# A Justice Experience at the University of Regina: A History of an Interdisciplinary, Academic, Liberal Arts Program[1]

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**Abstract:**

There are diverse criminal justice realties. These realities cluster around politics, the news media, entertainment, advocacy groups, and among others, post-secondary education institutions. Seldom is the public informed of the available evidence on crime and justice research and practices. Rather, the media market place and political agendas are a leading edge of misinformation, rhetoric, half-truths, and bumper-sticker slogans explaining crime and justice. Post-secondary institutions are not now, nor have they been in the past, immune from such influences. How independent is justice research at Canadian universities? How do academics formulate independent research proposals while meeting external funding criteria? What is it that attracts students to criminal justice degree programs? Is it the pursuit of a better society, a more just society? Or, are students influenced by cop shows, tough-on-crime politics, and editorials without an evidentiary foundation? Maybe, students have aspirations of joining the league of justice professionals fighting crime to make our communities safer. As fiscal constraints disproportionately dictate university priorities, the public interest in crime and justice has not gone unnoticed by colleges and

1 This paper reproduces a panel presentation at "Educating Justice" a conference held at the University of Winnipeg, May 8-10, 2014. The organization of the paper broadly follows questions provided by organizing committee of the conference. While historical facts are cited, the preponderance of comments are that of the author and do not represent formal policies or positions of the Department of Justice Studies, University of Regina

universities. In attempts to attract students, justice programs have become a well from which to draw financial resources. This is not an exclusive club for only post-secondary justice programs. Nevertheless, justice programs seem to attract the criticism that they are not "true" to an academic tradition of liberal arts. Whether the motivation behind such criticism is a legitimate concern for academic accountability or simply envy of the flow of students to justice programs is difficult to say. A brief journey through the justice program at the University of Regina reflects upon its liberal arts foundation and its integration of practices for improving human services to those most affected by crime: victims, offenders, families, and communities. The challenges of financial exigencies are briefly considered.

## Introduction

Many justice programs have found fertile ground at Canadian colleges and universities. These programs have been nurtured by a rich cross pollination of social science expertise and attract students with a desire for a justice education. The forty-one year history of the Department of Justice Studies at the University of Regina, formerly the School of Human Justice, echoes the achievements and challenges facing many post-secondary, justice programs.

Justice Studies at the University of Regina has been received with alternating applause and disrespect conditional on the administrative watch and/or government of the day and which faculty is willing to give us a home. Not to appear as a sole poor relative, I'm aware other degree programs are up against similar providence. In many respects Justice Studies does not have a corner on how programs are received by the university. That Justice Studies is too attuned to protective service education and not so much to critical thinking and writing is shared only by some colleagues.

The School of Human Justice was created in 1973, then a part of the University of Saskatchewan. After 1980 it became housed as a constituent and autonomous part of the Faculty

of Social Work at the newly established University of Regina.[2] The multi-disciplinary nature of the School eventually led to a conflict with the more single-disciplinary focus of Social Work. Moreover, the School's curriculum did not fall neatly within the framework of the national social work association's accreditation guidelines. The Human Justice program essentially cut too wide a swath, lacking focus as course offerings ranged from crime to politics, from the environment to social injustice; too much a liberal arts program and not enough professionalism. Eventually, in the mid-1990s, these frictions led to an unceremonious ending to an old and innovative relationship. Certainly, other factors were at play, but time and space are limited here.

After consultations with government, community groups, and Aboriginal groups that led to the creation of the School, it was decided to directly link studies to a human services (practicum based) education, hence the School was, at least at first blush, able to find common footing with Social Work education (Harding, 1997). Thus, human *justice* (nee services) was adopted as the degree name. The program did not duplicate offerings by the Faculty of Law at the University of Saskatchewan, did not use a single disciplinary approach such as sociology, and it was not an appendage of any another program (Harding, 1992). This was important to appease possible criticism that there could be a replication of other degrees.

The School provided access for a broad undergraduate student body to general electives in multi-disciplinary justice studies including: criminal justice, legal justice, service justice, and social justice. Examples of the areas of study and courses defining a multi-disciplinary standpoint were mapped as an interconnected web or matrix, each connected to the other: integration (practicum), analyses (theories), fields (criminal law, family law, and international law), issues (social control, ecology) sectors (youth justice, gender and justice, indigenous peoples) systems (criminal, legal, human rights and mental health) and orientation (explorations) (Harding, 1992).

2 The University of Regina gained independent status as a university from the University of Saskatchewan in 1974.

## Program offered today

Today, the Department of Justice Studies continues to be defined by the guiding principles of its founding architects: human service education supported by multi-disciplinary curricula and faculty. There are two undergraduate degrees offered: Bachelor of Human Justice (BHJ) and Bachelor of Arts, Police Studies (BAPS). There are two graduate thesis based degrees: Master of Arts Justice Studies and one in Police Studies. The future holds some promise for a partnership with the Faculty of Business Administration, University of Regina for a course based MBA degree in Public Safety Management: four business administration theme courses and four related to justice, including one from economics. This degree is consistent with the multi-disciplinary vision of our department's founders.

## Intellectual roots

The BHJ degree was originally designed to be accessible to the part-time, adult student already working in the field that desired or required professional education (Harding, 1992). The BHJ degree was considered to be equivalent to the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) insofar as a professional designation was necessary for the Saskatchewan Public Service Commission (Harding, 1992). Included in the design was province-wide access to the program for students. During the 1970s and 1980s, faculty in the School were involved with Prairie Justice Research, a research consortium engaged in a range of social, economic and cultural issues facing the province. Funding was largely provided by the federal government and the province, the University of Regina and other granting bodies (Harding, 1992). The School was committed to link academic and research resources to the needs of agencies in the justice field (Harding, 1992). Aboriginal justice, Aboriginal self-government, legal and social justice, human rights, and community justice were the fundamentals that framed research and practice. The BHJ degree stressed adult, self-directed learning: small group projects and presen-

tations; theoretical and analytical oriented classroom seminars; comparative methods; guest lectures and critical inquiry (Harding, 1992).

## Parent discipline

The architects for the BHJ were mostly from the Social Work faculty with instructional support (sessionals) from the array of human services providers in the province. The notion was to fill the education gap in the province among practitioners who required or desired a post-secondary, inter-professional education in criminology and justice studies. Human service education was, at the onset, believed to be the vehicle to explore, examine, and apply theories and methodologies that drew from an inter-disciplinary understanding of justice. Importantly, it was believed that justice issues required a spotlight to draw attention to community justice issues such as systemic racism, poverty, sexism, and so on.

## Department Momentum

Momentum for the department to find its niche ebbed and flowed throughout the years keeping it in an almost recurrent state of uncertainty; continually re-inventing itself in reaction to political realties – even sometimes willingly. This re-invention was most profoundly felt in the mid-1990s after the divorce from the Faculty of Social Work and the hooking up with a new partner, the Faculty of Arts. Since the early 2000s, scarcely a year has passed without some change in faculty, curriculum and/or financial exigency. This reality is also reflected historically, in a letter from provincial government officials in July 1984 to the then Vice-President of the university about the guidelines for the 1985-86 university budget; "substantive policy questions at hand which go beyond the University's area of responsibility and involve the provincial government...," about the continued existence of the department: "the possibility of the [University] Board and government entering into ...[a] candid and detailed discussions about the future mission of the University of Regina...,"

and "a more preferable alternative than...the possible arbitrary deletion ... of such programs as...", among the list was Human Justice (Harding, 1992). The role of Human Justice for the government and within the University reflects an historical and organizational tension. Defining itself as a multidisciplinary department underlies the complexity of justice issues, promotes the integration of theory in practice, and has provided fertile ground for both detractors and supporters.

Over the past few years (~2011 to the present), our department has been engaged in strengthening and developing partnerships with government and the justice community (e.g. police, corrections, CBOs, First Nations and Métis organizations). It is our belief that through objective scientific research and critical student education we can be leaders that affect positive change in and for justice communities. Detractors view such a close relationship with government as compromising our independence. Supporters, internal and external to the university, see the advantage of a positive relationship with government because criticism is more likely to be accepted if there is mutual respect. There has been some recent success in this regard evidenced by the establishment of the Collaborative Centre for Justice and Safety, a university institute dedicated to addressing injustice.

On another storm front, Human Justice is not a professional discipline with an accreditation body in the same vein as social work or psychology, and some critics do not accept us as a fit within traditional liberal arts disciplines as our history is quite different from that of traditional, discipline-based Arts programs. Yet, critical examination of justice issues, theoretical and practical, are foundational to our programs. Some view the Human Justice and Police Studies degrees as too prescriptive, with too many required courses compared to most other departments in Arts. These critics argue that our degrees are dedicated to professional proficiency rather than critical examination. The assertion continues, that with the lessening of available elective course options from other departments in the Arts, a critical liberal arts education becomes devalued.

In other words, they see our program as akin to a fixed entree rather than a buffet of courses. This observation is partially accurate. Our students do not have as many elective courses to choose from as do students in other Arts majors. Yet, students are opting for one of our two majors over others – we have the second highest enrollment in Arts next to psychology. Furthermore, we require that students take specific courses from other departments; unique among other majors in Arts. Would our students take elective courses from other departments if they were afforded a greater opportunity to do so or would they take more justice courses as electives? We don't know the answer to this question.

The impetus for our current persona was the melding of the Bachelor of Arts, Police Studies (BAPS) and the Bachelor of Human Justice (BHJ) degrees under one roof. At first, the BAPS was created under the Faculty of Arts as a multi-disciplinary stand alone degree with a tacit affiliation with Human Justice and a loose affiliation by way of course offerings with other departments within Arts. As we were able to revise our curricula, enhance our critical analysis of crime and justice - maintaining many of the original course descriptions with updated content - the BHJ and BAPS now successfully cohabit and share a universal course subject nomenclature: Justice Studies. The BHJ has 24 required courses and the BAPS has 25: criminological and social justice theory courses; methods; legal and restorative justice courses; and themed courses such as mental health and substance abuse in a justice context; advocacy strategies, environmental justice, and food, hunger and justice flesh out the scope of our course offerings. Each degree has a set of practica requirements. Both degrees have ten overlapping required courses.

**Focus and future direction**

I would see our future as one of engagement in open conversations with other post-secondary justice programs, community-based justice organizations, legal organizations and governments. A goal we might share is to educate students,

lead with research that will inform the paradigm of what justice means and how it is carried out. As a justice community I envision a response to ghoulish media headlines and to a misinformed public about the plight of those who suffer the indignity of injustice: the marginalized, the hopeless, and the abandoned. To this observer we are caught in a funnel that spins the truth until it is unrecognizable. Repeat the mantra, 'tough on crime' enough times, wrap it in fear and propose solutions that feed a public's disinformation about crime - their safety is at risk - and a hostility about offenders and crime will emerge that is unproven but believed. We would engage our students in critically analysing contemporary justice issues through the integration of theory in practice. As a justice community, we would draw clearly articulated lines between fact and fiction. This would be in the forefront of our teaching. For example, our course on mental health and substance abuse examines the "new" role of corrections in housing those with a mental disorder, a regression to the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution and workhouses. Another example reflects upon crime as a symptom of a more profound underlying social injustice (e.g. racism). Our course on Justice and Indigenous Peoples connects racist policies (e.g. residential schools) to criminal behaviours.

The field of justice studies is an orchestra of instruments sometimes playing in harmony at other times sounding disconnected. Our courses are the instruments of justice at play: critical education, information, collaboration, communication, and integration on a stage of evidenced based research that will improve the quality of our communities, families and individuals by creating graduates and research that contribute to the promotion of a civil society.

**Can we forge inter-disciplinary links without stepping on the toes of other disciplines?**

A challenging question! What do we mean by interdisciplinary? Does it mean that different academic disciplines co-exist in one department? Are courses from other departments

required in a justice major? We are, in part, bound by recent history as academicians. We organize ourselves in clusters of departments and faculties, as if to say there is only one way to think about justice and this is how to do it. When I think of interdisciplinarity from a justice perspective, I think about an English course on crime and punishment, or an anthropology course on culture and crime or an economics course on the economics of crime, or a computer science course on mining crime data. In this way, I can see linkages with other disciplines. We developed one course on interprofessional collaboration. This course was co-taught by faculty members from justice, education, social work, kinesiology, and nursing. Each instructor critically examining issues that crossover professional boundaries.

I put forward some principles that may guide us based on my non-academic experience:

- Student centred decision by faculty;
- Integrative curricula across discipline, departments and faculties;
- Collaboration that moves us away from positional thinking, personal agendas and to acceptance that in an increasing hostile environment where to think is a *crime*, we must recognize the extent to which our destinies are connected to one another
- Communication pathways that lead to open doors; create options; and have diverse solutions to the challenges we face. Margaret Wheatley (2000) suggests we are inclined to ask the wrong questions. Paraphrasing Wheatley, the question should not be posed as "What's the problem and how to fix it." Instead, she suggests we should ask, "What are the solutions and how do we get there?"

**Specialized inter-disciplinary programs critiqued as "protective services" or applied criminology, instead of a social science**

I am often bewildered by the assertion that specialized inter-

disciplinary programs in justice are critiqued as "protective services" education or applied criminology instead of real social science as if an academic sin was committed. This critique, in my view, fails academic rigor. If we agree that some of the attributes of social science disciplines are to explain the human condition, improve the lives of individuals, families and communities and to educate students who will then, meaningfully contribute to a civil society, I do not understand the lack of sympathy for justice programs. Justice programs, regardless of their proclivity to integrating theory in practice are no more without critical analysis than a sociologist examining issues in social policy. Specialized programs in my quality world, such as justice studies, are a stage for a diverse discourse, with creative ideas discussed at length, a healthy peppering of critical and ethical thought and the analysing and synthesizing of elements that will cut through it all. To identify justice programs as "protective services" or "applied criminology" is to divert attention from some sense of exclusive domain over critical education. "What is the benefit of a liberal arts degree and who owns its delivery?" This is similar to the "Fair Election's Act" recently table in our Parliament, which is anything but fair, or the Community Safety Act, which in the main, does not have anything to do with community safety. Protective service name calling is a challenge to defend what needs no defense. Critical justice, as an interdisciplinary approach to theory in practice is, in my estimation, as valuable as teaching critical thought in other social sciences or the humanities field.

Universities are under ideological and fiscal attack. Intellectual endeavours are criticised as "marginalized opinions" and not real world knowledge: "this is not a time to commit sociology," stated Conservative Prime Minister Steven Harper after the bomb blast during the 2013 Boston Marathon. If we accept that such events require more than one explanation, more than a single disciplinary understanding to fully comprehend terrorism, then justice programs have an important contribution to make.

I believe that as a justice community we have, in part, few others to blame but ourselves for the charge that we are a community of "protective service" trainers. As universities and colleges fight for butts in seats, criminal justice has attracted many students to the field. There has been an explosion of programs that have evolved to compete for students: certificates, diplomas and degrees in policing, corrections, etc. The criminal justice field has a readymade consumer (student) that has been watching crime shows for decades. Comparatively, our colleagues in the oldest of academic traditions, such as philosophy, are losing ground. Rather than defend our reputation, I would seek out collaborative enterprises and creative curricula that engage with other faculties, departments and disciplines.

**Is this reflected in your department?**

At the University of Regina, the protective service criticism does emerge from time to time, and is mostly subtle, flowing under the radar. You are being too prescriptive? Translation, your students have fewer options to take our courses! You deserve more resources! Translation, we ran out of money, maybe next year! You're successful, we agree! Translation, keep up the good work!

Successful degree programs are measured more by course credit hours than by graduands. The Arts are at risk of devolving into economically viable service courses. Yet, justice programs are criticized for offering "protective service" education. Is there a difference? Both seem at a most cynical level, a ploy for balancing budgets. The devolution of Arts to a service course industry may not be as concerned with graduating students, and justice studies may be too concerned. I make these observations recognizing its overt generality and that it does not necessarily apply in all instances across all institutions or within any one institution. I do not anticipate any contentiousness, however, on the part of my colleagues by asserting that post-secondary institutions are undergoing a profound change, often grudgingly. I believe there should

be a seat at the table for all university programs, as the problem is not whether justice programs fall within the liberal arts but is, relatively, a shift of reduced fiscal support to post-secondary institutions from tax dollars to the market place. We are all threatened by such a shift.

**What is your relationship with administration?**

Today, I would describe the relationship with our administration as, healthy: they are supportive and share a vision for creating a more recognizable justice identity at the university. The difficulty is the journey toward the fiscal cliff that most universities are approaching. Distributing resources to one faculty, department or program over any other has created some divisions.

**What is the climate in terms of faculty support?**

Some see Justice Studies as attracting students to the academy and others see us as taking students from their degree program or at least not sharing our students as we have been accused of maintaining an excessively prescriptive curriculum. The climate is, unsettled, as if a storm front was forming. Faculty are upset with the reprioritization of dollars to non-academic areas. There are the rumblings of some yet to be articulated response.

**What is your relationship with other departments at the university?**

Our relationship with other departments is quite cordial! Although, at times I bite my tongue, while at other times I speak out. We are collectively struggling with shaping our identity and we are caught in the crosshairs of budget restraint, ideological and positional thinking, an historical decision-making apparatus that appears to me, on the surface to promote faculty involvement, yet when I drill down, lacks a didactic wisdom that has been replaced by fiscal imperatives. We seem to politely compete for resources, then try to push our way to the head of the line for resources.

**How do criminal justice departments rise to the challenge of bridging theory and practice?**

When did theory and practice divorce? So we all know Kant's rant: Practice without theory is blind, but theory without practice is mere intellectual play. I have another question. Why are we asking this question? The bridge, if there is one to build, is between students and us, illustrating the dynamic flow between theory in practice; the dialectic condition of understanding the co-existence and tension between the two.

**What is the role of practitioners in the university context?**

Students love to hear stories. I have found if you can teach your subject matter through stories, rather than chalk and talk, students will be forever engaged – re-enact the debate on capital punishment from 1967 for example and we can capture the imagination of our students. Professionals can bring a rich discourse to the classroom, founded on "what works" from experience rather than experiment, yet, we should always reflect a sound theoretical scaffolding to contextualize diverse explanations of one's experience.

**What is your department's relationship to the local justice community?**

My colleagues are sought after for their research, their informed opinions, and for educating students as future prospects for employment. The relationship with many in our justice community, in some ways is closer than it is with our colleagues in the academy. Our community justice networks are broad and include governments, police, corrections, community based organizations, advocacy groups, schools, and other post-secondary institutions in Canada.

**How should criminal justice scholars and departments position themselves in relation to the American Society of Criminology, the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences,**

**other Canadian professional bodies and the CCJA in the 21st Century?**

These are all valuable and credible organizations. I'm a bit of a Canadian sovereigntist here. We should not fly great distances to share with others, across borders, what we need to address at home. We must, I believe, stem the current of US style justice reforms of the past three decades from flooding Canadian justice. We must raise Canadian awareness about Canadian criminal justice realties. I'm not suggesting we ignore the ASC or the ACJS, I am suggesting that our research weigh more heavily into Canadian forums.

## Conclusion

Justice programs in our post-secondary institutions are faced with many challenges. I have suggested that the question of whether university and college justice programs belong in the liberal arts is a distraction from the more common peril campuses and academics share: anti-intellectualism delivered through fiscal restraint. Yet, governments move toward funding vocational programs. We are more than a collection of university or vocationally educated individuals. Our civil society requires a contribution of knowledge, skill and attitude from all spheres of influence; an organic whole of inclusivity and diversity. As justice educators we must help frame the debates in ways that are less divisive and more constructive. Leave the question of who fits within the liberal arts to those few who are constrained by the past and frightened of the future.

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