Leadership Session Summary & Priority Conditions

Prepared by Stephanie Rebello, MDes and Quinn Davidson, MDes

Introduction

This spring, OCAD University commissioned a two-part Discovery process to examine how its academic structures serve the institution, with a particular focus on the student, faculty, and staff experiences with collaboration, communication, and effective decision-making within the current academic structure. That process produced a set of conditions and tested statements the community could hold up against any proposed structure and ask whether it was met.

On August 18 and 19, 2026, OCAD University's academic and administrative leaders met in separate sessions to bridge the Discovery and Design phases of the academic structures review. The Discovery Report was broad and comprehensive by design. Leaders were tasked with taking findings generated by faculty, staff, and students, stress-testing them against their own direct experience, and prioritizing what is most critical to carry into the design and prototyping phase.

Each group worked with three organizing questions:

- ➔ What does a new academic structure need to make possible?
- ➔ What does it need to be designed around?
- ➔ What would have to be true about the change management process for faculty, staff and students to engage with the new structure from a place of hope, creativity, and abundance?

This document is the record of that work. It carries forward the conditions leadership prioritized, the discussion that shaped how each condition was refined, and the language leadership settled on for each one.

A note on how to read this document.

- ➔ **Cheat Sheet:** The section that follows presents the conditions leadership prioritized, lightly explained, organized to support prototyping work. Each condition can be tested directly against a proposed structure.
- ➔ **Playback**: The section after that is a playback of both leadership sessions. It goes into further detail on each condition: the original language, the discussion that shaped it, and the refinement leadership settled on.
- ➔ **Managing Change**: The final section of this document outlines how the participants feel change should be introduced and experienced.

Priority Conditions Cheat Sheet

The following can be used as an input into Thursday's design session. It provides a prioritized list of conditions built by senior leaders in response to the Discovery Report findings. Use each condition to generate the specific management systems, processes, or governing practices a prototype puts up for redesign.

A small number of conditions did not originate in the Discovery Report. These are marked as **NEW.** Leadership raised them directly as structural gaps that the original consultation did not surface, and they are held to the same standard as every other condition: testable against a prototype and describing something a structure can be built to do.

How they might be used

- Use each condition to generate the specific management systems, processes, or governing practices that a prototype puts up for redesign.
- Watch for conditions that move together. Solving one may resolve or reshape several others.
- Use the conditions to name trade-offs out loud.

Enable Conditions What the structure must make possible, regardless of configuration
Studio-based education as core differentiator ➔ The structure must protect studio-based education as a differentiator, while decoupling it conceptually from "small classes" for analytic and design purposes. ➔ The structure must enable the use of appropriate pedagogies; the right method for the right context ➔ The structure needs to support students in knowing how to learn, how to be adaptive, and how to grow as artists across a career, alongside developing genuine technical mastery in a discipline.
Teaching and learning as the structure's purpose ➔ The academic structure should help to **optimize** the teaching/learning experience while responding to our operating cost constraints. ➔ The structure should enable space and resource allocations based on institutional and student needs, not legacy claims by units. ➔ The structure should explicitly support the institution's financial sustainability, including clearer financial transparency and accountability.
Supporting student experience and graduating on time ➔ The structure must actively support students in navigating their learning pathways, selecting their courses, and understanding how to register and plan.
Role clarity and accountability as a precondition ➔ The structure must support reduced competition for resources. ➔ The structure enables both universality (consistent, simplified processes and shared ways of working) and particularity (space for nuance and customization).
NEW: Collaboration, Exploration, and Experimentation ➔ The structure should enable collaboration across programs as a regular, expected part of faculty and chair

work (not ad hoc).

- ➔ The structure should maintain necessary boundaries but make them porous enough to facilitate collaboration and communication across units.
- ➔ The structure should facilitate exploration across and up/down: across programs and between undergraduate, graduate, and (potentially) pre-college/PhD.
- ➔ The structure should allow fast creation of experimental courses/programs (and their timely sunsetting), so the university can respond to emerging issues.

Design Conditions
What the structure itself must be built to do. These conditions change who decides, who reports to whom, or where a unit boundary sits.

Structural Relationship Between Graduate and Undergraduate Studies

- ➔ The structure must reduce grad studies' dependence on informal relationships for studio access, supervision, and teaching opportunities.
- ➔ The structure should minimize competition between grad and undergrad units for faculty time and resources by making relationships and responsibilities explicit.
- ➔ The structural integration must lead with what integration enables (efficiency, continuity, TA and mentor matching, cross-level collaboration) rather than with cost savings, since financial framing has consistently produced resistance.

Faculty Councils, Curriculum Committees, and Chairs Holding Real Decision-Making Authority

- ➔ The structure must pair any expansion of chair authority with real program-level costing data, so decisions aren't made on untested class-size assumptions.
- ➔ Do not create or imply new formal decision rights for faculty councils or curriculum committees. Instead, design a clear, visible pathway from their recommendations into Senate and its sub-committees, one that gives committees the audience and formatting requirements upfront so their recommendation still reads as recognizably their own when it reaches students, staff, and external regulators.
- ➔ The structure must treat continuity (term length, onboarding, formal knowledge transfer) as a structural requirement to evaluate any prototype against, not an implementation detail.

NEW: Responsibility, Accountability, and Information

- ➔ The structure must make academic units structurally responsible and accountable for the entire program experience, including all course types, not only courses carrying their own course code.
- ➔ The structure must build in two-way information flow, not only downward, so people held accountable also have the access needed to act.
- ➔ The structure must hold agency and accountability as a single design requirement wherever new roles or bodies are defined.

NEW: Governance, Participation, and Leadership Development

- ➔ The structure might require broader, non-optional participation in formal shared-governance committees, particularly from tenure and tenure-track faculty, rather than relying on informal bodies or voluntary opt-in.
- ➔ The structure might use governance and committee service as a deliberate leadership development pathway.

NEW: Psychological Safety and Culture

- ➔ The structure must build in dedicated, protected capacity for connective work, answering where connection is held, by whom, and with what protected time.
- ➔ The structure must account for workload directly in the design brief, evaluating every configuration for what it adds or removes from existing workload.

NEW: Grounded in External Requirements

- ➔ The structure must be tested against regulatory, quality, and accreditation obligations before it is tested against internal preference.
- ➔ The structure should be benchmarked against how peer art and design institutions organize graduate and undergraduate relationships, not designed in isolation from sector practice.

NEW: Formal Data Pathways, Not Informal Workarounds

- ➔ The structure must create formal, accessible, reliable pathways for the information decision-makers need, so the institution is not depending on informal systems that leave with the people who built them.
- ➔ This is distinct from two-way information flow. Two-way flow is about who gets access to information that exists. This condition is about whether the information exists in a usable form in the first place.

Session Playbacks: Leadership Outputs & Discussion

The conditions in this document are inputs to developing structural prototypes, not conclusions about what the structure should be. Each one describes something a future structure must do or must make possible. None of them describes a specific configuration, a faculty count, or a governance model. A condition can be tested; you can hold it up against a proposal and ask, does this design meet it or not? Each condition was developed in response to pain points shared by students, faculty, and staff.

Both sessions have been condensed into one clear, usable, and traceable document that shows how we moved from Discovery conditions into a shorter, more strategic list to support prototyping work. Each condition is presented in three parts.

- **Original condition:** The language as it came out of the Discovery Report, where applicable, so the line from Discovery to Design stays visible.
- **Discussion context:** What leadership raised in refining the condition, including disagreement, added nuance, and watch-outs the original wording did not capture.
- **Refinement:** An updated condition in its sharpened form, written to prompt a specific design choice rather than restate a value.

Across both Leadership sessions, the Administrative Leadership and Academic Leadership teams invited to participate prioritized and refined the following conditions. Use the navigation list below to review the prioritized conditions and session discussion.

Enable conditions aren't structural choices on their own, but describe what a new academic structure needs to make possible.

➔ Studio-based education as core differentiator
➔ Teaching & Learning as the structure's purpose
➔ The structure supports student experience and graduating on time
➔ Role clarity and accountability as a precondition
➔ NEW: Collaboration, Exploration, and Experimentation

Design Conditions change who decides, who reports to whom, or where a unit boundary sits

➔ Structural Relationship Between Graduate and Undergraduate Studies
➔ Faculty Councils, Curriculum Committees, and Chairs Holding Real Decision-Making Authority
➔ NEW: Responsibility, Accountability, and Information
➔ NEW: Governance, Participation, and Leadership Development
➔ NEW: Psychological Safety and Culture as Structural Preconditions
➔ NEW: The structure is informed by regulatory requirements, quality standards, and sector norms
➔ NEW: Formal Data Pathways, Not Informal Workarounds

Enable Conditions: What the structure must make possible, regardless of configuration.

Category	Content
Condition	**Studio-based education as core differentiator** **Original:** The academic structure supports the institution in recognizing studio-based education as its most powerful differentiator, rather than attempting to compete on the terrain of comprehensive research universities.
Discussion	Both leadership groups shared that this is already part of OCAD's stated identity, but both groups shared important context ➔ The structure must protect studio-based education as a differentiator, while decoupling it conceptually from “small classes” for analytic and design purposes. ➔ The structure must enable the use of appropriate pedagogies; the right method for the right context ➔ Pushback does not always relate to nostalgia or resistance to change; it is a strategic position the institution has earned the right to hold and needs to build toward with intention.
Refinement	The Academic Leadership group called for the structure to be paired with a shared institutional definition of studio, including terms such as: ➔ practice-based, problem-based learning ➔ a range of formats (including large-format studios, online collaboration, etc.) ➔ With clear articulations of the costs and trade-offs of different formats, with connections to programs. The Academic Leadership group called **learning outcomes to anchor the structure** ➔ The structure needs to support students in knowing how to learn, how to be adaptive, and how to grow as artists across a career, alongside developing genuine technical mastery in a discipline. These are not in tension. They are complementary, and the structure should be designed to hold both.
Condition	**Teaching & Learning as the structure’s purpose** **Original:** Participants described the need for teaching and learning to be named as the ultimate goal of any redesign, with the structure built around that purpose rather than around cost reduction — expressing that when decisions read as budgetary, staff on the front line

	are left
Discussion	Both groups pushed back on framing that positions teaching and learning against operational or financial considerations. The structure needs to be explicitly oriented around what it makes possible for students, legible throughout the design, not stated only as a principle.
Refinement	➔ The academic structure should help to **optimize** the teaching/learning experience while responding to our operating cost constraints. ➔ The structure should enable space and resource allocations **based on institutional and student needs**, not legacy claims by units. ➔ The structure should explicitly support the institution's financial sustainability, including clearer financial transparency and accountability.
Condition	**The structure supports student experience and graduating on time** **Original:** Participants named the need for clear visualizations of course connections and program pathways, sharing that current systems are insufficient and place stress on staff teams and students.
Discussion	➔ Both groups correctly identified that this condition did not directly relate to academic structure, but focused on the most important stakeholder experience: students ➔ Students pointed to a similar solution or problem frame in their Solutions Cafe work ➔ The condition was listed as one being addressed through program renewal projects, but is directly shaped by the configuration of faculties and their ability to collaborate and distribute resources
Refinement	➔ The structure must actively support students in navigating their learning pathways, selecting their courses, and understanding how to register and plan. This includes implementing Flow in a way that works, supporting major and minor selection with real guidance, and designing the course availability system so students who need it most don't experience access as scarcity.
Condition	**Role clarity and accountability as a precondition**
Discussion	➔ Many conditions that read as communication or governance problems are symptoms of unclear role definition. Until roles carry clear authority, the same dysfunctions repeat regardless of configuration. The Administrative group shared that this had real student impact; when students are stuck between unresolved decisions by administrators and faculty leadership, it often signals unclear or misaligned roles across units.

	➔ **Across both groups, this was defined as** ◆ **The structure must establish clear and consistent role definitions** (chairs, deans, central offices, committees). It must clarify decision rights and accountabilities (who decides what, and who answers for it). ◆ **The structure is accompanied by cultural expectations of:** ● Respect for that role clarity. ● Respect for subject-matter and procedural expertise. ● Reduced reliance on personal social capital to "get things done."
Refinement	➔ **The structure must support reduced competition for resources.** Units currently behave like independent businesses competing for students and resources. The structure should create systemic enablers for collaboration and shared stewardship, not only remove incentives to compete. ➔ **The structure enables both universality and particularity.** ◆ Universality means consistent processes, shared ways of working, and no shadow systems. Four faculties operating with four different informal systems create stress, duplication, and invisible work that the institution cannot afford and its people cannot sustain. ◆ Particularity means that within those shared frameworks, there is space for nuance, for programs that cost more because they are core to the institution's identity and ethos, and for decisions that are not weighted equally across all programs.
Condition	**NEW: Collaboration, Exploration, and Experimentation**
Discussion	Several interconnected conditions emerged from the Academic Leadership group when considering the Discovery Report conditions on program governance and curriculum responsiveness.
Refinement	➔ The structure should enable collaboration across programs as a regular, expected part of faculty and chair work (not ad hoc). ➔ The structure should maintain necessary boundaries but make them porous enough to facilitate collaboration and communication across units. ➔ The structure should facilitate exploration across and up/down: across programs and between undergraduate, graduate, and (potentially) pre-college/PhD. ➔ The structure should allow fast creation of experimental courses/programs (and their timely sunsetting), so the university can respond to emerging issues.

Design Conditions: What the structure itself must be built to do. These conditions change who decides, who reports to whom, or where a unit boundary sits.

Category	Content
Condition	**Structural Relationship Between Graduate and Undergraduate Studies** **Original:** Participants named the need for structural, complementary, and collaborative relationships between graduate studies and undergraduate programs, with mutually reinforcing support systems.
Discussion	➔ The Administrative Leadership session highlighted the challenge that grad programs don't map cleanly onto undergrad faculties, fueling competition over faculty time, studios, and resources. They framed this condition as another symptom of a scarcity mindset. They also noted that this produces annual negotiations for teaching assignments, supervision gaps, and TA mismatches. ➔ The Academic Leadership session framed **integration as continuity, not consolidation.** Wanted less isolation of grad as "off to the side" and more shared research, supports, and pathways connecting undergrad through grad and PhD. Connected this directly to strategy: where grad "sits," how its leadership connects to faculty leadership, and how support roles are organized are structural questions, not operational ones.
Refinement	Both groups shared that there was not one specific configuration in mind, calling for different prototypes, each preserving grad specificity where genuinely needed while still embedding grad structurally into the broader academic ecosystem. ➔ The structure must reduce structural dependence on informal relationships for studio access, supervision, and teaching opportunities. ➔ The structure should minimize competition between grad and undergrad units for faculty time and resources by making relationships and responsibilities explicit. ➔ The structural integration must lead with what integration enables (efficiency, continuity, TA and mentor matching, cross-level collaboration) rather than with cost savings, since financial framing has consistently produced resistance.
Condition	**Faculty Councils, Curriculum Committees, and Chairs Holding Real Decision-Making Authority** **Original:** Participants called for Faculty Councils and Curriculum Committees to function as genuine decision-making bodies rather than consultative ones. Participants also named the need to empower program chairs and program committees to determine which courses are taught and which are not.

Discussion	➔ Both sessions treated "empowerment" as the wrong word before it was the right condition. The existing governing structure states that faculty councils aren't formal governing bodies; curriculum committees recommend; they don't decide. ◆ Committees do not recognize their own work by the time it comes back to them. A curriculum recommendation gets rewritten for Senate, then rewritten again for students, staff, and external regulators, each with different formatting and language needs, and the committee that authored it was never given that translation logic. The recommendation returns looking unfamiliar, and that gap reads as their input being lost or changed, when it is actually an uncommunicated formatting and audience requirement. ◆ A "shadow Senate" was named as a real, current confusion this ambiguity has already produced. ➔ Chair authority already exists but has been narrowing under Flow and formal curriculum structures. They became Chairs' room to improvise has shrunk. They are bound by program guides, minimum offerings, and elective structures. ◆ Empowerment without financial visibility is symbolic. The clearest example named: a 45-person class with one professor can be cheaper than a large class needing four or five staff, but the "bigger is cheaper" assumption persists and works against studio-based programs. ➔ Chair turnover is named as one of the most consequential structural burdens, with ripple effects across teaching, grad studies, space, culture, and students. Named as both a governance issue and a respect issue.
Refinement	➔ The structure must pair any expansion of chair authority with real program-level costing data, so decisions aren't made on untested class-size assumptions. ➔ Do not create or imply new formal decision rights for faculty councils or curriculum committees. Instead, design a clear, visible pathway from their recommendations into Senate and its sub-committees, one that gives committees the audience and formatting requirements upfront so their recommendation still reads as recognizably their own when it reaches students, staff, and external regulators. ➔ The structure must treat continuity (term length, onboarding, formal knowledge transfer) as a structural requirement to evaluate any prototype against, not an implementation detail.
Condition	**NEW: Responsibility, Accountability, and Information**
Discussion	Both sessions treated responsibility, accountability, resources, and agency as one coupled problem. When diffused, the people absorbing the consequences are often removed from where the decision was made; most concretely, student advisors carrying the weight of decisions made elsewhere. Agency without accountability produces participation that

	doesn't move anything forward; accountability without agency produces compliance without ownership.
Refinement	Leadership groups defined these conditions as ➔ The structure must make academic units structurally responsible and accountable for the entire program experience, including all course types, not only courses carrying their own course code. ➔ The structure must build in two-way information flow, not only downward, so people held accountable also have the access needed to act. ➔ The structure must hold agency and accountability as a single design requirement wherever new roles or bodies are defined.
Condition	**NEW: Governance, Participation, and Leadership Development**
Discussion	Context: Who sits at the governance table is directly connected to how leadership capacity is built over time.
Refinement	Leadership groups defined these conditions as ➔ The structure might require broader, non-optional participation in formal shared-governance committees, particularly from tenure and tenure-track faculty, rather than relying on informal bodies or voluntary opt-in. ➔ The structure might use governance and committee service as a deliberate leadership development pathway.
Condition	**NEW: Psychological Safety and Culture**
Discussion	Context: Without psychological safety, participation becomes performative, people withhold what they actually know, and the resulting structure isn't owned by the people living inside it. Prototypes must be designed and sequenced with explicit awareness that the community is already fatigued by accumulated change, reading disengagement as a capacity signal, not apathy.
Refinement	Leadership groups defined these conditions as ➔ The structure must build in dedicated, protected capacity for connective work, answering where connection is held, by whom, and with what protected time. ➔ The structure must account for workload directly in the design brief, evaluating every configuration for what it adds or removes from existing workload.

Condition	**NEW: The structure is informed by regulatory requirements, quality standards, and sector norms**
Discussion	Context: Structural decisions cannot be made in isolation from what the institution is required to be externally. Raised specifically in relation to graduate studies, where certain governance bodies require a dean of graduate studies to be present, and where OCAD's credibility as a graduate school depends on meeting standards other institutions in the sector recognize. Looking outward at how peer art and design institutions organize themselves was named as a missing input to the design process.
Refinement	Leadership groups defined these conditions as ➔ The structure must be tested against regulatory, quality, and accreditation obligations before it is tested against internal preference. ➔ The structure should be benchmarked against how peer art and design institutions organize graduate and undergraduate relationships, not designed in isolation from sector practice.
Condition	**NEW: Formal Data Pathways, Not Informal Workarounds**
Discussion	When people cannot access the data they need through formal channels, they build workarounds. Over time, those workarounds become the actual operating system, invisible to anyone outside the people who built them and fragile in exactly the way formal systems are supposed not to be. The registrar was named as one example, but the condition sits more broadly in institutional analysis and data governance.
Refinement	➔ The structure must create formal, accessible, reliable pathways for the information decision-makers need, so the institution is not depending on informal systems that leave with the people who built them. ➔ This is distinct from two-way information flow. Two-way flow is about who gets access to information that exists. This condition is about whether the information exists in a usable form in the first place.

Implications for Change Management

Managing change was set aside as its own category in the Discovery Report, distinct from the design and enable conditions, because it is not about what a structure should be. It is about how change is introduced and experienced. The Discovery Report named this the invisible project, the work of arriving at a structure well, running alongside the work of designing the structure itself. Leadership echoed this without being prompted.

This section reframes what leadership raised as conditions the change management process itself must meet. It also carries one further implication: this process cannot be designed in isolation from how prototype feedback is gathered. The two are the same body of work. How people are invited to respond to a prototype is itself part of how the change is experienced, not a separate communications step that follows it.

The change management process must include:

- ➔ **A structured place for grief, held with leadership, not only with direct managers.** This needs to run throughout the process, including the ability to share loss directly with the senior leaders making these decisions. This is compounded by history: continuous, accumulated loss since the pandemic through financial pressure and curriculum change.
- ➔ **A visible, named difference from Flow, connected to a specific and unresolved condition**. Many staff, particularly administrative staff, do not feel the institution understands their roles and job descriptions. If role mapping is not addressed alongside a new structure and clearly communicated, people will experience this as happening to them regardless of what has been shared.
- ➔ **Explicit recognition of workload and cumulative fatigue as a condition of the process**. The institution runs on people doing multiple jobs, often through shadow systems leadership does not fully see. Fatigue is already present, not a side effect to plan around.
- ➔ **Genuine, specific recognition, modelled on the standard already set for workplace culture:** respect for role clarity and expertise, and leadership development built into governance participation.
- ➔ **A committed cadence for revisiting academic structure, communicated in advance.** Leadership added this directly: review on a regular, defined cycle, stated publicly, so this process reads as one instance of an expected practice rather than a singular disruption.
- ➔ **Deliberate use of language throughout the process, distinct from what is being decided.** "Restructure" triggers fear of job loss regardless of intent, so the process must state directly and early whether position elimination is in scope, and repeat that statement rather than assume it lands once. "Model" defaults in people's minds to a financial or costing exercise; "prototype" is the more accurate term for what is actually being tested. Traditionally, when teaching and learning is invoked alongside cost reduction, it loses credibility and starts to function as cover for cuts.

This report does not attempt to build these conditions into a full change management plan. That is deliberately left for a session designed specifically for that purpose.