

# Mount Saint Vincent University Academic Plan

Approved by Senate January 27, 2014

## Introduction

The academic work of the university – the academic programs, the services to support students’ learning, and teaching undertaken by scholars and researchers -- is the core activity of a university. This plan is intended to help guide our University's academic programming over the next three years and is rooted in the qualities and principles that make Mount Saint Vincent University distinctive. We aspire to being a community where faculty, staff, and students feel supported, valued, challenged, enlightened, and inspired to learn and experiment in their work. We have maintained our commitment to providing students with an environment where they can engage with, and learn from, their professors and each other. Accessibility has long been a hallmark of the Mount’s mission: we want to continue to welcome a diverse range of students and help them learn and grow. We have also been leaders in providing students with applied learning experiences, whether through co-op terms, practica, and internships. Students, at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, have the opportunity to work closely with their professors on research. Students choose among a range of distinctive, vibrant programs in three Faculties: Arts and Science, Education, and Professional Studies. At the same time, undergraduate students in both Professional Students and Arts and Science are encouraged to reach beyond their programs and take courses in other departments and Faculties. This interconnectivity has enabled us to create collaborations and joint projects across disciplinary, program, department, and Faculty lines. Throughout our history, we have demonstrated our ability to adapt and thrive, while remaining true to the values upon which the Mount was founded.

This Academic Plan fits closely with the University’s current Strategic Plan, *Mount 2017: Making a Difference*, approved by Senate in December 2012 and Board of Governors in January 2013. The Strategic Plan specifically calls for an Academic Plan “that encourages collaborative academic initiatives (within our own university and in partnership with other post-secondary institutions) and allows scope for the creative adaptation that has been a hallmark of the University’s past.” The Strategic Plan proposes several other plans, including the Teaching and Learning Plan, Research Plan, and the Enrolment Plan, as well as other initiatives. All of this planning fits together and is intended to provide longer-term stability and direction to our work in the context of considerable, and often sudden, changes in the environment external to the university, some aspects of which we outline below.

## Outcomes from Previous Academic Plan

The previous Academic Plan was approved in 2009 and was framed around Goal 1 of the previous Strategic Plan, *Destination 2012*. At the time, the University was experiencing an enrolment decline, and there was concern that “the scope and range of programs we now offer have stretched our current resources and student enrolment very thin.” The Committee on Academic Policy and Planning

(CAPP) undertook a thorough assessment of individual programs, and considered enrolment and graduation trends, faculty resources, and recommendations from external reviews. A principle guiding the recommendations was that there should be a shift “from supporting small, isolated, costly academic programs to supporting larger, better integrated, and more sustainable academic programs suited to the needs of both students and faculty” (p. 2). Based on this analysis, there were recommendations to discontinue a number of undergraduate programs, almost all of which were implemented. At the graduate level, there were a number of recommendations aimed at increasing collaboration and integration among existing Masters’ programs, including having common courses across current Masters’ programs, and developing professional masters’ degrees in addition to thesis-based masters’ programs.

The plan had a number of recommendations for developing new programs: some are now in place, including the joint PhD in Educational Studies and the Bachelor of Science in Science Communication. One recommendation was to create the Combined Major degree: almost all of the programs in Arts and Science have added this. In the last three years, unanticipated opportunities for new programs also emerged, including the BBA with an International Option. It is notable that almost all of the new programs that have been launched at the University since 2009 have been collaborative initiatives, either among departments, across Faculties, or in conjunction with other universities in the province.

Distance learning was recognized, in the previous plan, as critical to the University’s mission and strategic direction. One recommendation was that a “Task Force of CAPP with representation from faculty consider ways to encourage and support the development of degree programs for distance delivery,” including the “development of more complete academic programs to be available via distance.” While a number of the Task Force’s recommendations regarding the development of distance learning have been implemented, the number and range of programs that are offered via distance has not significantly altered since 2009.

### Changes in the External and Internal Environments

There have been a number of changes, both inside and outside the University, since 2009. The number of high-school aged students has been shrinking in both the province and the region. This decline is projected to continue. Since the majority of our students are drawn from Nova Scotia, currently 68% of our student population, this shift in demographics may affect our enrolment. Tied to this, is the projected decline in the number of teaching positions in Nova Scotia and other provinces and the subsequent widespread, negative media reporting of the outlook for prospective teachers. The financial picture has also changed: between 2010-2013, provincial government funding to Nova Scotia universities was reduced by 10.1%. At the same time, university costs continue to grow. This has led universities throughout the province to assess how best to allocate resources and establish their distinctiveness. Coupled with the reduction in funding are increasing calls for greater “accountability” and reporting from the provincial government and the general public, as well as a push to have universities in Nova Scotia collaborate more closely.

Along with other universities in the region and elsewhere, we have seen a shift in enrolment patterns: there has been growth in most of our professional programs and a shrinking in almost all areas in the Arts and Sciences and, more recently, in Education. In Professional Studies, there has been substantial growth in most programs, at both the graduate and undergraduate levels: from 2008-2012, there has been a 24% increase in students at the undergraduate level and a 43% increase at the graduate level. Overall, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences has experienced a decline in enrolment: between 2008-2012, student numbers fell 8.8% in the Bachelor of Arts and 10.4% in the Bachelor of Science. Most programs within Arts and Science mirror this decline, a few have had a steeper decline, and a few have had increased enrolment over the past five years. Currently, some programs in Arts and Sciences have few majors, with most of their courses at the first and second year. In the last Academic Plan, programs in Education were not a focus, in part perhaps because enrolments were strong and appeared set to continue to grow. Since then, the landscape has changed significantly for Education: with the projected decrease in the number of positions for teachers in the region, the number of applications for Teacher Education has contracted considerably, as has enrolment: since 2009, there has been a 34% decrease in enrolment in the Bachelor of Education. At the graduate level in Education, a number of programs have faced challenges, some with shrinking enrolments, while others have recognized that the focus of the program needs to be re-considered. Over the last four years, the enrolment in graduate Education programs has varied considerably from a high of 485 students enrolled in 2010 to 362 students enrolled this fall.

One of the goals in the Strategic Plan is to increase the diversity of our student population, and we have increased our efforts to reach out to and support diverse student groups, most notably Aboriginal students. Starting in 2012, students have had the option to self identify as Aboriginal: from 2012-2013, we have had a threefold increase in the number of students who self identify as Aboriginal. Another area where we have seen a significant increase is with international students: from 2009 until now, the number of international students has increased from 364 to 657, and international students now represent 17% of our student population. They are clustered in Professional Studies programs, with few international students in Arts and Science programs or in the Faculty of Education.

Our enrolment patterns have also shifted in the summer semesters: in the past, most of our summer enrolment was in graduate Education courses. This enrolment has declined but we have had increased enrolment in undergraduate courses during the summer terms, particularly in courses offered by distance: between 2009 and 2012, undergraduate unit enrolments have increased by 24%. We have tended to focus our course planning in fall and winter semesters but the shift in enrolment suggests that we should plan our timetable as a year-round university.

We have also had great success in attracting transfer students, primarily from community colleges through two-plus-two articulation agreements with the Nova Scotia Community College, but also with other colleges in the region and beyond: from 2009-2012, the number of students transferring to the University either from other universities or community colleges increased by 16.7%.

With distance education, although the number of programs that can be taken via distance has not changed since 2009, there have been gains at the course level, with almost 80 courses having been developed or re-developed for distance delivery. The number of students enrolled in on-line courses has increased significantly: we have had a 41.9% increase since 2008 in the number of individual course registrations, during a period where the University's unit registrations overall increased by 2.4%, and an increase of 22.4% in the number of course sections delivered annually. If we consider off-campus enrolment more globally, and include both on-line courses and those that are offered at off-campus sites, there has also been a significant increase: between 2008-2012, our off-campus enrolment grew from 32% of the University's total unit enrolments to 41%. In annual surveys of students in on-line courses, students consistently report that they elect to take on-line courses, because this modality allows them to balance their learning with the many other demands in their lives.

At the same time, there is increased competition. While the Mount has been a leader in distance education in the region, other universities are now offering more courses and programs on-line. The line between distance and on-campus teaching has also become less distinct. For example, some Mount instructors are using blended models and teach students simultaneously both on-campus and by on-line and many on-campus courses incorporate technologies which were originally intended for on-line education. A number of these new technologies have the capacity to enrich our teaching. We should carefully assess pedagogical benefits of the newest trends in teaching and incorporate technologies into our teaching that have the capacity to enhance students' learning.

### Consultation Process for this Plan

As with the previous Academic Plan, the Committee on Academic Policy and Planning (CAPP) has overseen the planning process. Recognizing that substantial and significant academic planning happens at the department and program level, academic and academic support departments and programs were invited to submit a brief summary of their plans for the next three years and to describe where they saw opportunities for expansion, contraction, and collaboration, as well as their plans for supporting students. The Vice-President Academic met with departments and programs across the University to discuss these plans. University-wide meetings were held: these provided the opportunity for faculty and staff from all parts of the University to share ideas across department lines. Student views were accessed via an on-line survey in which students reflected on the same questions that departments and programs had addressed. All members of the University community were invited to submit comments electronically.

In framing this Academic Plan, CAPP considered all of the feedback and submissions from across the University and analyzed data, provided by the Institutional Analyst, on enrolment in programs and departments over the past five years, retention rates, and class sizes in programs and departments. While the previous plan focussed primarily on individual academic programs, this plan addresses the broader academic environment, encompassing academic programs, academic support

programs, the skills, knowledge and values students need to learn, and the supports, both in learning and teaching, our university should prioritize. The plan builds on our many strengths and values and identifies areas where we need to develop further. The unanticipated changes over the past three years show that we need to be deft and agile in responding to external pressures as well as in taking advantage of new opportunities, and the plan builds in a process for ongoing planning and reflection.

A number of recommendations emerged from the consultations. They have been grouped under three core activities of our academic mission: supporting students' learning, enriching academic programming, and enhancing teaching quality. From faculty, staff, and students across all parts of campus, we heard that we should ensure our students are well prepared for the demands of university education. While the Mount community strongly endorsed the benefits of welcoming a diverse range of students, many identified areas where we need increased support for students, faculty and staff. Departments and programs had many creative ideas about how to maintain and grow their programs and identified a number of opportunities for collaboration with other programs, both at the Mount and with sister institutions.

A draft plan was circulated to the University community, and feedback was incorporated into the Plan. Following Senate approval of the Plan, implementation of the recommendations will begin. While CAPP will facilitate the implementation, it is anticipated that the University community will be deeply involved. The recommendations are framed so as to be broad enough to apply across different areas of the University. Some departments have already indicated how they intend to develop their own plans based on the Academic Plan. Existing University committees will oversee the implementation of some recommendations, and cross-campus committees will be constituted to implement others.

### **We Will Support Students' Learning**

There is a broad consensus throughout the campus that we need to provide the appropriate supports so that students will learn, and gain the knowledge, skills, and values they need to be successful. The transition to university is challenging for many students, whether they are coming directly from high school, transferring from another post-secondary institution, or returning to university after having been out of school for a number of years. The majority of students who do not complete their degrees at the Mount leave either during or immediately after their first year. We need a better understanding of why these students do not continue on with their studies, and we need to have programs that will help support students during their first year.

The first year is pivotal in setting the foundation for subsequent years of study. During the consultation process, students highlighted the importance of academic advising and well-designed timetables in enabling them to be successful. Across campus, a variety of suggestions were made regarding the core competencies and skills our students should develop, including intercultural understanding, a commitment to social responsibility, an understanding of academic integrity, and perhaps most importantly for academic success, skills in writing, communication, and technology.

The Teaching and Learning Plan proposes some core skills and values for students. We need to continue this conversation campus-wide in order to develop a shared understanding regarding what we want our students to have experienced, understood, and learned by the time they graduate. Programs and departments may also want to identify specific skills and knowledge they want their students to achieve. Identifying what we hope our students will have learned and gained through their university experience will help us build the base in first year.

We have a number of excellent programs aimed at supporting students in their first year, but we do not have an overall vision of the kinds of academic experiences our students require in their first year in order to develop the skills, knowledge, and values they need to succeed in their subsequent years of study. Having a strategy for first year will help us identify where we should focus our energy and how we can better integrate academic programs with academic support programs.

One of the goals in the Strategic Plan is to further diversify our student population. In keeping with our University's history of providing access to post-secondary education to women at a time when there were few opportunities for women, we aspire to increase the number of students from diverse backgrounds that have not been well represented in Canadian universities. Welcoming a diversity of life experiences and perspectives to our University community will help promote a more informed understanding of our world and strengthen our appreciation for the complex society in which we live.

During the consultation process, it became clear, however, that some of our policies and practices may act as barriers to attracting and retaining different groups of students, for example, students who have been away from formal education for many years and transfer students. We need to identify and dismantle these barriers and identify opportunities and strategies to increase accessibility and integration for diverse groups of students. The increase in the number of international students at the Mount has also highlighted the need for ensuring international students are prepared for, and supported during, their studies.

Applied learning, where students link classroom learning with practical experience, has long been a strength for the Mount, whether through co-op, internships, practica, or research projects. Students have identified that they would like the opportunity to develop skills during university which they can transfer to the workplace after they graduate. Students who complete a co-op program here at the Mount have a high likelihood of becoming employed soon after graduation: from annual surveys between 2009 and 2012, we know that, on average, 89% of students graduating from co-op programs at the Mount are employed in their field within six months of graduation. During the consultation process, departments and programs highlighted a number of areas where they would like to expand the range of applied learning experiences to undergraduate students, including service learning, co-op opportunities for students in the Bachelor of Arts, and increased opportunities for students to be involved in research. The rapid uptake of the co-curricular transcript program by students demonstrates that students are eager both to gain applied experiences and document them. While a number of programs already offer a range of applied experiences for their students, we have the

potential to expand and extend these experiences so that our students can apply their learning in a variety of contexts.

#### Recommendations:

1. Develop a strategy for first year that will both enhance students' academic experience as they enter the University and increase student retention. This includes identifying the services we need to have in place to support students in making the successful transition to university; better integrating academic support programs so that students can seamlessly access support services, for example, through the Learning Commons; building stronger partnerships among faculty, students, and librarians; developing a closer coordination between academic programs and academic support programs; and strengthening first-year advising.
2. Initiate a campus-wide discussion to identify the knowledge, skills, and values we want our students to have when they graduate.
3. Identify strategies to encourage and increase student access and integration, as well as address barriers that may be impeding students coming to the University and succeeding, for example, change admission criteria and procedures that discourage mature students and transfer students from applying, and coordinate course offerings so that students can access the courses they need when they need them.
4. Tailor academic support services to the diverse needs of students, for example, international students, students taking courses off campus and on-line, students with disabilities, and transfer students.
5. Increase the range of applied learning opportunities so that all undergraduate students can access at least one applied learning experience during their degree, whether this is through service learning, internships, practica, co-op terms, project-based courses, study abroad, research projects, or other experiences.

#### **We Will Enrich Academic Programming**

The focus for the next three years will be on deepening and enriching our academic programs. There is general agreement that we need to maintain the vitality of our undergraduate programs, while building on our strengths in graduate programs. As noted above, our enrolment has shifted in our undergraduate programs towards Professional Studies programs and away from Arts and Science programs. Enrolment in the Bachelor of Education program has also declined. Our challenge over the next three years is to support programs and departments where there is enrolment growth, and at the same time, sustain our smaller programs. This may involve re-allocation of resources and re-thinking how we offer some of our programs.

Our primary focus will be on ensuring the high quality, relevance, and vibrancy of our programs. We will also continue to be alert to opportunities for building new programs, modifying existing

programs, and closing programs that are no longer sustainable. We have strengthened the University's external review process; this provides an important point to assess and make decisions regarding the future of programs. External reviews occur relatively infrequently, however. As we have seen in the past few years, the sands can shift quite rapidly. We have demonstrated in the past that we can respond nimbly to external and internal pressures, and we need to continue to be able to adapt flexibly. Structures and mechanisms that facilitate departments' and programs' ongoing assessment and reflection, as well as ongoing planning at the University level, will help us be able to adapt and respond sensitively and creatively. It is also important that students be integral to these processes.

Although we are viewed as a primarily undergraduate university, we have a high proportion of graduate students, currently 25% of our total student enrolment. The large majority (83%) are clustered in course-based professional programs. Most are specialized programs in the region and appear well-positioned to grow. Offering more graduate programs through on-line delivery could attract enrolment from those who wish to pursue graduate studies but need to remain in their communities. While almost all of our graduate students are enrolled part time, the number of full-time graduate students has been increasing: from 2009-2012, the number of full-time graduate students rose from 58 to 102 (a 76% increase). We need to consider that full-time students' needs for space and support may differ from those of part-time students. Graduate Studies has been largely decentralized, with programs doing much of the work of recruitment, admissions and student support. From consultations with Graduate Coordinators, Admissions Office staff, and graduate students, it has become clear that we need a coordinated strategy for Graduate Studies that will strengthen recruitment, the admissions process, and the experience of graduate students at the Mount.

Increasing cooperative linkages and collaboration is one strategy to help sustain small programs, as well as provide students with more integrated and rich experiences. One of the strengths of the Mount has been the high degree of collaborative and cooperative relationships, both within the University and with sister universities in the region, whether through interdisciplinary programs, cross-listed courses, or shared programs. As noted above, almost all the new and modified programs approved by the University have involved cross-department, cross-Faculty, and cross-university collaboration. At the same time, many of our policies and procedures are predicated on a departmental model, and we need to consider how we can create opportunities for collaborations and cooperative linkages to develop.

Situated in Nova Scotia, we benefit from being part of a web of ten distinctive and diverse universities, as well as a vibrant community college system. We are partners in a number of joint and shared initiatives and programs within the province and beyond that have strengthened the University, for example, the Novanet Library system and our articulation agreements with the Nova Scotia Community College. There are many other possibilities for these collaborations, and we should seek opportunities that will help increase our capacity, offer a richer curriculum, and build a network of pathways for students.



### Recommendations:

6. Support curriculum development at program, department, faculty and university levels. Provide faculty, administrators, and students with the data and mechanisms that will enable them to plan, develop, and assess curriculum that will meet both program requirements and University-wide educational goals and aspirations. For example, in addition to program reviews, departments could hold annual planning retreats, annual departmental reports could be re-configured as planning documents, and University-wide committees, such as UCC and GSPPC, could help facilitate larger curriculum development initiatives across program areas.
7. Develop and implement a strategy to support graduate students and graduate programs that addresses recruitment, admissions, and services and supports for graduate students.
8. Identify and strengthen cross-program linkages among academic programs, for example, through cross listing courses, developing shared courses across departments, building a course timetable that facilitates collaboration.
9. Put into place administrative processes and structures that will foster and encourage collaboration across the University, first by identifying barriers to collaboration in current policies and structures and then developing practices and policies that facilitate collaboration.
10. Identify further opportunities for collaboration with other universities and community colleges, for example, shared programs with other universities, and partnerships with community colleges to offer two-plus-two, three-plus-one programs and dual degrees, as well as arrangements with other institutions for students to access courses at sister institutions.

### **We Will Enhance Teaching Quality**

Teaching has always been at the heart of the Mount and the work that we do. In the consultation process, students emphasized the importance of high-quality teaching for their learning. Faculty across campus talked about their desire to continue to develop their expertise in teaching, in particular when working with diverse populations of students. As a university, we are committed to recognizing and supporting teaching practices that stimulate students' learning, promote their academic success, and help teachers continue to reflect, grow, and learn.

This is an exciting time for thinking about teaching and learning at the University. Over the past three years, the campus has been engaged in conversations about teaching and learning which have culminated in a Teaching and Learning Plan, which "is intended to stimulate and support conversations about teaching and learning among faculty, staff and students across the University, and to guide exploration of our present institutional culture and future potential." This plan is framed around six commitments that "affirm the contributions and interconnections of our academic values, recognition of student needs, teaching practices, curricular development, learning environments and

resources, and scholarly research, in shaping our institutional learning culture today and into the future.” It provides an important context for our thinking and planning about teaching and learning at the Mount.

When the Margaret Norrie McCain Building for Teaching, Learning, and Research opens, the Teaching and Learning Centre will be moving into the new building. This offers us the opportunity to re-vitalize the Centre and heighten its impact and relevance. The Centre should be seen as a hub for coordinating teaching and learning activities across the University, highlighting and sharing innovative teaching practices, and supporting faculty development.

As noted above, while the number of programs offered entirely on-line has remained constant, there has been an increase in course sections offered and a significant increase in enrolment in on-line courses. In the consultation process, one of the main suggestions from students was to increase the number and range of courses offered on-line. We also heard that the ability to access their studies from their home communities is critical for different populations of students. As a university, we have considerable expertise and depth of knowledge in distance and on-line education, and it will be important to assess the potential for offering other programs and courses in an on-line format.

There has also been a growth in integrating “on-line” approaches and modalities into teaching on campus, such as using web-based resources or offering courses in a blended format. Changes in teaching technologies and approaches have meant that the line between distance and on-campus has become less distinct: for example, an instructor may teach students both on-campus and on-line in the same course using a blended method. Instructors teaching on-campus courses are using technologies, such as Moodle, which have been viewed as primarily relevant to distance learning. Students are accessing information in multiple ways, and faculty are drawing on a wide range of technologies and pedagogical approaches in their teaching. While we should carefully assess the utility and benefits of the newest trends in teaching, we need to be open to learning about and incorporating learning and teaching technologies into our teaching that have the capacity to enhance our students’ learning and create new contexts for instructors to share their knowledge and expertise.

#### Recommendations:

11. Re-conceptualize the Teaching and Learning Centre so that it becomes a hub for teaching and learning practices in the University.
12. Develop, extend, and enhance opportunities for faculty development, for both full-time and part-time instructors.
13. Provide professional development for teaching diverse populations of students.
14. Explore the potential of all programs in the University to be offered entirely on-line, or in blended or hybrid modes, while recognizing that different modalities may be appropriate in different contexts. Based on this assessment, develop a strategy for increasing on-line education within the University.

15. Incorporate learning and teaching technologies and approaches, into both on-line and on-campus courses, that can enhance students' learning.

**Next Steps**

Following Senate approval of the Academic Plan, CAPP will develop a plan for the implementation of the recommendations. This will involve: establishing a timeline, identifying the areas and/or committees that will be responsible for implementing recommendations, and defining outcomes for each recommendation. CAPP will report annually to Senate on progress.