

**“Canadian Undergraduate Education:
A Light Source in Need of Recharging”
AUCC President's Circle
Saskatoon, April 18, 2007**

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For more than two decades I have been critical of the relative neglect of teaching in our universities. And I still am. Of late, however, I have begun to experience a failure of pessimism. I'm beginning to believe there is a narrative shift taking place in the culture of Canadian universities. Later I will identify what I believe are some indications of that shift. First, however, a brief cautionary tale.

It is reported that as our first parents were leaving the Garden of Eden, Adam turned to Eve and said: "My dear, we live in time of transition." It seems that every time is a time of transition: which is to say, the process of change is perpetual and continual. No biological or sociological species would survive long without it. Birds do it, bees do it, even universities do it.

Universities, however, are ambivalent to the point of schizophrenia about change. Resistance is rooted in several aspects of their character. First, there is the conflictive duality of the relation between a university and the society it serves. The university is at once society's servant and its critic. As servant its impulse is to be useful and to change in response to social change; as critic its impulse is to be skeptical and keep its distance. The pendulum of its collective anxiety swings back and forth between rebellion and conformity.

Second, the ordained members of the academy (that is to say, tenured faculty) are generally people who have opted for the *vita contempliva* over the *vita activa*. Their primary interest lies in understanding reality, not changing it. The longer things stand still the better they may be studied. Action for academics is discourse, description, analysis, hypothesis, experiment. (Mind you, there are one or two up-start professional disciplines within our walls which think that problems exist to be solved rather than

studied - engineers, for example - but this only means they haven't yet been properly acculturated.)

A third reason universities respond warily to change stems from the way they are organized. Power, such as it is, is highly decentralized. Decision-making is characterized by the KKK: committees, compromise, and consensus. Everything takes time, especially the inconsequential. The former president of Duke University reports that, after yet another drawn-out board of governors meeting, a business-man governor said to her that if he should hear the end of the world was at hand, he would move to Duke University, because everything seems to take a year or two longer there.

Yet universities do change: both in what they do and in the way they see themselves. Recently I received a glossy brochure from one of Canada's fine small universities, known a generation ago for its attention to undergraduate teaching. Now it professes to be a "research-intensive university."

Research universities have, in the argot of today, become more relevant to business and the economy. Technology transfer, commercialization of research, creation of spin-off and start-up companies – well, you know the catchphrases of this catechism. That it grossly distorts the character and oversells the performance of most of our universities is beside the point. A brand is loose in the land, and for universities, as for people, when they are free to choose, they generally chose to follow each other.

Some thoughtful people who have looked carefully at this imbalance between research and teaching have concluded nothing much can or will be done to remedy it. One of those is Professor Kim Nossal of Queen's University. In an impressive and forceful presidential address to the Canadian Political Science Association last June,¹ he tracked with some hard numbers what has been termed "the flight from the classroom." In the past quarter century there has been a serious erosion of resources dedicated to undergraduate teaching. Nationally, from 1977 to 2003 full-time enrolment almost doubled, whereas the number of full-time faculty hardly increased at all. This, coupled with the tendency to give research stars (actual and imagined) reduced teaching loads (or

none at all), has meant (a) much larger classes at all levels, but especially first and second years, and (b) many more part-time instructors doing much of the early-years teaching.

In the same quarter century faculty actually reduced their undergraduate teaching loads. There are several reasons for this, but “most importantly,” he says, “we have seen the proliferation of the practice of taking full-time faculty out of the classroom, explicitly in order to give them additional time to pursue their research.” Professor Nossal illustrates his point by noting that in the Canada Research Chairs program, 80 per cent of the Tier One chair holders and 70% of the Tier Two holders teach fewer than two courses. Almost 10 per cent of Tier One holders do not teach at all. All this is consistent with the fact that at most universities research and publications, not teaching, are the pathways to tenure, promotion and preferment.

Professor Nossal concludes that there is little possibility that the system can be fixed, principally because “universities are working very well for everyone in the system – except perhaps for undergraduate students – and so no one actually wants the system fixed.”

Actually, I think there may be a goodly number of people who would like to see the system fixed: some of them undergraduates who know instinctively they are being cheated of the individual instructional attention they need and deserve; some of them faculty members who know they could be better teachers if they had reason and reward enough to make the investment; some of them graduate students who would welcome more emphasis on learning to teach their subjects rather than completing make-work requirements for their degree; some of them part-time instructors who would not unreasonably like a little more stability in their work lives; and some of them parents whose real interest is in the quality of their children’s education, not in the claims of the university to research-intensive status. The question is: are there grounds for believing that a better balance between teaching and learning, on the one hand, and the research enterprise, on the other, can be achieved, and what can those who favour such a change do to help bring it about?

More than at any other time during my longish career in higher education, I believe there is reason to think a significant change in the poor-sibling status of teaching and learning may come about. I say “may” rather than “will” because, for the reasons that Professor Nossal outlines, it is by no means inevitable. Human agency will be required, lots of it, not least from presidents.

What is my evidence that such change is possible? Mindful of the clock, I shall limit my broad indicators to three.

The first is that there is a growing interest on the part of universities in understanding and evaluating undergraduate experience and its relation to learning outcomes. Many Canadian universities now subscribe to either the Canadian Undergraduate Survey Consortium (CUSC) or to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The reason for this may have something to do with countering the *Macleans*' annual rankings of universities, but whatever the motivation the result could be salutary.

Significantly, when students are asked what the greatest weakness of their undergraduate experience is, the predominant criticism is of teaching. This is not news, of course; students and graduates have been saying this for some time. What is news is that people, including governments, are beginning to take notice.

At the risk of becoming a protagonist in my own narrative, let me cite my current role as a case in point. The Ontario government, to its credit, has recognized the need for an independent body to provide ongoing research and advice on the state of higher education in the province. The Legislature has passed a statute creating the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario and giving it a broad mandate to advise on improving all aspects of postsecondary education, including quality, access and accountability. While the Council's name emphasizes quality, the government has recognized – wisely, in my view – that quality and access must go hand in hand.

Under Frank Iacobucci's chairmanship, the Council is initiating an ambitious research program. The largest single piece of this program will aim to develop a quality framework for higher education. Many discrete activities take place today in the name of quality, including program appraisals, student surveys, key performance indicators, measures of inputs per student, and the like. Each of these activities was developed separately. But in Ontario we have not until now asked: how do the pieces fit together? What more do we need to do so that students, parents, politicians and the public at large can feel confident that our colleges and universities are doing what we expect of them?

While the Council's mandate is broad, it seems inevitable that our primary focus will be the experience of undergraduate students at universities and colleges. Many bodies are already in place to assess the quality of university research, and there is no need for us to duplicate their work. The appetite for evidence about the quality of students' education is large, and we hope to begin to satisfy it. And so the Council is a response to the growing interest in the quality of the undergraduate experience, and our research will, we hope, lead to better policy advice on how to enhance that experience.

Let me hasten to say that I don't believe there was ever a golden age of undergraduate teaching. The overall quality is probably no worse than it has ever been. But given the increased investment of hope and treasure – both public and private – being made in postsecondary education, is it enough to say we think we're no worse than we've ever been at the thing for which primarily we exist? What Derek Bok says of the US scene is broadly applicable to our own:

To be sure, the undergraduate enterprise has grown in several dimensions. Millions more students enter college today than half a century ago. Countless new buildings have been built; faculties have greatly increased in numbers; new courses of every kind fill college catalogues to overflowing. Undergraduates can now watch PowerPoint lectures, print out articles at their personal computers, and receive homework assignments via the Internet. But all these changes, however broad in scope, say very little about what is truly important. Has the quality of teaching improved? More important, are students learning more than they did in

1950? Can they write with greater style and grace? Do they speak foreign languages more fluently, read a text with greater comprehension, or analyze problems more rigorously?

The honest answer to these questions is that we do not know. In fact, we do not even have an informed guess that can command general.²

At the end of his review of postsecondary education in Ontario two years ago, the Honourable Bob Rae came to the same conclusion. He said, “We simply don’t know enough about how we’re doing and how others are doing.”³ It was to get us to at least better-informed guesses that he recommended the creation of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. Realistically, better-informed guesses may be all we can reasonably expect to achieve in the short run, for research that deals with human institutions and human behaviour will always yield provisional results. But if we can help to create an environment in which research and experimentation in teaching and learning are respected, encouraged, and rewarded, I believe we will have done something of inestimable value for students, teachers, and society itself.

The second exhibit I would offer in evidence of my proposition, following on from the first, is that progressive universities have of late begun to make significant investment in teaching programs and centres to assist professors and graduate students to improve their teaching and communication skills, to acquaint them with a bit of the scholarship of learning, and to enable them to adapt their courses to changing interests and technologies. Among the initiatives I have observed announced in the last little while are: (i) certificate programs in university teaching, designed for doctoral students who are interested in an academic career; (ii) a teaching academy within a university made up of the accomplished teaching professors who assist other, and especially younger, faculty to develop pedagogical skills; (iii) prestigious new awards for university teaching being created by universities themselves and other agencies, including most recently one by the government of Ontario that will recognize up to 100 faculty a year and will carry a financial reward of \$20,000; (iv) web sites (such as the *Teaching Professor* and the *Centre for Academic Excellence*) devoted to the promotion of successful pedagogical

strategies, including the use of teaching and learning portfolios; (v) the growing influence of the association for Professional and Organizational Development (POD) and, in Canada, the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) with their emphasis on pedagogical scholarship and practice.

These developments are all the more encouraging because they are happening in what seems a critical mass of North American universities, and some of the initiatives being taken are highly innovative. To cite a notable example, the University of British Columbia has attracted the American Nobel laureate, physicist Dr. Carl Wieman. For a nation (Canada) that has only had four Nobel Laureates since 1970, and none in more than a decade, this is a significant event. What is even more remarkable, however, is that Wieman didn't move to UBC to do physics research but "to support science departments in their efforts to provide an unrivalled education for ...undergraduate students..."⁴ Let me repeat: a Nobel Laureate, still in mid-career, has been hired by a Canadian university to strengthen the quality of undergraduate teaching. Over the next five years UBC plans to spend \$12 million on a project to improve undergraduate teaching in science. As the young are wont to say, how great is that!

The third piece of evidence I would offer for my hopeful belief is a new book by perhaps the most influential figure in American higher education of the past thirty years. I'm referring to the former and currently interim president of Harvard University, Derek Bok. Bok, who is now 77 (and by virtue of that alone, my hero) had a most successful run as president of Harvard from 1971 to 1991. That record, plus a steady stream of insightful and influential books both during his presidency and since, has made him perhaps the single most respected figure in America higher education today.

His most recent book is *Our Underachieving Colleges: a Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should be Learning More*, published last year. "When one moves from opinion polls to direct evidence of student learning," he writes, "the reasons for concern grow clearer. Most studies do show evidence of growth, but almost all the findings leave ample room for improvement. . . . Surveys of student progress in other important dimensions, including writing, numeracy, and foreign language proficiency

indicate that only a minority of undergraduates improve substantially, while some actually regress.” (312)

University curricula too, despite the fact they undergo periodic faculty reviews, are no less vulnerable to criticism. “Much time is wasted in the half-hearted pursuit of unrealistic goals – required foreign language courses that do not lead to proficiency, introductory writing classes taught by untrained graduate students with little reinforcement from other courses in the curriculum, basic science courses never designed for the nonscientists who are forced to take them. Additional hours spent fulfilling concentration requirements that have expanded beyond the purpose that led to the concentration in the first place. Meanwhile majorities of students graduate without receiving instruction in quantitative methods or moral reasoning or in subjects needed to prepare them as knowledgeable citizens in a democracy or as perceptive actors in a world in which their country will be increasingly influenced by other countries and cultures.”

What makes Bok’s criticism the more potent is that he writes from inside the establishment. When someone like Derek Bok joins the chorus of those who wish to elevate and reform undergraduate education, this is significant.

If there is a change taking shape of the sort I describe it should soon be reflected in the narratives by which universities present themselves. For a generation now we have justified education in utilitarian terms: it’s a competitive world out there; students need to prepare themselves for the knowledge society; governments need to invest in education and research if we are to keep our privileged place in the global economy.

There’s no denying that this narrative has been useful in garnering attention and public and private support for universities, and especially for the vitally important research enterprise. But there are signs that it has run its course -- in fact, overrun its course by making claims for commercialization which cannot be substantiated. Equally important, it doesn’t seem to be cutting it with those who matter most in universities, those on whose engagement and performance the future of education and our society depends. I don’t mean professors or presidents or politicians. I mean the young themselves, who

have never been as enamoured of the god of economic utility as their elders, and who have of late been finding a voice for their dissent, not through sit-ins and demonstrations, but more civilly and effectively through opinion-survey responses of various kinds.

If you agree – and you may not – that it is time we paid more attention to undergraduate education, then what might be done, especially by presidents, to effect change? Again, mindful of time, I'll limit myself to two suggestions. The first has to do with leadership within the institution; the second principally with leadership beyond.

First, challenge your institutions to engage in an ongoing process of experimentation and reform with teaching and learning. If your university is not using NSSE or CUSC, ask why. If it is, ask what use is being made of the results. If there are teaching training programs for graduate students, give them moral and practical support. If there are none, champion their creation. Ensure effective teaching is given the weight it deserves in tenure and promotion decisions. Sponsor, promote, encourage within your institutions the work of centres for the adaptation and advancement of teaching and learning.

All this is familiar and predictable, and susceptible to the charge that I may have forgotten how limited is the authority of the president, and how protective faculty are of their right to decide what and how to teach. I have two responses to this. One is that we all know, despite amiable protestations to the contrary, that effective presidents have a great deal of leadership influence and a large amount of political capital, within and sometime outside their institutions. If we're talking about which courses to require, faculty will naturally prefer their own judgement to that of the president. But few will object, and none legitimately, if the president gives emphasis to measures to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

And many faculty members would likely welcome such leadership. Most professors are highly professional and dedicated, and want to do right by their students. Traditional methods of teaching may still have their place, but there is strong evidence that they are not satisfying the instructional needs of either students or professors.

This kind of leadership can only be effectively provided institution by institution. In his report, *Ontario: A leader in Learning*, Bob Rae rejected the urging of some to recommend the creation of a teaching and learning centre for the province. He did so on the sound basis that experimentation and engagement with teaching and learning will only prove effective if universities and colleges are individually engaged with the theory and practice of it.

And the theory is important. For too long, universities have been dismissive of educational research on the grounds that it is not rigorous enough to meet the exacting standards of the academy. Setting aside the fact that the same might be said of a good deal of the scholarship that people are generously rewarded for, we can admit that it is indeed true that perfectly-matched control groups or double-blind experiments are hard to conduct in this field, and disagreements will arise about how to measure proficiency in such competencies as critical thinking and writing. But Bok is right when he says that “to let such problems discredit institutional research would allow the best to be the enemy of the good.”

The proper test for universities to apply is not whether their assessments meet the most rigorous scholarly standards but whether they can provide more reliable information than the hunches, random experiences, and personal opinions that currently guide most faculty decisions about educational issues. By this standard, there are surely many important forms of intellectual development that can be described and measured well enough to conduct useful studies to evaluate existing educational programs and assess new methods of instruction. If faculties are willing to examine their students and record the results on official transcripts, it is hard for them to argue that they are incapable of devising methods of assessment reliable enough to evaluate the effects of their teaching on student learning. (320-21)

To create a sustainable culture for better teaching and learning an institution should have its own ways and means of fostering on-campus research and experimentation with

teaching methods and learning methodologies. There is a growing body of scholarship in this field that those who lead universities and colleges should be aware of.

You know the old saw: “The job of the president is to speak for the university. The job of the faculty is to think for the university. The job of the deans is to make sure the faculty don’t speak and the president doesn’t think.” Whatever the truth in that – and it is certainly easier to ensure the president doesn’t think than that the faculty don’t speak – it is true that no one in a university has such opportunity to give voice to the mission and values of the institution as does the president. Which brings me to the second way by which a president can show leadership in this matter.

When I spoke to you in such a setting four years ago, I quoted Professor Robert Birnbaum to the effect that the challenge of universities in our time is not to argue a better case but to tell a better story. I do so again.

Stories compete with stories in the marketplace of narratives. And there is no shortage of competing narratives about the role of the contemporary university. Some portray an institution standing in very much the same relationship to its users as banks, supermarkets, and utility companies do to theirs, providing convenient, dependable, and quality service. Some tell of an institution that is already past its best-before date, and will largely disappear within the next generation. They are simplistic narratives, but nonetheless effective for that. They may or may not be true, but they resonate widely.⁵

Birnbaum cautions “you cannot dispel a narrative merely by criticizing it or presenting logical arguments against it. A narrative can be displaced only by another narrative that is as easy to understand and tells a better story.”

The Canadian who knew most about narratives, their origins, purpose, and forms, Professor Northrop Frye, once said:

Every person with any function in society at all will have some kind of ideal vision of that society in the light of which he operates. One can hardly imagine a social worker going out to do case work without thinking of her as having, somewhere in her mind, a vision of a better, cleaner, healthier, more emotionally balanced city, as a kind of mental model inspiring the work she does. One can hardly imagine in fact any professional person not having such a social model--a world of health for the doctor or of justice for the judge--nor would such a social vision be confined to the professions.

It seems to me in fact that a Utopia should be conceived, not as an impossible dream of an impossible ideal, but as the kind of working model of society that exists somewhere in the mind of every sane person who has any social function at all.⁶

I believe with Frye that it is the empowering of this idealism that is the overarching purpose of education. It should also be the essence of the educational narrative we tell and the rationale we give for the centrality of undergraduate education to our *raison d'être*.

Some time after the English writer and eccentric, Edith Sitwell, became a Catholic, she was granted an audience with the pope. She went on at great length about the glories of Catholicism, until, finally an exhausted pope interjected, "but Miss Sitwell, I AM a Catholic."

It's likely that on this occasion I'm preaching to the choir. We probably all agree that a sound undergraduate education -- one that attempts to ensure students develop intellectual skills in writing, critical thinking, moral reasoning, quantitative analysis -- is the light source for further scholarship, effective citizenship, and personal fulfillment. But I'm not sure any reasonable person would conclude this from the public pronouncements of presidents, from the narratives they tell, or from the things universities celebrate with attractive and expensive ads in national newspapers.

I have drawn heavily in this speech on Derek Bok's *Our Underachieving Colleges*. As you will have gathered, it is not a feel-good book, but towards the end Bok too suffers a failure of pessimism as he reflects on what institutional leaders might do if they were so resolved. "Above all," he says, "they have the opportunity to persuade members of their faculties that research and experimentation to improve student learning can be as challenging and absorbing as many traditional forms of scholarship and scientific investigation. With encouragement and prodding, careful research, and modest support for innovation, leaders in every college can aspire to create a culture of honest self-reappraisal, continuous experimentation, and constant improvement. They could hardly ask for a better opportunity to make a lasting contribution to their institutions and their students" (342)

References:

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² Bok, D. *Our Underachieving Colleges: a Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should be Learning More*. Princeton University Press, 2006, pp.29-30.

³ Ontario: *A Leader in Learning: Report & Recommendations*, 2005, p. 15.

⁴ <http://www.vpacademic.ubc.ca/CarlWieman/>

⁵ Birnbaum, R. *The Presidency*, Fall, 2002, pp. 37-8

⁶ Frye, N. (1988) *On Education*, Toronto. Fitzhenry & Whiteside. 70