

UBC athletics focused on success and student participation

Opinion: Review models focus exhibited in successful Olympic Own the Podium exercise

BY LOUISE COWIN, SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN OCTOBER 29, 2013

UBC sports are integral to the student experience, and important to the community. That's a good thing. Recently, there have been some loud voices raising completely false fears about the future of our sports programs. The concerns have to do with a review that was first announced after UBC made a decision not to pursue competition in the NCAA in 2011.

The NCAA decision was a difficult one, and based on comments received, President Stephen Toope called for a review of the UBC Athletics department. In 2013, UBC began the final phase of that review: evaluating each varsity team under a new competitive sport model.

The University has been clear that this is not a cost-cutting exercise. Budget will not be taken from athletics programs to fund other initiatives. But it will be better invested to propel our varsity and high performance sports programs to greater excellence. Ongoing input is welcome to inform the review and identify new ways forward, including criteria and measures for the review, as well as ideas for new models of donor and partnership funding for teams. This is a process UBC alumni should support.

UBC's athletic programs have grown to include 29 varsity teams and a wide range of competitive and recreational programs. Without any long-term strategy or formal evaluation process, these sports and their budgets have evolved over time. We are now looking at how best to target funding to support greater excellence, while ensuring capacity to support more participation in competitive sports at UBC.

Olympic fans will remember the controversy surrounding Own The Podium in the years leading to the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver. With a very focused and methodical approach, Own The Podium picked the sports and athletes for which it would provide more focused support. We all know how that turned out: Canada won more gold medals than ever before.

UBC is reviewing sports on campus with a similar objective and rigorous approach. We are now at the point where we are evaluating each of our teams. It is an assessment that will help us focus investment to achieve greater success at the varsity and high performance levels, while ensuring broader student participation in UBC competitive sport.

Despite what you may have read elsewhere, there is no secret agenda and no pre-determined outcome. The teams will be evaluated based on the criteria that will be selected following input from key stakeholders such as alumni, student athletes, coaches and partners. We are at step one of a four-step process that will lead to a final decision next spring. There will be additional opportunities for input and new ways forward in phases two and three.

We also want to dispel a rumour that funding from the athletics program will be diverted to fund well-being. There is a separate strategic planning process underway to create a comprehensive well-being plan.

Student well-being is a core concern of many universities as it has significant impacts on academic success. Funding for the UBC's comprehensive well-being plan is connected to a different budget — it will not be supported from the athletics budget.

UBC is fully committed to sport and the pursuit of excellence. Students deserve the transformative experience that only participation in team sport offers. These are not contradictions. One does not preclude the other. It does mean change — the kind of change that will take us to the next level. We invite all of our supporters to help shape the kind of change that will attract future generations of Thunderbird fans.

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