

Report on the Employment Relations Program at Woodsworth College, University of Toronto

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The report that follows reviews the Employment Relations (ER) Program at the University of Toronto as required by the Government of Ontario, to ensure regular external reviews of the quality of academic programs. The review occurred in December 2009. The report follows the suggested structure for external reviews.

In summary, the report commends the ER Program for its quality, breadth and depth, student satisfaction with academics, engagement of both full-time faculty members and part-time instructors, facilities, and especially for its contribution to the integration of human resources and labour relations into a specialized degree program. This is an impressive program.

Recommendations were made to recalibrate the program, consider allowing planned growth, improving the student experience, adding more skills-based courses of interest to both human resources and labour relations fields, and increasing the synergies between the ER Program and the graduate MIRHR degree program.

1. Review Process

a. Documents and Interviews:

I am satisfied with the quality of the documents provided to me and with the review process. I was given ample time, information, and opportunity to examine the ER Program. The written sources relied upon for my assessment consist of a "Self-Study of the Employment Relations Undergraduate Program" (SSDoc) dated November 2009, supplemented by the CVs of supporting faculty and the Employment Relations 2009/10 "Undergraduate Handbook." I then conducted an on-site review on Friday, December 11, 2009 during which I toured the facilities and met with the following staff and students:

- David N Klausner (Vice-Dean, Interdisciplinary Affairs, Faculty of Arts and Science)
- Joseph R. Desloges (Principal, Woodsworth College)
- Bill Bateman (Director of the ER Program)
- Anil Verma (Acting Director of CIRHR and Member of the Self-Study Document Group)

- Members of the Employment Relations Students' Association (listed below)
- Students (at the first meeting, Scott, Jennie, Rose, and Michael to discuss the ER Program; Theresa as Self-Study Group member and observer; and at the second meeting Karen Kim and Julie Gault as current MIRHR students to discuss the transition from the ER Program to the MIRHR). Note that over 150 students had an e-mail invitation from Mr. Bateman informing them of an open meeting with me; I am pleased at the openness of the review process to any student in the ER Program.
- Theresa Aversa and Sara Filippone (Student Members of the Self-Study Document Group)
- Lori Riznek (Full-Time ER Senior Lecturer and Chair of the Self-Study Group)
- Ted Mock (ER instructor)
- Bret Leech, VP-HR Rogers Communication (ER Instructor)
- Michael Fitzgibbon, Partner at Borden Ladner Gervais LLP (ER Instructor)
- Rafael Gomez (Tenure-stream associate professor with CIRHR and ER)

Though the meetings were brief, and I felt unable to explore complexities with any individuals, there were clear patterns that emerged, and the supporting documents and interviews allowed me to obtain a fairly accurate portrait of the ER Program. Corrections for purposes of accuracy were made to a January 2010 draft as a result of feedback from David Klausner.

b. Latest External Review

In 1999 a coupled review was undertaken of the undergraduate ER Program and the graduate Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources (CIRHR) Program. I was not given a copy of this review; instead, I was assured that the main recommendation (quoted on p. 8 of the SSDoc) was that the ER Program "should be expanded both in terms of course offerings and number of students." As a result, the ER Program added four new courses in the HR field, and a fifth course on Leadership is anticipated to launch in 2010.

In early January 2010, I asked for additional information about the size of the program when it was previously reviewed. The external report in about 1999 found that: "at present, there are 24 students enrolled in the specialist program and 57 in the major program.we are encouraged that enrollment in the foundation course WDW 244 (Labour Relations) increased from 100 in 1997 to 145 in 1998-99." The foundation course included non-ER majors.

Clearly, the program expanded from 80 to 90 students in 1999 to its current size of 136 majors and specialists. My baseline from the SSDoc begins in 2004-05 (an unusual double-cohort year) with 133 majors and specialists. The program then dropped to 105 students and has grown by a few students per year to its current size.

2. Structure, Content and Quality of the Program

To fully appreciate the significance of the ER Program and the University of Toronto, it is necessary for this external reviewer to provide a brief discussion of the intellectual and practical context within which this program is situated in North America, and why the Program has a competitive advantage. This would not normally be featured in an external review, but there are unusual circumstances that form the backdrop to this ER Program.

a. Why Does the ER Program have a Significant Competitive Advantage in the Academic Marketplace?

The foundational field for the study of employment relations in North America actually was industrial relations (IR), which highlighted the tension between equity considerations in the treatment of workers and the efficiency imperatives of employers. The field had a rather pluralistic notion of the workplace, in which there were multiple aims that often were either irreconcilable, or required substantial mechanisms and processes to put the workplace and society into greater harmony. The field developed with emphasis on unions, collective bargaining, and a substantial reliance on the well-developed field of labour economics to set the stage for the study of employment.

By contrast, human resources (HR) was a more recent academic field, and it tended to emerge from personnel management. Human resource training is more inclined to adopt a unitarist perspective, in which employees are recruited, selected, trained, compensated, motivated, and managed in order to fulfill the employer's productivity objectives. If conflict occurs, the field would tend to contemplate it as a technical failure of HR systems and strategies rather than the reflection of a system built on cross-competing pressures and alliances. The field developed with emphasis on industrial and organizational psychology, and managerial subjects such as organizational behaviour. There has been a widespread effort to professionalize the field by offering certification, and the designation of Canadian Human Resources Professional (CHRP) developed.

Though it may seem bizarre to outsiders, the IR and HR fields have not been comfortable bedfellows. Throughout the latter half of the 20th Century, each developed or advanced its own academic associations, journals, professional networks, and scholarly domains. Within major firms, IR and HR functions can be completely separated, even existing on different floors.

However, developments in the United States have threatened IR and allowed for the ascendancy of HR. Union density in the US has dropped from almost 40 percent to less than 12 percent. Managerial practice has emphasized individual motivation and reward systems that favour individual performance rather than collective rights such as seniority. The diminishing fortunes of IR can be measured in the closure of once-august free-standing academic programs, and in particular, the shocking departure of the University of Wisconsin's IR institute. The growth of HR was tied also to the rise of business schools, and HR has found a friendly academic base within which to flourish.

Within this difficult and unstable terrain, University of Toronto has distinguished itself in attempting to reconcile the tensions between IR and HR, allowing both to flourish within the ER Program and within the CIRHR. This is neither accidental, nor trivial. The late Dr. Noah Meltz, formerly Principal of Woodsworth College and former director of CIR (before the inclusion of HR), and a key intellectual driver of the ER Program, articulated his vision in a 1996 paper he wrote for an Atlanta conference on Innovative Teaching in Human Resources and Industrial Relations entitled “An Introductory Course in Employment Relations: Integrating HR and IR.” He argued that both HR and IR are the “central components of employment relations” and that there was a larger policy issue at stake in embracing both HR and IR within a single academic regime.

To add to this thinking, I should point out that the Canadian industrial relations setting is substantially more vigorous than that of the United States: our union density hovers around 30 percent, and unions themselves are more financially secure in Canada because they collect far greater amounts of union dues than do US unions (because of the widespread passage of right to work laws). Though there is no particular reason for Canada to lose IR competence, nevertheless, developments in the US are spilling over into Canada, with perverse effects. Because many IR scholars are scattered throughout Canada in business schools, upon their retirement, they are being replaced by HR scholars or their positions are simply vanishing. The strength of IR as a free-standing discipline is now in Quebec, but throughout English Canada there is reason for alarm.

Against this backdrop, University of Toronto has free-standing, vigorous, and well-resourced undergraduate and graduate degree programs that allow IR to coexist with HR, and that allow both fields to mingle in pursuit of more comprehensive training for students.

This is a significant competitive advantage for the University of Toronto, and the ER Program ought to develop mechanisms to market and celebrate its stature as one of the few havens in English North America that provide comprehensive training in all matters affecting employment, whether labour economics, HR, IR, political science, sociology, or simply the provision of best practice training in the management of personnel.

b. Strength and Viability of the Program

The ER Program is overshadowed by the much larger Woodsworth Criminology program, which has 519 majors and specialists. Though small relative to Criminology, the ER Program is 9th in size out of the over 29 college-based interdisciplinary programs at the University of Toronto. The steady state of the ER Program seems to have settled at under 140 students. This is without any aggressive marketing or expansion efforts. The current size of the program is small relative to its potential, particularly if efforts were made to recruit students who are interested in business but do not qualify for, or wish to be trained in a BComm program.

I was told that there are lengthy waiting lists for almost every offering in the ER Program, and that only the existence of caps or budget constraints prevents courses from growing. For example, there is a cap set at 50 for the Organizational Behaviour class, and only one section is offered during the regular term

(September to April) serving all ER majors and specialists. Residual demand is handled through summer session teaching. Given the demand there could be another section or two per year staffed by doctoral candidates at the CIRHR and at Rotman. A leadership course is capped at 15 students due to its enriched pedagogy, and it has a waiting list. The ER Program is in no danger of waning; indeed, there are expansion pressures.

The ER program is enriched by opportunities created at the adjacent Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources. For example, students, faculty and part-time instructors can attend public lectures and speaker series.

Students assured me that the instructors at the ER Program are “phenomenal” and the mix of practitioners and scholars strengthens the program. They feel their professors “really do care” and that “student satisfaction matters; it is taken very seriously.” I was equally impressed with the quality of instruction. I note that the most heavily subscribed courses taken by students (from Table VIII of the SSDoc) are those offered by Woodsworth, having the WDW designation. For example, over fifty percent of 2009 ER Program graduates took Human Resource Planning, Training & Development, Recruitment & Selection, Compensation, and Employment Health. By contrast, options accessed via the History and Sociology Departments -- such as Canadian Labour & the Left, and Sociology of Work, have 4 percent, and 8 percent, respectively. The scholars involved in delivering courses at the ER Program have strong research orientation and achievements. Students are receiving great value from both academics and practitioners.

Sometimes, it is the dog that didn’t bark that gives clues to a program. Students did not complain about the usual issues that we hear across the country, such as crowded classrooms, scheduling difficulties, dispassionate instruction, failure to link class materials to current issues or practical problems, and the litany of often well-justified pleas for improvement.

This program seems to be a little-known gem. It is a well-run undergraduate specialization that allows for intimacy, breadth of offerings, and gives students a sense that they are being well trained both for a future working in the ER field, or for graduate studies.

The program definitely meets its objectives for specialists and majors, but there are opportunities for improvement, laid out in Section 6 of this report.

3. Program Administration and Governance

The ER Program is well administered and no governance issues emerged in this assessment.

There is a growing appetite among faculty members for a thorough academic review of the ER Program to evaluate the course offerings and possibility of program expansion to meet the growing demand.

There are significant vulnerabilities. Of the eight instructors who provide value to the ER Program, only one faculty member is fully-appointed to the Program. This faculty member, Dr. Riznek, provides a range of courses that would be difficult for another instructor to duplicate upon her retirement. The part-time instructors are most often fully-employed elsewhere, and teach because they greatly enjoy

the experience. Without the extraordinary attention to the quality of instruction that characterizes the current program, it would be easy for the quality of the program to quietly decline.

The ER Program works well in tandem with the CIRHR, which together enjoy a strong working relationship.

4. Marketing the Program and its Graduates

The ER Program could do more to publicize itself and the caliber of its graduates. There could be stronger alumni relations, tracking of graduates, and celebration of the success of the ER Program on its internet site, and throughout the professional HR associations. It would be good to know the success rate of ER Program graduates in the CHRP exams.

The base of satisfied students who have had an enriched educational experience provides the raw material for marketing efforts. Building an alumni base using CHRP events would be helpful to graduate networking. Keeping in touch with graduates is an important element that could be built into future planning. The program should maintain e-mail contact with its graduates, keep them informed of program successes, and invite them to participate in appropriate events.

Of course, the extent of future marketing to the larger community would depend upon the ability of the program to expand to meet the demand that marketing would create. There is little point in aggressive marketing if there is no inclination to grow.

5. Facilities and Support Staff

The physical facilities are wonderful, and the proximity to the Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources Library is a strength of the ER Program. This Jean and Dorothy Newman Industrial Relations Library is one of the finest niche libraries in the country, and the staff are subject-matter experts. The financial agreement is in place that links the ER Program with the CIRHR's library.

Within Woodsworth College, the spaces seem ample and there were no complaints about facilities. A pleasant commons is a good meeting space for students who want to sit together and discuss their course work.

6. Future directions

a. Oversight of the Program

Currently, the full-time professional program administrator of the ER Program is retiring. Mr. Bateman is to be commended for the breadth of courses and his excellent selection of dedicated full- and part-time instructors. The quality of teaching in the program resulted from deliberate choices of top people who are passionately committed to teaching at the University of Toronto. As well, he has overseen the recruitment and selection of strong teaching assistants and support personnel who assist instructors.

There is some sentiment among faculty in the ER Program and at the CIRHR that Mr. Bateman's replacement should be drawn from the ranks of academics. If an academic successor is appointed, it is vital that this person have strong program administration skills and attention to detail – not all academics are so inclined.

Certainly, at this juncture, there is opportunity and appetite for an internal program review that recalibrates the program. More will be said below.

b. Expanding and Recalibrating the Curriculum

The program lacks an introductory course that sets the stage for Employment Relations. The Self Study document describes a "gateway course" and this is a good idea. It would bridge together human resource management and labour relations, which is fundamental to the philosophy of the ER program. Students spoke of the need to meet each other, and get to know each other earlier in the program than is the case today. They would welcome a course that introduced ER students to each other, perhaps offered some opportunities to work in groups (without necessarily on papers or graded components). There is an important "community-building" function of such a course, given early in the program.

The current wish to model the program after the CHRP designation is a splendid idea, but the program needs some recalibration so that it does not inadvertently reflect the weaknesses within CHRP. For example, the ER students seem deficient in spreadsheet analysis, management of data sets, and basic business literacy. One instructor described this as a deficit in "financial acumen skills" and hoped that students could learn more deep analytical approaches to the ER function. Any student lacking data analysis skills will be hard-pressed to oversee pensions, employee stock and flow issues, benefits planning, and how to cost out collective bargaining options. One of the instructors commented that the students lack an appreciation of business strategy, but were exceptional in narrower CHRP topics.

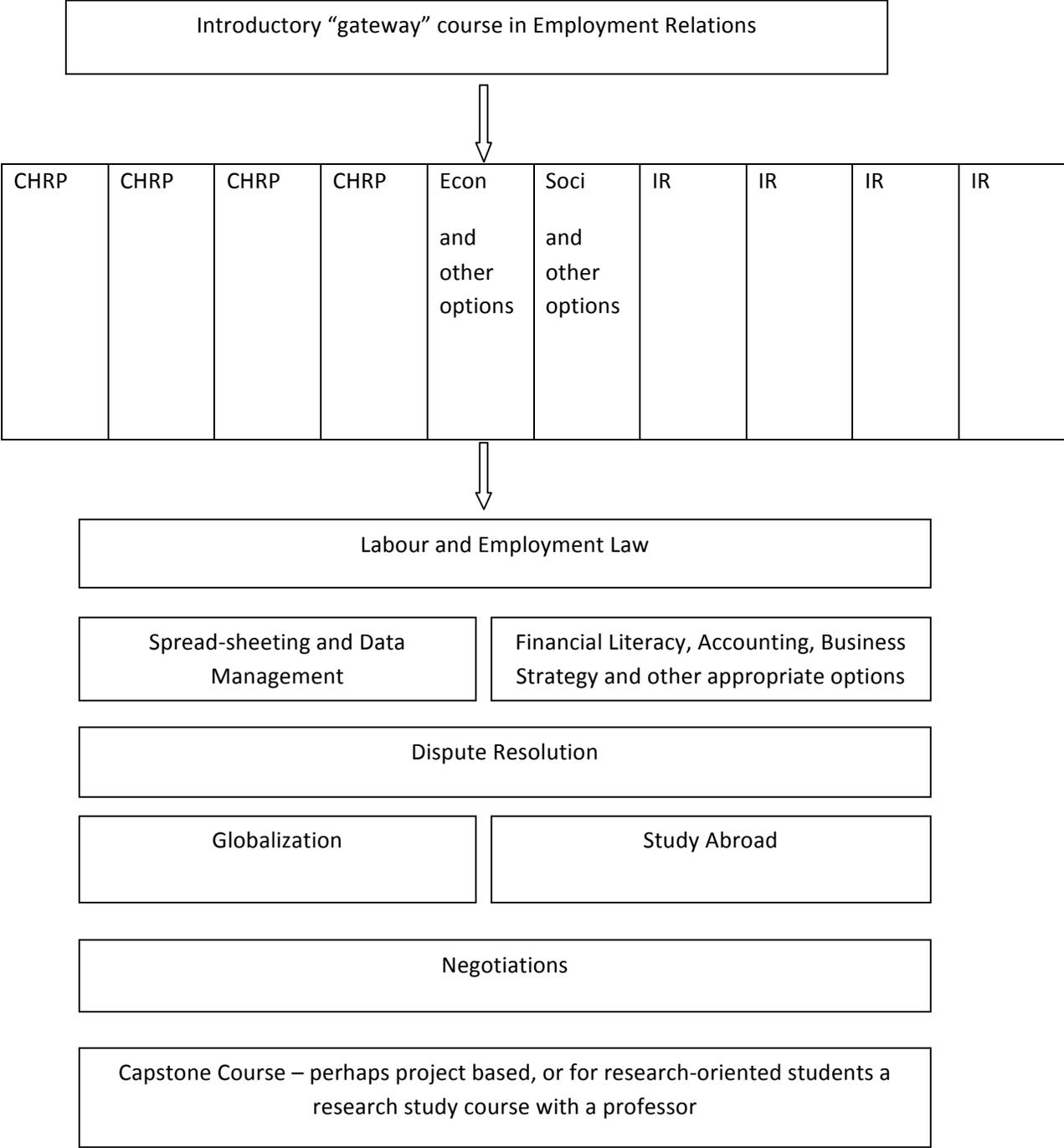
The program is to be commended for including a full course on labour and employment law, the knowledge of which is difficult to acquire outside university.

If the program broadened its offerings to include more of the labour relations concerns, it should certainly include negotiations, but not simply collective bargaining. Negotiations is a broader subject.

For both HR and IR students, a course in dispute resolution would seem to be a natural addition to the program. This could include arbitration, mediation, ombuds, and other ways of reaching agreements.

There are a number of low-enrollment options (optional courses that are not capped, but nevertheless have fewer than 15 students and no wait list) that could be replaced with a single strong course featuring global challenges, management the workforce abroad, and internationalization. Rather than being an HR course or an IR course, a newly-designed "outward" looking course could continue amalgamating the IR and HR interests into a single ER stream. As an alternative to a regular globalization course, the ER Program could sponsor a Study Abroad course for some students.

In short, the recommendations I gathered from all participants supported the following model, in which there are horizontal “breadth” or skills courses, and vertical depth or topics courses:



A capstone course whose content is controlled by the ER Program is worth considering. Perhaps there could be a projects office that recruits and makes available interesting community-based dilemmas that students could work on in teams. There may be interest in projects for incorporation into pre-existing courses. As one instructor noted, “our students are desperate for this type of activity,” as also evinced by the creation of an undergraduate consulting club. A capstone course using teams of students working on projects could replace the current dependence on Rotman to provide the senior-year RSM 460 half course. It is important that any program’s capstone course be taught by a dependable stalwart of the program who could provide excitement to the students while consolidating their ER experiences. However, the addition of these types of courses may require the streamlining or deletion of others, unless the program is allowed to grow sufficiently large that it could accommodate the additional courses. Some of the current CHRP-content courses could be melded together; not ideal, but if resources are constrained, this may be one approach to recalibration.

Some people recommended two streams within the program, IR and HR. I am reluctant to make a recommendation on this matter because one of the strengths of the existing program is its attempt to harmonize these streams. I would rather see the addition of courses – a gateway course, negotiations, dispute resolution, and spread-sheeting and data analysis. Each of these courses would benefit both IR and HR students without creating traditional and counterproductive field divisions.

A small program can, and should, take advantages of the opportunity for dynamic programming. For example, the SSDoc discusses how “leverage could be obtained by overarching and complimentary assignments, building shared knowledge repositories, and communities of collaboration and interaction.” There are significant opportunities that could be identified by the people directly involved in the ER Program, and so my primary recommendation is that a full academic review be undertaken in the next year. Some of my thoughts above are meant to generate discussion rather than impose ideas, but there is clear support from the SSDoc for many of these initiatives.

c. The Student Experience

Currently, the Employment Relations Students’ Association (ERSA) is one of the ways students can meet each other and bring vitality to their experience. However, there are opportunities to build more excitement for the program among students.

Students need to meet each other sooner, and a gateway course could help, possibly with the election of a student or two from the gateway course into ERSA leadership roles. As one student put it, “We need to know who the other ER students are earlier in the program; by year three and year four, when you work in groups, only then do you learn about the other ER students.”

There could be more of an attempt to use the adjacent residence facility for ER Program students, asking students with an interest in ER (or Criminology for that matter), to prioritize the residence in applications.

There is a dedicated HR annual competition in Montreal, known as Excalibur (<http://www.orhri.org/excalibur/en/description.aspx>). Judging from the eligibility criteria, ER program

students would be apply to participate fully. However, participation in such a competition is both expensive and time-consuming. There would have to be a faculty coach, and the team would have to be selected early, and prep at least weekly for months leading up to the competition. I strongly recommend that if the ER Program wishes to explore this option, a faculty representative be sent to observe the March 2010 competition with two student members of the ERSA in their third year of the program. If the ER Program enrolls in this competition, then it would be good to ask for volunteer “judges” to help prepare the team as they make presentations. Students should be able to receive course credit for their participation in Excalibur, as this requires dedication and a high level of preparation and performance. The faculty member who agrees to coach Excalibur should receive some acknowledgement; for example, every two years of coaching equals one course release.

d. Scholarships and Bursaries

The program is sufficiently strong that it could attract more in the way of scholarships and awards. Currently, there is The Baron de Douglas Crone and Ada Crone Scholarship, a Jack and Lena Meltz Award, and a bursary from the Toronto chapter of the Human Resources Professionals Association. It would be a realistic goal to add two or three awards based on approaching successful alumni of the program, or corporations who have benefitted from the graduates of the program.

e. Cultivation of Synergies between the CIRHR and the Employment Relations Program

The Acting Director of the CIRHR indicates that there is room in the MIRHR program to accept more graduates of the ER Program. At present, the MIRHR program takes in about 5 students from the ER Program per year. This could easily be increased to 8 to 10 students, and I would strongly encourage this target. It should be noted that Woodsworth and CIRHR jointly sponsor graduate study opportunity workshops for 3rd and 4th-year ER students, and this should be continued as it could be one of the vehicles used to attract prospective CIRHR applicants from the ER program.

One issue flagged by students is that University of Toronto is known to have rigorous grading standards, and there was concern that it is more difficult for University of Toronto students to achieve A grades than students at other universities. This comment is not meant to criticize the rigor of the University of Toronto programs, but rather, to suggest some systematic leniency or grade correction to bring ER graduates up to a level playing field relative to outside applicants. It is my sentiment (confirmed by my exposure to the excellent students) that a solid B+ student in the ER program can easily make the transition to a Masters degree program, and the CIRHR could confirm this view. It may be that despite the best efforts of all, students have a misperception that an unrealistically high GPA is necessary for graduate school.

However, this recommendation to increase the numbers of ER students entering the MIR degree program comes with a caveat. Students noted that the integration between the undergraduate and graduate programs was “too tight” and that there was too much similarity between the programs. Adding courses (as I recommended above) that recalibrates the program to include some of the courses taught at the graduate level by CIRHR faculty members would create duplication; it would make this situation more acute. Hence, there would be a need for the newly-appointed program director to work

carefully with the CIRHR on course exemptions or a program of advanced standing for ER graduates in the MIRHR program. Currently, there are options for accelerating the MIR program, which should continue. But if there are additional courses added to the undergraduate ER roster (per some of my suggestions on page 8), this will exacerbate the duplication issues already voiced by students. With changes to the ER program, there is a need for the CIRHR to remain sensitive to having to make some program adjustments in the MIR degree for ER graduates. Perhaps students with the ER degree could work on specific community projects (rather than repeating courses). This is an issue deserving of continued vigilance and cooperative academic planning.

Stronger linkages between the CIRHR and the ER Program should also provide opportunities for doctoral students to teach in the ER Program.

f. Summary of Recommendations

1. Creation of a curriculum review committee to design a program for the future. Without jeopardizing the current strength of the program, the committee should recalibrate it to include an intake or gateway course, a number of new courses, and consider the resource implications of these changes.
2. Consider ways of growing the program; the demand is there. If new courses were added, the program could easily achieve higher numbers of majors and specialists.
3. In order to grow, the ER Program must address its vulnerabilities, including the lack of full-time faculty members with a primary allegiance to the ER Program.
3. The ER Program is very successful and worthy of a more aggressive marketing effort, stronger alumni relations, and development of additional scholarships for students.
4. The student experience could be enriched by opportunities for earlier interactions among ER students, earlier attachment to the ERSA, opportunities to compete with other University students, project assignments that require group work in a community setting, Study Abroad, and a capstone course.
5. The ER Program should aim to place between eight and ten students per year into the neighboring MIRHR program. There is capacity of the MIRHR to absorb these students. The MIRHR and ER Program should work together to consider the implications of course duplication.
6. Linkages between the CIRHR and the ER Program should be encouraged. An expanded ER Program provides new opportunities for MIRHR students to be teaching assistants, for doctoral students to deliver courses, and for shared curriculum planning.

In summary, the ER Program struck me as an enclave of enriched learning. It is well-managed, and its students are content with the quality of their education. Ten years later, I can only echo both major recommendations of the 1999 report: the ER Program “should be expanded both in terms of course offerings and number of students.”