A Proposal to Establish a Teaching and Learning Centre at MSVU
Prepared for the Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning
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A. Background on Faculty Development at MSVU

MSVU has always valued quality of teaching. The collective agreement between the faculty association and the University specifies that teaching performance is one of the criteria to be considered in tenure and promotion considerations. The University Senate has approved the use of student evaluations of teaching and these evaluations are conducted regularly through the office of the appropriate Dean. The most recent faculty agreement has implemented the teaching dossier as a standard for documenting quality of teaching. While the University clearly places a priority on teaching, there has been little formal support given to faculty development in this regard.

In the last 25 years, faculty development has been left primarily to the voluntary efforts of individual academic departments to assist their members in improving teaching performance; informal mentoring between faculty members; and workshops/brown bag lunches sponsored by the Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning and its sub-committees.

More recently these efforts have become more structured. The annual Faculty Day has evolved into an event focused primarily on teaching questions and is held in late August. In-house workshops and seminars on a variety of topics drawing on the expertise of MSVU faculty members are held on a more ad hoc basis. In 2004, SCOTL, through the Vice-President (Academic), was allocated a budget to support MSVU’s participation in the Committee on Faculty Development of the Atlantic Association of Universities and to bring teaching experts from outside the University to campus. A small number of MSVU faculty regularly take part in the annual AAU Teaching Showcase and MSVU has hosted this event. The University’s librarians have regularly collaborated with faculty members to enhance student learning on campus, while the Distance Learning and Continuing Education (DLCE) department provides regular workshops on using technology for teaching and produces for the Education Technology Committee (an ad hoc sub-committee of SCOTL) a newsletter which focuses on learning technology to support innovative teaching.

In 1999, the University’s Strategic Plan, Blueprint 2000, indicated a commitment to faculty development through the strategy of providing opportunities for professional development to support the goal of attracting and retaining highly qualified faculty and staff (Enabler 1, page 20). The 2002 Academic Plan dedicated a section to teaching and learning, and included the following recommendation:

"It is recommended that, over the next two years, the University investigate the feasibility of establishing an office of instructional development, as is the case at a number of other institutions. The office or centre would be staffed at least part-
time by a coordinator who could advance some of the work of the Committee [SCOTL], and would be provided with an appropriate budget."

In the spring of 2004, SCOTL established a subcommittee of Judith Scrimger, Associate Professor of Public Relations and Peggy Watts, Director of Distance Learning and Continuing Education, to do groundwork for exploring the potential for a teaching and learning centre at MSVU. This report would explore: the current models of faculty development in the Atlantic Region; the current resources on campus which support faculty development; space, budget and staffing considerations; potential programming initiatives; potential funding sources; and the relationship of a teaching and learning centre to SCOTL and other departments on campus.

B. Faculty Development in the Atlantic Region

MSVU, St. Thomas University in Fredericton, St. Francis Xavier in Antigonish, and the N.S. Agricultural College in Truro depend on volunteer leadership from Senate committees tasked with overseeing teaching and learning policies. These committees, which function in much the same way as the SCOTL, are primarily composed of individual faculty members who take a strong personal interest in teaching and learning.

Dalhousie, Saint Mary’s, University of New Brunswick, Memorial University of Newfoundland, University of Prince Edward Island, University College of Cape Breton, Acadia University and Mount Allison University operate professionally staffed Centres of Teaching and Learning. These centres have evolved in different ways. Some have expanded out of instructional development departments which originally focused on integrating new technologies in the classroom. Others have grown out of faculty-driven initiatives of senate committees.

All of these centres employ full-time professional staff who are trained in instructional development or related fields. While programming varies, most include the following:
- Assistance to faculty in developing teaching portfolios;
- Peer observation programs;
- Peer mentoring programs;
- Subscriptions for faculty to resources such as the Teaching Professor;
- Co-ordination of teaching awards programs;
- Teaching Workshops and seminars;
- Administration of grants for teaching innovations/instructional development;
- Dissemination of conference/resource information;
- Consultations for individual faculty on teaching concerns;
- Support for new faculty.

Some of the centres also focus on scholarship of teaching (e.g. Mount Allison). Others administer audio-visual services and new technologies (e.g. Dalhousie, UPEI). UPEI maintains a Faculty Development Office within its larger Teaching and Learning Centre.
which includes a wide array of services including a math drop-in centre, writing resource centre, the first-year experience centre, and more.

Administratively, a variety of arrangements are in place but most centre directors report to the vice-president academic. Most have an advisory committee that is usually a senate committee similar to MSVU’s SCOTL. Universities comparable in size to MSVU tend to have smaller staffs, e.g. SMU is staffed with one professional and one support staff. Those that integrate technology and other services may have more staff associated with the centre. Faculty associates (part-time secondments) are also used to augment resources (e.g. UPEI, UNB).

Sample Mission Statement (Purdy Crawford Teaching Centre, Mount Allison University)

    The Purdy Crawford Teaching Centre (PCTC), in collaboration with other units and individuals, offers programmes, services and resources to encourage, enhance, and reward teachers, teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning at Mount Allison University. As a corollary to this mission, in harmony with the university’s mission “to create and disseminate knowledge in a community of higher learning, centred on undergraduate students,” the PCTC is committed to providing opportunities and support for Mount Allison teachers to publish and share that scholarship in traditional and non-traditional ways: at local, regional and national conferences, in the peer-reviewed pedagogical literature; in the educational development literature; through the PCTC newsletter, website, and programmes.

C. Context for An Office of Instructional Development at MSVU: A Learning Commons

In 2003, the Departments of Distance Learning and Continuing Education, Information Technology and Services, Student Affairs and the Library began to explore the notion of establishing a Learning Commons at the University. The notion was to develop an integrated information and technology services space, both virtual and physical, to serve students, faculty, staff and the public. The Commons would be centered within the Library, along the lines of models already established at other universities such as Dalhousie, Guelph, Victoria and York (Seneca at York). In December 2003, the heads of the four departments were invited to make a presentation to President’s Forum to outline the vision, describe the existing resources that could join the Commons, point out current gaps and limitations, and indicate what would be needed to make it happen.

The vision for the Learning Commons included services, physical space and virtual space. Services would include coordinated information services, instructional and information literacy services, learning support for students (such as ESL, writing, peer mentoring), technological support, student project support, specialized services for students with disabilities, staff training, and instructional development services for faculty. The physical space would be in the Library, serving as a welcoming hub that would be an entryway to campus teaching and learning resources. Virtual space would include online resources and services in personalized portals.
The Library and IT&S determined that they would be able to take the first step to realizing the vision with a small investment. The Information Commons area was opened in the Library in the summer of 2004, providing eight computer workstations and adding the IT&S Help Desk to the large open space containing the Reference Desk. All partners, including Student Affairs and Distance Learning and Continuing Education, remain committed to the development of a broader Learning Commons.

D. Creating an Office of Instructional Development

One model of a Learning Commons that provides insights into what could be developed at MSVU to include instructional development for faculty is that of the University of Calgary (http://commons.ucalgary.ca/about/index.html). Unlike the other models noted above, the Calgary unit is focused on faculty and their teaching and teaching-related research. Its mission is:

To provide leadership and support for quality, innovative, inquiry-learning approaches to curriculum innovation and research. We also provide leadership and support for the integration of technologies into the learning process.

The conceptual organization of the Calgary Learning Commons follows on the next page. As this diagram shows, this Learning Commons combines in one unit support for faculty in the areas of learning design, e-learning and multi-media, and broader professional development related to teaching, with inquiry-based research at the core. MSVU already has in place, in DLCE, IT&S and the Library, resources to address many of the elements in the three facets of the Calgary model for an instructional development centre. However, these resources are currently focused on supporting faculty involved in e-learning.

An opportunity now exists through DLCE for MSVU to inaugurate an office of teaching and learning to serve all faculty teaching in all situations, adding a key piece of the full Learning Commons envisioned for the future. Since DLCE is increasingly supporting faculty teaching with technology face-to-face as well as in distance mode, the department has already sought and received approval to appoint an Instructional Designer. This position is intended to be a resource for academic departments and individual faculty seeking assistance with course design and a wide variety of instructional challenges (technology-related and not) primarily in campus-based programs and courses and in research projects (existing coordinator positions in DLCE provide this support for faculty teaching at a distance). It is a relatively small step to add responsibility for coordinating University-wide teaching and learning services to the duties of this position, and the skills and qualifications required for instructional design would be a distinct asset in the Coordinator role.
The Instructional Designer/Coordinator would become an ex-officio member of SCOTL (as is the Director of DLCE, to whom she would report) and SCOTL would assume an essential advisory role to the position. Some modifications to the terms of reference for SCOTL would be necessary to reflect its relationship to the Instructional Designer/Coordinator, and the fact that she would be carrying out functions (such as organizing professional development opportunities in teaching) under its purview.

E. Benefits of the Proposal

This proposal would benefit the University in a number of ways. It takes advantage of an existing position to consolidate and expand important services for the ongoing enhancement of teaching and learning. Instructional design expertise and consultations on all types of teaching concerns would be available to all faculty, not just those teaching...
with technology. Existing services such as Faculty Day and other professional development workshops would have a coordinator, the teaching resource collection would be judiciously expanded, and conference and resource information would be managed and disseminated in new ways. The development and maintenance of a web-based portal to ensure a virtual presence would make the resources available to faculty anytime and anywhere, a feature especially important for part-time faculty.

New services to faculty would include assistance with developing the teaching dossiers now used for documenting quality of teaching, and with preparing teaching award applications. Orientation and support for the increasing numbers of new faculty anticipated in the next few years as older faculty retire will be an important role, and training in teaching skills for graduate students could also be undertaken. A process could be developed whereby faculty would be appointed as associates of the centre, conducting peer observation, acting as peer mentors or conducting research on teaching and learning. Students could also play a technology support role as interns or to complete course-related projects (such as those required by the M.Ed programs). Finally, the University would have a voice in national and international teaching and learning bodies to which the Instructional Designer/Coordinator would subscribe, and benefit from the sharing of best practices within these organizations.

F. Conclusion

Demand for its expertise in instructional development and best practices for e-learning has already moved DLCE beyond the realm of distance learning alone to include support for classroom-based teaching innovation. The proposed option of adding to the duties of the Instructional Designer position to encompass responsibility for the coordination of instructional development would build on this foundation and make economical use of existing resources. We believe it would fulfill the recommendation of the Academic Plan in a way that is compatible with the nature and size of the institution, linking into the larger MSVU vision for a Learning Commons serving faculty, staff, students and the public.

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