

## Dispelling the ivory tower myth

# The university as servant of society

This article is an abridged section from the report, *Towards Democracy in the University*, by Paul Axelrod.

### The content of learning

Students have charged that course curriculum is deficient in two major areas. It is 1) divorced from reality, i.e., irrelevant; and 2) status quo oriented, i.e., non critical.

This contention, which represents an immediate reaction by the student to his learning environment must be understood within proper historical perspective.

In Canada, the content of education in the university has always been tied directly to the dominant cultural, social and economic realities of Canadian society. In fact, changes in course content have varied directly in accordance with the goals of the society itself.

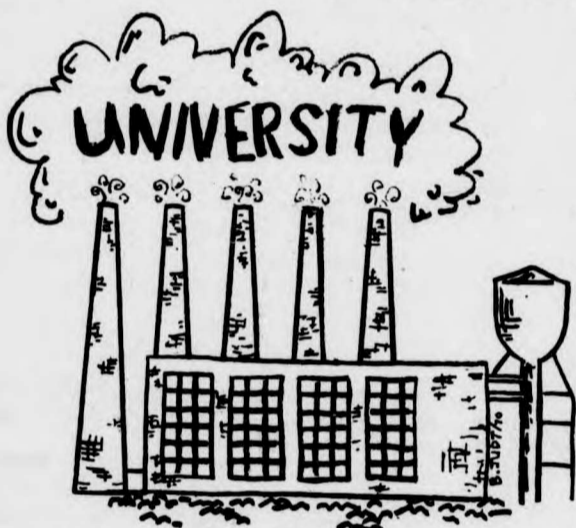
The earliest universities in French and English Canada were characterised and defined by the dominance of religious and secular ideas which pervaded throughout the respective cultures.

"Like their counterparts in Quebec, the first universities in Canada owed their foundations to the piety of religious groups.

... United Empire Loyalists, Scottish Presbyterians and Anglicans all shared in shaping the first English speaking Universities in Canada and left their mark on the life-style of the institutions they founded.

... These Universities served to prepare a professional elite — either the higher clergy in the official political aristocracy — and tailored their curricula to the requirements of theology, preaching pastoral care on the one hand; or to the needs of political governance, civil service or the cultural philanthropy of 19th century gentlemen on the other." (1)

But by the 1870's it was clearly recognized that



university curricula must change if Canadian society was to develop economically.

"The universities of the new world had, in the main been formed after the pattern of those in the old country. But now came the age of science and of demand for an education which would not only cultivate the mind but fit for the practical occupations, and help to the prizes of life. Even Oxford and Cambridge now reorganized, declericalized and relieved of tests by Parliament had enlarged their courses of instruction by the admission of more and more practical subjects — law, political economy, and natural science. . . . But in the industrial and commercial communities of those hemispheres, the demand for the full recognition of practical science and its admission to the university curriculum was naturally more pronounced and pressing than in England." (2)

### Industry Flourishes

At the beginning of the 20th century then, as industrial production was beginning to flourish in Canada, it was evident that the traditional university organizations and curricula could no longer fulfill the new demands of Canadian life.

Universities necessarily became producers of knowledge and based their new structures and curriculum on the American university model. " . . . The question presents itself whether the main object shall be as it hitherto has been, intellectual culture, or the knowledge which qualified directly for gainful pursuits and open the student's way to the material pursuits of life. The second object has of late been prevailing where commerce holds sway." (3)

In 1906, on the recommendation of the Royal Commission on the University of Toronto, from which the previous quotation was taken, the bicameral "corporate board" model of governing the university was established with a Board of Governors and a Senate in charge of university finances and academic programmes respectively. Included in the curriculum were "departments of forestry, mathematics, courses in finance and chairs of pathology, chemistry, and psychology." (4) The business-like framework within which the "new" Canadian university was conceived was consistent with the new found goal of "following the material pursuits of life." The precedent was set, and generally other universities followed suit.

A bill introduced in the British Columbia legislature indicated this new direction of the university.

"The university to be set up in this Act was quite obviously no ivory tower. It was to be administered by business and professional men and assist in the development of the province. . . in introducing the bill in the house, Dr. Young (minister of education) declared that the first thing that they bore in mind in providing for the university was the development of the mining, forestry and agricultural resources of the Province and an education that would aid this." (5)

### Military training

World War II saw the conversion of many universities into areas of military training, with the most notable feature of academic work at this time, being the "research they did on war time endeavours, particularly in the sciences, medicine and engineering." (6)

To this point, then, we have seen clearly how scholarship in the university has related to the values and goals of life in the community.

The purpose in developing this argument has been to affirm that the Canadian University has never been an ivory tower, that is, an isolated community of scholars who pursue knowledge for its own sake, and therefore, when a student reacts to the content and structure of his education, he is likely responding to certain realities of life in his society.

The streamlining of funds into particular faculties by the various boards of governors, the earmarking of grants by the government into certain specialized activities, the financing of research studies by governments and large corporations, who, furthermore, in several cases are situated outside Canada (see minutes of board of governors meeting, February 10, 1969. It is documented that the Treasurer of the United States, the Ford Foundation and General Foods all finance research projects in the university) and the incentives provided to students and faculty to study in certain fields (same board minutes indicate the board made available a loan of \$200,000 for business students thereby guaranteeing financing of their education) have allowed the direction of the institution to be determined by other than simply those who teach and learn in it.

With this in mind, it is crucial to note the trends in the nature of curricula in Canadian universities since World War II.

The surge of industrial enterprise in the United States and the rise of the multi-national corporation, which has resulted in the American domination of the Canadian economy, provides a useful framework within which to discuss this situation.

### Branch plant scholarships

Continuing on the historically established premise that there is a close relationship between the curriculum in universities and the reality of the society in which the university exists, it has been discovered that along with the existence of a "branch plant economy" in Canada, there has developed a form of "branch plant scholarship."

The universities which have been burgeoning are essentially continental institutions and are geared to the production of trained technicians and professionals for a branch plant economy.

There is less need for scientists and engineers on a percapita basis in this country than in the U.S., and if Canada spends less than 1.3 percent of GNP on research and development compared with 3.5 percent in the U.S., this is because employment opportunities for research and development are fewer in the branch plant than in the metropolis. Canadians pursuing advanced studies in the United States have a far better chance of landing lucrative jobs both there and in Canada itself than Canadians who study at home." (5)

We are faced with a situation in Canadian Universities where numerous professors (Canadian and American) who have been trained in the United States, are not prepared to examine, investigate and understand the realities of Canadian society. Canadian hiring practices which favour degree granting institutions in the U.S. over those in Canada, and special tax advantages for visiting professors have encouraged the Americanization of the content of education on Canadian campuses.

### U.S. content

The problem however, must not be viewed only in terms



of the "numbers" question, that is, how many foreign professors are there v.s. Canadian professors, but more crucially in terms of the failure of Canadian education to come to grips with the pressing issues of Canadian life.

For instance when Canadian university students who are asked to comment on racism, turn their attention exclusively south of the border, and fail to acknowledge, let alone investigate the existence of such an issue in Canada (thereby ignoring the blacks in this country, the French in Quebec, and the plight of Indians on the reservation and in the cities), then they are documenting a drastic failure in the present system of Canadian education to relate to the Canadian fact. (Ed. note: see page 10 of this issue.)

The deficiency of Canadian education to provide the resources through which students can learn about Canada, will result in the continual subordination of this country to the needs and demands of American society. For how can one ultimately insist that his country be independent and self determined when his educational training has been dominated by course content, research studies and a university structure all developed in and for the purpose of serving a society other than the one in which he lives?

In the days of religious secularism in Canada, education was necessarily religious and secular. In the current period of colonialism Canadian education has inevitably become colonial, and the call by students for the establishment of curriculum that will enable them to develop a clear understanding of the true nature of life in their own society may be a first important step in combatting this colonialism.

### FOOTNOTES

1. Report of the Commission on the Government of the University of Toronto, (CUG report), p. 6.
2. B. Cameron, A. Black, Trends in the Development and Curriculum and Governing Bodies of Canadian Universities, CUS paper (25-26-219), p. 6.
3. Royal Commission on the University of Toronto.
4. Cameron, Black, p. 6; 5. Ibid; 6. Ibid.
5. American Imperialization of the University, memo, New Left Caucus, p. 3.
6. York board of governors' minutes for meeting of Feb. 10, 1969.

