

Academic Planning at Langara College

“What Was Heard”: Findings from the Consultation Process

Glenn Harris
Harris-Gray Associates Corp
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This document summarizes the results of an extensive process of consultation undertaken during the fall of 2013 to inform the development of Langara’s first academic plan.

The consultation process was carried out under the supervision of the Vice-President, Academic and Provost and the Academic Planning Committee.

- An open invitation was extended to all members of the Langara community to participate in a series of group meetings during October 2013, facilitated by Glenn Harris of Harris-Gray Associates Corp.
- Anyone was also free to submit written comments to Harris via e-mail.

Participants were asked to consider a series of questions prepared by the Academic Planning Committee:

- *What do you want the Academic Plan to achieve?*
- *Does Langara College have a distinctive identity? What is it? What is it not? What should it be?*
- *What do we offer our students? What promises can we make to them?*
- *What are our academic values?*
- *What does Langara do well? What can we do better?*
- *What threats exist to Langara’s sustainability?*
- *What particular opportunities and initiatives should be included in the Academic Plan?*
- *What barriers to the successful implementation of an academic plan do you foresee?*

Using these questions to guide discussion, 106 people participated in 25 group meetings over 5 days:

- 69 faculty members
- 29 other employees
- 8 students

To the extent practical, groups comprised people with similar roles and responsibilities. Faculty participants were further grouped according to their length of time at Langara.

19 written submissions were received, a third of which came from people who also participated in group meetings.

All members of the Langara College community were subsequently invited to one of two “What Was Heard” presentations by Glenn Harris on December 11, 2013. This document elaborates on those presentations, as well as drawing on feedback provided at that time.

Confidentiality was assured to all those who participated in the consultation process and all discussions were characterized by an encouraging level of engagement and candour. In the writer’s experience, a healthy number of people elected to participate. Nevertheless many more chose not to do so. Further improving the level of engagement should continue to be an important goal as the planning and implementation process proceeds.

The degree of natural convergence on many issues was understandably limited. This reflects the complexity of the enterprise, the different experiences, interests and organizational vantage points of those at the College, as well as varied understandings of broader institutional matters. Furthermore people did not have an existing academic plan and related strategies to use as points of reference. Nevertheless the notes that follow constitute key insights into the issues and opportunities available to Langara College and provide a rich source of input to the development of the Academic Plan.

General Impressions

- The writer was struck by the enormous pride in, affection for and loyalty to Langara College evident in all group sessions. The vast majority of participants were keen to be engaged in the process and embraced a constructive approach to the challenges facing the institution.

- There is a strong desire for a new narrative that focuses on academic purposes and goals. While most appreciate that the financial challenges facing the College are formidable, the ‘budget story’ should not stand apart from mission related aspirations and priorities.
- Langara was consistently described as having an excellent academic reputation anchored in the widely recognized strength of its University Transfer offerings. More generally the College’s programs are seen as valued and enrolments are robust in most areas. While this is generally seen as a strong foundation upon which to continue building, some expressed concern that this may also be a source of complacency.
- Many favorable comments were made about the quality of the academic work environment. In particular many referred to the quality of Langara’s educators and their willingness to provide support to colleagues. This viewpoint was particularly evident among those relatively new to Langara who have had experience working in other post-secondary settings.
- Nevertheless a number of people commented on the need to overcome a troubling sense of institutional inertia. Reference was often made to a historical reliance on organic growth and development that is no longer sufficient to advance the College’s interests and those of its stakeholders. Most acknowledged the need to strike a better balance between bottom-up and institutionally guided activity.
- With respect to the scope of the Academic Plan, many appeared as focused on the implementation strategy (i.e. the ‘how’) as they were on the contents of the plan (i.e. the ‘what’ and the ‘why’). A number of people observed that, in the past, compelling proposals have surfaced within different parts of the College, but the structures, resourcing and integration of effort necessary for effective implementation have not followed. They urge that the Academic Plan not be allowed to suffer the same fate.

Two overarching impressions were left with the writer:

- There is a widely-held view that, academically, “we have not been moving forward”.

- A well-conceived Academic Plan with credible implementation strategies is seen as essential to successful academic remobilization.

What Should the Academic Plan Achieve?

There is little evident disagreement regarding the answers to this question:

1. The Academic Plan needs to clarify institutional identity.
2. It needs to present an academic vision that, while protecting and building on Langara's strengths, helps people imagine a future different from the present state of affairs.
3. It needs to express - and embody - Langara's academic values. These values need to be clearly defined and have operational meaning.
4. The Academic Plan needs to provide focus and direction, set priorities, and fashion core objectives and ways of achieving them.
5. The Academic Plan should serve as a guide for resource allocation.
6. It needs to set the stage for the development of comprehensive institutional strategies in the areas of strategic enrolment management, e-learning, internationalization and aboriginal education.
7. It should describe a living, breathing course of action with realistic goals, project milestones and progress reports. It needs to be expressed in plain language and be capable of adapting to new opportunities and developments.
8. It needs to foster innovation and enable more integration of effort
 - up and down
 - between academic, support and administrative communities
 - across disciplines

A number of additional comments were made about what the academic plan needs to address:

- *“look beyond the classroom experience”*
- *“address the perceived tension between skills training and broader educational goals”*
- *“pay attention to students readiness for their programs of study”*
- *“improve understanding of pathways available to students”*
- *“address the need for students to carve out a personal niche”(it was observed that students don’t know how to take full advantage of engagement opportunities available at Langara)*
- *“be clear about the role of research”*
- *“promote domestic and international institutional partnerships”*

Threats

Many comments were made about perceived threats to the achievement of academic goals that are contextual in nature:

- The relentless constraint on funding was a common, predictable theme. While many expressed concern about the extent to which budget considerations appear to be driving all institutional decisions of consequence, there was general appreciation of the need for an Academic Plan that is sensitive to the importance of revenue enhancement strategies.
- Threats are posed by institutions with whom Langara finds itself in competition. Examples cited include UBC’s new international college and Emily Carr’s new campus.
- Concerns were also expressed about reductions in high school enrolments in Langara’s traditional catchment area.

Limited diversification is also seen as a threat:

- Langara’s heavy dependence on University Transfer is seen as a source of vulnerability by a number of people. Langara is rarely a first choice

institution and can easily find itself reacting to developments at UBC and SFU.

- Langara's very heavy dependence on international students from China is also seen as an exposure. Most Canadian post-secondary institutions have set ambitious international enrolment goals and many have already mobilized on a broad front to realize them.
- Some cited the diversification threat as supporting the need for more "completion alternatives" for students. More such alternatives would enhance both recruitment and retention.
- More generally there is a perceived need for a more comprehensive strategic enrolment management plan.

Another perceived 'threat' relates to a widely held perception that Langara needs better data analysis to enable effective diagnosis and strategy development. For example:

- *"we don't know what ultimately happens to a large percentage of our students; we need baseline data"*
- *"do we really know what is working well for Langara and why?"*
- *"what are the real costs of the programs we offer?"*
- *"proposed offerings are not based on sound market research/feasibility studies"*
- *"we need universal student evaluations"*
- *"how successful are our students? what are the completion rates?"*
- *"where do/should our students come from?"*
- *"what is Langara's capacity?"*

In the eyes of many, the Academic Plan needs to speak to this limitation and pursue appropriate remedial measures.

Many also associate potential threats with the following:

- any failure on the part of the full executive team to commit to the new Academic Plan
- failure to engage more members of the Langara community in the planning process and outcomes

- risks to the healthy aspects of Langara’s culture posed by pending retirements

These are all matters that people expect to be taken into account as the planning process proceeds.

About Identity

Many comments were made about Langara’s identity. They are organized into two themes: (a) distinctiveness and (b) transition. A selection of comments follows:

Distinctiveness

- *“we are a teaching institution pursuing academic excellence”*
- *“we are a first rate college”*
- *“it’s already decided: we are the College of Higher Learning”*
- *“we embrace student success as a shared responsibility”*
- *“students feel important, do not get lost”*
- *“we are committed to small classes”*
- *“we are friendly”*
- *“people don’t appreciate the full value of Langara until they get here”*
- *“our faculty want to teach”*
- *“students develop meaningful relationships with faculty and staff”*
- *“we are a diverse community”*
- *“we connect with industry”*
- *“we care about their welfare after they leave”*
- *“UT is the source of our visibility and academic credibility”*
- *“we are not distinctive; we are a bit of everything”*
- *“we have lost sight of Langara as a 2 year institution”*
- *“don’t sideline Langara as a 2 year institution”*
- *“we should not aspire to be a second rate university”*
- *“we have a good brand re educational value”*
- *“we are not often a student’s first choice, but we enjoy respect”*
- *“students only appreciate the opportunities presented by Langara after they arrive”*
- *“people won’t come here if they have options elsewhere”*
- *“we should recruit more good students – all students would benefit”*

- *“we have great career programs”*
- *“we should promote Langara’s diploma and certificate programs as alternatives to university level study”*
- *“the focus on UT means that people lose track of degree and career programs”*
- *“we are not a remedial school”*
- *“we are not a trade school”*
- *“we are a vital part of the Vancouver community”*
- *“only Continuing Studies has a community profile”*
- *“Langara’s identity lies in its career programs”*
- *“all career programs (should) have UT courses attached, including arts/humanities”*

Transition

- *“Langara is a stepping stone”*
- *“we are the first choice as a transfer institution”*
- *“lots of programs do not transfer to a university”*
- *“students declare themselves as graduates of UBC and SFU – they do not refer to their time at Langara College”*
- *“we should be a destination institution”*
- *“students can get their feet on the ground”*
- *“we are a first stopping point”*
- *“we are metamorphic, a catalyst”*
- *“we are an easy transition to university”*
- *“we offer easier access to a university degree”*
- *“we are an established transfer institution”*
- *“students start here and can go anywhere”*
- *“we are a transition to a career”*
- *“we are a gateway”*
- *“we should express mobility as a goal”*
- *“we are a kinder, gentler point of transition”*
- *“we are a bridge to somewhere else”*
- *“it’s an inexpensive way to start university”*
- *“we are a great place to start and find out”*

Academic Values

A number of responses were offered to the question about Langara's academic values. The most frequent centred on (a) a focus on student needs and interests and (b) excellence, rigour and academic integrity:

- *a focus on students and their success*
- *accessibility and flexible learning*
- *relevance*
- *excellence in teaching and learning*
- *rigour, academic integrity and consistency*
- *collegiality – colleagues sharing and helping each other*
- *trust and respect*
- *passion*
- *responsiveness*
- *connectedness to community*
- *diversity*
- *independence and academic freedom*
- *interdisciplinarity*
- *development opportunities for all faculty and staff*
- *shared purpose*
- *safe place to learn*
- *global citizenship*
- *sustainability*

As noted earlier in the document, many are looking for academic values that are clearly defined and that have operational meaning.

Program Offerings

A number of comments were made about Langara's program and course offerings.

- There is general agreement that University Transfer will continue to be a cornerstone.

- Many expressed the view that new program offerings should be applied, meet market needs and avoid unnecessarily duplicating the offerings of other institutions.
- It is less clear how big a role people see for additional degree programs:
 - as earlier noted, a number of people observed that students need access to more degree completion opportunities
 - on the other hand, others expressed doubts about Langara's capacity to compete effectively in the degree program arena, except in special circumstances
 - there is some concern that more degree programs would cannibalize UT in order to provide electives to upper year students.
- Considerable interest was expressed in the potential development of more career programs, particularly for those who already have degrees. This is an emerging market that Langara may be well positioned to take advantage of. Post-degree diploma (PDD) programs would build on Langara's dual strengths in academic and career program offerings as well as provide access to new revenue opportunities. They are also seen as vehicles to foster interdisciplinarity and more flexible approaches to learning delivery. The only concerns expressed related to the need for (a) a more rigorous approach to market research and (b) the faculty in such programs to combine academic foundations with contemporary knowledge of workplace developments.
- Several recommended a greater focus on community programming and the creation of more laddering between Continuing Studies and Regular Studies offerings.

Learning Delivery

A variety of comments were made about different aspects of learning delivery. While many spoke to the importance of protecting the effectiveness of well-functioning classrooms and retaining small class sizes, others noted that the most appropriate model will vary according to the nature of the program and the learning and access needs of the students. More generally attention was drawn

to the need to be examining the effectiveness of existing arrangements. For example:

- *“experiential learning is key”*
- *“keep things practical”*
- *“we need less on line delivery and more time in classrooms”*
- *“classroom engagement fosters broader engagement”*
- *“we need more on line delivery”*
- *“we need more mixed mode/blended delivery”*
- *“we need to be more flexible, responsive to students”*
- *“we should make better use of evenings, weekends and the summer”*
- *“we need to do a better job of accommodating different types of learners”*
- *“we can’t afford clunky classroom technology”*
- *“we need to engage more students in research”*
- *“we need to expand coop opportunities”*
- *“we should continue to recognize volunteer activities”*
- *“we should have more field schools”*

While there are a variety of competing views evident in the foregoing list, two particular issues dominate:

- While Langara takes justifiable pride in the quality of the experience already offered to students, many believe the institution needs to be more flexible with respect to scheduling and delivery modalities.
- Current elearning arrangements are seen a patchwork and call for the development of a comprehensive elearning strategy to guide curriculum design, support services and infrastructure development.

Services and Support

Many participants pointed out that student success depends on more than curricular activities. They believe the academic plan must also acknowledge the need for effective student service and support arrangements. For example:

- *“we have very few resources invested in student engagement”*
- *“most students don’t look for engagement opportunities outside the classroom; they don’t know they exist”*

- *“we don’t know where to send students for help anymore”*
- *“Langara College may be alone in not having a central career centre”*
- *“there is a huge disconnect between the academic and support sides of the house”*
- *“IT is scandalously under resourced”*
- *“the Library is the only place open on weekends”*
- *“online students need access to online services”*

This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of issues associated with services and support. Rather it highlights a range of different considerations that many expect the Academic Plan to take into account.

Internationalization

The issues associated with increased international student enrolment were a major topic in virtually every group discussion. For example:

- *“we need broader set of goals; it should be about more than money”*
- *“there are many unrealized opportunities”*
- *“we are too dependent on China”*
- *“the competition is formidable (e.g. UBC)”*
- *“our internationalization strategy is a patchwork”*
- *“we need to develop cultural competencies”*
- *“we need meaningful international collaborations”*
- *“globalization is a more appropriate term than internationalization (i.e. it encompasses climate control, sustainability etc)”*
- *“international students are being registered at the expense of domestic students”*
- *“what is the true cost of international students?”*
- *“the implications of further international student growth are not understood”*
- *“income from international students is creating additional opportunities for domestic students”*
- *“we need to do a better job of assessing student readiness”*
- *“we are not dealing well with language issues”*
- *“language issues have heightened our awareness of language problems among domestic students”*

- *“too many international students are at risk”*
- *“international student services are woefully inadequate”*
- *“provide supports for faculty in their dealings with international students”*
- *“we need a dedicated international office (in particular to deal with administrative matters)”*

These comments highlight the perceived need for a comprehensive internationalization strategy, mitigating its academic risks and seizing opportunities.

Aboriginal Education

This issue was not top of mind for most participants. Nevertheless, in response to questions about the need for an aboriginal education strategy, there was ready agreement that it warranted attention as part of the academic planning process.

Research

Few spoke to the role of research. Most of the comments that were made referred to its support for the achievement of educational objectives:

- by providing opportunities for students to participate in applied research
- by focusing faculty attention on the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Inter-institutional Collaborations

Several highlighted the importance of inter-institutional collaborations, both domestic and international. Successful collaborations, however, depend on the ability of each party to represent effectively its own academic interests and priorities. The Academic Plan can provide the framework for this to occur.

Faculty Development

Faculty development was a recurring theme. For example:

- *“promote a culture of professional development”*
- *“people can be thrust into the classroom at short notice without adequate preparation and training”*
- *“more training is needed; it should be compulsory”*
- *“train to standards”*
- *“clarify expectations of faculty”*
- *“develop curriculum design skills”*
- *“use mentors”*
- *“create more development opportunities/projects to engage faculty”*

It is clear that the Academic Plan is expected to speak to professional development needs and strategies.

Planning, Budgeting and Decision Making

A recurring theme in the consultation process related to the adequacy of Langara’s planning, budgeting and decision making processes. For example:

- *“clarify governance and decision making structures and processes”*
- *“we need more transparency”*
- *“we need more consistency”*
- *“who decides what? who does what?”*
- *“budget considerations are the sole driver of change”*
- *“stop the decrees and come and talk to me”*
- *“a lot seems to be happening on the administrative side of the house – to what end?”*
- *“the budget system does not foster growth and innovation”*
- *“divisional meetings are spent reacting to administration, not on academic matters”*

The situation as described is best summarized as follows:

- There is a widely held view that strengthened communication, consultation, decision making and issue management processes are needed across the institution.
- There is an apparent absence of effective integrated planning
 - between academic and resource planning
 - between institutional and unit-level planning.
- There is a need for more consistency in policy and practice across the institution (. . . but don't over control; don't micromanage).

Addressing these issues is widely believed to be essential for the achievement of successful Academic Plan outcomes.

Concluding Comments

This document has attempted to synthesize and summarize the results of the initial consultation process while at the same time respecting the wide array of different opinions that were expressed. The writer hopes that this is seen as a faithful effort to do so.

The process for completion of the Academic Plan calls for further community input once the Vice-President, Academic and Provost and his Academic Planning Committee have prepared draft materials for consideration. It is hoped that experience to date fosters the continued engagement of those who have participated so far, and encourages the engagement of others who have not yet to be involved.