

Update regarding concerns about the University's response to a UTSC Health Studies Program course (July 17, 2015)

In recent days you may have heard or read reactions to the University's report on a UTSC Health Studies Program course. We have received a number of inquiries in our offices, and we are aware of conversations taking place inside and outside the University. We take these concerns seriously, and we are writing today to clarify the actions that the University has taken in this matter.

The course in question is a fourth-year special topics course; in such courses, the content and the instructor change regularly. We can confirm that the Department of Anthropology, in which the Health Studies Program resides at UTSC, has determined that it will not be offering a course in this area, whether a special topics course or regular course, in the foreseeable future.

We are grateful to Vice-President Vivek Goel for his review of this matter and wish to reiterate some of the key points from his report and the Provostial response statement of July 7, 2015. Both of these documents can be found [here](#).

Professor Goel emphasized that the Health Studies Program at UTSC, which includes both a BA and a BSc option, combines courses from a range of disciplines to examine this critical area from biological, social and policy perspectives. A description of the Health Studies Program at UTSC can be found [here](#). You will note the emphasis on the fact that the Program "is built around a bio-medical and, above all, evidence-based paradigm, to which the faculty in the program are unreservedly committed." We would also note that the program has recently hired a number of young faculty with impressive research credentials.

Under the U of T *Policy for Approval and Review of Academic Programs and Units*, evaluations of course content and approaches are conducted by academic colleagues in relevant fields with appropriate expertise. It is not the role of the senior administration of the University to examine the appropriateness of content within individual courses.

It is, however, our role to ensure that the appropriate review processes are in place in the academic divisions. Accordingly, the mandate of Professor Goel's report was to examine the policy requirements in this particular case. He found the curricular review and governance processes in Health Studies at UTSC to be lacking at the time that the course in question was initiated. Since that time, the required curriculum committee has been established. In addition to the normal review of the proposed curricula for new courses, it has established stronger processes for scrutinizing the content of special topics courses and the qualifications of sessional instructors.

In addition, in the coming year the Health Studies Program (both BA and BSc options) is scheduled to undergo a cyclical review by subject area experts from peer institutions under the University of Toronto Quality Assurance Program (UTQAP). The periodic external review of

programs by expert leaders in the field is a critical facet of the University's commitment to academic quality. External review reports are taken forward to governance for review and approval by academic colleagues from across the University as part of our governance processes.

While we are committed to respecting the diversity of opinions and views of academic colleagues in diverse disciplines and areas of research and teaching, and to ensuring that these values are upheld across the institution, we would like to draw attention to a statement by the Deans of the Faculty of Medicine and Dalla Lana School of Public Health, which includes the following:

“As deans of two of the health sciences faculties at the University of Toronto, we teach our students that vaccines are safe, effective and vital to children's health. Vaccines are one of history's most important and significant achievements in public health and medicine. The best evidence that science can provide proves that the health benefits of vaccines far outweigh their potential side effects, and we instruct our students accordingly.”

Their full statement can be found [here](#).

Together with all members of our community, we care deeply about the scientific reputation of our University. The University of Toronto has an uncompromising commitment to critical inquiry and teaching. We have been home to many life-changing medical discoveries and public health interventions. Our processes of rigorous academic evaluation and our openness to debate are essential to that proud history.

Our strength is based in no small part on our commitment to academic freedom and responsibility through academic self-governance. As leaders of the institution, it is our role to ensure that the highest academic standards are upheld while respecting our collegial processes.

Sincerely,

Professor Cheryl Regehr
Vice-President and Provost
University of Toronto

Professor Bruce Kidd
Vice-President and Principal
University of Toronto Scarborough