

Teaching in Canadian Higher Education—The State of the Art

A Communique from the 2002 3M Teaching Fellows Retreat

Preamble

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.

The Quality of the Learning Experience in Canadian Universities

While Canadian universities have been in the forefront of technological improvements in education, and while they have invested considerable sums of money in the development of technology programs, making Canada one of the most wired communities in the world, they have not always taken into account the quality of the learning experience. The following concerns remain pervasive in most Canadian universities:

1. Traditional teaching fails to provide students with life-long learning skills, such as critical thinking, teamwork, appreciation of diversity, effective communication skills, and the ability to integrate knowledge from different disciplines.
2. What students say about their learning needs is largely ignored in both curriculum planning and teaching.
3. Curriculum planning is often based on faculty qualifications and interests instead of on the learning needs of students and on those of the wider community.
4. Students' experience in university too often involves sitting passively in lectures instead of engaging actively in meaningful learning tasks.
5. The size of classes threatens to grow unchecked.
6. Too often assessment of student achievement relies on rote memorization of content instead of on more challenging tasks that would stress creativity and problem-solving skills.
7. There is a lack of ongoing, timely, and constructive feedback, which would allow students to reflect upon, and thus, improve their learning.
8. Instead of making meaningful improvements to learning, technology is often used inappropriately as a panacea for administrative problems confronting higher education.

The Importance Given to Teaching and Learning

In the past fifteen years, considerably more attention has been paid to the importance of teaching and learning in universities. Annual reports, alumni newsletters, and presidential addresses all speak of the role of the teacher and of the centrality of learning. Most universities now celebrate their good teachers. But this has happened at a time when the university itself has divided the faculty along research and teaching lines, with the obvious internal and public priority given to research. The following actions need to be taken with energy, consistency, and long-term commitment:

1. Government and private agencies must earmark funds for action research on teaching and learning in higher education.
2. A government structure needs to be created in order to offer and oversee research on teaching and learning in the same way that NSERC and SSHRC do for discipline-specific research.
3. The university should encourage and provide incentives for its best teachers to teach at the undergraduate and introductory levels.
4. Hiring practices should emphasize teaching credentials and innovation, and all applicants should be required to submit a statement of teaching philosophy with their dossiers.
5. Tenure, promotion, and contract renewal committees should reward good teaching in the same way that they rewards good research.
6. Sabbaticals should be granted for teaching and curriculum-related projects.

Teaching the Teachers

With a greater awareness of the importance of teaching in the university has come a very considerable growth in the number and size of faculty or instructional development offices (IDOs). The creation and growth of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) is indicative of the need as well as the energy in this area. Nevertheless, problems remain in the following areas:

1. The role and function of IDOs needs to be revisited to establish a coordinated mandate across the country.
2. Support for Faculty Development programs should be substantially increased in those cases where they remain underused, underfunded, and marginalized.
3. IDOs should play an important role in creating and spreading a cross-disciplinary culture with a focus on teaching and learning.
4. Graduate students should be encouraged to acquire a teaching certificate to enhance their effectiveness in the classroom.
5. Tenure-track faculty should be required to complete a one-year teaching certification program before tenure is granted.
6. Professors should be encouraged and provided with incentives to inform themselves of the latest research and best practices in university teaching.
7. All disciplines within the university should ensure that faculty are informed of the latest research into the best teaching practices of their own subject content.

Conclusion

The next two decades will see a substantial increase in the number of post-secondary students attending university. This increase will coincide with a marked reduction in permanent faculty due to retirement. University teachers hired to fill the void will shape the immediate and long-term future of our universities. The universities must view this situation as an opportunity to set new standards by ensuring that the very highest value be placed on teaching excellence.