A Tale of Three Programs – Reflections on Criminological Studies at Ryerson University

Tammy C. Landau and Kimberly N. Varma,
Ryerson University

Criminological studies at Ryerson University in Toronto, as in many post-graduate institutions, has had at least three lives. We will maintain that the development of what has been variously named Justice Studies, Criminal Justice and, as of November, 2013, Criminology at Ryerson University, is the result of four primary influences: the broader political and ideological agenda in Ontario to provide professional, technical training for increasingly scarce public-sector jobs; the corporate interests of the university to take advantage of opportunities to expand its mandate at a time when the value of university (vs post-secondary education more generally) was in question; the contribution of the individual faculty members hired to teach and contribute to the development of programs and curriculum and, finally, the purposeful change in identity of Ryerson University away from its polytechnic roots. One might argue that the transition through programs in criminological studies parallels those of the field of criminology itself. That is, a narrow focus on technical training with applications to the administration of criminal justice have been replaced, sometimes quite abruptly, by a critical, interdisciplinary and a richer integration of substantive and theoretical frameworks beyond the traditional scope. Today, criminological studies at Ryerson are really just a faint reflection of their early roots.

Prior to 1990, Ryerson Polytechnic Institute, as it was then called, was a post-graduate polytechnic, offering a few undergraduate degrees but mostly accredited technical training in fields such as engineering, business and marketing, archi-

tecture and landscape design, hospitality, nursing and social work. Social sciences and humanities were largely breadth courses and the academic homes which housed them (like Psychology, Sociology, History and English) were referred to as "service" departments to highlight their secondary, support function to the meat and potatoes of other program areas. However, in 1990 Ryerson Polytechnic Institute became Ryerson Polytechnic University- fully accredited, degree-granting, albeit still in a very small number of professional fields. Its motto, "Knowledge Applied", was used as the standard for the development and approval of any new university programs. That is, it was mandated to be faithful to its applied roots and maintain its focus as a polytechnic, but to complement such studies with more academic and scholarly curricula. This dual emphasis, it was believed, gave Ryerson a competitive edge over diploma-granting colleges, since it could now boast to offer the skills *and* the scholarship that both students and potential employers said they wanted. While some disciplines could easily fit within this new mandate (such as studies in public and environmental health), others (including most of the social sciences and all of the humanities) were clearly at a disadvantage, as it was difficult to make the case, at least at that time, for an applied or professional focus.

It was during this period that a small number of faculty from the Department of Psychology found an innovative way to meet these political and institutional imperatives, to create a part- time degree-completion program in "Justice Studies", designed for what were referred to as "criminal justice practitioners". The program opened in 1996 with the mandate to provide "professionally relevant education that combines the traditional university focus on theory and research with a career-oriented emphasis on professional practice and application." Students could enter the program from two general streams – with a college diploma in a justice-related field (for which they would get some but not complete transfer credit), or with little or no educational foundation but considerable relevant work experience. Indeed, these students typically

came from correctional services, public and private policing, and the fields of youth and childcare, and were looking to strengthen their professional qualifications (and opportunities for advancement) with an applied university degree.

The landscape of criminological programs at that time offered little to these students. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s in Ontario there were almost no stand-alone undergraduate studies in criminal justice or criminology. Most were housed in other social science departments (particularly sociology or anthropology and, in a few cases, public administration). Even then, criminological studies were often limited to a small collection of offerings rather than a full program of study. While there were 4 full graduate programs across the country (Toronto, Ottawa, Montréal, and Simon Fraser), undergraduate studies, popular as they were, tended to be institutional sidebars to more traditionally defined disciplines. And they were not designed, at the university level, for professionally oriented students. At Ryerson, the situation was even more dramatic. There were virtually no faculty in any of the "core" disciplines who "did" criminology, so there was very little intellectual interest in "owning" the program. At the same time, the inaugural undergraduate program in Justice Studies at Ryerson mirrored the goals that Chunn and Menzies (1999, p. 292) identified for graduate programs at that time: "abetting the aims of 'applied' criminology by promoting the institutionalist ideals of accountability, employability, practical knowledge, and technical innovation." Indeed, it explicitly and intentionally fell into what Frauley (2005) has referred to as "protective services" (p. 248), which resulted in additional lack of interest from existing departments. While this could be an advantage in that there was little interference in the curricular direction of the program, it sometimes led to a lack of direct collegial support in developing and administering the program.

Since students entering the program were assumed to have had either professional training or experience in providing direct services in the field of criminal justice, they were

"topped up" with a roster of more professional (or professionalized) university courses in areas such as "Confrontation and Crisis Management", "Cross Cultural Values and Communication" and "Applied Problem Solving." While the program was brought in and passed by faculty with only passing interests in the field, the range of expertise was not adequate enough to be able to teach the various courses. That was not, at first blush, a fatal problem since the cross-discipline design of the curriculum meant that students took courses from a range of departments across the university.

Indeed, in the early years, Justice Studies was, in many ways, a "success" as it drew increasing (albeit small) numbers of students from its target population, most students graduated in spite of having to take most of their courses in the evenings after work, and it filled a niche in university-level criminological studies. In time, however, and some might say, very quickly, it encountered a convergence of challenges that led to a dramatic shift in the goals and structure of the program. First and foremost, the program had no intellectual or scholarly home. While the program was explicitly designed to be interdisciplinary and did not envision a significant pedagogical or curricular contribution from psychology, that department, like most others in the Faculty of Arts at that time, wanted its own program. The existing program in Justice Studies could not meet that agenda. In addition, however, student enrolment remained low. While the program filled an important gap in post-secondary education, part-time, evening studies for a population that often required shiftwork meant it was not as accessible to the target population as was hoped. Finally, while the completion rate for students who began the program was high, it often took a very long time, something that universities are loathe to tolerate when resources could be more productively directed elsewhere.

Despite the rocky inception of the Justice Studies program, the field was growing and the program at Ryerson was part of the upward growth in this burgeoning field. Between 1999 and 2004, various Faculty of Arts departments submitted

proposals to create and offer their own full-time undergraduate programs. As part of this movement, the School of Justice Studies partnered with the Department of Politics and School of Public Administration to offer a four-year Bachelor of Arts that began with a common first two years and then split off into a more focused program of study in either Criminal Justice or Politics and Governance in the last two years.

This BA in Criminal Justice (as it was then known) was launched in 2005 with an intake of 100 students, exceeding its enrolment target of 80. At the time, there were four full-time tenured faculty members (three were hired in 2005) and one director (who did not teach in the program). The faculty complement consisted of two PhDs in Criminology, one PhD in Law and one PhD in Sociology.

The Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology (which replaced the "School" as the program evolved) became a separate, independent entity within the Faculty of Arts in the Fall of 2006. This move was a reflection of increasing organizational and disciplinary maturity, evidenced by the program's early success and by the addition of four tenured or tenure-stream faculty members between 2005 and 2006.

The rapid growth in student enrollment was remarkable. When the program started in 2005-2006, there were 22 applications for every one person admitted. That ratio increased over the years and hit a peak of 27:1 in 2009-2010. Moreover, the quality of students entering the program climbed steadily from an incoming average of 78% in 2005-2006 to an 85% average in 2013-14. The large number and exceptional credentials of the student body reinforced the changes that the department had already made – from an applied program focusing on work readiness, towards a critical, theoretical and substantively interdisciplinary program that continues to have roots in application – but more so in terms of the relevance of research in criminology to policy and community engagement.

Early on, the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology looked very similar to other BA degree programs in

Criminology elsewhere. The point of differentiation really came from the way in which the faculty positioned themselves in terms of their research as well as the wider Ryerson mandate. For example, the curriculum was quite similar to that which could be found at the University of Toronto or York University, but with an emphasis on practical experience both inside and outside of the classroom. "Practice" is not confined to "protective services" or even policy, although it is often that. It emerges from social activism and community engagement among the interdisciplinary faculty, but also from the increasingly diverse, racialized, politicized and community-oriented student body. They have embraced, if not led, our attempts to guide them into non-traditional practices (at least for criminology students) and have become leaders in their communities, even at their young age. So, in addition to more traditional work with policing and community organizations, restorative justice and youth justice forums, both faculty and students are involved in social advocacy, literacy, human and civil rights, the Law Practice Program (the newly instituted alternative in Ontario to articles for law students), and immigration and settlement services.

An additional point of comparison with other programs in larger institutions is that Ryerson's program was smaller and more personalized in comparison to the larger sized programs in neighbouring institutions. The size of the program has stayed within reason, mostly due to the practical space constraints of the location of Ryerson's campus. And the location of the University in downtown Toronto was an advantage for other reasons–an urban setting where organizations that worked in criminological and related fields were located within arm's reach. This has allowed many faculty members and students to create and maintain ties to these organizations in various capacities.

In November 2013, a decision was made to change the name of the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology to the Department of Criminology. The main reason for the

name change was that 'Criminology' better reflected the scholarly field of study and the curriculum reflected this already. Presently, most faculty are engaged in research which goes beyond analyzing the institutions and processes associated with defining and responding to crime and criminality to include critical analyses of the role of government policy, social institutions and other mechanisms of social control beyond the regulation of justice-involved individuals. "Criminal justice" simply did not reflect the range of scholarly and intellectual research, the breadth of the curriculum being delivered, and generally confused both current and prospective students.

Ironically, the more interdisciplinary we have become, the more our colleagues in other social sciences and humanities embrace us, unlike the experiences of many in other universities. Opportunities for collaboration have increased, and are encouraged, although institutional and administrative barriers sometimes remain. The Department of Criminology currently has 11 full time faculty members with PhDs in Criminology, Social Anthropology, Women's Studies, Law, Sociology and History. We have almost 600 undergraduates in the program and we are attracting many students with exceptional averages across Ontario, and some from further afield. Students at Ryerson are exposed to an environment which emphasizes entrepreneurial pursuits and innovation as well as student-driven projects. Thus, there is an increasing demand on the program to provide more experiential learning opportunities – something that our department is well poised to provide given our community connections and location. However, a lack of resources at the moment makes this difficult to carry through. At the same time, the commitment to intellectual rigour, critical thinking and theoretical inquiry has led to discussions to provide graduate programming which builds on the strengths of the undergraduate curriculum in providing students with a scholarly, critical, professionalized program.

References:

Frauley, J. 2005. "Representing Theory and Theorising in Criminal Justice Studies: Practising Theory Considered." *Critical Criminology*, 13: 245-265.

Menzies, R. and Chunn, D.E. 1999. "Discipline in dissent: Canadian academic criminology at the millennium." *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, 41(2): 285-297.