

RSAW and the Responsible Conduct of Research Policy: A Failed Collegial Governance Process

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In spring of 2021, University Council was requested to approve a motion presented by the Research, Scholarly, and Artistic Works Committee of Council (RSAW) pertaining to the revised Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) policy. I was a member of RSAW at that time, and how this issue unfolded left me troubled by the thought that collegial governance at USASK is not working well. Here are the details.

The University had been trying to amend the RCR policy for some time to make it compatible with Tri-Council guidelines. The senior administrative leader responsible for shepherding this policy brought it to RSAW as part of the consultative process. RSAW was ultimately requested to approve the policy and take it to Council for a vote as the sponsoring, duly constituted Council committee, even though our involvement had been only to provide feedback to text drafted elsewhere. A “Request for Input” was entertained at the May 2021 Council meeting, allowing Council members to comment on a draft, and an amended policy was approved at the June meeting.

Some members of RSAW had raised a variety of issues over the previous year or so regarding the RCR. These included: concerns about a process that unfairly disadvantaged the accused; a lack of attention to Indigenous scholarship; zero engagement with equity, diversity and inclusion; and (an issue that I raised) the overwhelming science bias in the policy that rendered normative practices in many disciplines as outliers that required scholars to justify. In response to these concerns one key change was made: after a list of examples of breaches (mostly appropriate to the sciences though not clearly stated as such), a clause was added that read, “Breaches of this Policy should not be interpreted as including disciplinary differences of opinion regarding research methodologies, theoretical frameworks, data sources, data analysis, or publication conventions.” So, these normative practices are nothing more than “disciplinary differences of opinion.” What does that even mean? The profound lack of understanding of ways of scholarship other than science, including work in the Fine Arts, and the disinclination to learn about and accommodate these, is unnerving and evi-

dent throughout the document.

Realizing that there would be no effort expended to “de-science” the policy, alternative text was offered by me to at least recognize the equal legitimacy of, and protect, other ways of engaging in scholarly work:

This policy acknowledges its limitations in the ability to accurately and fairly capture and articulate the full range of activities that constitute RSAW, including not only normative and accepted disciplinary and interdisciplinary practices, but also emergent, contested, and controversial practices that are characteristic of the dynamic nature of RSAW. Nothing in this policy is to be taken to challenge, contest, or limit these practices or other forms of imaginative inquiry, nor to characterize them as de facto breaches of this policy.

This text was rejected, allegedly because some unnamed legal counsel had problems with it. At RSAW, we never saw the legal correspondence, and we never received the details. RSAW was pushed to vote on a draft of the RCR policy which we had not

written and with which several members continued to have serious concerns. The vote to approve it was not unanimous. The RSAW committee includes faculty members, administrators, and students. You can guess how the vote went.

At the May 2021 Council meeting when the draft policy was presented for input by the Chair of RSAW, several concerns were raised by Council faculty members, including problems with the lack of Indigenous and EDI relevant clauses. It seemed that these concerns were taken seriously, momentary evidence that collegial governance works, right? We may ask why the exact same concerns raised by RSAW members were ignored, but a win is a win, right?

Except that, rather than bringing to RSAW a revised text dealing with these concerns, two new important sections were added, and the new text taken directly back for presentation at Council in June for approval. Further, what, if any, consultation was undertaken to amend the policy, especially with Indigenous and EDI stakeholders, was not shared with RSAW. To be clear: the Chair of RSAW presented a draft of the policy for input at Council, input was provided by Council members, but the input, and revised policy text, were not taken back to RSAW for consideration. It was senior administrators who made the decision how to respond to the issues raised, and who amended the policy. Yet the motion to approve the policy at the subsequent Council meeting was still made by the Chair of RSAW. This was a docu-

ment presented under RSAWs auspices as a Council Committee that was NOT written or approved by RSAW!

At the June 2021 meeting to vote on the policy, a few members of Council raised some of the concerns noted earlier by RSAW, while others reinforced that the policy before Council was actually not the one approved by RSAW. A few pleaded with their Council colleagues to not simply rubber stamp the policy but to read it carefully and think through what it will mean in practice. Questions were raised about the process, specifically why RSAW did not receive the feedback from the May meeting and review the revised text. The Chair of Council ruled that the document was appropriately before Council and could go to a vote. Despite these exhortations, the policy was approved.¹

I have no idea how members voted. I was on Council in the past and saw how it was quite common to simply vote to approve motions brought before it by Council committees. The heavy work of Council is done in its committees, after all. Still, one got the sense that many members paid little attention to the thick documents they were provided, and rarely questioned committee chairs or senior administrators who made presentations. I never saw administrative members argue with each other, but faculty members seemed to enjoy taking each other on. My overall sense of Council at that time was that the administration tended to get everything it wanted: some faculty

members were too busy or disinclined to read the extensive documentation carefully; some were too busy being critical of their colleagues who spoke in favour of or raised issues about pending decisions; or some were just too afraid to openly challenge their "People Leaders."

When I first joined RSAW I was told by several people that it "does nothing." My sense of the committee is that is largely a "due process" committee that listens to various stakeholders, offers input as part of consultation processes, and receives annual reports related to the RSAW activities on Council. It is, in my mind, treated as a "junior" committee, to be seen and not heard. Outside of its one annual report to Council, RSAW is rarely visible at Council meetings. Some were surprised, then, when RSAW led the effort to eliminate the terribly flawed "active researcher" designation from TABBS. But this attempt to be a truly relevant Council committee was short-lived as the RCR policy process demonstrated.

In the end, the RCR policy fiasco underscores that the job of the RSAW committee has been, and remains, to quietly rubber stamp approval on policies and documents brought to it, and to do what it is told by senior administrators. It could be so much more. It should be so much more.

The RCR policy is a bad policy. It is bad because it discriminates against, "criminalizes," or just plain ignores many of the ways of engaging in scholarly work that characterize our colleagues. It is bad because it was

not properly vetted by the Council committee whose job it is to vet policy related to RSAW. It is bad because key stakeholders were not brought into the conversation of changes to reflect concerns raised by non-white, non-male, non-science colleagues. It is bad because Indigenous consultation was minimal and problematic. It is bad because some members of Council likely failed to fully appreciate what they were approving. It is bad because it was pushed through by senior administrators who knew any opposition on the floor of Council would likely be feeble. They were correct.

Council, it seems, is no longer about shared governance. It is no longer about informed discussion of policy and procedure. It is about senior administrators and their allies going through the monthly ritual to get that approval they know is likely. RSAW, as a Council committee, is too compliant and accepting of its role in this. I am not pointing the finger at any specific members of RSAW, past or present. There is a cultural zeitgeist at work here; it affects any who join the committee and is enculturated into its modus operandi. This, too, can be said of Council as a whole

(and perhaps other collegial committees).

Council provides senior administrators with the visage of shared collegial governance they need while always getting their way. While some faculty Council members most certainly prepare and engage with Council processes, wanting to make a difference, they are too few. The upshot of this is bad policy. Ignoring or manipulating Council committees, like RSAW, and pushing through bad policy, such as the RCR, with nary a peep of dissent is a sign that collegial governance is failing.

1. The jurisdictional issue pertaining to Council and its committees, with respect to motions, continued to be debated after the RCR policy was approved, and further clarity sought on the matter. It is my understanding that this clarity should prevent a similar incident to the one I have described here, where input into a policy is not returned to the sponsoring committee. The larger issue of failed collegial governance remains, as does the largely dismissive attitude toward the RSAW committee.

Have you served on a “rubber stamp” collegial process committee?

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