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A Far Different Place

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A far different place

Historian Alan MacEachern takes us back to the momentous events a half-century ago that shaped the university system we have today - and the magazine that chronicled those events.

My favourite quotation on teaching in Canada comes from Rev. Patrick Bell, writing in 1833 for the folks back home in Scotland about his life as a tutor: “From the nature of my calling my life is necessarily monstrously monotonous – one day with another – one week – one month – nay, even one year, is but a tedious repetition of the one that preceded it. I need not tell those that have the least knowledge of the daily task of teaching, how irksome it is, in any country, or under any circumstances - and certainly the tedium is not alleviated by emigration to Canada.”

I don’t really identify with him, of course, but my guess is that any educator reading this would feel a twinge of empathy. Ours is a profession with a long tradition, one that allows us, in moments of frustration and self-pity, to imagine our situation as indistinguishable from that of St. Cassianus, stabbed to death with pencils by his students.

In much the same way, when one looks back at the early years of University Affairs, there is a natural tendency to see in the concerns of those days the concerns of today, only slightly distorted. In some of the very first issues we learn that the student-to-faculty ratio was feared to be on the rise, that the attractiveness of university life risked making trade schools unfashionable, and that students seemed to be less serious and more frivolous (“Bed-pushing: This Year’s Fad”) than ever. I was delighted to happen upon a 1973 retrospective piece entitled “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose” – a reminder that even retrospection ultimately becomes the subject of retrospection.

But in truth Canadian higher education is in a far different place in 2009 than it was in 1959. There are many more universities, and many more students in those universities, doing many more things in many more ways. And the faculty in those universities today are in a far better position than faculty were then. Considerable credit for all that must be given to events of 50 years ago.

Having languished throughout the Depression and the Second World War, universities in postwar Canada existed in what Claude Bissell (president of the University of Toronto from 1958 to 1971) called a state of “genteel poverty,” their “abominably paid” professors mired in the lower middle class. And there was little indication that would change. War veterans – outnumbering younger students on Canadian campuses for several years, and making university life an even more tranquil affair – brought a much-appreciated injection of funds, but it was perfectly understood that this would be temporary. Dalhousie University, for example, watched veterans’ fees drop from 10 percent of the university’s income to two percent in a three-year period in the early 1950s. But to the surprise of universities across the country, enrolment stayed firm, far above pre-war levels, because there was both a larger population and a larger proportion choosing higher education after high school.

Universities today seem to take the value of growth as a given, so it is surprising to learn that in the 1950s they responded to the rise in enrolment by questioning how it might be checked. Looking over the border at the American state school system in which all high-school graduates in the state were admitted, they feared that more students signaled that shoddier students would get in, weakening the experience for everyone. When Canadian journalist Willson Woodside published The University Question, his chapter “Who Should Go to College?” concluded with a section pointedly titled “Remember: Winston Churchill Did Not Go.” My own University of Western Ontario decreed in 1953 that its goal was to remain “a vigorous but relatively small university.”

Yet only four years later, Western talked of becoming “the greatest university in Canada” and doubled its projected enrolment from 3,000 to 6,000 students. What had happened in the interim? In short, recognition of a crisis and then the money to avert it.

At the 1955 meeting of the National Conference of Canadian Universities - forerunner of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada - economist Edward Sheffield of the Dominion Bureau of Statistics gave a dry, clinical presentation outlining why university enrolment was likely to double over the next 10 years. (It did so within eight.) Whereas university administrators today might feel excited by such prospects, the speaker following Sheffield, University of Toronto President Sidney Smith, said the news “cannot be expected to cheer us.” Canada would immediately need more universities, the existing ones would have to expand and, at a time when the country had fewer than 6,000 professors, an estimated 5,000 more were required. The NCCU sent a one-page summary of Sheffield’s talk to newspaper editors across the country and used the resultant publicity to arrange a conference the following year on “Canada’s Crisis in Higher Education.”
There, after sitting through a series of dire presentations, Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent in his closing address upstaged the academics by making two policy announcements. The federal grant to provinces for higher education, begun in 1951, would be doubled from 50 cents per capita to a dollar. And, as recommended by the Massey Report, the Canada Council would be created, with $50 million directed straightaway to university building projects (a much greater focus on higher education than the report had suggested). The conference delegates, in the words of Claude Bissell, “had the feeling that a new age had dawned, that the days of poverty and self-justification were now over.”

It would be difficult to overstate how important this support was. Essentially, a decade after the end of the war, universities were finally made part of the national reconstruction effort. This investment meant much more stability for running the universities; McGill University, which in 1950 received only four percent of its operating income from governments, by 1960 received almost 40 percent. It meant more access to student aid; whereas late in the war University of British Columbia students had received $14,000 in scholarships, bursaries and loans, they now had access to 40 times that. It meant that more faculty could be hired, holding the line on student-teacher ratios; in his memoirs, UBC chemistry professor Howard C. Clark recalls three new hires in his department in 1956, six in 1957, six more in 1958 and still four more in 1959. It meant faculty could be paid more; at Queen's University, salaries rose by almost half over a three-year period in the late 1950s. And it meant that new universities could be financed, a longer process that took off in the 1960s.

The ripple effects went still further. The new faculty, many trained in the major schools of Great Britain and the United States, were much more intent on research than were their predecessors, and they were given the funds to do it; research grants to Queen's professors quintupled in the course of the '50s.

Arguably the most important result of expansion was an indirect one: now that faculty were more valued, they were in a position to take greater control of their working life, and they did so. Beginning in the late 1950s, faculty and their associations moved to reshape university governance. Until then, university boards of governors were typically filled with businessmen and clergymen. The University of Western Ontario’s 12-person board had long been appointed with the aid of the local city council and the Lieutenant Governor, a gentleman’s agreement assuring that half of the members would be Liberal and half Conservative, and that Methodists, Anglicans, Presbyterians and Catholics would all be represented equally. The 1960s would see faculty fight for greater representation on the governing bodies of new and existing universities, a process that helped students subsequently make their own claims for representation. The final major innovation that faculty spearheaded was in the classroom: curricular reform resulted in more program flexibility and a greater reliance on seminars and tutorials.

Notably, these developments continued to occur after the initial roar of university expansion had settled into a steady hum. When Prime Minister John Diefenbaker declared at the 1961 NCCU meeting that higher education was not really a priority given the demands put on his attention by communism and nuclear weapons, it bookended the period which had begun with St. Laurent’s 1956 announcement, but it made little difference. Canada was now committed to universities in a way it had not been before.

*University Affairs* first appeared in October 1959, at the very height of the university boom. It began as a simple eight-page quarterly put out by the executive arm of the NCCU, filled with stats and statements about the state of Canadian higher education. Its formal, modest and rather bland nature can be observed in its goals as stated in its premiere issue: “to keep university personnel and others who are interested in higher education informed about university affairs. The length of its life will be determined by the extent to which it achieves this object and the reception it is given by its readers.”

And yet from that first issue it also possessed the assertiveness one would expect of a professionalizing group’s organ, as when it quoted McGill’s F. Cyril James that in the Soviet Union - as compared to the West, presumably - “University professors are in the top one percent of the income bracket, so that they can afford better housing, better clothes, larger automobiles, pleasant country homes and more domestic servants than 99 percent of their fellow countrymen.” *University Affairs* was the byproduct of changes in Canadian higher education in the 1950s and would also serve as a chronicle of that change, not to mention a catalyst for more that would come.

The magazine grew to 12 pages within its first two years, to 16 in two more, and from four to 10 issues per year within a decade. Gradually, it took on many of the features it possesses today. Book reviews appeared in 1966, photographs in 1972 and letters to the editor a year later. An article from 1966 - that is, seven years into *University Affairs’* existence - by an expatriate unable to find a job in Canadian academe or industry would seem to mark the earliest appearance of the word “I”. (It would not be the last.) And with the emergence in 1968 of an “Academic Vacancies” section, the magazine, like Playboy, fought the challenge of a feature so popular it threatened to draw the reader's attention from the articles. The editor in 1973 explained that it did not publish the vacancies separately and more frequently because it would cost too much, “But also because we would like people to read the articles as well as the job ads.”

It is 2009, and how universities define success has not changed much. It is still measured in terms of more funding, more students, more buildings, more grants and more faculty - in short, growth. And why not? The great boom in higher education that began 50 years ago served Canada and its universities extremely well. But the context has utterly changed, both because the universities have already experienced that half-century of growth and may simply be incapable of sustaining growth indefinitely, and because of demographics. In his 1958 The University Question, journalist William Woodside wrote, “The country's greatest need, unquestionably, is for teachers.” Despite the universal acceptance of the importance of education - or perhaps because of the idea's fulfillment - it is impossible to imagine any journalist, or even any university president, making that claim in Canada.
today.

Even in the unlikely chance that the recent recession ends up being just a blip in a long period of economic growth, Canadian universities should get used to the idea that enrolment rates and even absolute enrolment numbers may not always move in an upward direction. In the 1950s, universities averted a crisis through growth, but in the 21st century they face the task of adapting to the possibility – and perhaps even, at some point, the preferability – of no growth. That will be especially challenging for tenured faculty who, having taken greater control of universities, will need to make decisions that not only serve our own interests but are fair to students, staff, all faculty and the Canadian community. The decisions we make will determine how we are viewed at University Affairs’ centennial.

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