Two-Year Progress Report of the Centre for Society, Technology and Values

Introduction

The self-study for the Centre for Society, Technology and Values (including the STV Option) was submitted 7 July 2008. The internal review took place later that year, with interviews on 26 September and 31 October, and the review team report was submitted 3 March 2009. The Centre submitted its strategic plan and response to the review team on 28 June 2010. This report outlines the progress made in the last two years.

Based on the self-study, the reviewers’ comments, comments from the Senate following the 2010 submission of the strategic plan, and an Engineering Faculty Vision 2015 self-study and plan completed in 2011, CSTV has taken several steps to renew its undergraduate offerings, attract new students, and participate more fully in the university community. Recent developments have also suggested new directions for CSTV.

Since 2010 two new courses have been created and taught: STV 404 Technology in Canadian Society was offered in the Fall of 2011 and the Fall of 2012, and STV 201 Special Topics: Cities, Technology and Society will be offered in Winter 2013. Aside from increasing the variety of STV courses, these were chosen because they represent interdisciplinary topics underserved by other undergraduate courses at Waterloo, and they are aligned with the interests of CSTV faculty. Enrolment in STV 404 has not been high: only six students in 2011 and four in 2012. A possible long-term solution to this problem is proposed below.

In the last two years, student diversity has not changed significantly. As a general rule (one exception is noted immediately above), STV courses operate at capacity and fill quickly. Approximately 65% of STV students are in Engineering, 12% Environment, 10% Mathematics, and the rest are in the remaining faculties. Since the strategic plan was submitted, five students have completed the STV Option (or will have completed it by the end of 2012). This is an increase from an average of less than one Option student per year to more than two per year.

CSTV is working to improve its presence on campus, promote the STV Option, and explore collaborative opportunities and methods to resolve the Centre’s intellectual isolation. Old and new courses have been advertised via posters and contact with undergraduate advisors and associate chairs. The Centre has a social media presence with an active blog written by its faculty, highlighting and commenting on society and technology issues in the news. The Director of CSTV, Dr. Scott Campbell, participated in on-campus events, such as a keynote presentation at the 2012 Combining Two Cultures Knowledge Integration Conference held at Waterloo in January 2012 and moderating a panel at the on-campus Science and Technology in Society Day hosted by the Philosophy Department in March 2012. As well, Dr. Campbell (who is by training a historian of technology), will soon be an
adjunct lecturer in the History Department. This position will provide improved opportunities for relevant research, supervision of graduate students, and teaching, and will allow him to explore the cross-listing of STV and History courses.

A few recommendations and plans from the previous report to Senate have not yet been acted upon. In particular, plans for an online STV course did not move past initial discussions with the Centre for Extended Learning and CSTV has yet to host any non-teaching events or a speaker series. These activities may require more resources than are currently allocated to CSTV.

In 2009 internal reviewers suggested that CSTV reduce its course offerings to a single large course. The argument appears to be based on the misconception that the Centre existed for one reason: to meet the Faculty of Engineering “impact on society” accreditation needs of its undergraduates. CSTV did not and does not consider this a reasonable suggestion, given its pedagogical limitations, the existence of the STV Option (which requires at least four STV courses), and the obvious cross-faculty undergraduate demand for a variety of STV courses, which are routinely full, with students from all faculties (see above).

Nevertheless, CSTV is part of the Faculty of Engineering. It provides the largest set of courses on campus to engineering students who are in need of an “impact on society” course. In the last year, the Centre has asked to contribute its expertise and insights related to technology and society education to assist the faculty with its broader accreditation concerns, particularly with rubrics to assess and measure student knowledge and skills in areas relevant to “the impact of engineering on society” that are not covered in STV courses.

CSTV has one significant concern for the future, which was not articulated in the strategic plan: the lack of interdisciplinary coordination between courses offered by CSTV and the large number of similar or related interdisciplinary courses taught in other departments. This is a fragmentation problem, which produces overlap in teaching as well as disjointed situations in which students are unaware of related courses and unable to maximize their plan of study. STV courses still are not well known to many undergraduate advisors and students, and students are generally not encouraged to take such courses. We suspect the low enrolment in STV 404 is related to this problem. However, fragmentation is also a community problem for faculty who are unable to collaborate effectively across departments and faculties. Preliminary discussions with Dr. Carla Fehr (Wolfe Chair in Science and Technology Studies, Philosophy) and Dr. Heather Douglas (Waterloo Chair in Science and Society, Philosophy) have led to an exploratory committee that will study this problem in 2012 and the future. Given the large number of similar courses and faculty members with related interests, and the need to bring them together, in time, significant changes to CSTV could be necessary including much more direct collaboration with the Faculty of Arts.