

September 15, 2024

Dear Dilson:

We, members of the SFU Academic Freedom Group<sup>1</sup> and other concerned SFU professors, understand that you are seeking feedback on the July 2024 draft of the Academic Plan for 2025-30. We are writing to share some ideas for how to strengthen the Plan:

- p. 3: The meaning of the “Why we exist” statement is very unclear (e.g., to what do the two instances of “it” refer?). Moreover, it includes language errors (e.g., “we... create... learning”) and circular reasoning (“purpose” and “essence” are roughly synonymous). A clear, concise alternative statement is “We provide a forum for the generation and dissemination of knowledge. We foster excellence in research and teaching by creating an environment where open inquiry and viewpoint diversity can thrive.” This revised statement would then be consistent with the language on p. 6, namely, “[p]roviding quality and meaningful learning environments for students is the foundation of everything that is SFU. It is the reason why SFU exists and its ultimate goal.” We suggest, however, that this latter statement be modified, given that research is also a foundation of the university. Indeed, as a research university, research is **the** foundation of our institution because it informs our teaching.
- p. 4: The document mentions the “academic mission”, but SFU’s academic mission is not formally defined anywhere, to our knowledge. We suggest specifying that the academic mission is to generate and disseminate knowledge.
- p. 4: The document says that “[i]t is expected that most activities of the university will be compatible with the Academic Plan”. However, under the [SFU/SFUFA Collective Agreement](#), faculty members have the guaranteed right to academic freedom, specifically, the freedom to teach and conduct research “without reference to prescribed doctrine”. Therefore, the Plan cannot constrain our teaching and research, for example, by requiring a focus on the “priority activities” described therein. We suggest that the entire section about “alignment” be removed. At a minimum, it should be modified so that it is consistent with the Collective Agreement and avoids any suggestion of conformity.
- p. 8: The title “Research That Matters” (also the name given to a “focus area”) is worrying. The administration’s role is to foster an environment where *all* research can thrive, not to adjudicate the importance of research according to some unspecified criteria. We suggest using the term “Research Excellence” instead.

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<sup>1</sup> The SFU Academic Freedom Group is a non-partisan group that works to promote open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement on campus.

- p. 10: The document says that SFU will commit to “decolonized research and teaching”. However, as stated above, the administration may not impose philosophies or political goals on faculty members’ teaching and research. We strongly recommend that this phrase be removed.
- p. 10: The definition of “Indigenization” is circular. We request a clearer explanation.
- p. 11: The document says that the SFU Medical School will “infuse Indigenous methods of teaching and practicing medicine into the program”, which “highlights SFU’s overall commitment to decolonizing research, academic programs, and curricula”. It goes on to state that one of SFU’s potential goals is to “expand research on the colonial and post-colonial experiences of Indigenous peoples in Canada and globally”. Again, under the Collective Agreement, the administration may not dictate faculty members’ methods of teaching or topics of research – or (presumably) methods of practicing medicine, in the case of future clinical faculty. We request clarification.
- p. 11 and 12: The term “safe” presumably refers to something other than physical safety and freedom from discrimination, which are already guaranteed under SFU policy and Canadian law. However, its intended meaning is not provided in the document. The term “safe space” can sometimes be used to mean “a place where views are not challenged” or “a place where some views are not tolerated”. Research and teaching inherently involve the rigorous interrogation of ideas; they cannot be conducted in an environment where some ideas are protected from critical inquiry and others are not allowed to be discussed. Moreover, such an environment would threaten the academic freedom of faculty members who wish to question “protected” ideas or promote ideas that are unpopular or controversial. We therefore request that both instances of the term “safe” be deleted.
- p. 11, 13, 15: The potential goals include “expand Indigenous enrollment with programs with low representation”; “build accessible pathways for Indigenous students to all faculties, with a focus on SFU’s School of Medicine”; “creating pathways and laddering to make post-secondary education more accessible”; and “diversify both the countries of origin and academic programs of study of international students”. The document does not specify how these goals might be achieved, an omission that is worrisome. For example, strengthened recruitment efforts would be acceptable, while lower standards for admission would not. We request clarification in the document.
- p. 12: Section 4 discusses inclusion, not “inclusive excellence”. We therefore request that the title be changed to “Developing a Culture of Inclusion”. We ask that “differing cultures and learners” be changed to “differing cultures and viewpoints” and that “political belief” be included on the list beginning with “social

background, age, ..." (as per the definition of "diversity" in the [SFU Equity Compass](#)). We also request that a section on "Fostering Academic Excellence" be added to the document.

- p. 13: We believe that SFU's goal should be to support academic success among **all** students, not just "equity-deserving students" (a contentious term in and of itself) and request that the language be revised accordingly.
- p. 16: We fully support the administration's commitment to ensuring that all activities and resources support the academic mission. However, we are confused as to why Section 6 mentions support for research, one of two key components of the academic mission, only once and in passing. We request clarification.

Thank you for taking the time to consider our concerns. We look forward to your response.