

What's Next Town Hall – Q&A Transcript

This transcript details the Q&A session that occurred on March 23, 2023 as part of What's Next: The SFU Strategy Town Hall for SFU faculty and staff. The event was moderated by Janet Webber, Executive Director of SFU Public Square. For a full recording of the session, [click here](#).

Q&A Speakers:

- Joy Johnson, President (JJ)
- Martin Pochurko, Vice President, Finance and Administration (MP)
- Joanne Curry, Vice President, External Relations (JC)
- Yabome Gilpin-Jackson, Vice President, People, Equity and Inclusion (JGJ)
- Rummana Khan Hemani, Vice-Provost and Associate Vice President (RKH)

[25:57] To what extent have we considered how we will learn and improve along the path of implementation? Can we consider using an Indigenous research paradigm of relational accountability rather than the traditional transactional accountability?

[26:30] JJ: Great question, it's early days now and the working groups are being established. We're trying to think about how we will hold ourselves accountable, how we'll think about outcomes. But I really like what you're asking in that I think we need to interrogate the evaluative methods. That being said, our Board hasn't been mentioned. But our board is also really interested in outcomes, and how SFU is going to live up to commitments being made through the strategic plan, and they want to support us in that work. So I think there's opportunities for these things to be brought together.

[27:40] There was this funding for the Aboriginal Strategic Initiative that has now come to an end. What does the university have planned moving forward? Because clearly the need is still there and there's ideas going on across campus where Indigenous initiatives and programming could be supported. So what's next?

[28:26] JJ: I think there was always a sense that [the Aboriginal Strategic Initiative] was kind of one-off funding, and there was always a desire to create opportunities in the continuing budget to support the work. And that was really what we were pushing to do. What we're talking about right now at SFU is to creating resources and being thoughtful about those resources, and to be think about the gap areas that we need to fund as we move forward. So Chris and I are starting that process, and there will be opportunities to continue to support this work. It might not be in the form of ASI funding per se. But we recognize that to do the work across these areas we need to find out how to resource them appropriately.

[29:47] How are we accounting for low international student enrollment and potential for revenue loss and loss of jobs? Other research institutions in BC are going through budget cuts and job loss.

[30:19] MP: Certainly the question is an astute one, we are challenged on the international student enrollment front, as are other institutions across Canada. Other organizations are making cuts. We're actually taking a multi-pronged approach to it, and cuts are the last choice from our perspective. We're looking at other ways of generating more revenue to replace the revenue that we've lost. We're also aggressively re-engaging on the recruitment front to see whether we can recapture some of the

enrollment that we've lost. Certainly, as we looked at the cost side of the equation, we've inflicted what I would say is a little bit more regimentation around hiring new people, stopping where we don't necessarily need to fill positions, and trying to take that opportunity as well. So, as I say, the cut is the last option. If we have to go down that path, it's going to be very much evidence-informed, and we'll certainly take a close look at it before we get there. I think the other thing I would say, too, is when you look at our competitors, we come out of the COVID gate with a very strong financial position, and that has benefited us greatly and helps us bridge some of the challenges we're facing at this moment.

[31:36] I'm curious why the word "teaching" is not in the mission statement along with "research", if I read that correctly?

[31:49] JJ: You know, when we had feedback from the community, I think that there was a sense that SFU gets referred to as a “comprehensive university” but we really wanted to, and there's a lot of desire to, emphasize the fantastic research that takes place, and I think an assumption that because there are teaching universities, research universities, etc., that we wanted to distinguish ourselves as a research university. And then, secondly, I think there was an assumption that universities are there for teaching and learning. So there was a sense that that was, you know, embedded there. I will point out though, as well, that when you look at our purpose, it is about connecting knowledge and learning. So you see that really important element in our purpose, and we need to be purpose-driven as a university. We are here for knowledge generation and for learning, and we do need to remain focused on that purpose.

[33:14] How is SFU upholding the community right outside our doors (for example the Vancouver Harbour Centre campus) who are struggling with systemic injustices and homelessness? We see community members inside SFU's walls, how can we be supportive and help them maintain their dignity?

[33:41] JC: This is such an important question, and I really love the nature of the question. How can we further support? And there's no question all of us have seen huge impacts in the city core as it's now called, during COVID and then post-COVID, so it's been quite devastating. We are doing activities and dialogue, and, for example, SFU Public Square just had one on reducing the stigma of homelessness. So some of that is around public dialogue. But also the President has sent a letter, I think it was on day one of Premier Eby's job, to say we are the largest post-secondary presence in downtown Vancouver, we see the issues. How can we lean into the work more fully, utilizing our teaching, our education, our dialogue, our community engaged research? So we are engaging both the province, and we have an upcoming meeting with the mayor of Vancouver to see what further we can do. So really good question, we're all very concerned about the situation in Vancouver, and I must say some of the situations also occurring in Surrey with homelessness and across BC. But thank you for the question, and we are going to try to make more of a difference in this area in the future.

[35:17] We've got a couple of questions about implementation, I might just put them together. Who will be part of the conversation in the development of the KPIs, so sort of the evaluation and the measurement? And then also, what is the timeline for establishing the pan-university working groups for each one of the priority areas and who will be invited to join them? Will it be students, staff, faculty – do we know what any of that will look like, and the timeline?

[35:53] JJ: It's early days, and that's why we want to get out and start to talk to people. And I would say, if you're particularly interested in one of these areas, put your hand up and connect with the co-leads. I also think that the working groups are going to evolve over time as well. So that's something to think about as we move forward.

Adam Brayford is here with us, he's a staff person helping to put the plan together, and in terms of the KPI's that's part of the work that we really need to be thinking about. There's so many metrics we could utilize across these areas, and I think what we're trying to do is figure out what are the most impactful transformational indicators that would show that we are moving the dial in these areas. So more to come as we move forward, we'll be sharing progress. But, as I said, I think there is an opportunity as a community to reach in and to be part of it. We thought it was important to have co-leads, and there are a number of sessions where names are starting to be suggested, and some of you might be contacted over time. But I think you can also vote yourself up a little bit, and if you've got some time and passion for one of these areas and want to help us move it forward, I'd encourage you to do so, and the other thing I would say is that these priorities will also be driven down across the university. I know departments and units are also doing work in these areas, and we want to hear about that work and lift it up, celebrate it as well.

[37:43] As a yes person...I'm wondering what you mean by 'saying no'? What are you hoping to limit and/or support by this?

[38:16] JJ: Such a good question too. And because I'm a yes person too, and that's sometimes what gets me in trouble is you get so enthusiastic about so many things that you really lose focus. As an example, we had a discussion at our finance committee of the Board [of Governors] today, and they were saying, you know, every time you invest in an area it means you're not investing in other areas as well. I think that what we're really hoping to do is to be very mindful around our resources and budget, to be thinking about how we drive these areas in particular. Because these are the areas the university community has indicated a passion for.

What that means in terms of saying no: I can imagine any number of initiatives that might sound very, very attractive. Let's go establish a campus, in, I don't know, in New Westminster, or let's go, and, you know, spend some money developing a new initiative somewhere else. I think that we have to, while there might be temptation, while people might put money on the table, while there might be a great donor who wants to do something we need to use a frame and say, no, we need to stay focused. We need to deliver on these on these four areas and remain true to our purpose, thinking about our mission, thinking about our purpose as a university.

So that might not be very specific for you. I think there's a lot of 'yes' still to be had, let me tell you, within these areas. But I do think it's a framework we will need to use for decision making.

[39:46] I have a bit of a follow-along raising some tension points here. So speaking of revenue loss and implications on our overall budget within the institution, which we've talked a bit about, it feels like although these strategic initiatives are wonderful and much needed, not a whole lot of support (hiring) will be provided or available. How is leadership ensuring that workload is not negatively impacted across the board?

[40:26] YGJ: Thank you for the question. I think I want to point out is in the transforming the SFU experience, my colleague Rummana mentioned the People Plan, and the People Plan and the Equity Compass will work in tandem around supporting staff and faculty experiences. Within the People Plan, what we heard very clearly from from all of you and anyone that attended the People Plan town halls was that a focus area we had put forward on experience and well-being is a priority.

So the short answer is, yes, we're paying a lot of attention to supporting well-being which workload is significantly a part of. I think I'll add to what Joy had said earlier to say, we're saying yes to the things that we have heard from you are the priorities we ought to focus on. And so for me, our 'no's' are inherent in that. The What's Next is the overall focus document that we've looked at as we've been thinking about the People Plan and the Equity Compass, and it provides us focus in terms of where we're going to put our time and energy. And as we think about implementation and resourcing as well, we focus on areas that advance these priorities. I understand that with strategic priorities it's also personal excellence. But again, because we'll be looking at experience and well-being, we'll be looking at making sure that our staff are well-supported to advance the strategic priorities, to continue with day-to-day operational excellence, and to make sure that everybody is well taken care of as we do that, and it might mean some 'no's' along the way, but that's okay. That's what these documents help us do.

[42:22] MP: Maybe I could also chime in on that one if I could, Joy. As the co-leads were introducing their topics, many of them talked about all the initiatives that we already have under way in support of the various initiatives, and I think that's really important to point out. The other side of the equation is, you have to wonder, after we identify all those initiatives that are under way to support the initiatives - what else are we doing that isn't supporting any of them? And perhaps there are some opportunities for turning things off that we've got under way, and we have to look at that as well.

[42:52] JJ: And synergies as well, I mean what I know in terms of advancing truth and reconciliation [is that] there's so much happening at the university across our departments, across our units. Even to try and gather those up, and to think about the synergies, to think about ways we can lift them up together, and then figure out where the gaps are is really helpful for all of us. By enunciating it as a priority, it really does help us think through and celebrate what we're doing, but also think about where we need to go next.

[43:29] Okay, great. So we're gonna switch gears. The pandemic showed us huge potential for connecting virtually, and the accessibility benefits that this offers for many people. What plans are there for expanding remote delivery of synchronous teaching to improve accessibility of research and teaching at SFU?

[43:56] JJ: This has become a matter that Senate has had a lot of discussion about. And obviously Senate is the academic oversight for the university and we learned a ton during the pandemic about the use of online technologies, and how they can be so useful. But I think that what we heard on the Senate floor is that we have to be thoughtful about it. We have to think about under what circumstances these types of technologies are useful, and when they're not. And this also goes to thinking about the SFU experience, we aren't as purpose-built for some of this technology as we need to be in terms of being digitally ready - our facilities aren't necessarily 100% there.

[44:50] RKH: Around synchronous teaching, it is something that one of the IT committees that I am involved in is looking at in terms of students and structure, experience, and what we need to do to enhance classroom technologies to ensure that some of those things can happen more easily, because there is interest, obviously not just on the part of instructors, but also students to have more access to synchronous opportunities. We need to do some work to get there. But it is one of the key priorities out of that group that I'm involved in. And there is some work and planning under way for that. So I'm excited about that.

[45:57] What role will Student Services play in What's Next?

[46:09] RKH: I'm going to reframe the question just a touch, to talk about services for students instead of Student Services, because that's certainly an important unit that provides services but we have many areas of the university that support students and provide services for students. If you look across the priority areas, there are many goals across the four priority areas in which the services and the things that happen outside the classroom will be really important. It's a bit about what we've already been talking about. It's really taking a look at how do we align our services with the priorities? How do we get focused on the things that matter most to students? Our students have changed a lot, so our services have to change and keep up. So when I look at the various goals, I see lots of opportunities for a bit more cohesion across the university in terms of services, and really looking at what students need and how we can deliver that together in a more integrated way.

[47:22] How will provincial accessibility legislation and the Equity Compass be part of the What's Next plan?

YGJ: Thank you so much for that question. I think, to paint the response in two ways. One is my connection as being one of the co-leads for transforming the SFU experience is specifically about that representing the People, Equity and Inclusion portfolio and specifically the experience of staff and faculty from the People Plan perspective, but also equity concentrations overall for all our community through the Equity Compass. So the co-lead structures were very thoughtful in terms of thinking about the governance connections across the board to many of our other plans.

So that's one response. The other one is in the What's Next values, there is the value of equity and belonging that is there as a core value, and I know that that was very clearly represented in the the public engagements that were done on What's Next. I saw the reports, I heard it as an alumni even before I started this role. So just up to a year ago, I did go on to the thought exchange and look at what was emerging as well, and it was riddled with comments around equity and belonging. So it was no surprise to me that it ended up as a value. And what we've been saying about the Equity Compass is that it is the plan, the sub-plan, that articulates how we will make that value come to life. And so that's specifically how it's being represented. I know that often strategic plans are high level, and each one of these necessarily will have implementation detail in different plans. For the equity and belonging value, that is the Equity Compass. The People Plan is clearly part of transforming the SFU experience and the Equity Compass also underlies the People Plan. So we'll keep integrating and making sure all of these are working together to accomplish what it is that we're trying to accomplish.

[49:44] JJ: And we're really mindful, aren't we Yabome, of the accessibility requirements that are coming down and are really trying to work quickly to do some catch up. We have work to do at SFU.

[49:56] YGJ: Absolutely, and I should have said in the Equity Compass that there is specifically mention of the work that we're doing with the Accessibility Act as one of the priorities that came through, not just through the consultation and the legislation, but clearly from community as well. So yes, it is a priority.

[50:19] We've got time for a couple more questions here. Last I heard there was a wait list of 2,000 students for residence. What plans do you have for increasing housing at and around all campuses, including family housing?

MP: We certainly have plans afoot, Phase Two of the student residence is ready to open on Burnaby Mountain, it's imminent, and we also have Phase Three fully designed almost at this point. We are optimistic that the provincial government is going to be announcing a net new debt program to finance the next phase of student housing, and certainly, you know, we're prepared to hopefully be first out of the gate to respond to that request. So we're going to continue to build student housing, we have been looking at Surrey, we see that there is demand in Surrey for student housing. We're investigating opportunities there as well. One of the things that certainly Dugan has raised is around family housing and making sure that we have housing that's appropriate for graduate students, and we have to make sure that that's part of the mix as we move forward into the future. So some housing is opening pretty quickly and we're looking to build more.

[51:41] RKH: The demand is huge. It's actually really exciting to see the uptake. And really the students that want to live on campus have really changed over the years, which is also really interesting to see. As some of our commuting times go up, students from our local areas are really keen to be in our housing, and we know it makes a difference to international students to have places to live on campus. Affordability is a big topic right now for students, so affordable, safe on-campus housing is the way we want to keep going.

[52:28] JJ: And talk about a way to transform the SFU experience, right? We always were kind of referred to as a commuter campus, and our students want to live on campus, they want to be part of a vibrant student life, and that's something that we're really paying attention to on Burnaby Mountain, but we're also beginning to talk about housing in Surrey as well.

[53:01] To my impression, the What's Next Strategy is relatively a high-level one. People may have different interpretations and understandings of these headlines - is there is set plan to avoid/minimize miscommunication in the implementation stage?

[53:29] JJ: Such a good point. And these really are fairly large areas. I totally understand that. And it's all over to the working groups now to articulate plans, to share them with community to seek input. And it's going to be iterative. We're learning as a university to work that muscle a little bit more in terms of engagement, learning, sharing and improving. I think over time, the focus will emerge, priorities will continue to emerge and we will share them. We make a commitment to continue to share them with the community.

[54:24] My family doctor is retiring soon, and it's impossible to find a new one. What is SFU doing to get that medical school in Surrey open ASAP?

[54:37] JC: Everything we can. This is one of the three initiatives under making a difference for B.C. There's no question about the importance of the 1 million B.C. residents that are unattached to a family doctor. We are submitting a full business case, we've received funding for planning from the province. The first cohort will be in, if all goes to plan, fall of 2026. It's a tremendously complex project, including accreditation. We are moving as fast as we can, and the province is very supportive. So that's a really important question that will be addressed in our strategic area.