

MINUTES OF THE OPEN SESSION
OF THE MEETING OF SENATE

Held on Friday, November 13, 2020, at 2 p.m.
via Zoom Video Conferencing

PRESENT

Voting members: Graham Carr (*Chair*); Adewunmi Ajike; Ali Akgunduz; Shimon Amir; Nicholas Bailey; Leslie Barker; Matthew Barker; Guylaine Beaudry; Elizabeth Bloodgood; Catherine Bolton; Christopher Brett; Sally Cooke; Frank Crooks; Anne-Marie Croteau; Selvadurai Dayanandan; Mourad Debbabi; Alex De Visscher; Effrosyni Diamantoudi; Linda Dyer; Mary Esteve; Medhi Farashahi; Ariela Freedman; Annie Gérin; Vince Graziano; James Hanna; Fiona Harrison-Roberts; Safwan Hye; Hannah Jamet-Lange; Isaiah Joyner; Samantha Leger; Colin Long; Sarah Mazhero; Christopher Moore; Catherine Mulligan; Helena Osana; Virginia Penhune; Gilles Peslherbe; Pascale Sicotte; Reza Soleymani; Robert Soroka; Ron Stern; Alexander Stojda; Kelly Thompson; Guylaine Vaillancourt; Anne Whitelaw; Paula Wood-Adams; Radu Zmeureanu

Non-voting members: Joanne Beaudoin; Philippe Beauregard; Paul Chesser; Denis Cossette; Stéphanie de Celles; Michael Di Grappa; Isabel Dunnigan; Nadia Hardy; Tom Hughes; Candace Jacobs; Frederica Jacobs

ABSENT

Voting members: Natalia Whiteley

1. Call to order

The meeting was called to order at 2:03 p.m.

1.1 Adoption of the Agenda

R-2020-6-1 *Upon motion duly moved and seconded, it was unanimously resolved that the Agenda of the Open Session be approved.*

1.2 Adoption of October 16, 2020 Minutes

R-2020-6-2 *Upon motion duly moved and seconded, it was unanimously resolved that the Minutes of the Open Session meeting of October 16, 2020.*

2. Business arising from the Minutes not included on the Agenda

There was no business arising from the Minutes not included on the Agenda.

3. President's remarks

Dr. Carr began his remarks by conveying the sad news of the death of Ben Prunty, former CSU President who served on the Board and Senate and continued to be affiliated with the University in many initiatives since his graduation, as well as the death of Father John Walsh, a pillar of generosity and action for the homeless in the Montreal community.

He continued by apprising Senate of some notable events and major initiatives, summarized as follows:

- Each year, the Concordia Stingers women's soccer team plays a memorial game dedicated to Erica Cadieux. In lieu of a game, this year the team has set up a series of fundraising challenges, with a goal to raise \$5,000 for the Montreal Children's Hospital.
- He noted the release of the report of the Working Group on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, the creation of the Equity Office and the launch of the President's Task Force on Anti-Black Racism and thanked the faculty, staff and students who had a hand in bringing these initiatives forward.
- He was proud to have participated last week in the launch of the University's Sustainability Action Plan, a collective effort that has been many years in the making involving students, staff and faculty, led by the Office of the Vice-President, Services and Sustainability, comprised of five pillars: curriculum, research, food security, waste reduction, and energy efficiency.
- Damon Matthews was named Co-Scientific Director of new global initiative called Sustainability in the Digital Age, a research platform that leverages the technology of the digital revolution to spur climate action. Concordia will be the host of this international institution which is being supported by the United Nations.
- Later this month the creation of the Next-Gen Cities Institute will be announced which, among other things, will regroup 14 existing research units in the University to bring a truly novel, transdisciplinary approach to our understanding of cities and to our imagination as to what the city of the future could be.

- The Faculty of Arts and Science announced the creation of a new Centre for Research on Values, Attitudes and Societies. Supported by Concordia and the *Secrétariat du Québec aux relations canadiennes*, the Centre is co-directed by Guy Lachapelle and Antoine Bilodeau of our Department of Political Science.
- He was thrilled to announce that Francine Pelletier, weekly columnist for *Le Devoir* and award-winning documentary journalist, has been named Concordia's 2020 Journalist-in-Residence.
- The Fall edition of CU Celebrate was launched on October 28 as a lead-up to a virtual celebration of 1,831 graduates on November 19, with Eric J. Nestler being announced as the honorary degree recipient for this convocation cycle.
- The first-ever virtual Open House was held on October 24, with more than 2,300 prospective undergraduates attending from 109 countries. This confirms that Concordia is still an important draw for students, something which is also being borne out by early application data for the 2021/2022 academic year.
- Dr. Carr underlined the extraordinary accomplishments in the past months of some Concordia's notable alumni, who are the University's best ambassadors.

Dr. Carr concluded his remarks by providing an update on some COVID-related matters. Now nearly eight months into the pandemic, the public health caseload is reaching record heights, with Montreal remaining a red zone. He apprised Senators on that the University has had 11 cases since September, involving individuals who were reported on campus during 48-hour period prior to developing symptoms. All cases originated off campus, nine of which have been resolved with no community spread, and two others are self-isolating. The University continues to work very closely with the Département de santé public de Montréal, meeting weekly and often speaking almost daily.

To help alleviate some of the strain and exhaustion people are experiencing, the Winter operations, which were due to commence on January 6, will instead resume on January 11, and the Thursday of the Reading Week will be a day off for faculty and staff, in addition to the President's Day on the Friday.

The academic term, which was also supposed to start on January 6, will instead begin on January 13. The decision was made to maintain the Winter term at 13 weeks by pushing back the start/finish dates for the Summer semesters. Dr. Carr pointed out that this changeover, from an operations and information system point of view, is a major challenge and expressed his gratitude to Stéphanie De Celles and the Registrar's team for making this possible.

4. **Academic update** (Document US-2020-6-D1)

Dr. Whitelaw had no additional comments to her written report.

CONSENT**5. Committee appointments** (Document US-2020-6-D2)

R-2020-6-3 *That the appointment of S. Samuel Li to the Faculty Tribunal Pool be approved, and that the appointment of Karen Li to the Faculty Tribunal Pool, pending ratification by the Council of the School of Graduate Studies, be approved.*

6. Academic Programs Committee – Report and recommendations (Document US-2020-6-D3)**6.1 Undergraduate curriculum proposals – Faculty of Arts and Science****6.1.1 Department of Applied Human Sciences** (Document US-2020-6-D4)**6.1.2 School of Irish Studies** (Document US-2020-6-D5)**6.1.3 Department of Classics, Modern Languages and Linguistics** (Documents US-2020-6-D6 and D7)**6.1.4 Interdisciplinary Studies** (Document US-2020-6-D8)**6.1.5 Department of Journalism** (Document US-2020-6-D9)**6.1.6 Department of Political Science** (Document US-2020-6-D10)**6.1.7 Department of Religion and Cultures** (Document US-2020-6-D11)

R-2020-6-4 *That the undergraduate curriculum proposals in the Faculty of Arts and Science be approved.*

6.2 Undergraduate curriculum proposal – Faculty of Fine Arts – Department of Studio Arts (Document US-2020-6-D12)

R-2020-6-5 *That the undergraduate curriculum proposal in the Faculty of Fine Arts be approved.*

6.3 Graduate curriculum proposal – Faculty of Arts and Science – Department of Economics (Document US-2020-6-D13)

R-2020-6-6 *That the graduate curriculum proposal in the Faculty of Arts and Science be approved.*

6.4 Graduate curriculum proposal – Gina Cody School of Engineering and Computer Science – Concordia Institute for Information Systems Engineering (Document US-2020-6-D14)

R-2020-6-7 *That the graduate curriculum proposal in the Gina Cody School of Engineering and Computer Science be approved.*

REGULAR

7. Presentation on student mental health

The Director of the Campus Wellness and Support Services, Gaya Arasaratnam, noted that she oversees health services, counseling and psychological services and the access center for students with disabilities.

She began her presentation by conveying some anecdotes from the frontline regarding challenges and sparks of light feedback heard from students, faculty and staff, making it clear that these are not trends but anecdotes, and that the information should be taken in that vein.

The challenges for employees include the complex narrative of being overwhelmed, which affects both singles and families, blurred boundaries between work-life balance, with some self-medicating, fatigue and anxiety, pressures created by institutional expectations in a changing landscape. She made the point that COVID is affecting everybody. While the spotlight on March 13 was on families with children becoming completely responsible for all aspects of the education and child rearing, singles also remember that day as they lost the ability to touch someone, which is important to understand because it is through touch that we give and receive compassion.

Challenges for students are a complex narrative of isolation based on the family dynamics or living situation and economic realities. She explained that the demand for counseling clinics across Canada was very high pre-COVID but currently is not as maddeningly high, adding that the early theory is because some students are at home and could be better supported by their families. There is anxiety about performance and navigating a new virtual learning environment, which for some includes IT challenges and time zone differences for international students who must get up in during the middle of the night to have access to course contents which are not recorded. Anxiety also stems from faculty members taking harsher measures against all students and putting them in the same basket as the few “rotten apples” (cheaters).

For the employees, the sparks of light include understanding the differences of how to juggle the many demands and the scope of work, managing to create clear expectations and identifying how to provide good service, resorting to boldness and creativity. For the most part, employees benefit from more experience and therefore have more reserves of resilience and more frames of reference than students. Sparks of light for students include higher attendance at events related to creative pursuits and wellness and a change of level of demand for health and wellness services across Canada. She also spoke of the Emotions Calendar insights, which is in progress.

Ms. Arasaratnam continued her presentation by focusing on the resources to guide faculty members through the process of moving courses online, which includes two useful documents on Cspace regarding course teaching and assessments: A FAQs to help faculty respond to students in need and another document specific to

supporting student well-being in a time of COVID-19 while teaching online. Among other subjects, these documents guide faculty members on how to acknowledge students' struggles and help them troubleshoot and navigate and also on how to respond when a student divulges distress or says that they are suicidal. The document also shows faculty how you can activate certain offices, such as the Office of Rights and Responsibilities, etc. For faculty members who are teaching in person, she referred them to the *LOOK, ENGAGE, REFER* resource.

She also reviewed the many health and wellness services available to all the Concordia community, available through the Health and Wellness Hub at www.concordia.ca/health, which provides a holistic approach in the areas of medical care, mental health, health promotion and community support. It includes information for emergency and crisis resources for Montreal, Canada and internationally, how to obtain virtual medical care and counseling and psychological services, via Concordia services and Canada-wide, including a Canada-wide search provider. She identified difficulties that some students encounter in finding a confidential space and that she is working with Environmental Health and Safety to find spaces on campus where students could come to safely conduct their confidential conversations.

The Hub also provides information to connect to community support services and other health topics such as physical activities, healthy eating, sexual health, stress management, etc. Other useful guiding documents include the November 2018 Health and Wellbeing Review report, the Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students report and the Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace report.

Ms. Arasaratnam concluded her presentation by giving some tips on how she finds balance:

- Understand what is and is not in your control;
- Identify what gives you joy;
- Be permissive to your needs; understand your limits and co-create clear expectations;
- Cultivate interests outside of work;
- Cultivate family and social networks which do not talk about COVID; and
- Set limits on how much news you consume.

Several Senators thanked Ms. Arasaratnam for her insightful presentation, further to which Ms. Arasaratnam and Drs. Whitelaw and Carr responded to comments or questions of clarification.

8. Academic accommodations during COVID-19

Dr. Carr apprised Senators that they will not be asked to vote on any motion. This is part of a conversation to get feedback from students and faculty members on options for academic accommodations during the COVID-19 crisis.

Dr. Whitelaw noted that the experience for many in the community around COVID has been exacerbated by existing stresses and also introduced new ones. This presentation is intended to inaugurate discussion and to provide an opportunity for faculty members serving on Senate to hear the thoughts and concerns of students.

She reiterated some of the challenges mentioned by Ms. Arasaratnam regarding the effects of the pandemic. Faculty, staff and students all face challenges doing their work in an unfamiliar environment, many of whom are experiencing isolation, anxiety and concerns about performing at their best. That said, there are inequalities with respect to access to computers, internet, and space to work without distraction. Impact are different across populations and communities, often exacerbating existing inequalities. Moreover, uncertainty remains high since we cannot predict the length of time we will be in this situation.

Dr. Whitelaw recognized that it has been a huge pivot to teaching and learning online, which required recreating 1,800 courses, which translated into 3,000 course sections, involving nearly 40,000 students and over 1,500 faculty members. This constituted a huge endeavor for faculty members since remote teaching requires adjustments to how they deliver courses, run their activities and structure their assignments and exams. Students also require similar level of adjustments on how to manage their time, maintain their focus and meet their course assignments. Maintaining a meaningful connection and open communication is a challenge for both faculty members and students.

Some students have asked that the University adopt a pass/fail notation for Fall 2020. While the pass/fail option was offered in Winter 2020 as an extraordinary measure to respond to the rapid move to online, this was not introduced in the Summer and there is no plan to do so in Fall 2020. Dr. Whitelaw noted that this measure might have the advantage of decreasing the level of stress for students in the short term. However, she pointed out potential disadvantages with respect to GPA assessments, difficulties in assessing eligibility for transferring into programs, graduate school or loan and bursary programs, questions raised by employers on a high number of pass notations as opposed to grades and uncertainty as to whether or not pass notations would be accepted by professional orders. She added that other than Bishop's University, no other Quebec university has adopted this measure.

She acknowledged that University needs to think about how to best support and help its students during these challenging times, many of whom are indicating that they are not performing to their best ability. Some of the proposed compassionate measures for Fall 2020 include:

- Extending the eligibility and simplifying process for applying for a deferred exam;
- Simplifying the process for students to late-DISC a course; and

- Developing guidelines to allow professors to revise workload and redistribute assessment weights as well as developing guidelines to allow students to choose a predetermined number of assignments on which to be assessed.

Dr. Whitelaw made the point that none of those measures are yet in place but would welcome Senate's feedback.

She concluded by noting the importance of creating a supportive environment, having respectful communications, whether by telephone or email, being compassionate and flexible and recognizing the challenges that we are all facing. Students should recognize extraordinary demands on faculty members and avail themselves of opportunities to engage, and faculty members should be as responsive as possible to students, provide opportunities for virtual engagement and consider ways to moderate student workload.

Pursuant to the presentation, several Senators shared their views and concerns, summarized as follows:

- In relation to the potential negative consequences of students choosing the pass/fail option, after having considered the pros and cons, it should be their decision to determine if it is adequate for their situation and should be an option, particularly to alleviate the stress level.
- The guidelines for professors referred earlier are great, but in the name of academic freedom, a majority of professors are either unaware of those guidelines, do not care or simply refuse to follow them. For that reason, there needs to be a larger discussion about how those guidelines are going to be implemented, maybe even enforced. In the absence of doing so, we will be back to square one with a student body experiencing a poor experience at Concordia, far from the next-gen experience.
- While we are working towards the future to make remote learning more feasible, students are living in the now, and there are not enough resources, guidelines or options that provide students adequate choices. Students are in an impossible situation, without any flexibility or reprieve. The climate is not good and students are already on edge, so guidelines will not be enough. They need to be able to make their own choices, including opting for pass/fail.
- Understanding and compassion are the inherent elements. Everybody is upset to some degree, experiencing their own challenges, and what is perceived as anger is probably frustration. It is hard to imagine that faculty members are purposefully being cruel to students. It could be a question of helping people who may not be able to ask for help or simply decided that they cannot do so and taking the necessary time to explain all options and grading systems to the students.
- Ensuring that the technology is functioning properly and does not fail would be one way of reducing stress. Moodle failures during quizzes cause an immense frustration and a real struggle for students and faculty members.

- International students must take a full course load, cannot avail themselves of the late DISC and have stress-related issues specific to their status. For that reason pass/fail should be an option.
- Need to find a way to allow students review their mid-term exams, which is not being done in the current context. Students cannot improve their performance if they do not know what mistakes they made. This is a huge concern for the Student Advocacy Center.
- There is no motivation for professors to torture their students. In some faculties or disciplines, the pass/fail option does not work.
- Need to figure out if some courses have more leeway. Perhaps a tailored approach be possible for some students or some courses.
- People are still adjusting. In the Winter, we did a quick pivot, in the Summer faculty prepared but might not have been able to test and see what actually works in their classes. This could have a negative impact on grades and having the pass/fail in this instance would be the perfect solution.
- The late DISC can have a considerable financial impact and should not be an option.
- Deferred exams can be a burden for some students and therefore not a recommended option.
- Seems that the main problem could be a communication gap, which Department Chairs could help resolve by acting as a neutral conduit as is done by this Department Chair. Some students are scared or fear repercussions of sharing their concerns or comment directly to their professors. Those can be conveyed to the Department Chair who takes the students' questions or concerns to the faculty members without disclosing the students' identity.
- The Dean addressed comments about faculty members lack of compassion by pointing out that most faculty members feel great compassion for students while acknowledging that more work is required to ensure that all instructors understand the strains that students are experiencing and feeling.
- We should reflect on how to be flexible and to implement reasonable accommodations without creating corollary problems.

In response to some technical questions posed during the exchange, Dr. Whitelaw said that in the Winter, as part of a quick pivot, there was a long list of courses that were not available for the pass/fail option, particularly those required by accreditation agencies or for some disciplines which absolutely need a grade. In the Winter, about 15% of undergraduate students and 1% of graduate students chose the pass/fail option. Since there now has been more time to prepare, it is possible that entire Faculties would not allow the pass/fail option. With respect to deferred exams, the current practice is that it is to be written the next time it is offered, which can be up to one year away.

Where do we go from here? While she understands why students are asking for the pass/fail option, Dr. Whitelaw said she would rather see mechanisms put in place that will allow students to get the grades that they deserve and that they were able to work for and to put in place processes regarding deferred exams. A process that

demonstrates their knowledge and that they have fulfilled the learning outcomes of the courses. That would be the win-win goal. As in all of these kinds of conversations, the challenge resides in how we implement that and how we can implement that equitably across the University. This is and will be the ongoing conversations with the Deans.

Dr. Carr thanked everybody who participated as well as the active listeners, noting the very respectful conversation on a difficult topic. Senators have a better understanding of what the stresses and strains are, with an acknowledgement that they cut across all sectors of the University in very unequal ways.

9. Question period

In response to Mr. Long's query about whether or not the pass/fail option was under Senate's jurisdiction to vote on or under the purview of the administration, the President explained that the decision to allow the pass/fail option in the Spring was made under exigent circumstances. This is why the discussion was brought to Senate to obtain feedback. Any proposal for a permanent change would be embedded in the academic regulations and require a decision of Senate. The extension of the deadlines, however, is an administrative decision that do not require Senate approval.

10. Other business

There was no other business to bring before the meeting.

11. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 4:16 p.m.



Danielle Tessier
Secretary of Senate