ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND PROGRAM REVIEW:
TENSIONS AND POTENTIAL CONFLICTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the issues that arise in the conduct of a university-wide program review with respect to academic reviewers from other institutions and academics and administrators of the target program and university. Tensions leading to conflicts are identified in two areas: engagement, and response; these are explored and discussed through the experience of six years and 150 program reviews at the University of Saskatchewan. Academic freedom and responsibility are at the heart of these issues which play out through several perspectives, namely among the external reviewers and the review team, among academics within the program unit whose program(s) is/are being reviewed, and among senior university administrators whose consideration is accountability and program quality. Macro tensions and conflicts emerging from these observations are those of academic freedom in an age of accountability and assessment.

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Introduction and Background

In 1999 the University of Saskatchewan began its first-ever round of program reviews conducted systematically, and campus-wide, and encompassing all degree programs designated by discipline and level (undergraduate and graduate). Reviews were grouped by Colleges (Commerce, Education, Agriculture, Medicine and so on). These program reviews are not departmental reviews, even though in most cases programs are housed in and administered through departments. There are numerous programs contributed to through numerous academic units, though usually there is a home department. Interdisciplinary programs rely on several units for course delivery and have no designated home unit. These latter programs too underwent review. Graduate programs (master’s and doctoral, but not diploma programs) are the responsibility of the College of Graduate Studies and Research, though the programs are offered through departments and other colleges, were also reviewed. (In the graduate program review process, no distinction was made between master’s and doctoral programs of study within units.)

For the purposes of Systematic Program Review (SPR), units nominated external reviewers whose curriculum vitae were then requested by the Academic Director of SPR who reviewed them and made a recommendation to the SPR Executive (consisting of the Provost and Vice-President Academic, and the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research) who selected the review team. This team consists of at least two external reviewers and an internal reviewer. External reviewers are recognized disciplinary experts with national and/or international reputations. Internal reviewers are from non-cognate disciplines in other Colleges who are also senior faculty members with experience and understanding of university governance through their involvement in major university committees or through past administrative appointments. These internal reviewers have also established reputations on campus and are respected for their contributions to their home disciplines, their Colleges, to the University community, the profession, and often to the province of Saskatchewan. Many also enjoy national, even international, recognition in their disciplines.

The review team arrives on campus having read a detailed self-study sent a month in advance, prepared by the unit and going back through five years of the program(s). Onsite, the review team meets with senior administrators, faculty and staff in the department(s)/unit(s), students (undergraduate and/or graduate in each year of the program), alumni, and College administrators over the two or three days they are on campus. The reviewers are then responsible, as a team, for writing and submitting within one month a report which includes grading the program(s) using assessment categories A, B, C and D, and including recommendations for program change.

When the report is received it is read by the SPR Executive to determine whether it meets the minimal expectations before being released to the department/unit for its response (one month), then on to the College for its response (to the report and to the unit’s response), then to the Planning Committee of University Council. Finally, University Council itself receives the report.
and releases it to the University community and announces the outcomes publicly through press releases and through the official campus newspaper.

The review team is provided with a template with which to frame its report, if it so wishes -- almost all review teams use the template provided. The minimal demands of the SPR Executive for the report are: that it review and report on the programs under review, using the criteria provided and featured in the self-study; that it recommend a grade for each program; that the reviewers not take on the role of advocates for the programs or the unit; that the language used in the report match the descriptors for the assessment category recommended; and that recommendations be made.

If the report fails to meet these expectations, it is returned to the review team with the request for more information or for clarification. Tensions around *engagement* arise when the SPR Executive, and the University community asks: What can we rightly and justifiably expect of external reviewers who have accepted an invitation to review the program(s), and who have been promised an honorarium for their voluntary efforts upon receipt of the report? Reviewers as respected scholars are academic leaders: they may or may not have had administrative experience in the academy; all are familiar with the concept of academic freedom as it applies to the search for knowledge through research and scholarship, and for the dissemination of disciplinary knowledge and methodology to students through instruction which includes programs. However, they do enjoy academic freedom and they know that they are neither asked, nor expected, to bow to the wishes of administrators nor to the desires of their disciplinary colleagues at the University of Saskatchewan. (Despite attempts to locate external reviewers who are highly regarded in the discipline under review, and to avoid associations that might compromise an unbiased examination of the program, we have found that academic communities in Canada, and in some disciplines throughout North America, are small enough to disallow total anonymity.)

### Academic Freedom

Universities have struggled with the concept of academic freedom for centuries, usually in relation to the state or church. But in modern times, and certainly since the industrial revolution, academic freedom has played out as a debate more in contestation with the modern industrial and commercial age, where increasingly research and knowledge has become aligned with industrial, technological, scientific, military, and commercial development and application. In this current post-industrial era, when government funding for public universities is dwindling, universities are encouraged to seek “partnerships” with business and industry, to the extent that much research, and prestigious research chairs, and being funded directly by corporations, and applied research and development is the expectation and even the mandate. (Even capital projects are being funded by corporate interests, especially in business and some medical schools where entire buildings and programs are named for prominent business figures or corporations.)

Pincoffs (1975) claims that academics generally mean by academic freedom the right to pursue the truth unhindered (p.viii). Further, he submits that justification for protecting academic freedom must begin with the aims of the university; Pincoffs quickly goes on to suggest that “there is general agreement that universities aim at the discovery, publication, and teaching of
the truth” (p.xiii). However, Jones (1975), in the same book, states that universities have become much more than places dedicated just to seeking the truth: there is a multiplicity of goals, and there are more expectations than just the pursuit and transmission of knowledge, thus it is not surprising “that these other demands sometimes assume a higher priority” (p.49). Jones concludes by saying that “the basic idea is that such [academic] freedom allows us to determine better what we OUGHT (emphasis mine) to do” (p.50).

This notion of what we “ought to do” is a central one to my argument in this paper. When respected and renowned reviewers arrive on campus to review academic programs, they face their academic peers. The external reviewers for SPR at the University of Saskatchewan have been recommended by the faculty members of the department or unit. When the reviewers submit their report, with recommendations for program change, for administrative change, for curricular revision, for (re)deployment of human resources, they are stating what the department or unit, and its faculty members, in their collective and reasoned opinion, ought to do. (The review team at the outset is reminded that this is a program review, not a department review, and that they should not assume an advocacy role for either the program or department.) The department or unit may find some of the recommendations unworkable or, for good reasons, unsupportable or unsustainable, but to dismiss the call for change because it defiles academic freedom seems irresponsible to this writer. My point is that academic freedom without academic responsibility in the context of program review undertaken by peers is a one-sided and self-serving cause. Having established the connection between academic freedom and program review in the context of peer recommendations for change brings me to the first tensions and potential conflicts that centre this paper, namely engagement.

The Tension of Engagement

Academics cherish their academic freedom, their right to explore areas that arise conceptually or experimentally through their discipline, without restraint driven by commercial prospect or expectation, nor by political correctness, or even social rectitude. However, with freedom comes responsibility: to one’s research and teaching partners and colleagues; to one’s institution (being that universities are administered and governed through the collegial process); and to members of society at large.

I argue that when external reviewers commit to a program review at another university, they take on a responsibility to their colleagues at that institution, to the discipline itself at the core of the program being reviewed, and for which they have been identified as experts, and to the institution who has invited them to provide expert and unbiased counsel. Though external reviewers may bear no legal responsibility, I argue that they are bound BY an academic and collegial responsibility. When external reviewers neglect to fulfill, or to adequately fulfill, their commitment as an external reviewer, they is conflict between their dual role as academic and reviewer.

It is at the point of receipt of the reviewers’ report by the SPR office that the tensions and conflict of engagement and responsibility first surface. The first tension I have labeled engagement, where the locus of responsibility lies with the external reviewers who, with the internal, make up the review team. I should point out that it is very difficult to tease out the level
of engagement and hence the locus of responsibility of the internal member of the review team. Although the internal member is a fully participating member of the review team, he or she is usually minimally responsible for penning the report. This task is undertaken by the external reviewers. The internal, however, along with the externals, is listed as joint author of the report.

There have been four instances to date where the SPR Executive has identified conflict in engagement and has returned the report to the external reviewers because it did not meet the minimal expectations outlined in the previous paragraph. Below I briefly describe each of the four circumstances where a report was not acceptable. (I use broadly-based disciplinary descriptors in place of program names.)

1. Professional Program. In this instance the report did not arrive and despite email messages, faxes and phone calls there was no response from one of the external reviewers, who was a Dean at his university in another country. Finally the President of our university phoned the silent external reviewer, who declared that he was too busy with other work-related and academic responsibilities at home to attend to the report. The report was left in the hands of the other external reviewer and the internal, both of whom had to cobble together a report without benefit of the notes from the delinquent external. The report was long overdue and the receiving College felt that its efforts and program had not been taken seriously.

2. Humanities Program. This program and review team held the promise of a fulsome and articulate report given the nature of the discipline and the caliber of the external reviewers. However, when the terse and hastily-prepared (and long overdue) report arrived, it barely met minimum requirements and was returned for elaboration and rationalization of its recommendations. What was returned was an identical core report but with two appendices, one the draft of a paper for submission to a journal with one external reviewer as co-author, and which had little relevance to the report. The second appendix was a funding application to support a recommendation that the unit seek funding for a suggested initiative. The second version of the report was reluctantly accepted, the SPR Executive believing that returning it again would be futile. However, the Academic Director of SPR was charged with explaining to the two units receiving the report why the document was the best procurable under the circumstances. (The SPR Executive even toyed with the idea of bringing in another review team.) The report offered little for the units to discuss. The responses of the two units involved in offering the programs were more thoughtful than the report itself.

3. Fine Arts Program. This review included several undergraduate programs, each of which was to be reviewed and assessed. One program was very small with few students enrolled, few graduates, and during some years, no students or graduates. Nonetheless it was to be evaluated; the program was still being offered and had been throughout the five years of the review period. The report neglected to grade the small program and was returned for completion. As well, the report took on the tone of advocacy for the department, arguing the place of the discipline and the department within the University. The SPR Executive concluded that the grades were unrealistically generous and unsupportable by the data and history of the programs. Nor were the assessment
categories awarded consistent with the descriptive criteria for the categories. The report was returned for an explanation of the grades given, and the ensuing rationale was rooted in the importance of the discipline to the University and the potential for the program, rather than being rooted in the quality of the existing program. The response of the Dean also indicated surprise at the assessment categories awarded by the reviewers.

4. Social Sciences Program. The departmental program reviewed included an undergraduate program and a dormant graduate program, the latter still officially available and listed in the University calendar. The review team submitted a report which neglected to grade the graduate program, and the report was returned asking the review team to assign an assessment category. After some delay the second report reluctantly included a grade, but one which the SPR Executive believed was not consistent with the data and criteria for the assessment category. In short, a lower grade was more fitting. This report also advocated strongly for both the department and for the discipline, and took on the unusual tone of chastising the University for having under-resourced the department and for having reneged on commitments for more faculty members. The SPR Executive was not pleased with the strong political overtones nor with the challenging nature of the report, believing it went well beyond the mandate for the review. Nor was it comfortable with the grades assigned both undergraduate and graduate programs.

When the external reviews arrive on campus, their first meeting includes admonition from the Academic Director to not take on an advocacy role for the program or the department. The Academic Director advises that the external reviewers are, by virtue of their chosen field of study, advocates for the discipline, and that this is why they were recommended and selected. However, there were occasions when a review team did indeed become an advocate for the department and/or a program. Such advocacy took two forms: lobbying on behalf of the department or unit for more resources, or arguing for greater prominence of the department within the university. The two forms of advocacy often overlapped. These actions present what Rorty (1975) calls a dilemma of academic freedom. She writes that there are occasions when the work of academics serves or betrays their interests (p.104). Those interests, in the case of SPR and the reports, are those of external reviewers acting on behalf of disciplinary colleagues and represent a politicizing of their exercise of academic freedom in the context of program review. Thus I suggest that academic freedom is not without political purposes on occasion.

**Tensions and Conflict of Response**

Issues of *response* come into play at two levels: among senior university administrators, and with faculty at the department or unit level. The questions/issues that underlie issues of response are, correspondingly: What are reasonable expectations of and for senior university administrators and university committees from departments and units? and, What are the academic responsibilities of departments/units when responding to what they perceive to be overly critical, harsh, even biased reviews? Let’s begin with the first issue.

The SPR Policy and Procedures approved by University Council in February of 1999 states that “the results of systematic program review will also be used to inform decisions on program revisions, program deletions and resource allocations, by Council and its committees, and by
university administrators” (SPR Policy and Procedures, 1999, p.2). SPR was also designed to assess programs -- the term “grading” and “grades” quickly became substitutes on campus -- with assessment categories A through D. As SPR went forward the implicit expectation developed among departments that resource allocations by central administration would be tied to SPR results. But because SPR was an initiative of the Provost’s Office and the Planning Committee of Council, units held expectations or rewards from the Provost’s Office or the Planning Committee as a result of SPR outcomes.

However, contradictory and asymmetrical expectations emerged. The recipients of A-rated programs expected more resources as a reward for excellence, enabling them to grow; C-rated programs expected more resources to enable them to strengthen their programs and achieve a higher assessment in a future round of reviews. But university committees have no means or authority to allocate resources, while budget allocations go to colleges, where they are internally allocated to departments. Unrealized expectations by departments led to some cynicism about SPR and its outcomes, and these disappointments flavored departments’ responses to reviewer reports.

A more drastic response to reviewer reports occurred in one instance where a social science department firmly rejected a report as being negatively biased towards research and scholarly productivity, and unappreciative of the teaching and graduate student supervisory efforts of faculty. This response called for another review with a new set of reviewers, despite the fact that the department had nominated the reviewers in the first instance.

Another extreme response emerged from a humanities department that had gone through a merger of smaller units at least a decade earlier. Two programs were given a D rating, the other programs all received a C; the D-rated programs automatically triggered the program termination process (which does not necessarily result in program termination). The report recommended major curriculum changes, accusing the programs of being highly traditional, outdated, and out of touch with contemporary disciplinary developments. The recommended changes included internal reshuffling of priorities and re-establishing subdisciplinary emphases. Despite the department’s response in agreeing with the need for curricular change, one group of faculty made publicly-announced warnings of program closures by the department and submitted a petition signed by some (not all) department members to the dean of the college. In short, a defensive attitude was assumed; the issues brought out in the report were ignored. The protests were taken on by some other faculty members in the humanities and by a group of humanities students, and the issue escalated to an attack on the humanities as a whole. The university president became involved after a vocal humanities student group held a campus protest and invited the media.

Units differed considerably in their responses to SPR reports, from outright rejection to full acceptance, from denial of the need for change to the deletion of a program and the development of a new one to replace it. Traditional disciplinary lines were solidly drawn and defended. In some instances the ideals espoused by faculty of critical thinking, critical analysis, and creative thought were not to be seen when it came to facing the issues raised by reviewers, and recommendations made in the reports.
Academic Freedom and Responsibility

The differential reactions and responses to program review reports suggest that academics may be bringing to the exercise of response their conceptions of academic freedom: the right to pursue the truth unhindered with respect to disciplinary knowledge with its implications for curriculum and instruction, hence academic programs. Much has been written about academic freedom, little about academic responsibility. How do academics deal with conflicting “truths” when it comes to program review, when respected colleagues serving as external reviewers reveal “truths” about a program which conflicts with the “truth” understood by those who offer the program. Conflicting truths involve concepts of knowledge (what should be taught, course topics and the hierarchy of epistemology that are captured in courses which become curriculum); pedagogy (ways in which knowledge is brought to the attention of neophyte students); standards (what counts as sufficient or minimal student knowledge attainment); and technology (how tools and media interact with the discipline and pedagogy).

Rorty (1975) discusses a dilemma of academic and intellectual freedom that arises from the responses to SPR reports. There are occasions where academics betray their interests through their responses because they stand to benefit in some way (such as through pursuit of research interest), or because of a belief or ideology. Schauer (2000, p.18), speaking at a Canadian conference on academic freedom and the inclusive university, believes that academics should be as hard (critical) on their own ideas as they can be.

Stanley Fish (quoted by Smith, 2000), the literary response theorist, makes a somewhat cynical claim about the academic psyche when he states that academic administrators are incompetent, that academics get the administrators they want, that by getting the administrators they want they get downtrodden, which allows them to complain; and “by complaining they express their oppression, and oppression is a sign of virtue. Yet academics have great freedom to do their work without particular oversight or direction, and very little if any consequence” (p.22). Criticism is the outlet when academic freedom is exercised. I believe that this ethic surfaces in some the responses to SPR reports.

The changing nature of the university in contemporary times -- its need to engage the many communities it serves, its requirement to demonstrate and be accountable to governments who still provide the bulk of postsecondary funding, its need to partner with industry and commerce in the so-called private business sector -- have meant a focus on students (as client and consumer) and their university experience, which is almost exclusively through how students experience their program. To ignore, downplay, or reject a report that holds the promise of better, up-to-date, comprehensive, interdisciplinary (in some cases), collaborative programs that are likely to meet student interests would seem to be counterproductive for one’s own discipline, as well as being irresponsible to society. I believe we see this tension working its way through the SPR responses, at both departmental/unit and college levels.

Bernard Shapiro (2000), a university administrator who also held the post of deputy minister of education in Ontario during the 1990s, addresses the role of universities in a changing culture. He notes that there are high public expectations yet low public confidence and support for universities, not helped by recent popular complaints against universities that include neglect of
undergraduate teaching, fragmented fields of study, trivialized scholarship, conflicts of interest, and imposition of political correctness. He notes too that university studies have become far more professional in the scope of their curricula and far more practical in their orientation. Professional schools, such as commerce, engineering, and the health sciences, loom larger than ever before in enrolment and influence. The professionalization of curriculum and programs may be experienced by some academics as selling out to professions and corporate interests, along with the demise of their cherished discipline as they studied it and have lived it. Academics in the social sciences, humanities, and fine and performing arts, may perceive the looming influence of professional schools as successfully competing for dwindling university resources, to the detriment of their disciplines and programs. This tension may be new for those in departments and units who have never before experienced a program, or departmental, review.

There is also an epistemological tension in some of the responses to SPR program reports, one that derives from an ideology about knowledge and the knower. A scientific model of epistemology, dominant in much of the research funded and conducted in the modern university, has the expert discovering and reporting the “facts”. Yet this model runs counter to more contemporary theories of knowledge that arise out of the humanities, cognitive science, and education that place importance on the knowing subject and on the context of both the knower and situated knowledge. In this constructivist perspective there can be multiple truths, each situationally constructed and relevant. Within this framework, knowledge is socially constructed; facts do not exist independently of interpretation, theoretical perspectives, and assumptions about human nature. “Those academics who accept a theory of knowledge that recognizes how different standpoints can shape varying interpretations of truth and reality are more likely to be proponents of the inclusive university” declares Hornosty (2000, p.43). Thus some disciplines and departments may find themselves in conflict with competing epistemologies, such that to embrace program change may require a radical rethinking of the very nature of knowledge and knowing.
References


