

Universities must find Direction

Tuition and residence fee increases appear to be a fact of life for students anywhere in Canada these days, reversing the trend of the last few years towards more and more government assistance of students and universities. This trend had reached the point where the student paid only 15% or so of the cost of his/her education. However it appears that this trend is finally reversing itself.

During the sixties, the single ideal espoused by theorists about universities was that education should be available to all. Since only the rich could afford college education then the inevitable conclusion was that the government would have to support higher education (like everything else that only the rich could afford).

Money was available freely to anyone or anything that remotely was related to a college. Professors and grad students got exotic research grants; students got grants and loans; the university itself got money for everything (more staff, bigger salaries, larger buildings, etc.)

Of course with all this money available the universities began to be very spendthrift and expansionist. New buildings went up everywhere; enrollments increased (sometimes several times over); and new staff were hired at an incredible rate. In fact in the early stages the number of graduates turned out was just barely enough to teach the next crop to come along.

Like most universities, U.P.E.I. gained several new facilities during this era - two new residences, a Student Union Building (?!), a science building, some classrooms and no less than two libraries. This is despite the fact that enrollment here, unlike most places, actually decreased from 1969 on.

The question that was only too rarely asked (as is true in the expansionist phases of just about anything from a human being to a civilization) is "What will happen when the whole affair is over". For that matter why the affair in the first place?

The most common explanation for the phase was that it was necessary so that an education would be available for all. Almost never did anyone question exactly what an education was and if in fact everyone would want one. These are unimportant. What was - and still is - important is that an education is a 'gottahave'. No well-dressed man should be without one.

In the states, they sometimes argued that 'we have to beat the Russians' (doing

what no one was really sure but in any case it involved science and technology and men on the moon).

And that where we get to the crux of the matter - the education of the masses has never been something that has been espoused for the sake of the masses. Rather the education of the masses has been necessary to enable them to do something for the society they live in - in other words work as docily as possible in some pointless job for someone else. When the corporations needed technically trained people, the universities obliged by providing the facilities and the government obliged by providing the money.

No that - at last - the universities have turned out enough graduates to meet the market for them, industry ignores them and government cut off (or in a time of inflation, freeze) the funding.

Of course this plays hell with the universities themselves. By the mid-sixties they had convinced themselves - and society - that their proper role was to teach people all the secrets

of modern science so that they could get A Good Job and we could Beat the Russians. Now that there are no more Good Jobs and the Russians decided that they didn't want to play, the universities are in the middle of an identity crisis. Having abandoned the role that they held (or at least claimed to hold) for centuries to become the school of a technocracy, they suddenly find that the technocracy doesn't want them any more. Either they sit back and pray that everything will be like it was before - when they secretly know that it won't or they act irrational and search for a scapegoat.

Hence the university has found itself left in the lurch with no compensation from the technocracy except a glittering new campus. In a very real sense of the phrase, universities, have lost their direction. Possibly the tightening will enable the universities to come back by forcing them to look inward for resources rather than outward. They may thus re-gain their 'soul'. One can hope so anyway.

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