

# Review Report BA Humanities Briercrest College

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## Overview

### **Unit Review Team:**

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The review team scrutinized a number of College documents prior to the site visit, especially the self-study report (18 May 2018). During the site visit we met with students enrolled in the BA Humanities program, program faculty from both the Department of English and the Department of History and Philosophy, the Co-chairs of the Department of History and Philosophy, the Dean of the College, the Directors of the Library, Student Success Center, Information Systems, and Online Education, the Registrar, the Director of Recruitment, the President of the College and Seminary, the Executive Vice-President and Provost, and the Dean of Arts and Science.

Overall, we judge the BA Humanities program to be meeting, and in some areas exceeding, its stated outcomes. Students in the program benefit from high levels of intellectual challenge coupled with a high degree of institutional support. The faculty are well-qualified and committed teachers who take pedagogy in a post-secondary context very seriously. In the report below we give a brief overview of the program, identifying strengths and areas for development. We conclude the report with some recommendations intended to assist the program in building upon its strengths in the future.

## Infrastructure and supports

Students and Faculty in the BA Humanities program are supported by a number of key facilities in Briercrest, particularly the library, office of student success, academic advisors (Registrar's office), and information technology and online education.

As noted in the self-study report, the fortunes of the BA Humanities program in terms of enrolment are strongly dependent on overall admissions to Briercrest College, especially as the majority of majors transfer into the program after enrolling in one of the college's certificate programs or other degrees. Recruitment and marketing for the college also therefore play a key role.

It is significant therefore that a large number of key personnel in these offices are new, and that there has been significant turnover in some of these crucial roles. The Librarian, Director of Student Success, Registrar, and Director of Recruitment are all new within the last year or less, and the review team was told that there had been considerable turnover in a number of these positions.

While this is a source of instability and uncertainty, it also presents an opportunity for the college. Now is the time for the college to develop new policies and procedures, and to ensure that the relationships between these offices and the academic staff are fruitful and effective.

Briercrest has a high number of indigenous students (10% across all programs) and have a dedicated Indigenous Director and office which is located close to the Student Success Centre. Unfortunately we were not able to meet with the Indigenous Director during our visit.

The physical infrastructure of the college is generally high quality and well maintained, with active infrastructure plans in place. Faculty noted that there was a need for more smaller classrooms with furnishings suitable for active learning: this was also pointed out independently to us by the Dean of the College during a facility tour. During this tour the review team saw that the college is already in the process of implementing classrooms with movable furnishings that can foster new and effective pedagogical strategies. We are confident that the senior administration will keep working to renovate existing space.

The review team observed that the student success center was based largely on a reactive model, where students come to the center, or are encouraged to come to the center by academic staff, only when they face difficulties in classes. Further, although accommodations for physical disabilities and neuro-diverse learners were made available, there was a lack of clear policies concerning the obligations of both faculty and students with respect to accommodations. The newly appointed director of student success identified a more proactive model of student supports as one of her goals. She also noted as an issue for students the high cost of psycho-educational assessments, which are currently a requirement for formal accommodations at the college.

## Students

The students in the BA Humanities that we met with spoke of their experiences at Briercrest in glowing terms. They value the sense of community that the college gives them, the small class sizes, and the intellectual relationships they are able to forge with the academic staff. They perceive the program as the most intellectually demanding one at Briercrest, and praised the faculty for setting high expectations and supporting the students in meeting them.

As reflected in the self-study, students at Briercrest in general and in the BA Humanities in particular report a high level of satisfaction with their college experience. They report high levels of support from both professors and peers in the program. Briercrest scores extremely highly on the NSSE on a number of key indicators, including clear explanations of course goals

and requirements; prompt and detailed feedback; and evaluation and understanding of others perspectives. The college is to be particularly commended on its use of high-impact educational practices, with a startling 84 percent of senior Humanities students reporting participating in two or more HIPs (only 52% of Canadian University students report the same).

The students expressed some frustration with the existence of courses in the catalogue that were not offered in the 3-5 years that they had been students in the school. They also noted that they did not have information about future offerings and that this made planning for classes that may be only offered once in a three-year cycle difficult. A number of students described missing the chance to take a specific class in their first or second year and then waiting 2-3 years for it to appear again before taking an alternative class in their last year in order to graduate on time. However no student reported having graduation delayed because of unavailability of required classes—the issue is only with regard to being able to take preferred options.

Of the three concentration areas of the degree History was identified as the most lacking in course offerings—the students expressed a desire for more course offerings in Canadian and North American history, as well as European History. These courses are “on the books” but taught infrequently.

Finally the students expressed anxiety about how their degree would be perceived by large secular research institutions when they applied for graduate school or professional education—they asked the reviewers if we thought the program was intellectually demanding, about admission processes, as well as about differences in the classroom environment.

We specifically asked the students about the senior portfolio and service and experiential learning components of the degree. These requirements are not unique to the BA Humanities at Briercrest, but part of the content of the portfolio is specific to each degree program. Students valued the service/experiential learning they did as part of their degree, but they noted that there was no particular connection between the specific skills learned in the BA and the skills involved in their service/experiential learning experiences: in some cases students felt they had applied skills learned in the classroom, but this seemed accidental.

In the case of the senior portfolio it was apparent that many students did not know what was expected until they began preparing it, often a little over a month before the due date. Our visit created an accidental learning opportunity in which senior students explained the portfolio to the more junior students in the room. We later discussed this further with the Deans of the College and of Arts and Sciences, and they noted that while there was a fair amount of information available to students on the college website, it was difficult to get students to actually access that information. Those students who had started working on the portfolio reported anxiety about the process and the interview component, which they perceived as high stakes rather than the formative experience emphasized in the documentation. However they also commented that they appreciated the idea of the portfolio and had already benefited from reflecting on their learning experience. Both administration and faculty are currently involved in

a review process of the portfolio, addressing some of the major challenges highlighted by the students, and implementing new forms of communication in terms of expectations and formative goals of this initiative.

## Faculty

There are currently seven faculty members who teach core classes for the BA in Humanities; hailing from English (4), History (2), and Philosophy (1). The college is also advertising for an assistant professor in philosophy: when filled this position will bring the total number of academic staff to eight. The college offers a number of supports for new faculty, including a reduced teaching load for the first two years (5 courses in the first year, 6 in the second) and a pedagogy reading group organized by the Dean of the College. We met with 6 of these faculty members—the seventh is currently on sabbatical leave.

The academic staff of the college spoke highly of the students in the program—on average they felt that their preparation for and performance in classes was the equal of students at the larger research-based institutions where they had received their terminal degrees. They also noted that the commitment and enthusiasm of Briercrest students often exceeded that of their peers because their study was seen as part of their religious practice.

It was clear from the discussions with the faculty that curricular and course design decisions were made at the program level on academic grounds, and that the academic freedom of the staff to develop course and program content was respected and supported.

Senior faculty noted improvement in the research and teaching environment in Briercrest of the last 10 years—they mentioned that there was increased access to course release to support curricular development and research activity, and that their professional development funds had been increased.

Many senior faculty members expressed a desire for more opportunities for pedagogical and scholarly development. Both junior and senior faculty expressed concern that the research and publication expectations for promotion were hard to meet given the expectations for teaching (7 courses per year) and service.

## Program and courses

The curriculum for the BA Humanities is strong and well put together. In addition to the common core requirements for all BAs at Briercrest, the service learning requirement, and the senior portfolio, students are required to complete 2 credits of required courses in each of the available concentration areas (English, History, Philosophy), 6 required credits in interdisciplinary course, 3 credits in classical literature, 3 credits in fine arts, and a capstone interdisciplinary humanities seminar. In addition they complete a further 18 credits in their

primary concentration (9 of which must be in senior classes) and a further 9 credits in each of the other two concentrations (6 senior). The result is a truly interdisciplinary degree.

The courses themselves are intellectually demanding: faculty clearly take advantage of Briercrest's small class sizes by setting expectations high and then supporting students in reaching them. The addition of new faculty since the initial authorization of the program has led to the development of new courses in all concentrations. Faculty have appropriate expertise for the courses offered, and are conscientious and well-prepared pedagogically. The college places a high importance on teaching and it emerges from the careful course construction, the strong connections between assessment and course outcomes, and the high intellectual expectations of students.

The curricular and course design works well to promote the program outcomes for the BA in Humanities. However, those outcomes are expressed in relatively general terms on the College's website (as well as in the documents provided to the review team), with little detail on the specific skills or abilities graduates of the program can be expected to have. In particular, the "Learning Outcomes" sections implies, but does not explicitly communicate to potential students that this program will enable them to think critically, and engage critically with the materials they will encounter as students and, later, in their future endeavours (<https://briercrestcollege.ca/academics/program/?Program=68>).

Currently the only required 400 level courses are interdisciplinary ones (IDST 400 and the Humanities Capstone HUM 490). The self-study review suggested that students be required to complete at 3 credits at the 400 level in their area of concentration, a suggestion with which the review committee concurs.

With respect to other areas for curricular improvement, we observed that there are number of classes in the catalogue, especially in Canadian history, that have been offered only very infrequently in the past five years. Also, as noted in the student section above, both the service learning component and the graduate portfolio experience are less well integrated with the student's program of study than would be ideal. Finally, there are relatively few classes available to students that focus on visual and media literacy rather than textual literacy (one notable exception is the new English class focused on the Graphic Novel).

### Summary of strengths

In summary, the Briercrest BA in Humanities offers an intellectually rigorous learning experience with clear program outcomes. The academic staff who deliver the program are experts in their fields with strong commitments to pedagogical development and to both the program itself and the overall educational mission of the college. Students participate in key high-impact educational practices at a high rate, and are provided with many avenues of support from both academic and non-academic staff at the college. Student and alumni rates of satisfaction with both their overall educational experience and BA in Humanities in particular are high.

## Recommendations

The review team has five recommendations for strengthening the program going forward. The order of these recommendations is not meant to represent a priority ranking, and the team recognizes that some of them are more resource intensive than others. We hope that these suggestions can be used to spark discussions at Briercrest and encourage the staff and faculty to identify their own priorities and strategies appropriate to their unique environment.

### 1. Improvements in scholarly and pedagogical development for faculty

As reflected in the overview above, the College has a number of well thought-out and effective supports for pedagogical and scholarly development in place. We recommend that the college build on this strength. Some specific suggestions to be considered include:

- Encouraging faculty to take advantage of administrative support earlier in the course development process, particularly with respect to universal design for learning.<sup>1</sup> Universal design is a way to address the challenges that may be faced by students who cannot access the psychological educational assessments required for formal accommodations.
- Either expansion of the existing pedagogy reading group for new hires to include established faculty or initiating a new reading group focused on development for more experienced teachers.
- Workshops addressing specific pedagogical trends or problems: e.g. approaches to grading, universal design, active learning
- Exploring opportunities for relationships with the teaching development units of other post-secondary institutions in the province. (An arrangement where Briercrest faculty could participate in pedagogical development activities at the University of Regina might be advantageous, for example.)
- A faculty development fund focused on pedagogy (to complement the existing research fund).
- Examination of the compatibility of the current teaching expectations with the research expectations for promotion through the ranks, and comparison with other institutions/streams where faculty teach 7 courses a year.<sup>2</sup>
- Self-funded research accounts (pre-tax). Both senior faculty members and administrators informed the review team that this initiative is already in place, but not currently used. It appeared that younger faculty members were not aware of this opportunity, and therefore we recommend to explore strategies to promote it within the college.

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<sup>1</sup> Information on universal design in higher education can be found here: <http://udloncampus.cast.org>

<sup>2</sup> Several research institutions, including UCalgary and UBC, have 'Teaching Professor' streams as well as the standard stream for research faculty.

- Annual faculty development plans should include a plan and timeline for applications for promotion.

## 2. Broadening the mandate of student success centre

As mentioned in our overview students speak highly of the personal support they received at the success centre, and with a new Director in place this is an excellent time to further develop this resource. We suggest that the new Director:

- develop explicit accommodation policies to support students and guide faculty
- investigate the possibility of early intervention strategies (as privacy considerations allow)
- offer support to academic staff in program/course design with an eye to accessibility and universal design

## 3. Hiring of a historian specializing in North American History

We recommend that the College prioritize hiring a historian with a specialization relating to North America, ideally with a research or teaching interest in the history of colonial-indigenous relationships. We believe this should be a priority for three main reasons:

- 10% student body are indigenous, and while the College has a number of classes in indigenous studies, it would be ideal to have greater integration of indigenous issues across the curriculum.
- Students expressed interest in broader selection of courses in history, especially in North America.
- Faculty also identified this as an area where expertise was lacking.

## 4. Further development of the existing 3-year academic planning cycle

The major challenge that students in the BA Humanities program identified was planning their degree, especially with respect to course selection for those classes offered on a two- or three-year cycle. We understand from the Dean of the College that there is a three-year planning cycle for course offerings, teaching assignments, and sabbatical. However at this point none of this information is available to students because it is too subject to change.

Administration also noted that the tendency of students to request independent studies classes to access specific topics sometimes creates issues with the plans: for example, if everyone who wants a specific class takes it as an independent study, the class itself may suffer from insufficient enrollment when it is offered.

Obviously there are always unplanned events and the relatively small faculty complement of the college means that in some cases there is not a second faculty member who can teach a

particular class. Nonetheless, it would benefit students a great deal if they could have more information available, and may help to alleviate the difficulties raised by administration. Even categorizing classes as “every year”, “every other year”, “every three years” and “occasional” would assist students in planning.

## 5. Suggestions for program development

We have a number of suggestions for ways in which the BA Humanities program could be developed and enriched in the future. The committee wishes to emphasize that the College could not reasonably be expected to pursue all of the possibilities we are listing. Rather this is a non-exhaustive list of ideas for building on existing strengths and expertise.

- Increased emphasis on visual and media literacy: both in specific classes and across the curriculum
- Integration of indigenous perspectives in the classroom and course content throughout curriculum (with the assistance of the Indigenous Director).
- Integration of the graduate portfolio from the beginning of the program, perhaps by the use of a digital portfolio system within the College course management system.
- Closer integration of the service learning component with program of study (this was identified as something the College is already discussing)
- Further development of interdisciplinarity classes (examples of some innovative interdisciplinary classes at other institutions can be found in appendix A.)
- Articulation and communication of graduate attributes for BA Humanities students (examples of graduate attributes and strong student and parent facing communication can be found in appendix B)

## Appendix A

Examples of innovative interdisciplinary classes

<http://www.sfu.ca/outlines.html?2018/summer/hum/340/d200>

<http://www.sfu.ca/outlines.html?2018/fall/hum/211/d100>

<http://www.sfu.ca/outlines.html?2018/fall/hum/309/d100>

<http://www.sfu.ca/humanities/undergraduate/upcoming-courses.html>

<https://taylorinstitute.ucalgary.ca/cdci/global-challenges-courses>

## Appendix B

Definition of Graduate Attributes framework: <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/graduate-attributes-framework>

Examples of Graduate Attributes:



<https://www.adelaide.edu.au/learning/teaching/curriculum/renewal/arts/CR-HUMSS-GA&Indicators.pdf>

[https://www.ucalgary.ca/science/teaching\\_learning/graduate\\_attributes\\_framework](https://www.ucalgary.ca/science/teaching_learning/graduate_attributes_framework)

Example of well-designed student and parent facing information about a BA Humanities program:

<http://futurestudents.yorku.ca/program/humanities>

<http://humanities.huma.laps.yorku.ca/undergraduate-program/>