies, which must be defined and understood in terms of how they may enhance the learning experience. A core document in this regard is the Technology Integration Plan, adopted in 1997. The vision for the Technology Integration Plan (TIP) is integral to the way the

University fulfills its mission. The TIP states that it “is the role of information technology to serve the University’s people in their learning, creating, teaching and support roles.” The TIP concludes by noting that the University must support innovation and risk-taking as it relates to using information and communications technology to enhance learning.

Rationale

The ideal for a research university is participation in a community of inquiry. A community of inquiry is broadly construed as including both formal and informal collaborative learning experiences that incorporate various core characteristics of inquiry-based learning including responsibility for constructing meaning, discourse and self-direction. The primary concern is providing learning experiences where students gain a sense of belonging and have opportunities for interaction and critical reflection.

The business of a university is to create an environment in which both interaction and critical reflection occur at all levels and in all contexts. Indeed, the primary obligation of a research university should be to engage students in active, intentional, and collaborative knowledge-building communities, or ‘communities of inquiry’ (Lipman, 1991). Learning communities are the nexus of inquiry and the means to critical and creative learning outcomes. This concept of “communities of inquiry” informs the current policy statement at the deepest level of realizing a learning-centred university.

This invariably means that any discussion of quality must focus first on the methodology of teaching and learning. From the perspective of the research university, the quality standard for a course or program of study is that of an interactive and inquiry-based learning experience. The key principle is that of sustained interaction between and among faculty and students leading to the construction of knowledge. While this can be achieved in different ways, some small-class experience for all students must be a priority. The role of the student is that of an active and responsible participant respected by members of the community. Students, through a process of sustained and meaningful communication, will have the opportunity to question existing ideas and beliefs (i.e., knowledge) and to share and test their understandings.

The use of learning technologies contributes to innovative methods of facilitating inquiry-based approaches. For example, the integration of Internet technology has a unique capacity to facilitate communication, the core of an educational experience, as well as stimulate critical reflection. Of course, learning technologies are not a substitute for more traditional approaches such as classroom-based courses; however, they have the potential to enhance real time

face-to-face communities of inquiry. There is synergy in the thoughtful integration of the best of both face-to-face and online approaches.

When, for special purposes, a course is taught in an entirely distance format, the core value of enhancing interaction is nonetheless important. A distance course should take advantage not only of technology but also of human commitment to ensure that interaction both among students and between students and an engaged instructor is maintained. Learning technologies are at their strongest when used in the context of, rather than as a substitute for, a community of inquiry.

Finally, when adopting an inquiry-based approach to learning in a research university students must be introduced to research in their courses and professors reflect upon how best to share their knowledge with students. Professors should be encouraged to engage in the scholarship of teaching in recognition of the fact that the research and teaching enterprises are closely related.

Guiding Principles

A key feature of a high quality learning experience in a research university is establishing a scholarly culture that includes integration of research into the learning process in ways where students are encouraged to construct personal meanings and deep understandings. This process engages students in critically constructing knowledge and does not merely include being provided with access to content. The learning experience is facilitated by sustained interaction between and among faculty and students. This experience can be enhanced through the judicious use of instructional methods and learning technologies that support inquiry and expand its limits, whether through creative classroom-based activities, labs, computer simulations, or online discussion groups. Finally, this learning experience must be informed by the latest scholarly practices and knowledge of research results in the particular field of study.

If teaching excellence is to be truly valued, then faculty must be recognized and rewarded for these efforts. The Boyer commission states “Research universities must commit themselves to the highest standards in teaching as well as research and create faculty reward structures that validate that commitment” (p. 21). This necessitates that a “culture of teaching” and mentorship be developed and quality, innovative teaching be recognized in merit and promotion decisions.

The Learning Plan sets out the following core assumptions as its guiding principles:

1. The University of Calgary is a campus-based research institution. All students must have the opportunity to participate in communities of inquiry that include faculty, graduate and undergraduate students, and staff.

2. The University will promote the quality of the learning experience through fostering communities of inquiry that facilitate critical reflection, discourse, and the integration of research into the curriculum.
3. Learning technologies will be employed to enhance the campus experience and extend inquiry-based learning through the innovative use of on-line resources, collaborative learning opportunities, and electronic communication among faculty and students.

Learning Plan Goals

Based upon the Learning Plan's guiding principles and the identified action items of the Academic Plan, teaching and learning, and curriculum innovation should be guided by the following goals.

1. That inquiry-based learning approaches be at the center of the undergraduate learning experience.
2. That environments be provided that are accessible, welcoming and effective in facilitating communities of inquiry.
3. That leadership and support for teaching and learning, and for curriculum innovation be enhanced through professional development, technology development, research, and an appropriate reward system.
4. That quality, interactive online learning experiences be created and integrated into the campus experience where appropriate.

This section of the Institutional Learning Plan began by reviewing associated University of Calgary plans, policies and priorities. A rationale was then provided that set the stage for articulating the principles and goals, that, in turn, shape the action strategies described in the next section.

References

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