The Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies: Opening the Dialogue

Jon Beasley-Murray

jon.beasley-murray@ubc.ca

March 11, 2019

Our Responsibilities

The dynamic between Institute and University can provide a model for the dynamic between the university and society as a whole. Neither relationship is easy. Indeed, they should be marked by a productive tension, **with the Institute reminding the university of its better nature, just as the university offers society ways of thinking that are not reducible to calculation or profit.**

A Crisis Foretold

"PWIAS may well be unique in the world among institutes for advanced study in having appreciably more resources than it needs for its present programs. Such a situation naturally attracts predators eager to deploy the resources for their own schemes, producing mission creep of the sort that is perhaps already discernible. [. . .] **If the moment is not seized, the resources may be dissipated rather than focused, and a glorious opportunity will have been lost**."

(Report of the PWIAS External Review Committee, May 2011)

The Institute as a Problem

If there is a problem with the Institute, it is that **it is not causing** *enough* **problems**, not raising *enough* fuss. It is that, again in the words of its external reviewers, it has too often been "exceptionally inward looking and its programs [. . .] lack sufficient **coherence, synergy and external impact**."

2011 Review Conclusions

"Exploiting fully the exceptional financial resources and advantages of location possessed by the Institute, and with the committed backing of the UBC leadership, refocus PWIAS programs so that they are **coherent, synergistic and international**, and so the Institute can attract outstanding scholars from around the world [. . .] thus enabling PWIAS to realize its aim to be one of the leading institutes for advanced study and also maximizing the benefit to UBC."

(Report of the PWIAS External Review Committee, May 2011)

Five Principles

- Impact
- Synergy
- Coherence
- Internationalism
- Openness

Impact

The Institute should make an impact by proposing directions for academic research. **It should take a lead and give substance to its programming**. With the help of a reconstituted Advisory Board, the Institute should take the initiative, stepping up to make a difference by advancing concepts and suggesting priorities for interdisciplinary study, freed of the constraints faced by clusters and other units.

Synergy

The Institute should achieve synergy by ensuring that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. **Its programs should be more clearly articulated with each other**. There would still be room for contingency, but in the context of a focussed agenda designed for impact and coherence. The Institute should also have postdoctoral positions and a role for graduate students, to enhance its networks and to offer training in advanced study.

Coherence

The Institute should ensure coherence by promoting projects that directly address disciplinary boundaries. **It should acknowledge the difficulty of interdisciplinary collaboration**. Reflection on and critique of academic and institutional life is important, but it is only one part of the Institute's remit. The Institute should be a place where advanced study actually happens.

Internationalism

The Institute is rooted in its local context, and should make the most of its location, but **it also needs to be international in scope**. Like the university, at present it is often global in aspiration but parochial in practice. Wall scholarships need to be opened up to international competition.

Openness

The Institute needs to be open and outward-looking in every way. **It should draw on and contribute to the many external resources for conceptualizing common problems**, rather than purporting to offer finished solutions. It should have critique as well as self-critique at its heart.

The Challenge

Stressing impact, synergy, and coherence, internationalism and openness, we need to rethink the interconnections of Institute, University, and society as a whole. **We need to work on concepts with which to raise problems that unsettle our understandings of the world in which we live**.