Time for communication and planning

**DOUG PEERS**, Dean of Arts

WELCOME TO THE FIRST ISSUE of the Faculty of Arts newsletter, which coincides with the launch of our Strategic Planning exercise. This is no accident. In my discussions with faculty, students, and staff prior to my coming to Waterloo in July, two observations were repeatedly shared with me: Arts needs a plan, and Arts needs to communicate better – both within and beyond the Faculty.

Actually, two other things came up in my early discussions: a quiz to see if I knew how many times Weber and King crossed, and frequent lamentations as to how we could continue to exist in a world bereft of high octane caffeine.

Having driven Weber and King countless times, I am up to speed on that one (3). As for caffeine sources, I’ll do my best on that front too.

In the meantime, however, I will be turning my attention to developing a Strategic Plan for the Faculty, one which has meaning for our community, which has been designed through extensive consultations, and which will chart a course forward. Our diversity is our strength, but we must at the same time ensure that we do all that we can to check the tendency simply to see Arts as an aggregation of smaller units. The sum is stronger than the parts, though we have not always managed to persuade others of that fact (hence the emphasis on raising our profile through communications). And the time for planning could not be more opportune – or more pressing, depending on whether you are a glass half full or a glass half empty person.
Many changes are happening at Waterloo. The Sixth Decade Plan is undergoing a far-reaching mid-cycle review. The senior administration will be very different a year from now, and will include our incoming Vice-President Academic and Provost, Sallie Ann Keller. I want to be able to greet the new administration team with a plan which makes a case for investment in Arts, a plan based on rigorous analysis as well as strong consensus within our community as to where we should be going.

Our planning must also take into account the rapidly shifting external environment. To say we live in interesting times is, I admit, very clichéd – yet it is also very accurate. Student demographics are changing, as are student expectations; the federal and provincial governments are battling deficits and looking at how universities can help foster prosperity; ever-more stringent expectations as to accountability are becoming foisted upon us; colleges are enjoying a great deal of public (and political) support; and we are having to contend with the usual potshots against the humanities and social sciences. With respect to the latter, however, we are now facing criticisms from quarters we hitherto had little to fear.

To deploy another cliché: the best defence is a good offence, and the Strategic Plan will identify priorities that will assist us in making effective use of resources over the long term. Departments and units will have a framework within which they can more easily locate their own goals and missions. In the end, it is my intention that the Strategic Plan will provide the foundation for a series of more operationally-focused planning documents: advancement and fundraising, enrollment management, space allocation, complement, and internationalization. Collectively, such plans will assist in strengthening and better articulating a distinctive ‘Arts at Waterloo’ profile.

To do this, I have asked two of our colleagues to take charge of what might best be called “intelligent crowd-sourcing.” Professors David DeVidi and Theresa Libby are co-chairing a task force that will be reaching out to faculty, students, staff, and alumni to solicit their input into charting a course forward for the Faculty of Arts. I am excited at the prospect of working with the task force and hearing your thoughts on where you want us to be in five years (besides in a decent Arts coffee shop – in a new Arts building, while we’re at it). We hope to have a plan identifying priorities ready for approval at the Arts Faculty Council by the end of the academic year. This will give us the summer to work out action plans to meet these priorities as well as identify the metrics that will let us know how well we are doing.

Let the strategic exercise begin

WE’RE PLEASED and flattered to have been asked to chair the Arts Strategic Plan Task Force. This is an important time for Arts to have such a plan. The University as a whole is in the midst of a review of the Sixth Decade Plan, which is in part an attempt to turn that rather aspirational document into something more deserving of the label “plan.” With several new senior administrators about to come aboard, it is a time of opportunity for Arts. But the signals are clear that a sense of direction and strategy are necessary preconditions for Arts to receive the support (and resources) it needs from the University.

It seems to us that a Strategic Plan, properly done, is a good idea for other reasons, too. The Faculty of Arts already contributes to the University of Waterloo’s success, providing excellent teaching at the undergraduate level in a wide range of programs, first-rate graduate instruction, and scholarship that contributes to the good of Canadian society and the world. In Waterloo Arts, as happens at any university where there is such a concentration of brilliant minds and extraordinary work ethic, there will always be many great ideas for new initiatives that might be undertaken in Arts.

It is a simple fact that there will never be enough time or resources to pursue all these good ideas while maintaining what we already do well. Properly done, a Strategic Plan can provide a framework for making principled decisions about which new initiatives to pursue and what to change about what we are doing now. A strategy can help us reach our most important goals. Moreover, while it’s always disappointing to be told “no,” it is much easier to swallow if that decision is seen to be a principled one.

There is justified scepticism about strategic plans at universities. Often they are wildly unrealistic reorganizations of the ten buzz words in fashion among academic administrators at the time the plan is written. Our goal is to avoid producing anything of that sort.
There is little point in producing a strategic plan unless the people who will have to implement it and live with it buy into it. It is therefore a crucial first step to hear from the people who will be key to the success of the Faculty. A “vision” imposed from above will never have this sort of buy-in.

The first thing we need to know is the views of faculty, because they are the “front line workers” most directly involved in teaching and scholarship and the foundation for the Faculty’s existence. We will be meeting with every academic unit in Arts to discuss the aspirations and goals of that unit. Something we will seek opinions about is openness to interdisciplinary teaching and scholarship, and cooperation among units – are these good ideas for Arts, and if they are, can we do them in ways that enhance what we are already doing well? We will also provide faculty with avenues to communicate ideas they have that perhaps do not square with the goals of their department.

We know that there are productive and creative contributions to this planning process that we will only get from the other members of Arts, including the staff who work in departments, support units, and the Faculty’s administration, as well as Arts-affiliated academic librarians.

But faculty and staff members are only part of the Faculty. Obviously, understanding the goals and desires of undergraduate and graduate students is also crucial to this process. And there is much to learn from our alumni, supporters in the private and non-profit sectors, and from the parents of our students.

We have almost finished assembling a Strategic Plan Task Force to help us with this process. With the help of the Dean’s Office, we have selected people to represent key constituencies. We’ve looked for candidates that have the trust and admiration of the people they represent, and a proven ability to think strategically and in the general interest. The names of those on the committee will be announced soon. After that, we look forward to hearing from you!

Get ready for Congress this spring

AS I WRITE THIS I see that my BlackBerry app ‘TargetDate’ informs me there are only 135 days until Congress begins. That makes my chest tighten a little, but the planning for Congress 2012 continues apace, and I think we’ll have a great time in May!

Registration is now open, and colleagues from across Canada and around the world are making their plans to head to Waterloo. Our own campus will be hosting many of the association meetings, especially during the period of May 26-30. In the coming weeks students will be informed about volunteer and paid work opportunities at Congress, and a Waterloo website portal to all things Congress will be launched as well.

A number of special events will be taking place during Congress. The Big Thinker Lecture Series will feature speakers such as Margaret Atwood, Sidonie Smith, and our own Tad Homer Dixon. The Region and City of Waterloo will be hosting a special fair at the Waterloo Public Square to celebrate Congress. At the University of Waterloo we will be showcasing a number of special features such as UWAG (the University of Waterloo Art Gallery), our innovations in the digital arts realm, and our work in the performing arts.

We’d also like to showcase a range of research in the Faculty of Arts that embodies the Congress theme of ‘Scholarship for an Uncertain World.’ If you or a colleague you know is conducting research that has a potential or concrete impact relating in some way to the theme, please get in touch with me or Wendy Philpott. Don’t parse the meaning of “impact” too much; if you’re doing work that you think is interesting and would like to see it get some exposure, just let us know. We expect to produce a variety of promotional pieces that will inform Canadian and international academics as well as the public at large about the variety and value of humanities and social sciences scholarship at the University of Waterloo.

James Skidmore
Germanic & Slavic Studies, and Waterloo’s Congress convener
More students embracing exchange opportunities

TRAVEL BROADENS THE MIND, as the saying goes. And when that travel has as its focus one or two terms spent studying at a university outside of North America, the effects can be particularly enriching and life-changing. The University of Waterloo has for many years offered its students just such an opportunity through its international exchanges. As the university’s largest faculty, Arts participates very actively in these overseas experiences, currently offering its third- and occasionally fourth-year students the possibility of studying at one of more than 80 overseas partner institutions on every other continent except Africa.

In 2011-12 Arts will have sent almost 90 undergraduate students from third- and fourth-year overseas to 36 different universities in 17 different countries on four continents. Faculty of Arts students’ participation in overseas exchanges has, moreover, increased fourfold over the past six years. While the largest contingents of exchange students come from Economics, Psychology, and French, every department in the Faculty has students studying abroad this year. Exchange opportunities for students continue to broaden because of the tendency of more and more universities in non-English-speaking countries to offer an ever wider selection of courses taught in English, or even, as is the case of certain universities in Turkey or Japan, to teach entirely in English. Waterloo students typically take a full program of courses while away, with the expectation of obtaining the same number of credits as if they had stayed here. Tuition is paid to Waterloo where the students remain enrolled. A certain amount of scholarship help is available to offset some of the additional expenses students necessarily incur on an overseas exchange.

The academic and human enrichment our Waterloo students gain from their stay at an overseas university is, of course, returned reciprocally to us at Waterloo by the presence on our campus of students from partner universities. Visit the “Student Stories” page of Arts’ International Exchange website to hear and read about our students’ enthusiasm for this life-changing international experience.

December 27, 2011

Greetings from Jerusalem!

The term has been splendid and I’d like to thank you again for all of your help and assistance in giving me this opportunity. I’ve made many great friends and memories I’ll never forget.

Christmas was a little strange, as it’s not a very popular holiday here, but I’ll leave you with a crazy Christmas Eve story.

So I’m staying in Jerusalem and it’s pretty close to Bethlehem. I figured “hey, let’s go to Bethlehem for Christmas, visit the place where Jesus was born.”

I get to Bethlehem and it’s PACKED with 70,000 tourists trying to get into the Church of Nativity where Jesus was born. It’s 8 pm now and Christmas Eve evening service is about to start and there are thousands of people at the gate trying to get into the Church.

Anyway, you need a special ticket to get into the service and even if you had one, there’s no guarantee that you’ll even get into the church. I did not have a ticket.

I push my way around the crowd, trying to get to the closest swarma stand and a pastor from a church in Jerusalem recognizes me from an evening service I went to A MONTH AGO and waves me to come over. Not only do I get in, but I get into this tiny room, big enough to fit only 50 people (including the clergy) where the service is held. I completely bypassed several thousand other people who’ve been waiting for hours in the rain.

Now, I don’t get a seat, so I stand next to the pastor who happens to be right next to the rest of the clergy. THEN WHO WALKS IN?! The President of Palestine, Muhmoud Abbas and the Prime Minister of Palestine, Salam Fayyad. I’m standing 10 feet away from the President and the PM of Palestine, with all of his body guards, foreign dignitaries and ambassadors. They’re all in thousand dollar suits and all I’m wearing is a soaking wet leather jacket from the rain.

Anyway, from Jerusalem to all of you in Canada, Merry Christmas.

Charlie
What’s happening to Waterloo websites?

GOOD QUESTION! The Waterloo Web Redesign project started two years ago and will likely continue throughout 2012. Here is an attempt at a brief explanation of where things stand now and what’s coming up for 1) Waterloo’s homepage, 2) the Faculty of Arts website, and 3) Arts departmental websites.

UWATERLOO.CA BACKSTORY
You may have noticed that last winter 2011, the Waterloo homepage changed to the large photo with the slogan ‘Everything you discover at Waterloo belongs to you.’ Soon after that, the Arts webpages, including departmental pages, had the new black and white University of Waterloo banner with an orange departmental name added to the top of each page. The new banner and Faculty-coloured wordmark was incorporated on all six Waterloo Faculty websites. All of this was part of the ‘phasing protocol’ sanctioned by the central Web Redesign team.

ARTS.UWATERLOO.CA BACKSTORY
Meanwhile in Arts, a decision was made by Ken Coates and Bob Park not to wait for Arts’ turn to update per the Waterloo Web Redesign schedule and instead proceed with updating the Faculty-level website not yet including departments, moving it to a new ‘content management system’ (CMS, a product called Drupal), and implementing many of the Waterloo Web Redesign principles such as menu structure, style guidelines, and disability accessibility. This Arts initiative started in November 2010, and the new ‘Arts – 50 years and counting’, launched in July 2011. While it is new, this website is, in fact, our interim-new website, a step toward our final-new website that will align with the whole university web redesign scheme for faculties and other units see ‘Waterloo’s next moves’ below.

INSIDE/TECHNICAL STORY
For those who deal with webpage updating, you’ll be familiar with the editing software we’ve used for quite a few years now (Contribute, or Dreamweaver). Creating and updating the new Waterloo and Arts websites does not require software; instead, it is facilitated by our new web-based CMS (Drupal) – meaning updaters can work on webpage edits from any computer with internet access.

WATERLOO’S ONGOING HOMEPAGE STORY
Get ready for another change to uwaterloo.ca. The Redesign team is working on a new-new homepage, with an ETA of February. The current-new homepage (‘Everything you discover…’) has received mixed reviews, particularly this: “usability of the site was rated poor by the majority of respondents; people expect to find content about the university and useful links on the homepage.” So, the new-new homepage will have more photos, text and links – and will likely be black and gold themed (Waterloo’s traditional colours).

WATERLOO’S NEXT MOVES
Meanwhile, the faculties of Environment and Applied Health Sciences, as well as several non-academic units, are the “early adopters” and have recently launched their new redesigned websites based in the Waterloo CMS/Drupal. Most Arts web pages (both at the Faculty and department level) will eventually undergo a similar redesign. Doug Peers and Bob Park have elected to delay our move to this design for at least the next 6 months in favour of concentrating our web-updating resources on departmentals (see directly below).

ARTS DEPARTMENTAL WEB REDESIGN COMING UP!
We are beginning the dept.-by-dept. website updating process right now, starting with Economics. For each department, this process will typically involve the efforts of three people (see ‘Who’s doing what’ below) to review the current website, edit and write new content, plus gather images, per the new menu and style guidelines provided by the Waterloo Web Redesign team. Each departmental website will be launched as soon as it’s ready in Drupal on the Arts server (and will feature a similar look and feel to the Arts 50th website). We will work our way through Arts
departmental websites as efficiently as possible (translation: it’s hard to give a timeline at this point). As with the current arts.uwaterloo.ca site, departmental updating makes a big step toward the final redesign for Arts departments (see ENV and AHS for examples of the design).

WHO’S DOING WHAT (and when, roughly)
For each department, the content review and updating process will be completed by me, Wendy Philpott, together with two reps from the department: ideally, one staff and one faculty member. We’re currently preparing the new Economics website and hope to have it launched in early February. Political Science will be next, likely followed by Drama/Speech Communication. We have not yet designated a department to follow after that, so if yours is keen to get into the queue and will have the needed person-time available in the spring, please let me know. Also, if you want to be proactive, you can start planning your website redesign/migration to Drupal now. Please contact me or Lisa Tomalty (of ACO/IST) for guidance on how to get started.

Comments, suggestions and questions regarding Arts website redesign are welcome: wphilpott@uwaterloo.ca.

arts&letters
Have you seen the latest edition of Arts & Letters?
Edited by Christine White Woods (Co-op and Arts Special Programs Co-ordinator and Arts Alumni Liaison), this impressive annual update on Waterloo Arts is distributed to thousands of alumni and friends worldwide.

Reminder from University Affairs
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Feedback, please
Do you have an opinion about what should or should not be included in this Arts internal newsletter?
We plan to publish five issues per year and will gladly receive your suggestions for upcoming issues.
Please send feedback to wphilpott@uwaterloo.ca.