

Undergraduate Teaching in Canada: C- at Best?

Across Canada, students are anxiously waiting for their grades, academic standing and report cards. Graduating students are also hoping to “make the grade” translating into job offers that kick-start their career or scholarships for further studies. For their parents, grades have taken on an entirely different meaning. Admission standards are up, the demand for post secondary education is also up and the double cohort situation in Ontario has dramatically increased the entrance stakes. While students arrive in busloads at University Fairs, the registrar’s office is busy forecasting the numbers—Maclean’s tags the increase this fall in the range of 40,000 additional students. All of this is unfolding during an unprecedented era of faculty retirements and consequent rehiring of new, inexperienced faculty. It is time to ask the obvious: how are these dramatic changes affecting the quality of education?

In a summative sense, a student’s success is generally reflected in his/her academic performance. High grades signal academic achievement while other aspects of intelligence such as maturity, emotional stability, drive, creativity, etc. are typically not measured. In a telling video, when young Harvard graduates were asked to comment on current affairs or explain basic science many of them appeared stumped or responded, “We were never taught this!” Lifelong learning, or even learning how to ask good questions, may not be part of the curriculum. However, the quality of the learning experience in and outside the classroom determines the impact and outcomes of the time spent at university.

In 1990, the Association of Universities and Colleges in Canada (AUCC) decided to issue a report card on university education itself. The introduction of this report created considerable angst and controversy among faculty and administration. In the words of the author, Dr. Stuart Smith, “teaching is seriously undervalued at Canadian universities and nothing less than a total re-commitment to it is required.” The report had several positives. But many reacted to concerns prevalent in their campuses, including the “publish or perish” mentality, a very narrow definition of scholarship and a need to rebalance faculty roles and rewards.

Well, that was over a decade ago. What has happened since? Are students more satisfied with classroom practices? Are employers applauding the perspectives that graduates bring to the workforce? What kind of grade would an independent enquiry give to the state of Canadian higher education today?

Last month, we were at an extraordinary awards ceremony in Montebello, Quebec, which prompted us to contribute our opinions and voice those of many of our colleagues to some of the questions posed above. But first a little background about this event. The award is a three-day, all expense paid retreat at the magnificent Chateau, where award winners are free to choose how they will spend their time together. It is sponsored by 3M Canada and a national learned society of approximately 500 academics whose primary focus is on teaching and learning issues (The Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education—or STLHE). This coveted award is known as the 3M Teaching Fellowship and is presented to ten Canadians annually regardless of discipline or level of appointment. Today, the growing community of 3M Teaching Fellows spans two generations of teachers and a broad range of academic disciplines. It represents large and small universities located in all ten provinces, and constitutes an invaluable resource of experience, expertise, information and innovation. Although this 17-year national award remains Canada’s best-kept secret, it embodies the highest ideals of teaching excellence and scholarship as well as educational leadership that goes beyond one’s discipline.

And what did the award winners do at the retreat to celebrate a lifetime of achievement in bringing out the best in our university students? They followed tradition and did what academics do best—they talked! They talked non-stop for the precious time they had with each other.

What may surprise you about their conversations is their shared concern about Canada’s post-secondary educational system. This group felt that, despite the many strengths and superb success that educational institutions have enjoyed in times of reduced budgets and increased demands, the state of undergraduate education is in such a crisis, in magnitude and in volatility, that universities must galvanize themselves to respond. From spirited discussion to analysis, they decided to call for action. Next May some 80 of them plan to gather in Toronto and issue a press release. Here is an excerpt from what was drafted:

"The 2002 3M Teaching Fellows have issued the equivalent of a double-hurricane warning regarding the state of teaching in Canadian higher education. This national concern, largely under-reported, has been incubating for several years. Dramatically increasing student enrollments across the country, equally as dramatic waves of faculty retirements, and the exacerbated pressure of Ontario's double cohort have conspired to create the equivalent of academe's "Perfect Storm." In a country that leads the world in post-secondary educational participation, a 3M Teaching Fellows' Report Card that assesses university teaching generates a grade of C- at best. The report card assesses the quality of the learning experience, the importance given to teaching and learning within the university, and the professional development of the teachers themselves."

One of our colleagues asked whether this state of affairs is unique to Canada. Are similar concerns being raised in the United States? What about Europe and Australia? At first glance, there is very little to suggest that there is anything that really needs fixing. The educational system of developed countries has an enviable record of achievement. Discovery research and pushing the boundaries of intellectual frontiers have been the hallmarks of an unparalleled growth in educational institutions, some of which have endowments larger than the GNP of countries. Considering its reach and range of offerings, the rest of the world believes we have the gold standard in education. Crisis, you may ask? What crisis?

A closer look, however, suggests that important concerns about the quality of undergraduate education continue to be raised in most developed countries.

In 1996, the Carnegie Foundation issued a report entitled "Reinventing Undergraduate Education." It focused on the elite US research universities (175 in number) that house significant resources. These universities attract Nobel laureates and world-renowned scholars and also confer almost one third of all baccalaureates in a country with more than 3,500 institutions of higher education. The undergraduates from these universities are the primary pool from which the cultural, intellectual, economic, and political leadership of the country is furnished. The authors' state: "research universities have too often failed, and continue to fail their undergraduate populations.... Again and again, universities are guilty of an advertising practice they would condemn in the commercial world. Recruitment materials display proudly world famous professors, the splendid facilities and the groundbreaking research that goes within them, but thousands of students graduate without ever seeing the world famous professors or tasting genuine research . . . All too often they graduate without knowing how to think logically, write clearly, or speak coherently. The university has given them too little that will be of real value beyond a credential that will help them get their first jobs . . ."

The conclusions of this report not surprisingly suggest a radical reconstruction of curricula and drastic re-engineering of the learning environment. In the UK and Australia, the need for reform was recognized earlier and efforts to address these concerns on a national basis attempted long before the issues gained attention in North America.

In Canada and the US approximately half the population enters a college and university. In the UK and New Zealand it is 40 percent, while in the Netherlands, France and Denmark it is 30 percent. No one will argue that there is a clear link between a country's productivity, measured in both economic and cultural dimensions, and the level of education inherent in its workforce. The Economist, in its lead article in March 1997 "Education and the wealth of nations," took the argument a step further by suggesting that education is by far the golden key to success in the new world economy.

However, there are important issues that tend to divide educators. One of these is the university's core mission of educating students and producing research for society. Some say that the pendulum has swung too far in diverting the energy of faculty to produce research at the expense of quality teaching. The debates on teaching versus research are tiresome but also framed on several false premises. One of these is based on the argument that research excellence feeds into pedagogical insights that almost always translates into excellent teaching. A considerable amount of educational research supports no such connection or correlation. This is not to say that good research is not useful to students. But it is but is typically reserved for graduate and doctoral students—not undergraduates. That is why it is a common practice to grant research oriented faculty teaching release mainly from front line first-year courses.

We recognize that it is not helpful to dichotomize the dual mandate of university professors, which is to produce research and to teach effectively. Most faculty will agree with us that research and teaching are not a zero sum game. Pitting the two against each other is not helpful. On the contrary, solutions supporting a culture that values both to co-exist synergistically and innovative approaches to gain new perspectives are beginning to emerge.

Among those responsible for changing such perspectives are the often-overlooked Instructional Development Officers (IDO's) who typically report to the Academic VP. Their efforts are increasingly focused on the development of new faculty to not only help them design effective instruction but also to encourage them to be more innovative, reflective and scholarly in their teaching. IDO's are also engaged in the difficult task of gathering evidence to evaluate teaching. They help departments to conduct peer observations of teaching which are increasingly being used for tenure and promotion. IDO's are also successfully launching recurring conferences on teaching that are attracting greater numbers of faculty. They are leading the charge to help faculty integrate technology in instruction. An excellent example of their collaboration can be found at <http://www.facultydevelopment.ca> which is an online resource for professional development. Even corporate partnerships including the Teaching & Technology Series with McGraw- Hill Ryerson are paying off in terms of raising the profile of good teaching in Canada.

Despite its heroic efforts to sustain itself in times when the budgeting envelope has shrunk, our educational system needs to focus on the quality of teaching. In a recent Globe & Mail article, Jeffrey Simpson wrote that "there's at least one Chrétien legacy: universities" and pointed towards the \$6 billion injected for research and the \$2.5 billion Millennium scholarships. We applaud these efforts as well. However, new public policy initiatives that directly impact on the quality of education are also required. We need to remind ourselves that the university's core mission must focus on quality undergraduate education. After all, this is where the majority of university income is derived from them.

It is also important to raise this discussion at a time when the \$100 billion or so allocated to health care continues to beat out the shrinking amounts given to education. Canadians may choose to spend more on Medicare but we need not wait for more money in order to apply innovative educational solutions. Our system as is stands today presents new opportunities for change. For concerned educators, administrators and other special interest groups it is time for renewal and reform. It is time to create new standards for teaching. It is time to launch Centers of Excellence that model and share best practices in pedagogy. We invite the media to engage Canadians to continue this conversation. We owe it to ourselves that the learning experience of the undergraduate student must be improved.

(1,954 words)

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