

## A Faintly Imagined Haven of Interdisciplinarity: The Forced Amalgamation of the Fine Arts

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Just over a year ago, at the height of the pandemic, the three fine arts departments at this University were summoned to a Zoom meeting with our dean. We were given no advance notice of what was to be discussed. Instead, we were blindsided with the news that a decision had been made to amalgamate the three departments into a larger, but unspecified, entity. We were assured that this move was not occurring because of financial exigencies, although the timing suggested to many of us that it was a cost-saving measure. The reasons that an amalgamation had been decreed, we were told, were numerous. Such a move would improve our profile within the community and the University; it would help with enrolments; it would foster interdisciplinarity; and it would aid the University in its efforts toward Indigenization.

It was difficult for fine arts professors to believe that visibility within the community was an issue. Our campus art galleries, our Greystone Theatre, and our Greystone orchestras and singers have, for a long time, provided

outreach into the community. Few of the artistic institutions in this city would be in existence were it not for the University's fine arts departments. Today, students, alumni, and sessional lecturers from the Music Department are prominent in the Saskatoon Symphony. Drama Department alumni are regularly featured on the stages of Persephone Theatre and Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan. Alumni from Art and Art History serve in the administration of the Remai Gallery and elsewhere. While we are quite visible and active within the community, it appears that senior administration at this University has been blind to our achievements. In recent history, senior administration has systematically depleted our resources by commandeering departmental reserve accounts (which had been used to purchase equipment and to fund artistic/research endeavours), by whittling away at departmental budgets, by cutting faculty and sessional positions, and by failing to replace retired faculty in a timely manner. And the sad news is that, with one person at dean's round tables instead of three, under amalgamation the fine arts will have fewer voices and votes in collegial

matters than it has ever had before.

If enrolments in the three departments have become an issue in recent years, it is because faculty numbers have been dwindling. The top-down structure that allows central administration to deliver a reduced envelope of funding over successive years to the colleges, with orders to make do, has led to a situation where faculty numbers are declining. The Drama Department has been hardest hit. While it housed seven tenured faculty members in 2011, it is currently sitting at 4.5, with a five-year limited term position that may or may not be renewed after 2026. In 2011, Art and Art History had twelve faculty members; now it has ten. Music had nine faculty members in 2011; it currently has eight (with one faculty member serving outside the department). With reduced faculty numbers comes a reduction in numbers of courses taught, and with a reduced number of courses taught comes a reduction in enrolments. This problem is particularly exacerbated by the fact that many courses in the fine arts are of necessity limited in their enrolments. Instruction on a musical

instrument, or in voice, demands a specific focus on each student, as does actor training, painting, print-making, and photography.

In recent meetings with the amalgamation project lead, there have been intimations that senior administration might be open to other methods of funding the fine arts—presumably methods that don't rely on the TABBS model—if amalgamation were to take place. As is well known, the TABBS model has not been kind to fine arts departments at this University, just as similar funding models have not been kind to the fine arts at other universities across the country. Envelope funding has systematically created the situation we are now in and has depleted our resources. The suggestion that another way of funding the fine arts might suddenly be made available, or will be if we chase the carrot on the amalgamation stick, is galling. If central administration has other ideas about funding the fine arts departments, it should make those ideas known now rather than asking us to believe in vague promises.

The interdisciplinary piece is even more of a conundrum, particularly as the amalgamation decree has not come with the promise of a new building in which to house the fine arts departments. In past years, there have certainly been projects on which the fine arts departments have collaborated. The Drama Department has worked with students and faculty from the Music Department on several occasions, and faculty members from Drama and Art and Art History

have also collaborated on projects. The major barriers to increased interdisciplinarity are geographic; the three departments are, and will continue to be, three hundred yards from each other across campus. If a more integrated curriculum is being sought—one with common introductory and capstone courses—this could have been achieved long ago, and without amalgamation, simply by creating that change at the college level. In the past, interdisciplinary course creation has been very much in the hands of interested professors. When William Slights and I created and taught a Shakespeare Page and Stage course some years ago, we did so of our own volition and with a genuine enthusiasm for working together.

I have never heard a clear explanation of how the decision to amalgamate will automatically enhance the University's efforts at Indigenization or why we would need to amalgamate in order to further Indigenize our curricula. While I am in favour of increasing the numbers of Indigenous scholars on this campus, I am also aware that any increase in faculty numbers will cost money. If the University is interested in attracting and supporting more Indigenous scholars, it might have done so before now by providing each of the fine arts departments with the necessary funding to hire and support those scholars. Lack of funding is at the root of the problem, as it has been at the root of so many other problems faced by the fine arts, and this challenge might have been ad-

dressed long before now and without a decree to amalgamate looming before us.

To date, senior administration has offered little in the way of a vision for what an amalgamation of the three departments might look like. The only thing that seems clear to these administrators is their feeling that current departmental structures are not working; they haven't offered much advice as to what might work better. When, at a departmental meeting, I asked the Dean if she could provide us with a model of fine arts amalgamation at another university that we might follow, she was reticent to do so, instead insisting that the three departments, once amalgamated, will have time to decide for themselves how to create new collegial processes, new courses of study, new methods of salary review, and so forth. This is putting the cart before the horse, especially as the plan is to rush the amalgamation proposal through Council this Spring. Council is, or is supposed to be, an academic body that makes decisions about academic issues, but Council members will not be given curricula or even a broad list of courses of study upon which to deliberate. Instead they will be asked to vote on a new non-departmental structure before seeing how that structure will play out in curricula that will need to be created after the fact.

Lost in all of this are the goals and needs of faculty and students, who were not consulted before the decision was made to proceed with amalgamation. In the faintly imagined haven of interdisciplinarity that

senior administration has foisted upon us, faculty members will likely be asked to create and teach introductory art appreciation courses that will cater to a large cohort of students rather than getting down to the business of teaching acting and design, drawing and painting and sculpture, piano and voice. If other fine arts schools can serve as a model, these new introductory courses will be team-taught and will have labels like Art and the Moving Image 100 or Sound 101. In my experience, team-teaching is not a labour-saving device; in fact, it is often more labour-intensive and time-consuming than teaching an entire course by oneself. At a recent meeting, a senior administrator suggested that, instead of advertising for a theatre historian, we might in future consider hiring a

general arts historian with expertise in theatre, art, and music. I wonder if she would be as comfortable asking Physics, Biology, and Chemistry to make a one-size-fits-all hire of somebody who could teach in all three scientific areas. Who might be found with the proficiency to teach such a course, and who would want to take it? Our students have not been consulted in the matter, but I will venture to say that they do not necessarily want or need a double major in acting and printmaking, and they do not necessarily want or need faculty who are general arts historians rather than theatre historians. They might well be more interested in becoming great musicians or sculptors or designers rather than taking introductory courses labelled Art and the Moving Image 100 or Sound 101.

It is time for senior administration to explain why we have embarked on this odyssey toward amalgamation at this moment and with such urgency. It is also time for senior administration to be much more transparent about funding and outcomes for this new model. The faculty in the fine arts and throughout the University deserve more, at this stage, than faint imaginings of what amalgamation might look like in its final form. And it is time to have a fulsome discussion of the issues that are at the root of top-down decisions such as the decision to amalgamate, whether those issues be financial or otherwise. If all faculty members knew what those issues were, we might be able to work together to solve our problems in a manner that could be described as collegial.

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