

**FROM THE DESK OF ...**

**Academia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Towards both a research and a teaching-intensive university**

Anna M. KINDLER<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Vice Provost and Associate Vice President Academic  
University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

Address for Correspondence: Professor Anna M. Kindler, The University of British Columbia, Walter C. Koerner Library, 640-1958 Memorial Road, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2 Canada. Email: [anna.kindler@ubc.ca](mailto:anna.kindler@ubc.ca)

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## **Academia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Towards both a research and a teaching-intensive university**

Over two decades ago, when I first joined the University of British Columbia (UBC) as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Visual and Performing Arts in Education, I was immediately advised by my colleagues and my department Head of the importance of research to my academic career. One of the Associate Deans in my Faculty arranged meetings with junior faculty to advise us of upcoming research grant competitions and volunteered to review our research proposals. To help me successfully plunge into the competitive “publish or perish” culture of UBC, my department Head was available to offer feedback on my early papers. Yet, as far as my teaching was concerned, I was just provided with a list of course numbers and it was up to me to figure out from calendar descriptions and economically worded past syllabi what and how I was now responsible to teach. I initially took this lack of attention to my role as a university teacher as a reflection of my joining a Faculty of Education, and a possible assumption of my curricular and pedagogical competence based on the nature of my doctoral degree. Yet, I soon realised that my experience was shared by colleagues joining other Faculties, whose doctoral and post-doctoral experience provided them with minimal, if any, exposure to educational issues. There was no doubt in my mind and the minds of my contemporaries joining the academia in the 1990s, that our professional lives were to be about research, and that teaching was the necessary price to pay for the privilege to be an academic at a university with world-class aspirations.

Twenty years later, research remains a key prerogative for globally influential universities; at the same time, teaching and learning have gained new emphasis. A variety of factors have contributed to this shift, including budgetary pressures and an increased reliance on student tuition as a source of university revenue; a related drive to recruit and retain growing numbers of international students; and societal changes that have transformed students into educational clients demanding better value for their investment. Consequently, although international university rankings continue to overemphasise research, many universities around the world have embraced the challenge to more appropriately balance their research and teaching missions.

In this article, I will outline examples of key initiatives that UBC has undertaken, to position itself not only as a research-intensive but also as a teaching-intensive university. A common thread in these developments has been the belief that curriculum and pedagogy ought to be guided by scholarly inquiry that draws on the advances in cognitive science, insights from educational research and discipline-specific scholarship of teaching and learning. Furthermore, these initiatives have been framed by the understanding that, in order for this approach to take root at a Faculty and departmental level, there is a need for the presence of a cadre of faculty with primary responsibilities for educational advancement and leadership, well positioned and empowered to lead this process of change.

In 2007, UBC made a bold move to invest twelve million dollars in the Carl Wieman Science Education Initiative (CWSEI)<sup>1</sup>. Bringing on board a Nobel Prize laureate in Physics, whose research brilliance was paralleled by his passion for teaching and learning in science, constituted a pivotal step in what, over the past five years, has become a consistent drive to improve the student learning experience and outcomes at UBC. While the effort was focused on the Faculty of Science, CWSEI was developed as a catalyst for a broader educational change, inviting faculty across the University to pay attention to the ways in which research, scholarship and integration of technology can, and should, inform and support their teaching. By bringing in educational leaders capable of rallying colleagues to reconsider existing science curricula, basing curriculum re-design on research findings and validating new approaches by a structured inquiry, the CWSEI has accomplished more than “just” improving courses and programmes in several departments in Science. It has also made a powerful statement across the University that teaching and learning are more than intuitive endeavours, and that effectiveness and excellence within these domains do not always rely on the common wisdom or experience. By modelling a scientific approach to teaching, where experts convene to make decisions about what students should learn; where students’ actual learning is subjected to careful measurement and assessment; where curriculum, instructional approaches and incorporation of technology are adjusted based on these findings; and where the generated knowledge and experience are shared and disseminated, CWSEI became an important catalyst for education-backed-by-evidence at UBC. This positioning has been re-asserted in the 2010 *Place and Promise: The UBC Plan*<sup>2</sup> that specifically called for action to “review and revise curricula and pedagogy to ensure that they are informed by research on how people learn.”<sup>3</sup>

With CWSEI situated within the Faculty of Science, the University needed to step up central support for implementation of evidence-based education in other academic units. In the past, various offices supported professional development but not always in a coordinated fashion. The existing Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth was historically focused on professional development, and while able to provide assistance at a unit level, it was not structured to support the growth of such services. The Institute for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning was a separate entity; and the Office of Learning Technology responsible for instructional development and innovation in the applications of technology across various learning contexts and platforms, was yet another stand-alone unit. Two years ago, a decision was made to bring together the three units into a new Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT)<sup>4</sup> and to explicitly include in its mandate consultancy services to Faculties, departments and programmes to support scholarly approaches to teaching, and encourage scholarship of teaching and learning as a vehicle for continuing improvement. Recognising the importance of optimising the use of resources dedicated to teaching and learning, the Centre’s consulting division now has the benefit of an on-demand partnership with the UBC Strategic Decision

1 <http://www.cwsei.ubc.ca/>

2 <http://strategicplan.ubc.ca/>

3 <http://strategicplan.ubc.ca/the-plan/student-learning/>

4 <http://ctl.ubc.ca/>

Support (SDS)<sup>5</sup> team, which provides cost analysis of various curriculum approaches and analyses staffing required to support alternative instructional strategies and technological enhancements. This collaboration between the CTLT and SDS allows academics in charge of programmes to consider their options and choose only those that bring optimal learning benefits within the available resources.

Educational change in academia relies heavily on the engagement at the grass-roots level and unit-based educational leadership. Consequently, we looked for ways to enable Faculties and departments to develop their own relevant human resource base and expertise. In a large, comprehensive, research-intensive university, this is not a small challenge, given traditional reward structures and the primacy of research as a driver of faculty academic careers. Within the ethos of professional lives, where colleagues seek teaching buy-outs to free time for research, initiatives that involve programme development, curriculum revisions and pedagogical innovation tend to take a back seat. Colleagues who become engaged in these tasks are often novices who may not be versed in the relevant research and scholarship. The resulting discourse about curriculum design and pedagogical decisions tends to be guided more by intuition, past experience, and the interests of individual faculty members than by scientific inquiry. Market-driven faculty salaries, where outstanding research potential has to be compensated at a competitive level in order to successfully recruit and retain research stars, further makes departmental leaders vulnerable to perpetuating a culture where Heads may be reluctant to “waste” this kind of talent on education-focused work. Furthermore, although at UBC the scholarship of teaching and learning has been a recognised form of research for the purposes of promotion and tenure in traditional professorial ranks for some time, few academic units have taken advantage of this opportunity at the hiring stage, where the focus has continued to be on disciplinary (or interdisciplinary) research within the candidate’s cognate field(s).

It could be argued that UBC has long been well-positioned to develop curricular and instructional expertise within departments. Unlike many of our peer institutions, we have had for years a tenure-track teaching stream. However, the Instructor category, with only one step on the advancement ladder (Senior Instructor), was not designed to meet the current educational leadership needs. Historically, colleagues were recruited to these positions based on their excellence in classroom teaching and the Collective Agreement<sup>6</sup> language that defined these positions was silent on educational leadership. Instructors and Senior Instructors were expected to teach a significant number of courses, but there was no expectation and limited opportunity for them to serve as educational leaders in their units. In more recent years, Faculties began to make appointments into these positions in a more rigorous fashion, requiring that all teaching faculty not only have terminal degrees, but also demonstrated experience in curriculum design, innovative uses of technology and the promise of scholarly teaching. Yet, given a career track that included only one

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5 <http://www.treasury.ubc.ca/strategic-decision-support/>

6 Collective Agreement between the University of British Columbia and the Faculty Association of the University of British Columbia, Agreement on Conditions of Appointment for Faculty July 1, 2006 - June 30, 2010.

level of possible promotion and the relative lack of profile and importance, both recruitment and the impact of faculty members hired into these positions were limited by the existing structures. This track also lacked incentives for colleagues to invest their efforts in educational innovation outside of their own teaching.

Two years ago, the University made a decision to increase the demands, opportunities and value attributed to the contributions of faculty with primary responsibilities for teaching. We wanted to be able to more effectively invite, motivate and reward colleagues who come with strong disciplinary research backgrounds, but whose passions are closely aligned with the educational mission of the university, to impact on educational change.

The existing teaching tenure track has been extended to parallel the three-step ladder in the traditional professorial stream, and the title of Professor of Teaching was added to it as the culminating career step. At the same time, the language in the Collective Agreement has been revised to reflect the raised level of expectations at all ranks within this stream. All faculty members newly appointed to this stream must now not only hold a terminal degree in their respective disciplines and demonstrate ability and a commitment to teaching, but must also offer promise of educational leadership. It is now expected that, in order to be successful, faculty in this stream must not only keep abreast of current developments “in their respective disciplines” but also “in the field of teaching and learning.” Familiarity with the relevant scholarship of teaching and learning and educational research, and the capacity to model evidence-based teaching, have become central to the re-defined teaching stream. Colleagues in these ranks are expected to become curriculum and pedagogical leaders in their communities, and take significant responsibility for educational reforms. In the traditional professorial ranks, research, teaching and service are the three pillars of the academic career; in the new stream, teaching, educational leadership and service are expected. The prestige of the new Professor of Teaching title is intended to communicate not only the value of these contributions to the University but also the rigour with which this stream is now regulated. It is designed to empower colleagues whose professional lives are invested in these areas to serve as respected mentors in their units and motivate and support educational change. Finally, it is also hoped that this change will allow UBC to internationally recruit and retain star teaching faculty ready to advance educational change, and to create circumstances for them to have fulfilling and truly impactful academic careers.

Any change in culture is a process that takes time. We have stepped onto this road of transformation with no illusion that success will happen overnight. What I have outlined above is very much a work in progress at UBC; the verdict is still out on the long-term value of the specific initiatives implemented over the recent years. Our experience to date has clearly suggested, however, that, while having appropriate references to teaching and learning in the University’s mission, vision and strategic plans is critically important in initiating this culture change, it is the

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7 Collective Agreement between the University of British Columbia and the Faculty Association of the University of British Columbia, July 1, 2010 - June 30, 2012, Agreement on Conditions of Appointment for Faculty, Article 3.

tangible, overt and strategic actions that are the key for this process to unfold. We have come to believe that targeted investments in the development of curriculum and teaching practices that are research-based and informed by the scholarship of teaching and learning; adjusting forms of institutional support for teaching and learning so that they focus not just on the individual faculty members but are robust enough to offer support at a Faculty, department or programme level; empowering faculty responsible for programme development to fully understand the financial consequences of pedagogical decisions and thus be in a position to optimise the use of available funds; and investing in a diversified faculty complement, where those with primary responsibilities for teaching and educational leadership are purposefully recruited, valued and rewarded for their contributions, are some of the necessary steps on the road towards a university that can fully deliver on both its teaching and research mission.