

The Fractured University Administration

Sina Adl

Department of Soil Sciences
College of Agriculture and Bioresources

At the December 2021 University Council meeting, the Vice-President Finance and Resources (VP-F) was asked why he was reporting a surplus in the budget since previous university communications on the topic claimed that the university revenues were down and we needed more austerity. With the introduction of the new transparent budgeting process, Colleges have taken turn year after year receiving massive cuts to their budget with no assurance of program delivery stability. The School of Nursing, in particular, is in shambles with insufficient tenured faculty to both deliver the programs and attend tenure and promotion meetings year after year. Since Covid in March 2020, despite record enrolment and cost savings across the board, the university has claimed revenues are down and we need even more austerity. At the October Council meeting, in response to a question, the number of about one-half million dollars in monthly utility savings due to the pandemic was provided by VP-F to Council. The contradictory statements about revenue and all the talk of misery and austerity culminated in a magic surplus. But what is the plan that required so much of the budget to be moved out of aca-

demic units to provide such a surplus for the VP-F's spending plans? The VP-F was expected to respond to this question at the January 2022 Council meeting.

For years faculty have been raising problems with the malfunctioning of Connection Point, Concur, IT and security, UNIVRS, and specific policies built around these. (The stated aim of the shared services, according to its link on the VP-F website, is to improve the administration of the university). Connection Point staff turnover means there is no continuity with ongoing or unresolved problems. This faceless, nameless system doesn't allow anyone to complain about their performance. Issues that would have been resolved in a few minutes (by phone or in person) with an individual who had a defined responsibility, can drag on and on. Concur, introduced as a more efficient accounting and tracking system, is a brute to use, and wastes much time in moronic micromanagement and data entry about what hour you did what. Refunds and approvals take longer and cause unnecessary additional work and expenses. Bizarre edicts from the senior staff [under VP-F](#)

force faculty to book travel, even for out-of-the-way field research, through Concur and with a pre-designated travel agency. Travel is rarely cheaper, and itineraries unaccommodating and sometimes impossible. Introducing policy on IT security and the administration of computer hardware and software means you cannot even control which shortcut is on your desktop or install necessary research software. Trying to resolve simple computer issues drags on for weeks or months as your ticket gets closed prematurely, and you can't get the same person to continue resolving issues. We have become restricted to a choice of very few and often inadequate research computers (which might be acceptable for administrative staff); and soon Apple products are scheduled to be banned (what do we do with research software that needs Apple computers, and years of research files in Mac format?). And then there is UNIVRS, a software that doesn't tell you what to click, where to look, if something is submitted or not, and with many options for imaginary uses. Faculty face administrative silliness of Kafkaesque proportion¹. How did we get to this?

On the one hand, platform purchasing and contracting choices by VP-F directors, such as the examples above, are made without consultation with users, and fake-consulting is the pattern^{2,3,4}. On the other hand, when problems and issues are flagged, they are ignored. The standard response is to call these “exceptions” rather than acknowledge the scope of the problem. When senior university administrators are engaged on the problem, they seem ignorant of the issue and sometimes even surprised. Therefore, either Deans and staff are not transferring the problems to the staff under the VP-F, or the staff are hiding the problems from their superiors. It has been too many years for other explanations to make sense. Something is broken.

I am often reminded - in taxis and about the town - how little the general public understands “research.” A strange concept, I’m sure. Less acceptable and unjustifiable is the poor understanding of “research” by VP-F directors and their staff. It is evident from conversations over the years through diverse committees that these senior staff have no idea what we do as “research.” The functioning of Departments and Colleges or Schools is so foreign that instead of using correct terms to address people and their responsibilities, everyone has become a generic “people leader.” They do understand research is a source of revenue and there have been attempts to label faculty that were not bringing in enough cash as “research inactive.” In a well-run university, where the university administration embraces its role as support staff for faculty activities, they would ask

“will this make your life easier? Your work environment better? Improve your productivity?” Instead, we are simply told “this will make your life better,” with categorical rejection of any discussion, and with the counter-productive consequences that we have.

We know from colleagues at other universities that computer security, travel policies (with and without Concur), and university administrative practices don’t have to be this way. Better universities have handled the modern world more intelligently. The President and Provost have a responsibility to ensure that policy is developed to provide support for faculty teaching, research, and administrative oversight on university committees. Their inability to address persistent poor decision making under VP-F is absurd. We have a right and a responsibility to ask for justification of dumb decisions and how the university budget is prioritised.

There are clues to the perspective of the VP-F directors and their senior administrators. The VP-F response to Council questions about revenues being down due to Covid (October 2021), despite record enrolments and cost savings because the campus was mostly closed, referred to other sources of revenue without clarifying. Are these the income from leasing university land to malls (supposedly for scholarship funds)? From the construction of a hotel on university land? Which other income generating revenues? Are these revenues for academic programming, ie., the university’s mission? An article in the

Canmore newspaper [Rocky Mountain Outlook](#) dated 3rd of February 2021 reports the university is investing in a commercial mall with Innovate Canmore. Is justification for renting an office in Canmore for a professor the same as investing in commercial real estate development and lobbying the municipality for rezoning the land, to put a professor in it? The VP-F response to Council indicates revenues from investment projects are more interesting than the academic mission.

Faculty spend much time discussing amongst themselves university priorities and decision-making processes. Since complaints lead to nowhere and the university refuses to engage faculty (or Deans and most Vice-Presidents) on these issues, a more productive discussion is to contemplate corrections and fixes to the broken model. Imagine departments with sufficient office staff: a research secretary to handle the university’s “shared services” and platforms (research related aspects of our work such as graduate students, Concur, UNIVRS, IT issues, P-cards, etc.), and an academic secretary to manage the academic administration. A research-secretary for every so-many graduate students and faculty (and grant load) should not be hard to contemplate. It would be a better use of our time and resources than the current centralised, anonymised, dissociated, unaccountable model. The staff would be moved from the current pool of centralised staff. The idealistic notion that grad secretaries could be pooled, and any could handle any file from any department, did not work. We returned to grad secretaries handling department

students by program, but from far away offices. Similarly at Connection Point: with time, specialists emerged that know some things better than others. Organizing ourselves into working units, where people share tasks based on their skills, to work towards a common goal is a natural process in any group of humans. Although it is against the dogmatic ideology that governs the VP-F offices, this is a predictable development because we are human, not equivalent-dots on a screen.

Despite repeated claims by the VP-F directors that this is a more efficient system, the University is now firmly anchored at the bottom of the U15, unimpressively ranked in international rankings, with deep employee morale issues and weak governance (8-10 years ago we were climbing all those rankings). Despite the Indigenization thrust we are in the midst of an exodus of Indigenous faculty. In focusing on micromanaging a small saving here or there, the overall landscape created is one of clumsy and counterproductive policies, and a great deal of time spent by faculty doing the work previously done by secretaries and administrative assistants instead of engaging in RSAW activities. The senior leadership seems to ignore the overall

landscape of malaise and dispirited staff. Instead of consultation and dialogue on improving the University, the VP-F directors invent slogans and propaganda (flags for this, T-shirts for that). With few willing to wear the slogans, the burden of wearing “the university the world needs”⁵ fell on the janitors. Council (through its committees) gets the University it asks for. To get the University you want you must ask for it. Through disinterest and disengagement, you end up with the university you can barely tolerate.

In the meantime, we have a new Collective Agreement (approved 10th of January 2022) for one year that was approved by about 10% of the faculty complement who bothered to attend. It dealt with a very narrow range of issues and carries-over salary increases far below the inflation rate. We have a long list of non-monetary issues (of the kind I mentioned here) pertaining to the delivery of University administrative services, with the core of the issues identified in a faculty survey on administrative services⁶ during the Spring of 2020, which received written input from about half of the faculty complement. We look

forward to further discussions amongst ourselves to develop solutions and proposals to move forward. Let’s hope the next negotiations, which would begin in about a year, bring forward proposals that will draw the attention of more faculty.

Questions asked at the fall 2021 Council meetings about the magic surplus and counter-productive policies, were supposed to be answered at the January 2022 Council meeting. At the December Council meeting, the Provost said she would respond at the January Council on how to evaluate whether the policies and procedures under VP-F align with Council’s Research Scholarly and Artistic Work commitments. The response from VP-F was brief, in one sentence, and directed faculty to read the quarterly statements provided to the Board of Governors as posted on the university pages. The Provost responded that the RSAW committee of Council (headed by someone in the senior administration) now has this on their agenda and will add this to their work in progress. I look forward to continuing that conversation.

Footnotes

¹ One example is an edict three years ago that all laboratory emergency showers were to be tested on a regular, frequent schedule, with the water running for several minutes. Despite many weeks over months of attempts to convey this impossibility by a punctilious department head, it became evident that nobody in the administration could answer or was interested in pursuing the issue. It also became clear that everyone understood this was another edict for appearances sake that was meant to be ignored due to its impossibility. What confused the bureaucracy was the word “shower.” In fact, an emergency shower is not a shower at all but water for accidents. Had the bureaucrats bothered to visit a laboratory they would know that there is not necessarily a drain hole or any “shower” at all.

² At the September 2021 Council meeting a document was brought for a vote which claimed consultation regard-

ing a new research misconduct policy. The document was sent back, and it is still not clear who was consulted on the final version (version 12) presented to Council, because those consulted had commented on much earlier versions (version 2).

³ At the November 2021 Council meeting a document was brought for a vote which claimed broad consultation regarding a new intellectual property policy. The document was sent back because it was not clear who was consulted in formulating the version before Council.

⁴ In one recent example, in an email sent to faculty on 30th of December 2021 the University claimed there were free N95 masks available from several outlets. Testing the procedure on January 4th indicated the edict was made without operationalising the process. Outlets had not been told or consulted. On January 19th one VP-F director responded there were 47,000 N95 masks on campus available. Later that day another director acknowledged there was a problem but only stated that there will be operational changes over the next year. However, masks still require a CFOPAL and are not yet free. The directors under VP-F did not figure out how to distribute for free the stockpile of masks.

⁵ [University Plan 2025 report](#)

⁶ [2020 Report on University Administrative Practices](#) (USFA)

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