

Senate Question Period

February 28, 2012

2. From Senator Jones on the Principal's Report to Senate, January 24, 2012

<http://www.queensu.ca/principal/speech/SenateJan.html>.

Written responses provided by Principal Woolf.

1. Your summary of the “core suggestions of the [Academic Planning] Task Force” makes no mention at all of writing and communication skills--and yet the promotion of discipline-specific training in writing and communication is a “core suggestion” of the Plan. It is a recommendation, moreover, that had very broad campus support in the Task Force's consultations. As the Academic Plan states:

"We recommend that Queen's foster Academic Integrity at its roots by enabling its students in the communication skills and discursive conventions appropriate to their chosen fields of study university students need to learn not just general communication skills but also the discursive / communicative practices appropriate to their specializations." (November Draft, as approved by Senate, p. 21)

As it also states,

Beginning with its informal session in Senate in February 2011, the APTF has consulted widely on the propositions “that the performance or mastery of a discipline is largely coextensive with the ability to write in that discipline and that writing should therefore be taught in connection with disciplines.” Support for these propositions has been strong, though some have argued for general writing courses at the first-year level in lieu of or in addition to discipline-specific training, and still others worry that required first-year writing courses would infringe on time and resources needed for teaching disciplinary content. Support for improving the teaching of writing in general has been practically unanimous. (p. 22; see original for notes and documentation)

As one faculty member enthusiastically suggested, Queen's should strive to be known as “the University you go to, to be produced as a writer” (p. 21). Do you support and hope to implement the Academic Plan's recommendations for improving the teaching of writing?

Senator Jones asks whether I “support and hope to implement the Academic Plan's recommendations for improving the teaching of writing.”

I am in full support of measures to improve the teaching of writing at Queen's, and look forward to the work led by Provost Alan Harrison, which must include Faculties, academic units and individual instructors, for the implementation of this critical aspect of the Academic Plan.

2. You observe that in government, universities “are frequently contrasted with the colleges that are seen as more flexible, quicker to adapt, and *more responsive to the needs of the employer marketplace*” (emphasis added). Do you accept this as a fair criticism of the universities--i.e., as a complaint that they should act upon? Given that Ontario's post-secondary system has, since the

1960s, allotted career and trades training to colleges and held universities responsible, among other things, for research and liberal education, is it not actually appropriate that the colleges should be the “more responsive to the needs of the employer marketplace”? As the Principal of a major Canadian research university, are you committed to reminding our politicians of this important distinction?

Senator Jones asks if it “is...not actually appropriate that the colleges” should be “more responsive to the needs of the employer marketplace” and if I am “committed to reminding our politicians of this important distinction.”

As for a distinction between colleges and universities in terms of responding to an employer marketplace, we do no service to our students if we fail to provide them with the critical skills, attained through a liberal education, which will see them capable of contributing to Canadian society. At the same time, we must be sensitive to the needs and desires of our students and of the greater society. We must teach the foundational skills of critical thinking and clear and expressive oral and written skills, but we may need to adapt the areas in which we teach specific skills. The processes by which this will occur will, again, be developed by Provost Alan Harrison in concert with Faculties and academic units.

3. You say “it is imperative that we move to a system where departments are more equitably funded for the level of teaching and research activities they undertake *and in which money in support of teaching, quite simply, follows the student*” (emphasis added). Would you please explain exactly what you mean by saying that money should “follow the student”? Would you agree that a publicly funded university is duty-bound to allocate resources to the support of research and teaching in some disciplines that are socially necessary but lightly subscribed or unremunerative?

Senator Jones asks what is meant by the idea that ‘money should “follow the student”’ and whether I agree that “a publicly funded university is duty-bound to allocate resources to the support of research and teaching in some disciplines that are socially necessary but lightly subscribed or unremunerative.”

As I noted above, there are some skills, like critical thinking, speaking and writing, which we must support. However, we must recognize that there are parts of the University where demand is higher. We cannot ignore that data. At the same time, where there is the potential for innovation in teaching and learning, there should be support. More detail on this will be found in the new budget model that Provost Harrison is developing.