MEMORANDUM

TO: Fran Walley, Chair, Planning and Priorities Committee of Council

FROM: Caroline Tait, Chair, Research, Scholarly and Artistic Work Committee of Council

DATE: January 30, 2014

RE: **Research, Scholarly and Artistic Work Committee response to the Support Service Transformation Task Force report and the Academic Programs Transformation Task Force report**

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On behalf of members of the Research, Scholarly and Artistic Work committee of University Council, I am pleased to provide the committee's response to the Transformation Task Force reports. Members of the RSAW committee had the opportunity to discuss the reports at the committee's meeting on January 9, 2014 and reviewed the response in detail on January 23, 2014. Our committee wants to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of the members of the Transformation Task Forces in producing the reports. The RSAW discussed the reports within the context provided by the Task Forces in their assessment of the challenges in using and adapting the Dickeson model for prioritizing academic and service programs. It is clear from their assessment that the reports offer an unique overall view of the university not previously attempted, and that the conclusions found in the reports are to be used with other sources of information (existing and to follow) for decision making about academic and services prioritization and university budget reduction.

The RSAW committee sees the Transformation Task Force reports as implying a range of potential outcomes (that may be viewed from differing vantage points as negative or positive) for the university, its respective colleges, units, programs and employees. With this in mind, we encourage that all decision makers within this context, as well as those who are impacted by these decisions, to proceed with respect, integrity, sound evidence, open communication and transparency, reflecting the underlying values of our institution.

The RSAW committee believes that the reports yield valuable discussion points, insights, and, in certain instances, provide momentum to encourage enhanced research efforts and success at the University of Saskatchewan. Our discussions of the reports fall naturally into thematic areas. These are elaborated upon below and are presented in no particular order of importance.

The Administration of Grant Applications and Funded Research by Researchers and the Office of Research Services

In discussing how the Transformation Task Force reports understood research, the RSAW felt that the committees privileged a researcher-centric perspective rather than a global perspective of university research, which included both researcher and research administration perspectives. We concluded that this focus was most likely a reflection of the task force committees' memberships and, as such, required consideration of some of the conclusions made about the Office of Research Services. The reports drew attention to important challenges that researchers face in their pursuit of tri-council and other funding opportunities, including those related to their relationship with the Office of Research Services. We felt that in their understanding of the researcher—research services relationship, the Task Force committees did not consider fully the compliance requirements that the Office of Research Services are bound to by tri-council and other funding agencies and how this impacts the relationship. It was pointed out that Research Services are required to follow the rules of the funder in the administration of research grants beginning at the application stage and right through to the completion of a grant. Within this context, researchers may be unaware of funder compliance regulations, the consequences for the university if compliance rules are ignored or broken, or that what the Office of Research Services is asking from researchers is not always sanctioned by the university but rather by funding agencies. For example, the support services report appeared to have more of an internal focus on the researcher—research services relationships, rather than on a broader context that includes adherence and application of compliance regulations from external funding agencies. Therefore, we conclude that any realignment of resources in the Office of Research Services must be done in consideration of the necessity of the university to adhere to funding requirements and regulations and in so doing, acknowledges that stress is commonly generated by this context for both individual researchers/teams and administrators of university research.

The committee also discussed changes in the past decade to the ways in which research funding is awarded. The almost blanket emphasis by tri-council agencies on interdisciplinary, multi-university research teams has resulted in larger grants being awarded, and the virtual elimination of smaller single investigator grants. This has led to a significant increase in grant administration (budget, human resources, team management, knowledge dissemination) for researchers. The history of increased delegation of grant administration to nominated principal investigators over the past decade is not evident in either of the Task Force reports. It was pointed out in our discussions that in some instances, nominated principal investigators are managing larger numbers of employees, research team members, and budgets than some university departments. In cases such as this, researchers may still be required to carry a significant teaching load, contribute to department, college and university administration, and engage in university outreach for both purposes of tenure and promotion and to assist in keeping their respective departments running properly. Those most vulnerable appear to be junior faculty and faculty in small- and medium-sized departments where demands outside of research are highest. It was also determined that the distribution of support for faculty to engage in and sustain research programs was uneven. For example, while some units reported having an administrator who assisted faculty in the handling of research finances and human resources, in other units, researchers were responsible for all research budget transactions and human resource requirements. Those left with limited or no research support in their unit, especially junior faculty, appear to be disadvantaged at all stages including submission of grant applications, managing research projects, data collection and analysis, knowledge dissemination, community engagement, graduate student training and publication. This context also impacts negatively on the researcher—research services relationship, leaving both sides at times frustrated and discouraged.

The tri-council agencies are in constant change, introducing new priorities, modifying the scope and definitions of priorities, and, changing what is required to hold, administer, and report on funding. This places additional pressure on faculty who would like to, or are already, engaged in research. Support staff in departments, and those hired by faculty researchers are required to keep pace with research regulations and requirements and to liaison with college-administrative staff and the Office of Research Services. However, with multiple demands on their time, they are not often able to keep track of the various changes, nor are they able to properly support research in their departments. All of this indicates that a web of faculty, research administrators and facilitators, and support staff support research at the university. Much of what is done in the application and administration of research projects is bound by rules and regulations determined by outside funders and is ever shifting and changing with new research programs, funding formulas and team requirements. This does not create an optimal climate for researchers, unit support staff, or the Office of Research Services. In response to this, the university has added college supports, such as research facilitators, new requirement for internal peer review of proposals, set timelines that require researchers to begin planning grant submissions well in advance, and other efforts to improve conditions for research success at the University of Saskatchewan. These appear to be steps in the right direction and their value considered by TransformUs in the implementation phase.

Not surprisingly a correlation exists (as pointed out by the Task Force reports) between successful research programs, groups and centers, and having increased resources (e.g. from the university, tri-council funding, provincial funding, private industry), supports and designated space. This raises questions about faculty promotion and tenure requirements, departmental designations and annual departmental work assignments for faculty who do more or less research, and for those who work in optimal research conditions at the university and those who do not. In an increasingly competitive national research climate, consideration of an increase in research-intensive faculty (e.g. 75% protected time for research) beyond the CRC program may be required for the University of Saskatchewan to maintain its U15 status and to leverage funding for research and research infrastructure that generates high level research along with financial and other resources and benefits for the university, province and local community.

Quintile Placement

The TransformUs implementation phase is faced with the inherent challenge of translating prioritization quintile recommendations to research entities. For example, a ranking of "3" suggests a program ought to be retained but with potentially reduced resources. Determining how a ranking in quintile "3" applies to a research entity raises a number of questions. For example, would the university recommend a continuation of the research program, but with a curtailing of investment in it? Implementing a recommendation that could potentially limit the research program's ability to augment the caliber and quantity of its outputs may be less beneficial to the university than identifying ways to support and improve the success of the research program through increased financial, human and material resources.

The final placement of research entities in the various quintiles largely corresponds with the amount of resources the entity has, with well resourced programs being more likely to be placed in quintiles 1 and 2 and less funded research programs being placed in the bottom three quintiles. While this is not surprising, it does draw attention to how important it is for research entities (whether located in a department, center, or cluster) to have the attention of the university and by extension receive added

benefits and supports to build successful research projects, teams and programs. It also draws attention to the increasing role that high tech, large investment, and high impact (industry and societal) research has in shaping our university's identity locally, provincially, nationally and internationally. While this is not bad, in and of itself, what effectively happens (and is reflected in recent changes to tri-council agency funding) is that many types of research that are believed to fall short in these areas are deemed to be less important or even irrelevant to the identity of the university. This concern was raised by some of our committee members who felt that in certain instances the Task Forces failed to recognize the important role of foundational disciplines, such as mathematics, and the research that is undertaken in departments that have less of an applied research focus, but nonetheless whose core value is reflected, for example, in high level of service teaching to supports other units to train their students.

A further concern raised in our discussions is that even if the 98 programs placed in quintile 5 were eliminated, these programs do not consume 3% of the university's operating budget. Therefore, additional savings must be found from programs placed in the other quintiles.

Program integration

The committee's view is that the approach adopted by the university to require the Task Force committees to differentiate among programs gave a new perspective of the university as a whole, however it is one that fails to reflect the complexity of departments, colleges, schools, administration units, and the university overall. An example given was that units were required in their reports to the Task Force to distinguish between three-year, four-year and honours programs, and then tease research out as a separate program. As students in three-year degrees contribute seats in programs, it is not clear that offering fewer options to students by eliminating three-year degrees would result in any cost savings or unit benefit. In reality, unit programs are intertwined and eliminating a program may have unintended consequences for students, faculty, other programs or aspects of the unit.

The committee feels that actions identified in the implementation plan must not be made in isolation, because individual programs (as categorized in the report) are not discrete entities. For example, the reduction of resources in one program may negatively affect a department's or unit's ability to continue to offer related programming. As a result, the implementation plan will require careful consideration in order to create a plan that goes beyond the budgets reported in the templates. Consideration of the integration of programs will be key to achieving continued program success post TransformUs.

Interdisciplinary research

The Academic Task Force report confirms the committee's view that efforts to enhance and encourage interdisciplinary research (student training, research teams) require investment of resources (financial, human resources, dedicated space). As interdisciplinarity is the desired make up of research teams by federal and provincial funding agencies, as well as private industry (and we believe has the potential to produce cutting edge and innovative research), investment in interdisciplinary research teams that prioritize student training, including undergraduate, graduate and post doctoral trainees is necessary. A mechanism for supporting emerging and existing researchers/trainees/teams that have potential to address societal needs and build research and other capacities beyond what can be achieved within a single discipline is an important consideration at this time in the university's history. In doing so, the university will enhance student training and overall "the student experience" at the university. This has become particularly evident to the RSAW, who, for example, has heard from students who have

participated in interdisciplinary undergraduate research and from undergraduate and graduate committee representatives who have brought to the attention of the RSAW the struggles that students in interdisciplinary programs currently face in negotiating their way through a program that is not located in a single department.

College of Medicine and Health Sciences

The RSAW committee recognizes that the College of Medicine is going through restructuring in efforts to address the shortfalls that have resulted in the college being placed by accreditation bodies on probation. Research within the college is of significant concern, particularly clinical research which is underdeveloped, yet a necessary component of any strong and vibrant College of Medicine. The absence of a strong clinical research program as a centerpiece of the college raises questions that we feel can and must be addressed through the planned restructuring of the College of Medicine and possible changes through TransformUs to administration units, particularly the Office of the AVP Research—Health, whose central purpose is to build robust health research across population, clinical, biomedical and social science disciplines.

College of Graduate Studies and Research

The RSAW committee's discussion of CGSR's placement in quintile 5 is largely based upon our January 23rd discussion of the Graduate Education Review Committee Report and its relation to the Task Force reports. Decisions about the future of CGSR we believe require a number of considerations, first and foremost support of new and continuing graduate students and post doctoral fellows. Both the Transformation Task Force reports and the Graduate Education Review Committee Report are important resources for decision making, and the committee agreed with many of the recommendations in these reports. It was pointed out, however, that any savings resulting from the disestablishment of the CGSR must factor in the resources required at the college level as the administrative responsibilities formerly carried out by the CGSR are devolved to colleges.

Future program prioritization exercises

Any future actions similar to the TransformUs process should require an auditing of the financial information provided in the templates so that an enhanced systematic approach is employed, based on the realization that many units undervalued programs not performing well, and others placed a greater proportion of resources in programs that were performing well.

Concern was expressed that if the process is perceived as being flawed, then the implementation plan has as its basis an incomplete assessment. A systematic apportionment of resources in a standardized format is required of a future process. For example, some resources committed are not readily apparent or overlooked, such as faculty member contributions across the university toward interdisciplinary programs. As the approach was not a peer review of programs, some committee members felt it was necessarily a blunt instrument, and a more discipline-based approach is suggested in the future. However, others commented that a peer review process might leave out certain stakeholders, such as students.

Members had differing views on whether the process was damaging to the university due to perceived competition created among programs and the anxiety that was generated by the exercise. In response to the question of whether the process created or deepened rifts within the university

community, or whether it caused the community to pull together to create a more common understanding, the main view of the process being negative was directly linked to the association of the reports with budgetary reduction. Further, some felt the process created a great deal of stress for faculty, staff and students. Other members referred to the usefulness of the review as a more honest approach at a time when the university is under budgetary restraint, as it identified where research efforts are focused and where curriculum renewal is required.

Additional thoughts on future program prioritization included a different view of peer-based assessment whereby representatives from the areas that were being reviewed were at the table during key discussions. For example, if the Support Services Task Force were able to draw in to key discussions representatives from central units who had institutional perspectives informed by awareness of the national and international landscape, this would provide important information to inform rankings. In response, however, other RSAW members noted that the diversity on the task forces, including student participation, was a strength given the expansiveness of the review.

As the primary cost and revenue driver in a department or non-departmentalized college is their highest-level academic program (typically a PhD, Masters or honours degree) the ranking of that particular program very much determines a ranking for that unit. As a result, the ranking of any lower level program in the same discipline becomes largely irrelevant, unless the lower level program is ranked higher than the highest-level program, and the highest-level program is ranked in quintiles 4 or 5. In future program prioritization exercises, it would be more efficient to look at the highest-level program for every department or non-departmentalized unit, and if that program is found to be deficient, to then review the lower level programs.

Conclusion

The RSAW committee agreed that the TransformUs name was not appropriate for the given purpose of the exercise and recommended that in the future a name more closely describing the process as a program prioritization exercise would be better. Our report covers a number of areas, however we want to acknowledge that there are many areas of research, such as discussion of the low ranking of the School of Public Health, that were not covered in this report but are relevant to our committee and the upcoming implementation plan. It was simply impossible in the time period for feedback to go into further detail; however the RSAW will continue to inform the TransformUs process in the upcoming months. Any shortfall within the report should be attributed to Dr. Tait who drafted the report, and any benefit drawn is the result of the hard work of the RSAW committee members who contributed their time and energy to producing this document.

Sincerely,

Caroline L. Tait

Caroline L. Tait

cc   Brett Fairbairn, provost and vice-president academic