

Reflections on the Academic Retreat, UVIC, January 29, 2009

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Disclaimer

These notes do not offer a record of discussion, or even a selection of main points from the discussion. They set out a quick draft sampling of thoughts that occurred in light of the conversations at the recent academic retreat, juggled subsequently. Almost every idea here was broached or prompted by someone at the meeting, but only a couple of names are mentioned in attribution of a few very specific observations that I heard, or thought I heard, or perhaps wished I had heard. If these impressions reflect a misunderstanding of the discussion, that's my responsibility and I apologize for any errors.

Coin of the Realm

My old teacher, Nobel Laureate in Economics Paul Samuelson, offered in his 1962 Presidential Address to the American Economics Association his advice (though it really must be read in context) to the profession as to evaluation of their work. "In the long run, the economic scholar works for the only coin worth having—our own applause." This endorsement of the ancient and honourable tradition that sees the criteria for evaluation of academic performance—and the performance of the university as a social institution—in terms of internal disciplinary standards of rigour and quality seemed to find a direct echo in President Turpin's anecdote about the counsel he received early in his career, seeing publication in the first-rate journals as the only coin worth the effort—a 'good' journal being 'not good enough'.

From entitlement through enlightenment to accountability: the obligation to explain, to a broader, more questioning, public

But all that coinage now comes from a different paymaster. There is increasing emphasis on measuring the social impact and outcomes flowing from the rising flow of external funding of university research, in which broad-based curiosity-driven research competes with specific and targeted 'strategic priorities'. Major problems of attribution are present in accountability for results from either, but are obviously largely insurmountable in interdisciplinary initiatives and boundary-spanning research partnerships aimed at transformational results.

On evaluation of the impact of public investment in university research, there was a suggestion that universities have to move beyond a sense of entitlement to support as just a 'good thing' to a sense of accountability for much fuller (though not quantitative, because that ambition is everywhere pretty well illusory) explanation of the pathways and linkages through which university activities contribute positively to desired social outcomes. That explanation ultimately rests in interpretation and imagery. In this

setting, the faculties of Humanities and Fine Arts become the pointed end of the academic mission, conveying new ideas and new perceptions of enduring human needs and challenges, and means to meet them. Justification moves away from the university, downstream of the research enterprise itself. Disciplinary criteria for evaluation of performance and progression in the field become problematic in the face of emphasis on community-driven as distinct from curiosity-driven research.

It was noted that the effect of recent budgetary decisions is to shift resources away from

limits of scientific ambition in a complex

A student entering UVIC could be entering a community small enough to be personal,

