

vccfa / memo

VANCOUVER COMMUNITY COLLEGE Faculty Association FPSE LOCAL 15

DATE: July 27, 2009

TO: Pete Legg, President
Lorna Brown, CUPE 4627
Lila Heilbrunn, AVCCA
Tiffany Kalanj, SUVCC

FROM: Frank Cosco, President, VCCFA

SUBJECT: STRATEGIC PLANNING MEMO OF JUNE 26th

VCCFA Commentary in boxed sections below, interspersed with excerpts from the June 26th memo from Pete:

As requested, the VCCFA will be represented at the summer meeting of constituency groups, scheduled for August 12th at 9 am. We do have concern with the date being in the heart of summer when it's difficult to get representation and impossible to have appropriate consultation.

The memo to the constituency groups lists six assumptions the College is working from and mentions that College administration has already concluded that it will recommend to the Board that a "fully developed strategic plan" is necessary and that comprehensive VCC2015 process "recommence starting this fall."

The letter mentions prior conversations with employee group leadership. The VCCFA has used those opportunities to comment on the idea of recommencing the VCC 2015 project. References to some of those comments can be found in this letter; however, some of our perspectives have not been included. We have therefore interspersed VCCFA comments in boxes throughout the June 26th memo. It is our hope that these comments can provide some of the input asked for. It is our feeling that because of the importance of the topic that they should be in the mix prior to the meeting.

I would invite the leaders of the other constituency groups to share this response with their executives or members as widely as they like. We would welcome any inquiries as well.

Frank Cosco

Excerpts from the June 26th Memo from Pete Legg:

"There is widespread agreement that the VCC2015 process had a high level of engagement and participation from the College community."

It is true that the community responded enthusiastically. Part of that engagement and participation was

predicated on an unprecedented level of release from normal duties being provided. Very significantly, at that point there was no felt threat to any existing program.

“The current strategic plan was initially approved in 2002 and last updated in 2005. ... It is widely accepted that a strategic planning process is necessary ...”

We are not so sure where the “wide acceptance” comes from. It has not risen up through faculty; in fact the union is the one that is usually reporting on administrative comments re planning. In our view it seems the College administration links items that could be routinely dealt with such as Curriculum Development to renewed Strategic Planning.

The College itself is clearly reporting significant progress and engagement. In its 2009/10 to 2011/12 “Institutional Accountability Plan and Report to the Ministry of Advanced Education” (May 10, 2009) VCC makes a convincing case of not only having made significant progress and innovation with “12 new programs in 2009/10, including a degree in Nursing” but also on pages 4 through 7 of being well positioned on several major fronts that make up the “Planning and Operating Context.” Those include Demographic Shifts, the Skills Crisis, Immigration, working with the Aboriginal Community, Mature Workers, At- Risk Youth, Low-Income Families, and People with Disabilities. Although it can always improve, the simple fact that our current Plan was last updated in 2005 does not mean that the College is standing still and not able to function appropriately within its mandate.

One is forced to note on page 3 in the attractive historical chart/timeline that “VCC unveils VCC 2015 -- Its new Strategic Plan” is already included as the major event for 2010 and on page 8, “VCC expects to engage in strategic planning process in 2009/10.” Unfortunately, these assertions beg the question of whether this whole consultation is after the fact.

Leaving that concern aside, the VCCFA can agree that a new process is necessary at some point within the next couple of years. However the alignment of “future direction” with “vision and needs” is a major point of discussion. Who gets to define these points? How do we know we have had a wide canvas of competing visions and needs in order to make the process as authentic as possible?

One thought we raised with Pete was that perhaps we should open up part of strategic planning in a way that has never been done at VCC before. Speakers from all facets of the “community” could be invited/challenged to give their views of a community college such as ours and how they see its challenges and roles. People could come from the academic world, other leading community colleges in North America, from the artistic world, from the world of the community and city planner and geographer, from labour and from business and industry. Before we start to engage internally we should invite external stimulation.

“...the College must continue to exercise prudent fiscal management to improve financial stability. ...”

We of course would welcome stability, but we would also welcome a less conservative view of budgeting. It is and always has been tight. It actually should be tight because serving the public should be the primary purpose of the budget not achieving a 1 or 2% surplus and to that end it should always

be asked whether every dollar not spent is a dollar not being used for our purpose.

Given the financial stability we have achieved with little help from the provincial government, at the tremendous cost of continuing trauma to faculty members, other employees and to students, we reiterate the points we have often made. Tight budgets mean difficult decisions have to be made but the priority should be to protect the direct education and education support activities of the college and therefore if cuts are to be made they should be in other areas first.

“The VCC2015 process would take place at the same time that we are searching for a new President. There are different perspectives as to whether the college’s planning process ought to continue or be finalized prior to the installment of a new President.”

Although a planning process might be begun in some key college-wide areas, such as space utilization, website use, obtaining third party contracts, and curriculum development, we are certainly amongst those who feel any planning effort has to be limited in scope until a new President is installed and certainly not near finalization so that it still open to major input from a new President. It has always been true in the college system that Strategic Planning is one of a President’s major responsibilities, and that makes sense. Who will be charged over the ensuing decade with implementing it and fostering it but the President?

Accountability would be another major concern. Part of every President’s evaluation is measured on achieving the goals of the current Strategic Plan, which they have usually played a key role in shaping; how fair would it be to have a new President evaluated against goals with which they have had little or no input and may even have fundamental criticisms? Would effort be wasted if a new President felt compelled to redo parts of a plan?

Nevertheless, we do feel there could be a beginning to Strategic Planning in 2009/10. We would recommend the “external stimulus” mentioned above, work on a limited number of pressing college-wide topics, and a School/Centre initiative which is commented on below in the “Agenda for the Meeting” section.

“Although the timing for collective bargaining has not been established, it is possible that it will be concurrent with the planning process. “

This is potentially very problematic both in terms of content and in terms of process. There may be important bargaining issues that either side brings up which are simultaneously part of planning. One process could be played against the other, to the benefit of neither. Collective Bargaining only comes around about every three years these days and its integrity has to be respected. On the process side, leadership from both the college and the union who get involved in collective bargaining are also those who would normally have much to offer to planning, that potential overload is troubling.

“There is an interest by the Board that we restart the planning process. ...”

In responding to the Board Chair’s challenge to restart the process, the VCCFA has had to speak of the unfortunate history of planning attempts at VCC. Planning has gotten intertwined with cutting and

ended up hurting morale rather than enhancing it.

We challenged the Board Chair and the Interim President to make a commitment that the College itself would do nothing to cause a reduction in programs or jobs for the period covered by the plan. We repeat that challenge here. The VCCFA will have to make its decision regarding participation depending in large part on the answer to this challenge.

We suggest that such a commitment would do wonders for engagement in planning. We are making serious suggestions about restarting within a defined set of parameters but there should be a mutual commitment to our current programming from the Board and senior administration.

“We also note that a fully developed strategic plan is necessary to form a basis for other important decisions such as campus planning. “

We have a hard time understanding why this should be so unless in fact the option to cut programming and activities is a real one that the College wants to have available.

We have several times pointed out that there should be planning exercises around space utilization, around tuition fee levels, website use, investment in faculty and curriculum development and other key initiatives. The lack of reaction from the College begs the question of why not? Is it because senior administration wants to determine which programs might not be around so they don't have to be included in the space discussions?

For this transitional period, when we have leadership in interim positions, college-wide planning should be on an “as-needed” basis. As we are trying to suggest, that should not however prevent certain valuable college-wide initiatives such as hearing from outside expert opinions.

“... management proposes that the VCC2015 process recommence, starting this fall. The objective would be to develop a proposed plan that would be finalized in the fall of 2010. It is our recommendation that the process should proceed through completion even though there may be uncertainties around budgets, collective bargaining or the timing of the installation of a new President.”

There will always be uncertainties around budget which probably can never be avoided. However, the other uncertainties mentioned are too important to ignore and would perhaps set the process up for failure.

We've mentioned our concerns around maintaining the integrity of the collective bargaining process. The importance of the installation of a new President bears elaboration. Many of us were involved in the 08/09 presidential search process. Strategic planning was a key criterion of discussion throughout that process. Candidates expected to be grilled on their views on it, their records were examined, and they were well prepared for the topic. Their comments and documentation highlighted their past successes in this area.

There's a real disconnect between what seems to be a lack of concern about the role of a new President

with a 2015 strategic planning process and the obvious importance of that plan to the new President's job. Going too far down this path could even negatively affect the just recommended presidential search process, a prospect none of us would want.

“Agenda for the meeting

- Are the assumptions stated above reflective of your understanding? “

We believe the comments above demonstrate where the assumptions are lacking. In fact restarting a comprehensive 2015 process in the near future could very easily go off the rails. As mentioned, the VCCFA's participation cannot be confirmed.

- “Are there other issues or considerations that ought to guide our recommendations to the Board? “

We repeat the danger of going too far with planning to 2015 when the person to be held most responsible for the success of that plan cannot be fully engaged in it. Who else will take up that responsibility?

We have suggested other ways to prepare for planning. We mentioned the useful stimulus of hearing from experts from other successful post-secondary environments or from other connected environments who can provide different perspectives.

We add here that one key feature of the current plan, the establishment of Schools and Centres--which were to allow for some independence of thought and action as opposed to the previous Divisional model—has not been examined at all in the more than five years of their existence. Their so-called “strategic plans” (page 10 of the May 10th Report to the Ministry) were tacked on to the current plan in most cases without their involvement.

Perhaps a useful preparatory planning exercise would be to have them separately engage with outside professional facilitation in reflection, for the first time ever, on the School/Centre model; on how it has worked over the past few years; and how it might function better. There is starting to be a compilation of relevant data through Program Renewal and Review processes and this could also be a new opportunity for Schools and Centres to get a good return on that investment by using that data as part of their reflection.

- “Are the proposed recommendations feasible? “

We have raised concerns as to why going fully into comprehensive planning in the way the 2015 exercise was originally set up is not the best idea at this juncture. The best outcome is not achievable right now. However, that does not mean that important work could not be done.

- “Are there other approaches that ought to be considered? “

vccfa / memo

VANCOUVER COMMUNITY COLLEGE **Faculty Association** FPSE LOCAL 15

We suggest three other approaches, none of which are mutually-exclusive:

~If commitments to current programs and activities are made, then limited planning on college-wide topics could be considered. We have mentioned a few topics which need attention, there are others.

~Inviting outside commentary from within the wider post-secondary world and from the broader connected community could be very stimulating.

~Schools and Centres doing their own exercises with outside facilitation could be very valuable.

All three of these approaches could then feed into a later comprehensive planning process. In our view they would help make its success more likely.

Thank you for your attention.
FC

FC/av:COPE15
C: memos/Frank/Strategic Planning Memo of June 26/09