

Saskatchewan Polytechnic's Academic Model: Disrupting the Status Quo

Barbara Gustafson

Saskatchewan Polytechnic

Abstract

In 2014, Saskatchewan Polytechnic set out to create a vision for program delivery that would meet the needs of industry and students well into the future while building on existing strengths. Through a highly collaborative process, the Academic Model was created with more than 100 commitments to changing the status quo. Since 2016, the implementation of the Model has moved Saskatchewan Polytechnic forward as a polytechnic: adding employability skills, work-integrated learning, applied research and Indigenization to curriculum, as well as making learning more flexible for students and reinforcing quality assurance in program design. However, disruption comes with some discomfort, and this presentation shared the lessons learned about change management and communication along the way.

Article History

Received 27 September 2019

Available online 19 December 2020

Author Note


Dr. Barbara Gustafson is the Acting Special Advisor to the Provost at Saskatchewan Polytechnic.

Introduction

During the past five years, one of the most disruptive forces at Saskatchewan Polytechnic has been of its own making: the institutional academic model. Saskatchewan Polytechnic began a review of its implicit academic model in 2014 with a view to create a documented vision and plan to meet the changing needs of students and industry. The result, *Tomorrow's Learning in the Making: Saskatchewan Polytechnic's Academic Model*, was completed and approved in September 2016. Throughout the development process and subsequent implementation of the Academic Model, many lessons were learned regarding change and deliberate disruption that may provide guidance to other polytechnics considering similar projects.

Status quo and need for change

As the development of the Academic Model began in 2014, Saskatchewan Polytechnic was a strong and growing institution. As the sole polytechnic in Saskatchewan and the primary provider of vocational and technical post-secondary education, Saskatchewan Polytechnic has four campuses in the province's major cities and serves more than 26,000 students through 170 programs, including certificates, diplomas and degrees. This success built on concepts anchored in an earlier time, however; to have continued success in the future, change would be required.

 This article is published under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International License \(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

***Presentation Summary** These brief reports are summaries of the presentations that were given during the annual conference, May 15-16, 2019, in Richmond, B.C.

The project charter for the Academic Model explained the challenge:

The current implicit Saskatchewan Polytechnic academic model is based on constructs developed in an era when provincial and institutional mandates and visions were quite different from what they are today. Employer demand for more skilled graduates, technological advances to program delivery options, student demand for access to programming on a where-needed, when-needed basis and for new learning pathways to achieve their career goals require us to re-think and innovate our academic model.

A steering committee, including all academic deans and associate vice-presidents, provided oversight to the project. Two project managers were seconded from faculty positions as primary researchers and writers over an 18-month period. The approach taken for this work was from a strengths perspective, similar to, but not strictly following, Appreciative Inquiry practice.

To inform discussions on what changes would be required, the project managers first reviewed student demographics and industry requirements, on a national, international, and local level. Using this information, they held extensive consultations with senior management, faculty, staff, and students to gather input on how institutional processes could better serve key stakeholders. More than 800 people participated in the multiple rounds of campus consultations. A preliminary discussion paper, followed by a draft academic model, circulated at these meetings and electronically.

The resulting Academic Model was a slim but very carefully considered document. Built upon principles and commitments to the four key stakeholder groups—students, industry, Saskatchewan Polytechnic itself, and society—the Academic Model included five major elements around knowledge and skills for student success; clear and efficient curriculum design; flexible student pathways; instructional excellence; and standardization for academic efficiency. From these five elements, 29 components that provided further detail were developed.

Implementation: Making change happen

Beginning in the fall of 2016, Saskatchewan Polytechnic's Academic Model moved from plan to action. The two faculty members in place at this stage were required to serve as project managers in a more traditional sense, organizing and tracking progress.

As the Academic Model shifted into implementation, it required a key communication change, to move the implied ownership of the model from the small team that had developed and approved it, toward belonging to the entire institution. As well as this change in style of communication, additional messaging was required as ideas became changed expectations and processes.

The 29 components served as the basis of projects to be detailed, developed and completed. Smaller, somewhat simpler, components became the first projects. These included standardizing the passing grade; defining course and term structures; creating or updating foundational documents, including the credential qualification framework; and policy changes.

During the second year of implementation, resources for the overall project lessened, leaving one project manager to continue the work previously done by two. Nevertheless, progress continued with a new curriculum framework created, new quality assurance processes developed, and key aspects of the Academic Model integrated into programs as regular curriculum revisions occurred.

As the implementation phase moved into its third year and beyond, projects involved more complex components of the Academic Model, including Indigenization of curriculum, inclusion of intercultural competencies in both course content and teaching practice, and operation of the new academic council with additional powers of peer review over new program implementation and program revision.

Lessons learned

Disruptive change, whether deliberately undertaken by an institution or forced by external changes, does not happen without some difficulties. In reflecting on the five years of

the Academic Model development and implementation, several lessons were learned:

- Dedicated resources, in the form of two project manager positions, were key to making the development phase successful.
- Beginning with research to support the case for change is necessary, especially when presenting initiatives to an academic audience of faculty.
- Consultation is time-consuming, especially when institutional campuses are more than 500 kilometres apart; however, providing opportunities for input during development is essential to building engagement with the change.
- Enthusiasm from all those closely involved in a project is very valuable. This includes those at the executive sponsor/vice-president level through to the steering committee and project managers.
- Implementation of more basic, simpler projects first allowed for some early wins.
- Moving from development to implementation requires a transition period. Moving quickly from one phase to another resulted in projects not fully planned as they should have been, and lack of clarity regarding roles within the project teams.
- Distributed leadership of multiple, concurrent projects with one project manager leads to projects not being properly supported. Fiscal realities and difficult staffing decisions, unfortunately, may undermine previous work and delay progress.