Mcmaster University
Arts & Science Program Review

Review Team
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Review Team Report
Based on information gained from the on-site review, the self study, consultation with members of the program and the University, independent assessments and all material submitted as part of the program review, the review team is expected to report on, but is not restricted to the following issues/questions:

1. Program

To what extent do the program's goals and priorities match the academic plan of the University?

We understand from the mission statements that McMaster University places a premium on world class research, and the ability to relate this to cutting edge pedagogical practices that link the research and student communities in ways that challenge existing modes of thinking in groundbreaking ways. We further understand that the key goals and priorities for the University depend upon developing truly interdisciplinary approaches to academic enquiry, provide the intellectual space to encourage innovative forms of experiential learning, to create an environment wherein self-directed learning can thrive, while maintaining both an international focus in curriculum and program design, and placing importance upon local community engagement.

The Arts and Science Program at McMaster excels at each of these stated
ambitions. Driven by the clear, purposeful and visionary leadership of Director Jean Wilson, the program benefits from a truly innovative pedagogical program that is unique in North America and beyond. The decision to bring together Arts and Science into a coherent framework for intellectual study not only provides students with a broad range of skills and competences that allows them to follow many diverse career paths, it places the University at the center of many of the truly interdisciplinary pedagogical debates today which demands that we appreciate both the science of the arts, along with the poetics of scientific enquiry.

One of the most obvious indicators of esteem for the Arts and Science Program is the shared sense of pride and belonging to its academic community, with faculty members, students, support staff, and alumni alike all sharing their experiences of a vibrant program that creates a sense of loyalty that goes well beyond the fixed term of any academic study. Many of the Faculty attested to the fact that this was the most exciting and innovative program to be part of, while the obvious sense of student community created by management and support staff should not be underestimated. Creating such a vibrant and engaging student cohort demands considerable effort and continually investment to make them feel part of something important and inviting; this has been achieved with excellence.

The symbiotic nature between research and teaching is evidenced in both the core and elective module options. We were introduced to numerous examples of the ways in which their activities as researchers informed their course design, and how this translated into reciprocal forms of scholarship between various faculty members, along with taking seriously student feedback when notable issues have arisen in terms of academic integrity and quality. Again
here the academic leadership of Jean Wilson appears exemplary as evidenced by the need to maintain the highest intellectual standards, while acting upon any identifiable shortcomings as far as the integrity of the Program is concerned.

The passion, dedication and enthusiasm of most faculty members were apparent to the review team, this resulted in the delivery of some truly innovative Inquiry modules that demands broader pedagogical attention by the University and beyond. Indeed, whilst we appreciate the work being undertaken by MIIETL within the University, we felt that the relationship here was rather skewed as it appeared that MIIETL was positioning itself as the center for “discovering” best practice to then be rolled out to the Programs, and yet here we audited a program that was already at the forefront of some truly excellent and innovative methods. In short, part of MIIETL’s research should focus more on the already existing excellence being evidenced by the Arts and Science teaching cohort and use these findings in a self-reflective and University wide fashion.

Another impressive and ethically significant achievement to be developed from within the program has been the “Discovery” initiative. More than simply connecting the University to disadvantaged people in the local Hamilton community, thereby providing remarkable opportunities to those otherwise denied, it evidently has a very positive impact on the modes of self-study and reflexive learning undertaken by the students involved. The volunteering ethos the initiative has developed is something to be rightly promoted across the University as another example of excellence; while the ability to encourage students who have a global outlook to recognize and act upon local forms of disadvantage is a testament to the less stated but more
apparent mandate that the remarkably intelligent, mature and confident students on the program believe it is possible to change the world for the better.

We further note that the Art and Science Program has needed to recover some of its core values and vision due to a notable decline in performance (as indicated in numerous surveys presented to review team). The shared experiences of Faculty and support staff during this period were notably uniform in their disillusionment, as was the honesty and self-reflective nature of program Directors past and present. The turn-around has been a notable success. Whilst we fully acknowledge the position played here by Gary Warner in identifying the problem and acting accordingly, we cannot emphasis enough the importance of the incumbent Director in transforming the cultures of complacency (on behalf of certain management/faculty) and entitlement (on behalf of students) that seemingly prevailed, to one of striving for excellence and being active participants in shaping the programs future.

2. Admission Requirements

Are the admission requirements appropriately aligned with the learning outcomes of the program?

The admission requirements to the program are appropriate and it is important that the number of students is capped to maintain levels of excellence across the program in terms of delivery and cohort.

3. Curriculum

• How does the curriculum reflect the current state of the discipline or
area of study?
• Is there evidence of significant innovation or creativity in the content and/or delivery of the program?
• Are the modes of delivery at meeting learning outcomes appropriate and effective?

The merger between Arts and Science puts the program at the forefront of the most central intellectual debates occurring in the humanities, social and natural sciences. That we need to think in truly interdisciplinary terms seems to be the given mantra from 21st Century academic enquiry. From our experiences, this program is unrivalled in terms of breaking down the disciplinary silos, whilst still retaining the integrity and autonomy of individual academic pursuits. This owes a great deal to the evident thought and revision that goes into the overall program design, along with the benefit of inspirational and creative faculty who mostly appeared to appreciate the importance of pedagogy and the privilege of teaching the next generation of leaders in their fields.

As we have already mentioned, the program benefits from teaching excellence and creativity. It is a worthy case study in experiential learning that ought to have a dedicated academic volume as what we encountered were methodical innovations that are at the cutting edge of academic study. A significant number of the modules bring together the arts and science elements in subtle and yet meaningful ways, opening up important conversations that are having notable impact on research and teaching portfolios.

Whilst it is apparent that significant self-reflection and revision has been
undertaken in the more historical and philosophical teaching streams, if there is a criticism, elements of the program do remain profoundly Euro-centric and somewhat outdated in terms of teaching methods (a 2 hour lecture for instance) and its reductionist content. Further to this, whilst the students are enthusiastic for the opportunity to have a broad educational offering, it does appear that many are unaware (across all levels) of the pedagogical significance of studying arts and sciences together in the contemporary world. The obvious way around this would be to either provide from the outset a set of introductory lectures on that highlighted this meeting of often considered separate intellectual worlds; or more rigorously, to develop a comprehensive core module that dealt with the science of the arts and the poetics of the sciences more critically.

Such additions to the program would allow students to be aware of the wider picture that was evident to the review team, but somewhat missed by the student cohort. Indeed, this is where Alumni participation in the teaching curricula (a further impressive and innovative element) could be further developed, for it was notable in our discussions with former students that those who went into traditional science based employment really valued and now apply in their works the art based components to their study, and vice-versa. In terms of improvement, there is a notable lack of more contemporary political thought in the teaching portfolio; along with modules dedicated to critical pedagogy; the art of politics/philosophy; and some of the cutting edge cultural studies components such as the importance of performance/aesthetics in film, art and theatre that again could stress the social and scientific relevance.
4. Teaching and Assessment

• Are the means of assessment in clearly demonstrating achievement of the program learning objectives and statement of Degree Level Expectations appropriate and effective?

• Are the methods of assessing student achievement of defined learning Outcomes and Degree Level Expectations appropriate and effective?

Students are testing in variety of formats (some very innovative in terms of Inquiry modules), each of which test various skill sets. While a number of students mentioned that the science based modules still relied on exams, interviews with faculty countered this perception with evidence of the testing of broader range of skill sets. We have no question that on the whole, the methods meet the defined learning outcome and retain their integrity. Indeed, it was notable that students felt able to question the marking structures and have their grievances taken seriously were there notable disparities with a particular course or faculty member and respective teaching assistants.

5. Resources

• Is the program’s use of existing human, physical and financial resources appropriate and effective?

• Are there opportunities for more efficient use of existing resources?

From both a governance and sustainability perspective, we recognize the significance of the program being made an “activity unit” reporting directly to the Vice Provost’s office. With the diplomatic immunity that comes from locating the program outside of a disciplinary faculty structure also comes the
challenge of ensuring the ongoing support of skilled faculty. At the time of the review, there were two outstanding faculty making substantial contributions in the form of both teaching and pedagogic research. Both of these people were on contractually limited appointments and it was unclear how new university funding structures could be pushed to allow for the possibility of these faculty finding a tenured relationship with continued strong ties to the Arts and Science program.

Whilst we didn’t find any negativity from students regarding access to academic resources, one of our biggest criticisms concerns the actual space used by the Arts and Science Program. What should be held in the highest esteem by the University due to its truly innovative productions, and visibly promoted as such, remains somewhat hidden on campus. The space itself, whilst intimate, nevertheless feels claustrophobic and very contained. More than proving limiting in terms of more confidential discussions (the review team for instance often found ourselves needing to whisper on occasions in the corridor space), the current location goes firmly against the intellectual aspiration of the program that is premised upon openness and the breaking down of the sense and experience of a more contained intellectual environment. In short, the review team felt that relocating the Arts and Science program to a more prestigious and spacious setting is a necessary step to a needed visibility strategy that needs to begin locally alongside any internationalization strategy.

6. Quality Indicators

Please provide context and commentary on the data provided.

The review team was particularly impressed by the tangible difference now
evident by earlier quality indicators taken during years of previous Directorship and the real sense of improvement and optimism shared by Faculty, support staff and students alike. The negative comments that were an initial source of considerable concern for the review team bare no resemblance to the current delivery of the Arts and Science program with the management having fully addressed the principle areas of student and staff concerns.

7. Quality Enhancement

Are the initiatives that have been undertaken to enhance the quality of the program (teaching, learning and/or research environments) sustainable?

There are two notable concerns that have been raised in terms of the sustainability of the programs quality. First, concerns the rotational basis of teaching and how a number of previous Faculty members haven’t bought into the vision and ethos of the Arts and Science Program. We are confident that the current management structure is in a position to monitor this effectively. The second has remains a problem of teaching “permanence” were a small few appear to be continuing to deliver modules that have remained the same since the program was first conceived. The static nature of these few courses puts them at odds with the rest of the program, and was duly noted by the students in terms of their inability to relate the content to 21st century problems.

The students undoubtedly benefit from a very capable faculty that operates on a rotational basis. Most faculty expressed their sense of privilege from being able to contribute to what they rightly feel is a very illustrious and
innovative program of study. At present, however, the long-term success is wholly dependent on the vision and integrity of the Director, which as recent experience shows can have a profound impact on the progress/decline of the program. Having a committed and dedicated cohort of faculty members who could further assist in the responsibilities of overall governance would strengthen this considerably and help alleviate any possible regress in the future.

8. System of Governance

Is the governance system used to assess the program and implement changes consultative and inclusive?

We were suitably impressed by the collegiality of the program. This is testament to the dedication of the Director, support staff and Faculty in creating a positive intellectual environment that works by breaking down unhelpful relations of authority and privilege. What we found were relationship built more on respect and openness, instead of distance and isolating marks of separation. Again however, we do have concerns about the future governance of the program as the governance structure currently stands. It remains solely dependent on the capabilities of the Director. This is not a sustainable model – especially if the program looks to develop more in terms of its international reputation and appeal.

9. Previous Concerns and Recommendations

Are there any previous concerns and recommendations related to the program that, in the review team’s opinion should be addressed?

These have been fully addressed and we are satisfied that the program has
now moved from one of recovering its core values to looking to developing its strategic ambitions.

10. Areas for Improvement

Are there areas for improvement related to the program that, in the review team’s opinion, should be addressed as priorities?

The Arts and Science program is a truly innovative and exciting initiative that should be held in the highest esteem and central to the Universities internationalization strategy. Excellent foundations are already in place, but if the program is to achieve its potential and receive the international recognition it deserves, there is a need to have some consultation on a number of key areas.

1) Whilst the pedagogical ambition to connect the Arts and Sciences is already taken as given in the program set up, the intellectual message needs to be improved. This not only needs to take place amongst the faculty and students, it also needs to be factored in to any international strategy. Recommendation’s include:

- The creation of specific introductory modules that address more specifically the science of the arts and the poetic of science
- Improved emphasis on this pedagogical connect in terms of marketing materials (notably the web presence which requires significant attention)
- Readdress or make clearer the relationship between Arts and Science Program and MIIETL such that the program is given due recognition for the innovative work already undertaken that doesn't simply talk to
positivist scientific modes of enquiry

2) There is an evident need to make the program more visible both within the University setting, nationally and beyond. Recommendations include:

- Moving the program to more suitable location that will make it more visible on campus and reflective of its esteem
- Creation of a student led Arts and Science journal (modeled perhaps on Millennium as run by the London School of Economics) that could provide a forum to stake out a pioneering claim in the breaking down of disciplinary boundaries and also be integral to international reputation
- Employ a dedicated marketing member to the support staff to focus intently on improving the international reputation of the program. Integral to this would be a web presence that used latest multi-media technologies that relayed the truly innovative arts and science crossovers being developed beyond a simple recruitment brochure
- Hold a consultation meeting on the development of a Graduate program that would appeal more to an international student base. The students we met had notable success in going on to prestigious study in the world’s most illustrious academic institutions. Not only would a graduate program benefit from retaining a number of these, it would truly impress the pedagogical significance at a higher level to further the international reputation and credibility.

3) The program’s success can be located within the creative, committed and generous relationships between students and faculty. Recommendations include:
• New faculty with the skills and vision to contribute to the evolution and continued excellence of the program need to have access to arrangements for a long term, tenured relationship with the program.
• At the other end, to allow for continuous program renewal, the director is encouraged to review the use of emeritus faculty