UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH BA PROGRAM REVIEW (APRIL 9, 2007)

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INTRODUCTION

The BA program at the University of Guelph is both rich and complex, and offers a diverse number of disciplines of study, each of which has its own unique academic and learning objectives. The program has carefully preserved traditional disciplines whilst simultaneously introducing new knowledge sets necessary for life and learning in the 21st century.

Students in the BA program are exposed to a wide range of disciplines through the structure of the degree which requires that students complete a distribution of courses across Arts, Social Sciences, and Physical and Natural Sciences. Although a minority of students complained about the divisional requirements, the reviewers agree that the present organization of divisions offers opportunities to develop knowledge of disciplines outside of the 29 choices of majors and the 37 choices of minors. In addition, the BA program includes four interdisciplinary programs: Criminal Justice and Public Policy, European Studies, International Development Studies (reviewed 2006), and Women=s Studies (currently being reviewed).

In the discussions that took place on February 28th, it was clear that this review of the BA program for the Senate Committee on Internal Review was taking place in the midst of several major planning exercises (i.e., Integrated Planning within each of the Colleges and the 21st Century Curriculum Committee across the University of Guelph). Although the reviewers recognize that there are areas of overlap, we did not attempt a complete integration of the recommendations in this report with those in the IP and 21st CC reports.

Finally, the reviewers wish to register at the outset that the BA program constitutes a strong and vibrant component of the University=s overall mission. Our recommendations are intended to strengthen an already rigorous program and to encourage creative debate about future directions. As outlined in the SCIR template, our review focuses on 6 areas:

1. Consonance of the degree program with the general objectives of the University=s Mission Statement, the Learning Objectives, and the Strategic Directions;
2. Appropriateness of administrative structures to achieve the academic objectives of the program;

3. Appropriateness of program=s admission requirements;
4. Appropriateness of the pedagogical and evaluation strategies and methods applied to the program;

5. Adequacy of the available human, physical and financial resources to support the program;

6. The definition and application, where possible, of indicators to determine the outcomes of the program.

The text that follows provides discussion and recommendations under each of these six broad areas.

1. **Consonance of the Degree Program with the General Objectives of the University=s Mission Statement, the Learning Objectives, and the Strategic Directions.**

Despite the large number of specializations in the BA Program, its multiple offerings are clearly consistent with the University=s Mission and its Learning Objectives. The reviewers agree completely with the statement in the program overview that Atthe reports from the individual areas of specialization under the BA program umbrella contained in this Internal Review speak specifically, repeatedly and eloquently to the commitment of Arts and Social Sciences professors and students to the tenets expressed in the University=s Mission statement.@ In addition to the written submissions, discussions with faculty and students reinforced the many ways that the BA program offers students opportunities for international experiences, flexibility to move into different areas as their interests develop, and to work closely with faculty members.

The academic units= self-studies provide substantial evidence of the varied ways that specializations within the BA program satisfy the Learning Objectives of the University. Given the range of disciplines that are included under the BA umbrella, there may be a greater emphasis on certain objectives in a particular specialization (e.g., Literacy in English, or Numeracy in Mathematics) but none of the learning objectives are ignored. It is clear that the senior-level (3rd and 4th year) courses emphasize self-reliant learning and opportunities to develop deeper knowledge of a particular discipline. Experiential learning is achieved through Co-operative education programs and many BA students take advantage of Study Abroad opportunities. Similarly, the opportunity to work as an undergraduate research assistant provides incomparable hands-on research experience for gifted undergraduates.
Challenges/Recommendations

The BA program is consistently presented as the sum of its parts or specializations. However, there is no clear articulation of the objectives of the overall program. The BA program committee is preparing a statement of the objectives that will be included in the University’s official Calendar (draft statements were shared with the reviewers). The reviewers support this endeavour as a way to develop a framework for preserving the liberal education strengths of the BA degree. Otherwise it is too easy to focus on individual disciplines and strengths that each contributes to the value of the degree rather than the value-added by the BA program structure itself and delivery to each specialization. Also, it is impossible to develop appropriate outcome indicators if the objectives of the program are not clearly articulated.

The large number of minors contributes to interdisciplinary experiences, but many of the minor programs attract a very small number of students. Although many faculty feel this situation is cost neutral, the infra-structural costs of advising students, tracking and maintaining records for this large number of minors is not clear to the reviewers.

**Recommendation 1**: Clearly articulate the objectives of the overall BA program. This manifesto may well be developed collaboratively through discussion and debate at a proposed BA retreat (see below, Recommendation 3).

**Recommendation 2**: Review the number of minors, numbers of students declaring minors, learning outcomes, and infra-structural costs to determine the viability of continuing to offer current minors.

2. Appropriateness of Administrative Structures to Achieve the Academic Objectives of the Program.

As the largest program at the University of Guelph, the BA program is governed and operationalized via a complex series of administrative structures and mechanisms. In the first instance, there are two main drivers: the College of Arts and the College of Social and Applied Human Sciences (each with their own Deans and decanal staff); all other Colleges at the University (except for the Ontario Veterinary College) contribute to the degree in varying ways; there are also three Schools (Fine Art and Music; Languages and Literatures; English and Theatre Studies); there are numerous Departments with their own sets of committees for planning and curriculum development; there are interdisciplinary programs whose own coordinators and curriculum Acommittees@ straddle a number of different home departments (e.g., European Studies, Women=s Studies, Criminal Justice and Public Policy, International Development Studies) and finally, there is the BA Program Committee which has broad representation across contributing units, but for practical reasons cannot include all departments.
There are many virtues to such a decentralized series of structures. By having its own Achain of legitimation@ each unitBboth large and small, both traditionally defined and inter-disciplinary alikeBhave developed strong and vibrant identities. (This was evident in the passionate statements of both graduate and undergraduate students who kindly shared their thoughts with the reviewers; a definite esprit de corps was also evident in the Schools of Fine Art and Music and in TheatreBeach of whom has their own building and, therefore, their own physically defined communal space.)

Likewise, separate administrative hierarchies contribute to the number one Avalue@ mentioned time and again by studentsBthe quality of faculty engagement. By having identified communities within communities, faculty members are able to engage directly with students, which is one of the University=s critically important qualities. Relatively autonomous political units can interact from a position of strength, thereby leading ideally to interdisciplinary initiatives that areBand that are seen to beEqually shared and equally resourced.

The question that begs to be asked, however, is this: is the BA program a victim of its own success? Can the program continue to increase its offerings at its current rate? And, if so, is such expansion sustainable with the current administrative structures in place? To answer these kinds of hard questions one must reflect upon the program=s current administrative structures: are they a hindrance or a support to the BA program=s ongoing success?

Notwithstanding the above strengths, there are many serious issues involved in perpetuating such a baroque administration. The multiple levels of governance blur both the chains of command and the lines of communication to such an extent that the BA program emerges as an impenetrable series of independent fiefdoms, all of which lack a coherent integrated or global perception of the whole. Each silo, in other words, although potentially vibrant and creative, could become stagnant and short-sighted in its isolation from its neighbors.

More specifically, virtually all interdisciplinary activities ultimately depend on goodwill and individual personalities who choose to cooperate rather than on a coherent or integrated institutional vision committed to using all of its resources for the common good. More specifically, in a fiscally challenged environment each unit will naturally compete to protect what it perceives to be its own resources; this does not always contribute to the overall health of the body politic. Conversely each unit will spend what it has, often resulting in the duplication of offerings (i.e., a proliferation of similar courses which is unsustainable.)

**Challenges/Recommendations**

Although difficult to see as a golden opportunity the University is faced, quite simply,
with two inescapable facts:

(1) The University of Guelph has, until now, experienced unprecedented growth, exacerbated by the Adouble cohort@, which it has tried to service by pouring its limited resources into an ever-proliferating series of programs and courses. This has contributed directly to the problems of deferred maintenance and increased teaching by sessional instructors (both of which were areas of concern expressed by students during the site visit meetings). As one Review participant put it, AWWe are cutting the pie into thinner and thinner slices.@

(2) Despite increased resources for specific post-secondary educational costs (e.g. public statements around graduate expansion), the Ontario government has not addressed the budgetary pressures of inflation and deferred maintenance that face most of the province=s Universities.

As sobering as these two facts are, this situation can be seized as a golden opportunity for the UniversityBas a wholeBto revisit how it does what it does; i.e., now is the time for a radical review of the entire College, School and Departmental systems, as well as the entire BA program. In short: now is the time to reconsider the wisdom of the status quo and to consider whether or not the University of Guelph can radically reconfigure its administrative structures and processes in the BA program.

**Recommendation 3:** An expanded Bachelor of Arts Program Committee, including members from the Administration and all contributing units, should review the efficiency and effectiveness of all decision-making processes for majors and minors programs, as well as the resource allocation mechanisms for said programs. All interdisciplinary programs should be reviewed simultaneously, with an eye to rationalizing resources, credit for coordination, dedicated faculty, credit for teaching etc. This review could begin at a curriculum retreat attended by all stakeholders.

**3. Appropriateness of Program=s Admission Requirements, E.G. Achievement and Preparation for the Educational Objectives of the University and the Program.**

Although many units in the BA program reported satisfaction with the admissions process being handled centrally, some expressed serious reservations about enrolment decisions made without consultation with the programs themselves. Some individual programs (e.g., CJPP) have instituted a higher than minimum admission grade and these anomalies seem to be easily handled. Likewise Fine Arts is moving toward a portfolio requirement in the application process which seems to the reviewers to be a good idea given the nature of the Fine Arts program.
With regards to admissions requirements in general, however, there was considerable angst displayed in many quarters from Deans to undergraduate students concerning the lack of proper preparation provided in the Ontario high school system. Although it was generally felt that most students at Guelph are very strong students, there remain a number of areas that may merit reflection and action.

**Challenges/Recommendations**

Students themselves complained of a lack of knowledge in the areas of English grammar and language usage. One suggestion (from a student!) was for the University to offer a mandatory introductory course in Year 1 devoted to the basics of grammar. This discussion led naturally to other areas where both students and professors noticed a distinct lack of skills: technological literacy, Mathematics and Science. These concerns gave rise to the idea of a common first year experience for all students—a concept that may merit consideration and debate amongst the various units contributing to the BA program. The 21st Century Working Group on the First-Year Experience also recognizes the challenges presented by diverse skill levels and one of their recommendations is to invest in programs that target first-year students in the development and advancement of their skills in the areas of learning, writing, research and numeracy.

**Recommendation 4:** Examine the possibility of implementing a common first year course, taught in discrete modules configured to match varying competencies, that would address the basic skills of numeracy, literacy (including technological literacy), mathematics, study skills, note taking, and writing. Such a course could also address the transition from high school to University and the expectations that will be placed on first-year students.

**4. APPROPRIATENESS OF THE PEDAGOGICAL AND EVALUATION STRATEGIES AND METHODS APPLIED TO THE PROGRAM.**

Pedagogical strategies are varied, reflecting the different disciplines within the BA program, and include formal lectures, small seminars, studio time and experiential learning opportunities, such as study abroad, exhibitions and performances.

**Challenges/Recommendations**

A common concern expressed by faculty focused on recent growth in enrollments and the impact of larger class sizes on pedagogy and evaluation methods. Many recognize the need to include writing experiences for students, but this is difficult in large classes that are typical in 1st and 2nd year courses. Unbalanced growth is also problematic, particularly if physical resources such as studios are limiting.
The increasing use of technology such as WebCT and Distance Education offerings received mixed reviews from students. Feedback included observations that some instructors are not familiar with WebCT technology and are not always using it effectively. Also, online discussions become cumbersome when there are a large number of participants and messages to read through. In some DE courses, participation in online discussions is graded and this bothered students who prefer other learning modes. Finally, students were positive about DE offerings during semesters when they are off-campus (typically Spring) but felt that there were limited DE offerings at senior levels during spring semesters. Furthermore students felt they deserved face-to-face experiences when they were enrolled full-time and on-campus. One principal complaint was the substitution of mandatory face to face classes with a DE offering; students were unanimously opposed to this process.

Several students also expressed their opinion that 1st and 2nd year courses are too general and that there is significant overlap between courses offered within and across departments. In contrast, workload and expectations in senior (3rd /4th year) courses are significantly higher but credit weightings for courses remain the same (i.e., 0.5 credits per course). Some of these issues are considered by the 21st Century Working Group on Teaching and Learning Innovations and their draft report includes recommendations to Adevelop effective and innovative curricula, with clearly articulated program and course level learning outcomes.@ The inclusion of a program-level perspective is a key factor for the BA program. The Teaching and Learning Innovations draft report also recognizes the value in taking Abetter advantage of differential course weights as a means to provide students with the opportunity to undertake in-depth critical inquiry projects or the focus on the development of higher order thinking skills such as application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation@.

**Recommendation 5:** Review all 1st and 2nd year course syllabi to ensure (a) there is a minimum amount of overlapping materials; and (b) there are mechanisms in place to ensure that basic writing and critical thinking skills are in place before students move on to senior levels.

**Recommendation 6:** Review DE course offerings in terms of level and semester offered as well as required versus elective courses to assess the range and flexibility of learning opportunities offered across majors in the BA program.

**Recommendation 7:** Evaluate the use of computer technologies in the learning environment (whole course or components of courses). Obtain feedback from students, faculty and Teaching Support Services concerning effectiveness and ways to improve learning/teaching experiences.

**5. Adequacy of the available human, physical and financial resources to support the program.**
On the one hand students and faculty agree that the BA program offers superb opportunities for learning, knowledge creation, and professional development. Faculty members appreciate the calibre of Guelph’s undergraduate and graduate students; conversely, students routinely praised faculty for their availability, interest, and genuine supportiveness. Although one student complained about poor counselling, most seemed satisfied with the kinds of academic counselling they received.

On the other hand, both faculty and students expressed concern with the small size of the faculty complement and the reliance on sessional lecturers; the demand for more research intensity that may threaten the availability of faculty to students; the growing size of undergraduate classes; the increased use of DE courses offered in lieu of mandatory face to face classes; likewise the deferred maintenance issues that face all Ontario universities are clear (and is having a definite impact on the Theatre and Fine Arts facilities especially.)

In short, although all constituents praise the quality of the Guelph BA program, all constituents are also worried that severe under-resourcing will have a detrimental effect on morale, the quality of instruction and the overall undergraduate experience.

There is a need for more resources and improved facilities. There is also the common perception amongst faculty and students that government is unlikely to resource the University to the levels it requires.

**Recommendation 8:** Faculty and Administration might explore realistic options to deal with the current fiscal environment; Administration needs to explore how best to strategically pressure government to revisit the funding formulae used to establish Basic Operating Income for Universities.

**6. The Definition and Application, Where Possible, of Indicators to Determine the Outcomes of the Program.**

The self-study reports consistently identify the high quality of instruction across the BA program, based on course evaluations as well as a large number of teaching awards to individual faculty and to recognize excellence in distance and open education courses. The online survey confirms the students’ high regard for professors in terms of accessibility and accomplishments.

One of the challenges for any program, but particularly for the BA program which covers a broad spectrum of disciplines, is to develop a set of general indicators as well as the evidence to measure and benchmark. The self-study for the program as a whole recommends a number of possible indicators for the BA program including: quality of incoming students (as defined by admission averages and in relation to other universities),
retention of students in the BA program, tracking of students (BA and other programs) in
BA program minors. Given the complexity of the analysis and the resources that would
be required to collect, summarize and monitor the data, these indicators need to be
considered with care. It is important to define the objectives and outcomes for the BA
program and then the measures used to assess these outcomes.

There are clearly outcomes that are more difficult to track through central resources (e.g.,
the success of in-course students [prizes, publications, performances and exhibitions] and
graduates [employment, community service, creative accomplishments.]) Sometimes
student success is tracked at the level of departments (e.g. Studio Art), but there is a need
to compile data and use this data across the entire program. There is a need, in other
words, to recognize the full range of activities and accomplishments and qualitative
indicators, as well as a need to recognize the resources required to track and compile

**Recommendation 9:** Define a set of indicators based on declared learning outcomes for
the BA program and identify the data collection and analysis processes that are required
to support these indicators. The balance between program- and department-level data
collection and summarizing needs to be considered, particularly for tracking unique
accomplishments of in-course students and graduates.