

Can the University of Saskatchewan be a University the World Needs and Trusts without an Inclusive Vision for the Social Sciences? Reflections on the Signature Research Areas

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“No”.

You are probably not surprised by my answer to the question posed in the title. You may or may not be surprised to know that I support the strategy of establishing signature research areas (SRAs) in general, and I support the university’s choices of SRAs. This does not mean, however, that I do not have concerns related to the administration, financing, assessment, and reporting procedures related to the SRAs. My concerns, of course, may reflect my ignorance of facts widely known by others. However, having said that, it often seems to me that both what is reported and what seems unreported leave unanswered questions about the costs and benefits of the SRA investments. Such issues, however, will have to wait for another time. In this short article I restrict my com-

ments to the question posed in the title.

So, is the University of Saskatchewan *the* university the world needs? The answer is obvious – no. We cannot be *the* university the world needs unless the world’s needs for new knowledge and skills are encapsulated in the six SRAs. Of course, nobody, not even those responsible for identifying, instituting, resourcing, and promoting the SRAs, makes that claim. Having said that, however, senior university leaders and others do judge the SRAs to be an overall success (Chad, 2021).

The document entitled *Reflecting on our Signature Research Areas* is replete with nearly unbridled enthusiasm. The document consists largely of a litany of positive opinions crediting the six SRAs with all manner of institutional

accomplishments and successes. This is a good thing and something of which we all can be proud. It would have been appropriate, however, to set the long list of positive outcomes in the context of the institutional investments in the SRAs, the rates of return on those investments, and other foregone investment opportunities.

Foregone opportunities are alluded in the Reflection paper mentioned above: “We made new and unprecedented investments in research infrastructure while administrative structures evolved to support the collaborative use of that infrastructure” (p. 18); and “Collegial, community and peer support for the declaration of the six signature areas assisted university leaders as they made decisions to support and in some ways privilege the signature areas of research” (p. 18).

Based on many conversations I have had with colleagues from across campus, there is a feeling that the SRAs, and core contributors to them, are privileged by uni-

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versity leaders in many ways. Social sciences and humanities researchers I have spoken with acknowledge the benefits of contributing to SRA projects. Their involvement, however, is project based. There is no opportunity to develop and sustain a research program built on core discipline-defining issues and problems. Thus, engaging with SRA projects may be seen by some as potentially stunting one's career development, which in most cases requires faculty members to demonstrate substantial contributions to their disciplines. Being a tail on an SRA dog is not satisfying for many and may hinder a person's academic contributions as assessed by their peers. Perhaps, what looks like suboptimal engagement from one perspective, from another perspective reflects efforts to optimize disciplinary contributions and career development.

Among all the positive reflections I could find only two critical comments, and these were not of the SRAs themselves. Interestingly, the main lament seems to be the "uneven and sub-optimal ... engagement of social scientists and humanities scholars ... across our signature areas." Two reasons for this are offered. First, "Insufficient numbers of these scholars strongly identify with a signature area and their research." Second, "their involvement is often compartmentalized or not invited until after research has been conceptualized and funded" (Chad, 2021: 21). Why is this the case and how can these situations be corrected? No suggestions are offered.

Two go-forward strategies, however, are suggested. The first involves focusing more resources for a longer time in a research area which "might lend critical mass of intellect and resources and the ability to support the research with specialized infrastructure, which could result in Nobel-prize worthy discoveries" (Chad, 2021: 21). It is not obvious from the perspectives of humanities and social sciences which Nobel Prize is envisioned – Literature, Economics or Peace – or how greater engagement of social sciences and humanities scholars with the SRAs will enhance the likelihood of achieving that goal. It seems evident that the social sciences or humanities were not the focus of that reflection.

The second go-forward proposal is to "modify the ways that we measure and reward scholarly accomplishments" to take better advantage of interdisciplinary research within signature areas. For example, "In some areas of discovery, researchers in foundational and applied science might be linked more purposefully within the innovation pipeline to accelerate the movement of ideas through basic discovery to application, whether in commercial enterprises or in public policy" (Chad, 2021: 21). This makes me wonder exactly to whom this reflection is being addressed. It certainly seems to reflect a radical revisioning of the university's mission and autonomy, at least for those researchers in "foundational and applied science," and, I presume, also for social sciences and

humanities researchers who are more optimally engaged with the SRAs.

Although this vision does not explicitly exclude *individual* social sciences or humanities scholars from making supplementary contributions to the SRA programs of "foundational and applied" scientists, it also does not provide an obvious place or role for social sciences and humanities *disciplines* and, as I allude above, it may serve to further reduce our motivation to be engaged.

It is true, of course, that the social sciences can make contributions to the research and teaching programs in SRAs. And, to a limited extent, we do. The research traditions of the *social sciences*, however, differ from those of the *physical sciences*. The physical sciences address questions of fact related to the objective physical world. The social sciences also address questions of fact, but these are intersubjective and intergroup "social facts." Examples of social facts include issues of social inclusion and exclusion, social mobility, migration and immigration, social solidarity and social conflict, socioeconomic inequalities, citizenship, and social justice related to racism, sexism, gender identity, sexual preferences, ableism, ageism, and so on.

It should be evident that inherent in addressing social facts are issues of morality, law, and politics. It is impossible to set these issues aside in social sciences research. The physical sciences have been institutionalized in such a way that issues of morality and

politics often are bracketed in the name of objectivity and value-freedom.

It is naïve at best to ignore or deny the fact that the production and application of STEM-based knowledge and technologies through the “innovation pipeline” has contributed to unprecedented economic growth and development and improved the quality of life for many. At the same time, however, it is also naïve not to acknowledge that science, technological innovation, and economic growth also have negative environmental and social effects. Many have argued that the disruptive and negative effects are at the base of populist, nationalist, and xenophobic backlash against the expansion of the globalizing knowledge economy.

Failure to acknowledge the unpleasant does not make it go away. Indeed, doing so may well contrib-

ute to the growing distrust of science, governments, corporations, and universities. Any university the world needs must be a university it can trust. We can be neither needed nor trusted if we ourselves do not address the fact that the knowledges we produce and apply have real effects on the social and physical worlds. These effects are both positive and negative. But the costs and benefits are differentially distributed such that some reap more benefits and others pay greater costs.

One of the often-stated motivations for establishing SRAs focused on substantive issues, rather than disciplines, is to foster and promote interdisciplinarity. The goals of interdisciplinarity include creating new and better knowledge by asking *all* the relevant research questions, including those of both social and physical sciences. Also, as we become more actively and

intentionally engaged in applying research knowledge and technologies in ways that have both positive and negative consequences, we, as researchers and as an institution, will also need to proactively and reactively address the moral, legal, political, and environmental issues that result from our work. Social sciences and humanities disciplines, considered as full partners, can help the University of Saskatchewan to become a university the world needs and trusts.

The newly appointed V-P Research has announced his intentions to establish a Signature Research Area Advisory Committee. I believe this is a positive initiative that may give us the opportunity to conceptualize and support SRAs that also focus on the social, moral, legal, and political issues that are the central focus of much social sciences and humanities research. We will see.

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