

Address to Faculty Board on Modularization proposal - final

Disclaimer: What I am going to say is as a regular faculty member thinking of all students across FAS, rather than on behalf of Department of Biology or even of the Undergraduate Studies committee, of which I am Chair.

Summary: There are definite positives to modularization (- as I have tried to say at every juncture so far). My point is that before going ahead, we need to 'press pause' and begin identifying and developing strategies to address/mitigate the negatives.

Outline: 3 major points, and a constructive positive example of an alternative or at least complementary approach to Modularization that would help to address the fundamental problem we are facing.

I'm going to start at the end – where FAS graduands become FAS graduates. I attended Convocation 10 days ago, recognising and celebrating the achievement that is a Queen's undergraduate education, and have been to at least 20 previous ceremonies. Each is different – but they all have the same profound similarities. Speaker after speaker after speaker over the years have used phrases like: 'Go forth and be Global Citizens'; 'The Rights, Privileges and Responsibilities of a Queen's graduate'; 'Be empowered to make a positive difference in society' – 'to make a contribution'. These phrases encapsulate the vision of our Undergraduate programs – to develop students' capacity for critical thinking, for originality and creativity, for intellectual synthesis, for challenging dogma, for reading, writing, and speaking effectively... for independent

learning. Is there anyone in the room who would not agree that Ontario, Canada, and the World need more people with those capacities?

Before us today is a proposal for the biggest structural change to undergraduate education across FAS in the past 21 years. This initiative has definite benefits for students in that it will provide flexibility, enable them to readily take double majors, and promote multidisciplinary learning. These are positive educational outcomes for sure. It will also make our Major degree structure equivalent to that of the other principal Ontario universities, although whether this is a good thing or not is at the very least debatable, although I will withhold on that. However, I do wish to point out that the Administration's use of the word 'equity' to describe this equivalence is bizarre and completely inappropriate. But, finally, and most importantly, given the current Queen's austerity-driven initiatives to substantially reduce teaching personnel, there is absolutely no doubt that modularization will have huge pragmatic benefits in terms of FAS's future capacity to provide undergraduate degrees at current rates of enrollment. My first point is that we need to start being open, honest, and truthful that pragmatism is the primary impetus for this proposal.

The problem for at least some of us here today is that institutions – perhaps universities especially – can only be effective if decision-making is based on some combination of pragmatism with vision. For me, the ultimate pedagogical vision of undergraduate education is to facilitate a student's rise from dependent to independent learning; so that they are then enabled for a lifetime of further advances in their understanding of themselves and the world around them; so that they can go off and explore, investigate, conceptualize, synthesize, and be creative/original; so that they can make a strong positive contribution to society. Yes, there are many, many ways of helping this process along across all our programs in large first and second year

classes, but the best ways are in small 3rd and 4th year classes - that's when you and your students can look each other in the eye, and you can see and feel their enthusiasm and respond accordingly. That's when you can best facilitate independent learning, and the generation and exchange of ideas. That's where the university's 'heart' beats strongest for undergraduates. That's where the pedagogical vision is most active.

So what's all this got to do with the proposed modularization initiative? It starts with the 4 tier 'pyramid' idea: students take large first year courses, and as they move up each year get a chance to take smaller, more specialised courses, ultimately perhaps taking a one-on-one research thesis or mentorship. The reality is that there's a significant portion of students currently completing FAS degrees who have never taken a small seminar course, or a specialised lab or field course, let alone a one-on-one honours thesis – just medium/large classes, maybe group projects, but no individual 'capstone' experience. If students take a double major, they will be climbing two different pyramids, meaning most of their time and energy will be tied up in the lower tier courses, and their opportunities to take 4th year courses will be particularly limited. So what is the net effect? Here's my second point: Proportionally more of our undergraduate students will complete their degrees by taking only medium/large courses...proportionally more of our students will not get, or be encouraged to take, the chance to experience the true 'heart' of what we can offer them, the chance to experience the best parts of our pedagogical vision at work.

My third point is about changes in class-size. The bare truth is that - with or without modularization - the administration's austerity-driven push for fewer full and

adjunct profs, fewer lab instructors, TAs, and other teaching support staff, when combined with the hope of maintaining current student enrollment numbers will mean class size on average across FAS must increase in the future. Despite multiple denials by the Administration, it still seems to me that class size will be affected in particular ways by modularization. For example, there'll be considerable pressure on whatever 1st, 2nd and 3rd year courses are popular for double Majors (and Minors) to grow to accommodate the increased demand. As a consequence, our more limited teaching personnel resources in the future will have to be focussed on delivering those courses. The downside that concerns me most is that small 3rd and 4th year specialist courses will be the 'lowest hanging fruit' when those resource pressures strike, leading to increased enrollment pressures for those classes, switching them to a biannual cycle, and even in some cases their elimination. I've seen hints of that in my own department already, as we start to discuss our personnel constraints. Bottom line: We'll still have some of these small courses, but less than now, and if any courses end up being eliminated, it is small courses that are most at risk. And by extension, it is small departments that are likewise most at risk.

What is absolutely extraordinary to me is that throughout all the administration's push for modularization over the past 15 months, there's been little or no talk of pedagogical vision. There's hardly been even an acknowledgement of any potential negative impacts, let alone any discussion of efforts to develop and incorporate specific measures to counter them. Overall, it feels like the concerns that many of us expressed have 'fallen on deaf ears' - pragmatism without pedagogical vision... and so we find

ourselves here today... with 'the cart pushed well before the horse'. Yes, a huge amount of administrative effort has already gone into developing and pursuing the details of implementing the modularization initiative across all FAS departments. Furthermore, many departments have already put much time into reviewing, considering, and formally approving, curriculum changes in preparation for approval of this initiative. In Biology for example, our UGSC curriculum expert Dr. Adam Chippindale's strategy has been to make our 'current major' into an SSP, revitalized with more optimal course options....and the new major would be a 'watered-down' version of that. Likewise, we have revitalized some of our other SSPs, but kept others as is, primarily because their strength is the integration (e.g. ENVBIOL SSP that requires courses in Environmental Philosophy as well as Community Ecology. I voted in favour of these very positive changes within our current program course options. And I note that, in our case, and perhaps in other departments, many of them (especially for the SSPs) can be readily implemented without the need for Modularization.

I fully acknowledge that Queen's FAS is experiencing a severe monetary crisis. Accordingly, I acknowledge that there are fundamental pragmatic reasons for modularization. But pragmatism alone is simply insufficient. We need, and have a responsibility, to handle this austerity wisely - not just as accountants, but as academics. In short, before pursuing this path, we need to first 'press pause', and then begin a meaningful discussion to develop some specific initiatives, aimed at enshrining our overall pedagogical vision. Let me give a constructive example of what could be done as an alternative or at least complementary to the Modularization. At the instigation of FAS administration, Departments could be encouraged to review their small 3rd and 4th year courses to see if some of them could be made 'capstone' deeper learning experiences (e.g. by adding a field trip, lab activities, guest lectures, additional

assignments etc...) so that they'd be worth 4.5 units instead of the usual 3.0. Assuming that such changes were small enough that no substantial increases in teaching workload would be needed, I think this approach could be readily implemented in at least some of our 3rd and 4th year courses. Many of my BIOL colleagues are voluntarily doing this already, and I for example teach a course that really should be 4.5 units because it has a full weekend of field trips that are currently not included in the contact hours. The key point is that if this approach were widely adopted across FAS, students would need to take fewer courses in total to complete their (current or future) major degree requirements. This approach would directly address the fundamental pragmatic problem of how do we meet students' total course credit needs despite a substantial drop in available faculty and teaching support personnel. But the real beauty of this approach is that - up front - it marks out the deep pedagogical value of small 3rd and 4th year courses, and would enshrine them/protect them/improve them.... as a specific part of the solution. And there's another completely separate and equally important benefit to this approach too: student well-being. All those stressed and anxious students who are currently struggling to complete five 3.0 course units each and every semester would have their load lightened – Don't you think that would be a wise move?

What exactly is my goal in addressing you today? I want to encourage each one of you to consider your position not just as a pragmatist, but also as an academic. Some of you will think: 'Okay let's vote it through and sort out those negative impacts afterwards'. No, I say. That's totally inappropriate. This is an academic institution – we need to do things right. Before voting in favour of this enormous change, we need to see some substantial time and energy specifically invested in addressing the inevitable negative impacts that go along with the positives of any big structural change. And some

others may think: Let's vote it through – it's up to the Departments to implement vision. No, I say! With such a profound structural change, we need - and should be getting – administration leadership on how to best protect our collective FAS pedagogical vision.

To me it is literally unconscionable to vote this through now. I want to attend future Convocations feeling that FAS has genuinely done its best to enact the pedagogical vision that is described in so many of the speakers' words. To live up to those words, we must have vision at the heart of every major decision - not overlooked as it has been over the past 15 months, or even as an add-on addition afterwards. And so finally(!) my question to the Administration here and now is: How can you reasonably ask me to vote in favour of this pragmatically-based motion which has some educational benefits for sure, but which has been developed to the best of my knowledge without consideration of potential negative impacts that impinge on our pedagogical vision?

Or to put it more personally, how could I vote in favour, and not feel some gnawing discomfort that I had not stood up for my pedagogical values as I sit and watch future students cross the stage at Convocation ceremonies?

Thank you all for giving me the time to express these views.