

Re-Valuing Teaching: An Open Letter to the Presidents of Canadian Universities

In March 1990, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada established an independent commission of inquiry "to examine the ability of university education to adapt rapidly to the needs of a Canada that is and will continue to be increasingly dependent on the essential national resource of well-educated citizens." The findings and recommendations of that commission were published in 1991 as the Smith Report.

A primary concern of the report is the status of teaching in the universities. In Dr. Smith's words, "teaching is seriously undervalued at Canadian universities and nothing less than a total re-commitment to it is required." To this general concern he adds a list of specific ones including the imbalance between the perceived value of research and of teaching, the relative disregard of teaching in regard to hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions, and the undue extent to which scholarship is defined and measured exclusively on the basis of research publication, while ignoring the range of scholarly activities essential to producing effective teaching and learning.

As recipients of the 3M Teaching Fellowship, we share many of the concerns and conclusions of Dr. Smith regarding the current status of teaching in Canadian universities. From our experiences at universities across the country, teaching is indeed undervalued, at times to the extent that in several institutions new colleagues are encouraged to neglect teaching so that they can get on with the business of research publication that will earn them tenure and promotion. Because of this neglect and demeaning of the universities' central mission, we are urging you to use your influence and office as president of a Canadian university to initiate, promote, and facilitate discussions and activities that will enhance the status and improve the overall quality of teaching within your university. While we respect the important role that research has, and know from our own practice the fundamental way in which research, broadly defined, contributes to good teaching, we hope through your leadership that the education of undergraduate students will become recognized as a mission of your university no less important than research, that good teaching will become as highly recognized and valued as good research, and that those faculty members who are truly excellent in teaching are no less valued and celebrated than those who excel in research.

As President, you have the capacity to enhance the status of teaching in many ways. You can:

- stress, publicly and repeatedly, the importance of effective teaching and bring attention to those teaching and learning activities that are meritorious;
- encourage the reporting of innovative teaching activities in annual reports and newsletters;
- foster experimentation and innovation in both the curriculum and the ways in which it is presented;
- ensure that your university has done all it can to provide a physical and intellectual environment that facilitates good teaching and learning;
- encourage the establishment of several annual teaching awards throughout your faculties and celebrate those who achieve these awards;
- ensure that sabbatical leaves for teaching and curriculum-related projects are not only permitted, but encouraged.

Your university's encouragement and nurturing of good teaching can be demonstrated and furthered through the presence and support of an instructional or educational development office that disseminates information on teaching and learning, that plans and offers workshops, seminars, conferences, and courses on teaching, and that coordinates peer consultant and peer support programs.

If your university has a graduate program, it should make available to graduate students intending to enter the professoriate a course on university teaching.

The above suggestions are a few of the ways in which the quality of teaching and learning can be enhanced and more highly valued. But none of the above strategies will fully achieve their intended goals until effective teaching is recognized as a demanding, challenging, and worthy scholarly activity, and that excellence in this scholarly activity, ON ITS OWN MERIT, can justify tenure and promotion to all professorial levels.

Despite the all-too-frequent protest that good teaching is difficult to measure, we all recognize what it is and does. Good teaching inspires and motivates. At its best, it demands a thorough grasp of the breadth and depth of its subject matter, rigorous criticism, and original approaches to intellectual issues. It requires the regular assimilation and synthesis of new knowledge, the consequent reorganization of the old, and the development of innovative learning materials, teaching strategies, and techniques. It demonstrates a love of learning and a concern for one's students and discipline, and it elicits intellectual excitement and personal boldness. It nurtures in students independent thinking and a commitment to life-long learning. It motivates students to learn how to learn and to care about their personal success and the well-being of others. Effective teaching is a most demanding creative and scholarly endeavour.

In our judgment, the time has come for university presidents to examine the extent to which their universities are truly committed to excellence in teaching. It is time for universities to publicize and reinforce standards of teaching effectiveness, and to mandate the highest of teaching expectations. Your leadership is needed to direct Canadian universities back to their most practical and important task: teaching.

Signed,

Arshad Ahmad (1992)

Guy Allen (1992)

Wiktor Askanas (1989)

Colin Baird (1990)

William Barnes (1992)

Roger Beck (1986)

Beverly Cameron (1991)

Richard Day (1991)

Laszlo DeRoth (1991)

Trevor Dickinson (1990)

James Erskine (1986)

Alexander Fancy (1988)

James Fenwick (1989)

Joyce Forbes (1986)

Peter Frost (1988)

Dean Gaily (1991)

Allan Gedalof (1991)

Eileen Gillese (1986)

William Gilsdorf (1990)

Joseph Habowsky (1991)

Penelope Hansen (1990)

Robert Hawkes (1988)

David Humphreys (1989)

Gordon Lange (1991)

Andrea Lebowitz (1989)

Madeline Lennon (1990)

Jack R. London, Q.C. (1987)

Ron Marken (1987)

Peter McLeod (1989)

Nadia Mikhael (1987)

Harry Murray (1992)

Rosemary Nielsen (1991)

James Newton (1990)

Manfred Prokop (1989)

Ray Rasmussen (1987)

Patricia Rogers (1990)

Peter Rosati (1988)

Bob Schulz (1987)

Ron Sheese (1986)

Vladimir Sistek (1986)

Ronald Smith (1988)

Clarke Thomson (1989)

David Topper (1987)

Donald Ursino (1991)

Fred Vermeulen (1990)

Wayne Weston (1992)

John Young (1990)