November 2019

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PHASE 3

Consultation Guide

***Victoria University Strategic Visioning Exercise***

# THE FUNDAMENTALS OF A STRATEGIC PLAN

The purpose of this strategic plan is to conceptualise the future of Victoria University and to provide a strategic framework for the university over the next five years.

In developing a strategic plan, organisations are presented with unique opportunities to reflect upon who they are as well as what they must do in order to either further develop the strengths that have come to define their institutional persona or reduce the gaps that constitute perceived operational weaknesses.

This being Victoria University’s first collective strategic planning process, the institution has, perhaps for the first time, an opportunity to address the elements of their organisational structure and activities that enhance their ethos. In many ways, this process offers the University a chance to clearly articulate what that ethos means to its communities.

The University is also well situated to embark on such a process of identifying strategic areas of growth because of the solid foundations laid by the *Presidential Priorities Discussion Document* tabled for the university community in 2017 and the supplementary documentation that have guided the *Priorities* report’s implementation.

This particular process thus far has revealed three distinct identities of Victoria University: it is most easily identified as an academic ***institution***, best understood through its governance structures and support services. However, Victoria University is also a ***community***, membership criteria to which are purposefully blurred and expansive to allow facilitated entry. It is also, and perhaps most importantly, an ***idea***—an oasis of the very best of impactful, conversation-driven liberal education. This document attempts to describe these three identities.

## Victoria the Institution

This process has illustrated the complexity in identifying one of the most particular institutions in the Canadian postsecondary landscape. As an institution, Victoria University is a study in complexity and overlapping sovereignties.

Academically, it consists of two very different colleges, Victoria and Emmanuel, which are united by a co-location and a common derivation from a Methodist heritage. The former is an undergraduate arts and science college which is eponymous (and often conflated) to the university itself, while the latter is a smaller multireligious theological college offering graduate and postgraduate programs.

Victoria University is also one of three universities (along with St. Michael’s and Trinity) federated into the University of Toronto, one of the world’s greatest public universities. Its two colleges are also independently enmeshed into other wider academic structures within the University of Toronto: Victoria as one of seven undergraduate colleges within the Faculty of Arts & Science and Emmanuel as an important member of the consortium, the Toronto School of Theology.

But while both similarly offer programs within these larger structures, they are not symmetrical in their enrolment, staffing, or governance. Victoria College delivers academic programs towards a wider Arts and Sciences degree but largely shares instructors with academic departments across the wider Faculty; Emmanuel offers degrees conjointly with the University of Toronto and employs its own teaching staff.

The question of “who” Victoria University is institutionally also extends to its students, particularly those affiliated with Victoria College. The relationship that the college has with the Faculty of Arts & Science means that the overlap between the students studying at Victoria College and those registered there is far from simple. Some Victoria College students—in particular those registered in science-based disciplines, which make up about half of any incoming class—never take classes there; conversely, the majority of the students in the college’s classrooms are registered with other colleges within the Faculty of Arts & Science.

To better understand this institutional persona, however, one cannot simply focus on the University’s academic offerings. Victoria University as an institution is not merely a confederation of two contiguous colleges. It is also a provider of various learning and student services to those colleges (albeit asymmetrically—Victoria College’s needs are more closely catered to than those of Emmanuel’s smaller student body). For students who do not take classes at Victoria College (and who may not live on campus), the Registrar’s Office is the point of contact, as it is for all Vic students. Likewise, the E.J. Pratt Library or the Goldring Student Centre are often a central connection to the University. The University’s libraries are situated at the heart of the institution and is an instrumental tool for the type of active learning and interdisciplinarity that has come to define the academic experience at Victoria.

The academic services and learning support provided by the Registrar’s Office are augmented through the variety of supplementary learning services provided services on offer at the library, such as personalised mentoring and tutoring supports. The Registrar’s Office plays an important and dynamic role on campus. It supports students—to a high degree of satisfaction, it should be noted—through a robust suite of academic advising, learning support, and career and graduate services. The Registrar’s Office also manages scholarships, bursaries, and provides additional supports to recruiting and study abroad activities.

## Victoria the Community

To best understand Victoria the community, it is worth interrogating its purported ethos: although deeply entrenched in its traditions and connection to its historical roots, the manifestation of this ethos at Victoria University is wholly modern. As one of the oldest universities in Canada (its Royal Charter predates Confederation), Victoria University has played a crucial role in the intellectual, social, and political evolution of this country.

For almost two hundred years, it has trained and fostered national and community leaders, instilling in them a profound intellectual commitment and social responsibility. Indeed, these two qualities have become synonymous with the Victoria experience, which is defined by the transformative nature of the academic and co-curricular programming at both of the University’s constituent colleges.

The outward focus of the University’s academic mission reflects its tradition and history: Victoria graduates are dedicated to their communities, and to the diversity, dignity, respect, and trust of those communities. Taking an active stand in society is not a novel concept for Victoria’s undergraduate and graduate students; it is what defines them as learners and citizens, and what continues to define them as alumni.

The roots of this academic mission can be traced back to the University’s founding and its original pursuit of creativity and excellence through a fundamentally liberal education.

Drawing from its traditional teachings, Victoria University defines itself through the embodiment of its inviting understanding of community. The oasis that Victoria University has managed to create for itself on the northeastern corner of the University of Toronto’s campus permits it to be not just be a home but a community for those who seek one. Though space is permeable and membership criteria expansive, the place and setting nevertheless allow those who wish to take advantage of it to create a nurturing and supportive learning community on a human scale.

This community is not, of course, perfectly inclusive. It is far more a product of undergraduate Victoria College than it is of graduate Emmanuel College, even though the latter—due to the way community values and pastoral studies are embedded into its academic programming and values—embodies the same values in many ways.

However, Victoria University does strive to practice what it calls “inclusive excellence”, which is realised in the University’s diversity, predominantly within the student body, of under-represented and marginalised groups. It is an academic community that strives for excellence but refuses to do so at the expense of being welcoming and supportive to its members. In other words, Victoria the community is defined by those who *want* to be there and are able to find a home for themselves within.

## Victoria the Idea

To focus on Victoria University as an institution or a community is perhaps to miss its larger, arguably more important, function as an idea of what higher education should or could be, shielded even from the so-called neoliberal impulses of the sector.

The idea materialises in the place: the quad, the architecture, the student spaces. It is physically a home to the students who study and live in the residences, but also figuratively to those who spend time in the common areas and classrooms—places where, in a very literal, sense generations of students have grown up and reached adulthood.

The Victoria experience allows students to take part in that deep history and in a setting that is surprisingly intimate for one of North America’s largest universities in the downtown of one of the continent’s busiest cities. They have done it with small classes, with faculty who enjoy close interaction with students in and outside the classroom, in a small number of stone, ivy-clad, and modern buildings in part arranged to form a figurative sanctuary of what is, for the undergraduate students at least, a small college nested within a large world-class research university.

Both colleges’ attention to interdisciplinarity in their academic programming reflects the University’s understanding of the complexity of the world and its efforts to empower its students and prepare them to confront complexity, diversity, and change both within their studies and outside. It is, in many ways, a reflection of perhaps what a university education ought to be.

This reputation—that intangible ideal of what could be—drives many students to the University, and its focus on community and service has made it a leader in inclusive education and holistic, humanistic formation. This attention to social responsibility is reflected in key programs such as “Ideas for the World”, “Humanities for Humanity”, Pastoral Studies, and Vic One.

The qualities of Victoria University’s “unique value proposition”—the combination of the small-class academic setting, the learning supports and services, and the learning community—work together to create a certain magic. This is particularly the case for the University’s undergraduate students. Every young student goes to university craving self-actualisation and freedom: the ability to meet new friends, to think new thoughts, to choose one’s own path rather than have it laid out for one, as in secondary school. This freedom, however, comes at a price: the possibility of failure that comes with looser structures and less oversight.

Victoria University’s unique value proposition—and, importantly, the staff who create it—provides a unique sense of support for that part of the community that most needs it. It is this environment of support that takes the fear out of freedom; it is the belonging that makes flourishing possible.

In combining the seemingly endless possibilities for self-fulfillment and personal development with carefully curated support services, Victoria University offers an experience which is at once highly traditional and yet extremely modern. Superficially, it seems like something out of an earlier age: an Oxbridge collegiate replica in scale and atmosphere, a deliberate throwback to when postsecondary education was both more elite and more human. But at another level, it is perhaps the ultimate modern community: in organisation, complex, ambiguous, nested, and permeable; in mission, dedicated to knowledge, community, and human flourishing. And flourishing, fundamentally, is what education is all about. It is the essence of the idea of university.

## Priorities for the Future

### Victoria as an Institution

Institutionally, Victoria University offers inspiring academic programs and also provides students with the tools and resources they need to succeed at university. Successful delivery of these institutional goals is made possible by the commitment of both colleges to student-centred offerings, by high-quality operations across all departments, and by mutually beneficial relationships with partners across the University of Toronto.

Over the next five years the make-up of the student population at all Canadian post-secondary institutions will continue to change (becoming more diverse, with a high proportion of international and first-generation students) and society’s expectations about post-secondary education will continue to shift.

In this light, a key strategic challenge will be to **ensure that learning and support services meet evolving needs and expectations**.

When setting priorities, it would be useful to see this challenge as two-fold: the services themselves—such as academic guidance, learning support, and counselling services—and the staff and structures through which they are provided.

To meet this strategic challenge, the University might prioritize the following:

* Increase awareness, access, and availability of mental well-being and counselling services for students, including students at Emmanuel College
* Continue to invest in academic and learning support services offered through the Registrar’s Office and Pratt Library
* Continue to develop programs, such as Vic Ready, to prepare students for life after university
* Bolster staff training and support for the delivery of enhanced student services in the changing context
* Strengthen connections and collaborations across all departments (not just those that provide student services), and where feasible, plan for closer proximity of units with related functions

### Victoria as a Community

The Victoria experience is defined by the transformative nature of the academic and co-curricular programming at both of the University’s constituent colleges, programming which is grounded in opportunities for face-to-face conversations, in high-impact activities, and in treating students personally and holistically. It is a community that strives for excellence while being welcoming and supportive to its members.

Due to a number of pressures (social, political, technological, etc.), many aspects of post-secondary education in Canada increasingly are being approached in a transactional or instrumental manner, with the personal dimension afforded secondary importance. As a consequence, many students are hungry for a variety of ways to create community.

In this light, a strategic challenge over the next five years for Victoria University as a community is to ensure there are multiple ways for students to take part in the Victoria experience. At the same time, the University should continue to offer the distinctive programs, services, and activities that build a sense of community and should highlight the University’s role in the wider community.

To meet this strategic challenge, the University might prioritize the following:

* Continue to identify opportunities to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion across the University community
* Continue to offer transformative co-curricular programming
* Increase financial aid
* Strengthen commuter spaces, services, and programming
* Ensure choice, affordability, and availability of food on campus
* Increase interaction between the two colleges (students, staff and programming)
* Introduce online learning within selected programs at Emmanuel College
* Champion inter-religious teaching and learning at Emmanuel College
* Increase alumni engagement, including mentorship opportunities
* Provide leadership among postsecondary institutions in Toronto on issues such as mental well-being and student experience

### Victoria as an Idea

Victoria University, as an idea of what higher education should or could be, is characterized by several factors: its long tradition of inclusive education and holistic, humanistic formation; its combination of small-class academic setting, learning supports, and sense of community; the role of its colleges within a world-class research university; as well as its inspiring campus, with a mix of heritage buildings, modern facilities, and beautiful grounds.

The strategic opportunity that presents itself to Victoria University is to **champion this idea of education and adjust it to contemporary contexts**.

Victoria University as an Institution and Victoria University as a Community are essential elements for Victoria as an Idea. Equally essential to Victoria as an Idea are the University’s commitment to academic excellence, and its strong sense of place.

To meet this strategic challenge, the University might prioritize the following:

#### Academic Excellence

* Continue to foster excellent teaching in all academic programs
* Provide further undergraduate research opportunities, building on the success of programs such as Scholars-in-Residence
* Increase funding and support services for research grants for faculty and graduate students at both colleges
* Increase enrolment numbers at Emmanuel College and strengthen doctoral support
* Publicly champion the benefits of small-scale, conversation-based models of education

#### Campus

* Create a master plan for the campus that incorporates the University’s history, protects architectural heritage, improves accessibility, and envisages inspiring new spaces
* Reduce the carbon footprint of the physical plant and continue to improve sustainability in mission, dedicated

## Questions for Consultation

The purpose of this session of the Board Development Day is to engage the Board of Governors in a discussion about the contents of this document. A similar process will take place shortly with the broader Victoria University community to gauge the reaction and validity of these characterisations of and priorities for the institution.

The discussion will be guided by three principle questions:

1. **The Identities**
2. What do you think about these characterisations of Victoria University? Are any of them wrong?
Should any others be added?
3. **The Priorities**
4. What do you think about these priorities for the next five years of Victoria University? Are any of
them wrong? Should any other be added? Do any priorities appear more important than others?