

**The University of Winnipeg Faculty Association's Response to  
"The University and Community Learning: An Evolving Mission" (L. Axworthy)**

The University of Winnipeg Faculty Association (UWFA) views the above-named "policy paper" with some alarm. The "mission" that is proposed in the policy paper reads like that of a community development agency or of a K to 12 community school, rather than that of a university. Serious implications for funding and resource allocation go unaddressed in the document, and the false impression is created that there is a campus consensus that our greatest current priority should be community learning. No such consensus exists. The Academic Plan Update, approved by Senate on June 15, 2009, presents Community Learning as one of five primary outcomes identified. The others are Academic Excellence, Sustainable Operations, Student Diversity/Access, and Outstanding Student Experience. The current focus on community learning raises the question of how academic excellence and outstanding student experience are to be enhanced if our limited funds, time, and energy are centred upon community initiatives. In the position paper, anecdotes, occurrences, opinions, catch-phrases and ideas are strung together in such a way as to suggest that the university's present mission and activities are somehow inadequate or wrong-minded (despite a lack of evidence to that effect), that change is required, and that a "mandate" for a particular sort of change somehow has emerged on campus. In point of fact, however, we are presented with no real evidence that these implications and assertions represent anything other than the opinions of the author, and not those of any academic university body.

In the context of serious erosion of faculty self-governance by such practices as the sidelining of Senate in decision-making and the disappearance of the General Faculty Council (leaving no body in existence that represents the faculty broadly), the appearance of a proposal for fundamental change in a "position paper" is unsurprising, but worrisome. References to the faculty throughout the document are glancing, except for the faculty who are involved in Dr. Axworthy's favoured initiatives. On p.4, we read that community-based work that occurs as part of faculty members' teaching and research presently stems from "the traditional effort by individual faculty members to define and shape their specific teaching and research agendas," but that if the new "mandate" proceeds, "there will have to be a more comprehensive and well-organized approach." This and other statements in the document skate perilously close to the view that academic freedom is either irrelevant or a hindrance to progress. The same impression is created right in the opening paragraph of the document, in which Dr. Axworthy appears to endorse the view that the history of residential schools ought to be a "required subject." We would remind the President that although universities might have course requirements, they do not have "required subjects," that attempting to control the teaching of history has an unappetizing history of its own, and that the teaching faculty exercise academic freedom in determining what shall be taught in their classrooms.

This is not the only instance in the document where the experiences and aspirations of aboriginal people are used as fodder for the "community learning" argument. On p. 4, we read that "in listening to the teachings of Aboriginal scholars and elders who have enunciated the responsibilities that bear on all institutions occupying the lands of Treaty One, it is clear that our University has a special

duty to honour the commitments to education embodied in that Treaty by working to advance educational opportunities for First Nations people.” By wrapping the suggested “mandate” in the cloak of fairness and justice for First Nations, Dr. Axworthy begs a question whose answer is conspicuously absent throughout the document. Why do we have a “special duty” to retool ourselves for “community learning?” Why do our responsibilities in this regard exceed those of the University of Manitoba, Red River College, the school boards, and the provincial education and training ministries? Arguably, the University of Winnipeg has less responsibility to provide access to disadvantaged groups, rather than more, because we are relatively underfunded and do not receive anything even beginning to resemble the sort of funding needed to provide support for access programs. As it is, many faculty perceive that we enroll too many students who are inadequately prepared for university-level work, provide them with none or little of the help they need, allow them thus to fail or drop out, and thereby falsely raise (and then dash) community expectations for university success.

Further to the issue of funding and scarce resources, we read on p. 18 that “our new Librarian is ... seeking ways to collaborate with collaborate with... the public libraries on downtown outreach and education programs and ... exploring the potential to develop and maintain an online digital learning commons that would support both traditional academic work and community learning initiatives.” Perhaps nowhere on campus is it more clear than in the Library that a scarcity of funding already has been disadvantageous to academic work. Our professional librarians are already over-worked and understaffed. Adding these new responsibilities could only occur to the disadvantage of existing research and teaching.

On p. 24, we learn that “in our latest bargaining with faculty, teaching and community work have been accepted as a basis for promotion and tenure. Now it is a matter of making this clause more broadly operational.” Perhaps this was written by Dr. Axworthy’s “research and writing” assistant, and perhaps it escaped his notice when he reviewed her work. If not, we are astounded to learn that Dr. Axworthy seems ignorant of the fact that teaching and community work have been activities credited in our Collective Agreement for promotion and tenure since unionization occurred in 1981, and long before that as well. We certainly have no quarrel with the idea that community service and teaching could be more highly valued than at present in annual evaluations and in tenure and promotion decisions, but we do object to the implication that the UWFA somehow has been an impediment to doing so. On p. 21 we learn that “we are seeking ways to ensure that involvement with community and University learning initiatives is honoured, valued and rewarded, as are research and teaching, as integral parts of the professorial role.” As sole bargaining agent for the faculty, we would suggest that this is a matter for collective bargaining, and not one to be handled unilaterally from the President’s office.

Similarly, the suggestion on p. 21 that we might reserve seats in some Arts and Science courses for community members auditing free of charge is one that requires not only discussion with faculty, but also negotiation, as it raises workload issues. Any professor who has had auditing students in a class knows that it is certainly not the case that auditors consume no resources and do not require the instructor’s time. Especially if auditors are non-traditional students or lack confidence in their ability to succeed in university course work, they require substantial effort on the part of the instructor both in and outside of class, and their presence affects the way the course is taught. Once again, faculty are

already concerned that many first-year students are ill-prepared and do badly, and that we serve them ill by making it seem that they can succeed at university when we lack the resources to help them do so. Again, doing what Dr. Axworthy's paper suggests would require a major resource transfusion. On p. 23 it is argued that there should be "additional public cost added to the already strained budgets of the university system," because of the social utility of "community learning." Simply put, this is not the purpose of university funding. When such funding already minimally meets the needs of the university to offer the programs and conduct the research that reside at the core of its purpose, how can it be argued responsibly that new funding to the institution should be used for other purposes?

Finally, UWFA is concerned that throughout the document, there are signs of a lack of comprehension of, and regard for, academic governance structures. The Board is presented as the major body that must approve the suggested changes to the central aims of the institution, even though the content involved is academic content. The Board is in no position to understand or assess the impact of Dr. Axworthy's proposal on the academic functioning of the institution. Particularly troubling is the suggestion on pp. 22 - 23 that there should be an Executive Director of Community Learning who would bring the community learning programs into "the broad structure of the University," and who would work with a "Community Learning Council" composed equally of "members from the University and community." Nowhere in that suggestion is there any recognition that academic programming is at issue, and that this is properly the role of Senate. Once more, it would appear that Senate is to be bypassed or to play a negligible role in the governance of what are arguably academic initiatives. (And if they are not academic initiatives, why are they being contemplated at a university?)

In sum, the document does not support the argued need for a dramatic change in the university's central goals and purposes, and it employs a variety of rhetorical tactics to claim a "mandate" for such change when no academic consensus for such change exists. It reveals a lack of understanding and respect for academic decision-making bodies and for faculty collective bargaining, and it argues for the diversion of resources that we do not possess into a function that is not central to the university's purpose. Apparently in the name of greater justice and resources for Aboriginal citizens, it proposes practices that might well constitute "false advertising" regarding the ease with which non-traditional students might expect to achieve success in university studies, because the level of resources needed to achieve the document's aims is great, and our funding and resources are seriously limited. Diverting any increased funding that we might achieve to this "mission" could occur only at the expense of our core academic purposes.

We believe that these and other related issues must be addressed by the relevant Senate committees and by Senate itself. We also believe that the full faculty must be consulted in a general meeting (and not by soliciting individual responses to the position paper) before this proposal is pursued further, and especially before it is presented to the Board for decision. Although the Board clearly has a strong role in determining "mission" and in determining fundraising priorities, it should not be asked to approve what is essentially an academic proposal in advance of its consideration by Senate and the university's faculty.