

September 23, 2011

An open letter on Collegiality, Planning, and UTFA
to Cheryl Misak, Vice-President and Provost of the University of Toronto

Dear Provost Misak,

As requested, I am taking this opportunity to comment on the draft report of the Academic Planning Advisory Committee, and on your responses to the UTFA proposals. I place these two issues side by side, since they are closely related.

First, the draft academic planning document:

Any reading of this document is clouded by the fact that, in establishing the Academic Planning Committee, you ignored the UTFA proposal on academic planning of last October, giving the impression that the planning committee deliberates in willful ignorance of the faculty's collective voice. While I welcome the general idea of establishing an advisory committee on planning, I share the same concerns that have already been voiced by many colleagues about how this committee was established. As a result, the draft document risks repeating and formalizing the same procedural flaws that it is intended to respond to. Couched in a jargon of collegiality, it completely overlooks the problem that an administrative culture has arisen at U of T which speaks the language of collegiality while cynically pursuing a pre-established agenda. This was the clear message sent to faculty during the Arts and Science Planning Debacle of 2010 (allow me to call it ASPD2010). Yes, there is the need to think more carefully about the planning process, but there is also the need to acknowledge inherent problems in administrative culture at U of T. As long as these are not openly addressed, the problems that initiated the drafting of the Academic Planning Committee's document will repeat themselves.

This is evident in various places in the document. I will mention just two points:

In the Preamble there is no mention of the genesis of the advisory committee. It needs to be stated clearly that the main issue to be addressed is the failure of a top-down, secretive planning process in the Faculty of Arts and Science in 2010. Where did this process come from? Why did your office think it was the best possible planning practice? Why did it fail? How can we be sure it will not happen again? These are the questions that need to stand at the front of any planning document coming from your office. In the wake of ASPD2010, the question is how to ensure successful planning in future – successful in the sense that administration will oversee planning processes that conform to the ideals espoused in the University of Toronto's various mission statements. Because the failure of the 2010 A&S plan is not mentioned, there is no recognition of the fact that the structural deficit in the planning process has to do with the way administration currently perceives its relationship to faculty and to units. I see very little, if anything in this document that would actually prevent ASPD2010 from happening again.

On pages 7 and 8 you state that divisional planning should be conducted in accordance with U of T's overall values and mission, as set out in the *Statement of Institutional Purpose*, and you go on to list these values. Tellingly, you omit the core institutional value set out in that document. The U of T *Statement of Institutional Purpose* says: "The University of Toronto believes that it best serves Canada and the wider world by pursuing to the limit of its abilities its fundamental mandates of research and teaching in the spirit of academic freedom." What I miss in the draft planning document – indeed, what I have missed in the entire planning process – is any attempt to engage in the difficult question of how to realize the ideals of academic freedom in a climate of economic cutbacks. In fact, I haven't seen any indication that your administration even understands or cares what academic freedom is, or why it is so important in running a viable teaching and research institution, or why it is given such a prominent place in the university's policy documents.

This brings me to UTFA. Rather sensationally, and not entirely accurately, you state in your message of September 16 that UTFA's proposals would "hand ultimate control over matters such as academic planning and criteria for tenure and promotion to an external arbitrator." In fact, a mediator is precisely the correct person to preside over negotiations around implicit or explicit breach of contract, protocol or faith at any stage of the academic planning process; and an arbitrator is precisely the correct person to decide on the outcome of negotiations if no agreement can be reached. An arbitrator would not make decisions about the content of plans unless this was tied to breach of contract, contravention of protocol, etc etc.

You state that our core values would be betrayed by handing over the planning process to arbitration. Let us examine this. At what stage would the situation you describe take place in the course of a "normal" planning cycle, such as took place regularly before you became provost? The dean would, in consultation with your office and with unit chairs, make the terms of planning explicit. Units would conduct the customary self-review and set out the terms of their own unit's plan, much in the way described in the draft document. The dean would then strike a committee to evaluate the unit plans and a decision would be made regarding complement and other areas of development. The outcomes would be decided according to the overall vision of the university, and within existing budgetary limitations. In this normal planning scenario, there would be no need for UTFA to be involved, and in fact there would be no grounds for UTFA to evoke the mediation / arbitration process, even if it wanted to.

However, let us assume that a divisional dean informed units of the terms of planning, the units acted accordingly, and the dean disregarded the terms of the plan, choosing instead to strike a secret committee to evaluate unit plans according to unspecified criteria. Suppose the dean suggesting closing units, and misled faculty about the reasons for this, claiming academic reasons, but not being in a position to name any, and claiming budgetary reasons where in fact no budgetary analysis had taken place. I don't need to tell you that the scenario I'm describing is ASPD2010. Surely, Provost Misak, it would be in your interests, and in the interest of every member of the academic community to have a negotiating procedure in place for solving the resultant stand-off. Compare this to what actually took place in 2010 with the failed Arts and Science plan. A well defined role for UTFA would have prevented countless wasted person-hours on the side of faculty – faculty who were doing nothing more than defending one of the core principles of this university, academic freedom. It would have prevented the humiliation of

the administration, which, once it came to light that collegiality had been violated, had no procedure in place for restoring correct process. Surely, Provost Misak, if you respect your responsibility to the academic community and to the Institutional Purpose of the University of Toronto, you cannot object to a proposal that does not speak the sound-bites of collegiality, but that puts in place guarantees that collegiality and academic freedom are respected.

Since collegiality is a word you are using a lot, I'd like to conclude with a couple of observations about it. Collegiality is not a matter of decorum in debate, of not protesting too vehemently when we disagree; and it is not a matter of faculty placing its trust in administration and unquestioningly accepting its dictates. The fact that you appeal to us for collegiality is telling. Collegiality is not the purview of faculty. It is a recognition on the part of administration that administrators have better insight into the challenges facing the university and its divisions, but less insight into how this affects individual disciplines, and how individual disciplines can best address these challenges. In other words, collegiality dictates not that you instruct the academic body on correct responses to prevailing conditions, but that you put mechanisms in place for soliciting the advice of your colleagues, and that you listen carefully and sincerely to this advice. I see little or no evidence of true collegiality on the part of your administration. What is more, collegiality is not optional. Your office is obliged by the various mission statements of the University of Toronto to exercise collegiality, in its true sense, in all your decisions.

What ASPD2010 showed us is that faculty needs protection from arbitrary, ill-informed decisions. What I miss in your various responses to UTFA, Provost Misak, is a little humility, a little honesty, a recognition that your administration's current crisis in legitimacy is of its own making. Having provoked the widespread resistance to top-down decision-making, it is now cynical to appeal to our sense of collegiality. Yes, we want collegiality in academic decision making, but we also want guarantees that there are remedies for the academic body when your administration fails to live up to the standards of collegiality you are obliged, by virtue of your office, to respect. That is what the UTFA proposals are about, and that is why I support them.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "John Noyes".

John Noyes
Professor of German