

# Is the status quo

by Gordon F. N. Fearn

The U of A is "too large, too amorphous, and too impersonal." This was how Harry Midgley characterized the university when writing 18 months ago in the *Edmonton Journal* (June 4, 1975).

Before that, in the December 1973 issue of *New Trail*, William Thorsell was critical of the university's general arts program. Thorsell, himself a graduate of this university, argued that the general B.A. "denies the continuity of thought over time and the relation of ideas across disciplines. That is to say, the market BA fails to assert that there are structures and relations, historical and interdisciplinary, that sustain the matrix of our ideas and arts — of our culture. Or, at a minimum, the market BA does not take these relations to be very important."

A few months ago Bill Thorsell, no doubt reminiscing over his dusty *New Trail* article, published a column in the *Edmonton Journal* under the title "Reform — U of A take note" (September 30, 1976). Once again Thorsell likened the university to a supermarket and called for "radical reform." It must have been his last missile, for in October Bill Thorsell moved to Toronto.

The critics of the university and the general B.A. in particular can be faulted for being insufficiently detailed. To carry on the business of reform, the university as a community requires continual review to guard against the constant threat of rigor mortis.

Achievements do not diminish the need for continuing invigoration and reflection, to improve standards of excellence in a university already displaying high standards, to isolate par-

ticular problems, to propose ways to keep the university honest with its ideals and with community needs. Otherwise the university may become an unresponsive monolith, a spirit-crushing bureaucracy, and in particular an institution without commitment to undergraduate education.

While the achievements of the U of A may be evaluated in terms of the contributions of alumni and the quality of research, it is noteworthy that this university has no sustained reputation for excellence in undergraduate teaching. This failure is a matter of great concern for the university.

Midgley, Thorsell, and others have tried to identify some of the roots of failure. In what follows I choose to focus on the Faculty of Arts in general and on the social science departments in particular. I should alert my readers to the fact that I teach in the Department of sociology and that, therefore, my judgments may be as suspect as they are informed.

## The Faculty of Arts

Some will remember the Faculty of Arts as a small and intimate learning setting. This is an image of the past; it no longer holds. In addition to more than 2,800 students registered in baccalaureate programs in 1975-76, the Faculty of Arts services many thousands of students working toward degrees and certificates in other faculties and schools. Indeed, the service role of the faculty is so significant to its overall operation that academic goals are exceedingly difficult to define, since so many of the faculty's students fall within the jurisdiction of other faculties and schools.

Today the Faculty of Arts is composed of 17 academic departments, of which 5 are social science departments. The social science departments in particular expanded very rapidly during the 1960s to the point that, by the beginning of the present decade, close to one-half of the teaching workload of the Faculty of Arts was conducted in these departments. While the social science teaching staff expanded as workload demands increased, staffing failed to keep pace with the demands and a pattern was established which since has become seriously entrenched.

The table reports some of the indicators having to do with workload, staffing, class size, and operating budget. Data for the Department of Sociology and for the 5 social science departments (including Sociology) are contrasted with overall data for all academic departments in the Faculty of Arts. Sociology is singled out because its specific situation is extreme in a context of generally untenable conditions — conditions which are allowed to prevail in spite of the best efforts of many responsible persons in the Faculty of Arts.

The data indicate just how desperate the situation is. The 5 social science departments are carrying approximately 45 percent of the faculty's total teaching workload with approximately one-third of the faculty's staff. In the case of the Department of Sociology, 16 to 17 per cent of the faculty's workload is carried by less than 9 per cent of the faculty's staff. On the average, undergraduate classes in the social science disciplines are much larger than they are for the faculty as a whole. Student/staff ratios are grossly

unfavorable to the personal exchange which ordinarily one should obtain in an advanced educational setting. Ironically, though not unexpectedly, the budget figures indicate that budget allocations are tied to staffing when, in order for these departments to overcome the situation, budget allocations would have to be tied to teaching workload.

The table reports the data across a three-year period. All the indicators fluctuate year-to-year, but only one indicator — 200-level class size — shows a significant favorable change over the three-year period. Class size in the introductory courses in the social science departments is diminishing. In part this is the result of an effort to reduce class size at the introductory level, but it is also the unplanned product of changing registration patterns at the introductory level. Apart from this one change, the table is remarkable for its relative constancy over time. Little is changing, perhaps little can change, in the context of established structures and priorities.

## Students as consumers

While it is a hard proposition to prove, I venture to guess that the fluctuations apparent in the data are the result of yearly adjustments between demand and supply and should be viewed in such terms, rather than as being the result of any policy or plan to rectify imbalances which threaten and are destroying educational programs.

After all, there is little room for planning when departmental empires already are built, when there is vigorous competition across departments for the scarce resources which remain, when so many members of the academic staff

Selected Data for the Faculty of Arts, 1973-76 (percent of faculty total in parenthesis)

		Weekly Student Hours (WSH)**	Full-Time Equivalent Staff (FTE)***	Student/Staff Ratio (WSH/FTE)	Average Junior Lecture Section Size	Average Senior Lecture Section Size	Percent Net Operating Budget
Faculty of Arts	1973-74	97,207	459.8	211.4	41.9	28.2	100.0
	1974-75	107,350	456.5	235.2	43.8	29.6	100.0
	1975-76	102,775	461.1	222.9	38.3	29.6	100.0
Five Social Science Departments*	1973-74	43,734 (45.0)	157.6 (34.3)	277.5	114.3	38.0	33.3
	1974-75	47,925 (44.6)	156.8 (34.3)	305.6	105.5	39.5	33.5
	1975-76	45,746 (44.5)	152.6 (33.1)	299.8	83.4	39.5	33.3
Department of Sociology	1973-74	16,771 (17.3)	41.7 (9.1)	402.2	207.1	57.2	8.9
	1974-75	18,109 (16.9)	39.5 (8.7)	458.5	140.2	64.2	9.2
	1975-76	16,746 (16.3)	39.4 (8.5)	425.0	123.2	57.3	10.0

\* Anthropology, Economics, History, Political Science, and Sociology.

\*\* A measure of instructional demand equal to the product of the hours per week that a course is taught and the course registration. Data given are averages across both teaching terms for all levels of instruction.

\*\*\* A measure of academic staff strength expressed in full-time equivalents. Includes seasonal lecture graduate teaching assistants, and faculty service officers, but excludes academic staff on leave, librarians, administrative and professional officers, and non-teaching graduate assistants.

Sources: Data on weekly student hours and lecture section sizes from the Data Book 1975-76, Office of Institutional Research and Planning, The University of Alberta, November, 1976. Data on full-time equivalent staff and net operating budget courtesy of the Faculty of Arts.



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