

September 20, 2023

Dear Members of the Senate of Thompson Rivers University,

I am writing to you today regarding the BRD 8-4 Program Reductions and Eliminations Policy currently being applied to the Visual Arts (VISA) program. After attending the Special Meeting of Senate on June 12th and the Special and Regular Meetings of Senate on September 18th I believe there are serious unanswered questions about the impact of eliminating the program. I also believe that this process has revealed multiple issues with the policy itself that have serious potential impacts on the University if they are not addressed.

Unclear Impacts

Space and salary savings were initially presented as the main justifications for eliminating the VISA program. There have been multiple messages about the potential future use of these spaces, including turning them into lecture-based classrooms or administrative spaces, but no actual plan has been presented for their use. It is therefore unclear what the proposed benefit would be that Senate or Board could weigh against the cost of eliminating an established program.

Senate, the university community, the media, and the public have been unambiguously told that VISA classes will continue to be taught at TRU. For example, the Senate Secretariat replied to all letter writers stating: "We want to assure you that even if resources in the Faculty of Arts are realigned, TRU will continue to provide a wide array of visual arts classes, including in ceramics, drawing, painting, photography, printmaking, and sculpture." While this message is reassuring as it comes directly from Senate and therefore appears to be settled TRU policy, it includes classes that require the same spaces and faculty whose elimination was originally proposed as the primary benefit of eliminating the program. Senate has also been told that no faculty positions will be eliminated, and that faculty will be able to continue to do research using these spaces. This suggests that the original space and salary savings justification is no longer relevant.

Prioritizing resource allocation has also been put forward as a reason for eliminating the program. Multiple different priorities, including new degree programs, have been suggested as possible reasons for eliminating the visual arts program. Yet it is unclear how eliminating this program would benefit any specific new program or priority. Without a clear understanding of how eliminating this specific program would benefit other priorities, the Senate and the Board cannot weigh these benefits against the costs of ending an existing program.

Following the presentation by the stakeholder from Tk'emlups several members of Senate pointed to their priorities for new programs as support for closing the visual arts program, perhaps missing that the speaker clearly stated during their presentation that if the new programs could be created without cancelling the visual arts program, they could support

that option. Given that the programs identified have been in development for years surely their approval does not hinge on the elimination of this program.

The importance of stewarding public funds was also identified as a priority and possible reason for eliminating the visual arts program. Stewarding public funds requires that transparent and fair processes are established and followed so that the public has trust in the management of resources. While it is true that there are opportunity costs associated with continuing to fund any program, there are also opportunity costs associated with eliminating a program. The loss of faculty, staff, students, and facilities needs to be considered as a potential cost, along with the potential future cost of reestablishing a program that was incorrectly eliminated. These costs increase if there are real or perceived issue with process. Real or perceived damage to the reputation of the institution and to collegial governance needs to be weighed against the cost of taking the time to ensure that the process is fair and transparent.

Workload equity and student attrition were also suggested as reasons for eliminating the program. It is unclear why program elimination would be considered an appropriate mechanism for dealing with workload equity issues. If studio-based classes are to continue, these issues will continue, as they must in any lab, shop, or high-touch programs. Regardless, it is difficult to weight workload equity issues and student attrition given the conflicting data presented throughout the process related to enrolment, faculty complement, graduation and attrition rates, numbers of Indigenous students, numbers of lecture versus lab courses, costs, etc. Faculty data, including salary data, has been presented without clarity about what it includes, including if the faculty were bipartite or tripartite, on leave/sabbatical/release, or were working full or part time. It has also not been clear which faculty have been included in calculations, including sessional, UI, and new faculty. In some cases, numbers were presented that members of the Senate noted were incorrect. Good governance would seem to require, at minimum, that Senators, the President, and the Board have data they can trust before they make recommendations.

A Process Requiring Revision

The BRD 8-4 Policy process lacks clarity, and that this has resulted in multiple issues that have impacted the process. This situation needs to be rectified before this inevitably becomes an issue for other programs. This lack of clarity started with the initial roll-out of the policy when the impression was given in the media and to faculty that the program had already been eliminated. It is still unclear why enrollment was halted, a point that needs to be clarified in policy immediately before it happens again and impacts more students.

At no point does it appear that faculty were given a clear ultimatum and the resources (including a defined process and appropriate release from teaching) that would be required to respond to the possibility of elimination. Current policy seems to be written with the assumption that the Dean of the associated Faculty would be involved in championing the program by, at minimum, presenting options for continuing the program. In this case it seems clear that this assumption has not held, leaving the program without the administrative champion the policy seems to require.

Confusion over the policy extends to basic information gathering and to the role of Senate itself. At the September 18th meeting the President stated that letters to Senate were not initially distributed to Senators because their purpose was solely to gather potential speakers for the special meeting. Yet the policy clearly states: "the Senate will accept written input from any person or group." There is also clearly confusion about the way advice is to be communicated from the Senate to the Board, as illustrated by the many questions from Senators about this process.

These examples of legitimate confusion show that the current policy is inadequate and requires revision. As it stands, the current process risks creating the impression that any program could be eliminated with little warning or process. This is an existential risk for an institution that relies on multiple parties representing often conflicting interests to work together in good faith. This is especially important as TRU moves into a future of rapid change that will inevitably require many difficult policy decisions to be made, and for stakeholders to be able to trust in the processes behind those decisions.

The most appropriate action would be to recommend that the policy be revised to require clear notice be given to a program facing elimination, along with the requirement for an immediate program review and the appropriate resources to complete that review. Independent data should also be required so that the Senate and the Board have the information required to make decisions in the best interest of the University and our communities. The fairest course of action would be to extend this opportunity and the required resources to the visual arts program, while recommending an immediate review and revision of board policy BD 8-4.

Thank you for your time and service to the University.

Sincerely,

Franklin Sayre

Librarian II

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