

# INCORPORATING THE UNIVERSITY

Is there a danger in the link between the business community and universities? *The University Means Business* is a new book by York professors Howard Buchbinder and Janice Newson, which specifically deals with this question. In the book, the authors trace the history of Canadian universities, and explore the various images that society associates with them. *Excalibur's* Howard Kaman recently spoke to professor Buchbinder about the book and the state of universities today.

**EXCALIBUR:** What made you and Professor Newson decide to write this book?

**BUCHBINDER:** I think, initially, our interest emerged because we both are past chairpeople of the York Faculty Association, and it was really out of our working in the union that we became very much aware, in a new sense, about academic work. One of the things that struck us was that, although academics are often very knowledgeable about all kinds of things, we tend somehow to . . . see the academic world in which we work less as a workplace than perhaps other people will, because in many ways the research and work we do is very individualized and the teaching we do is localized in classes. So the things that happen in the institution that affect our work life as academics tend to be things which we don't focus on too much. I think our experience in The Faculty Association directed our attention to those kinds of things. We got quite interested in that and have used academic work as a window on what's happening in the university.

**EXCALIBUR:** How has the public's perception of universities changed over the years?

**BUCHBINDER:** The term we use in the book is this notion of the "visions" of the university. Not visions in an abstract, kind of visualized sense, but rather visions in the sense of a blueprint. And the university is an institution which has always interacted with the society around it. If you look at the last thirty years or so, what you see is a shift. For example, during the 1960's, where you had a situation with a lot of economic growth and expansion, in Ontario the universities went from five to a system of fifteen. In a very short period of time there was a rapid and immense expansion. The notion of the university in that period was what we'd call the "liberal" university. It was committed to accessibility, open to as wide a range of students as possible. It was committed to all kinds of innovations, like interdisciplinary studies, and new ways of approaching these kinds of things. They were hiring lots of people, creating new universities.

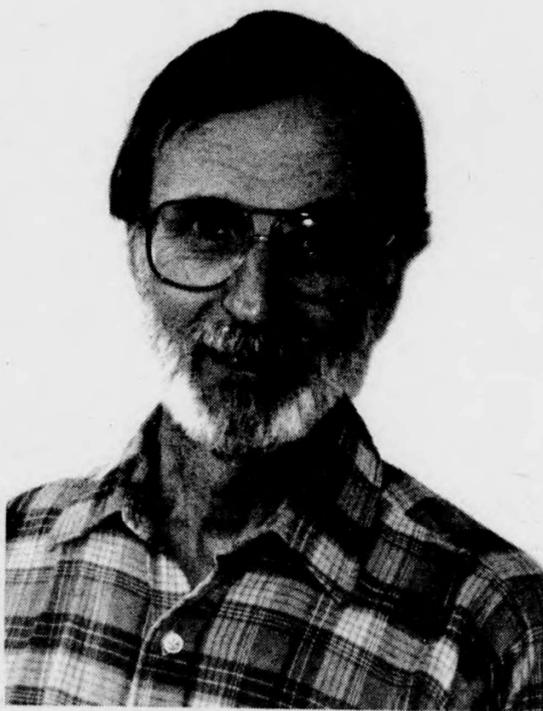
In the mid-70's there was an economic crisis, and a lot of contraction. We went through a period of underfunding that we really haven't totally come out of yet. During that period, the vision of the university changed from the liberal vision to one where there were many questions raised about the issues of accessibility. You had people talking about standards getting too low. Excellence was a word that was used a lot. "We've got to restore the university to excellence because it has lowered its standards." That's the lingo for "We've admitted too many people. We haven't been discriminating enough. We have to admit fewer people and do away with wide-ranging programs like Women's Studies and things like that." The university has to become more of a tool also to aid the economy, so that the whole shift in the vision changed from the liberal one to the university as an economic tool, and also, the university as much more elite and meritocratic place.

**EXCALIBUR:** Is this the image that prevails today?

**BUCHBINDER:** Now, we're into a new vision of the university: "the service university." That's a term that's been coined by the Science Council of Canada where the university now needs to become a servant of the private sector. In fact, the university has to do research and development for the private sector. It has to be involved in technology transfer to meet the needs of high tech, and it has to adjust itself to this new kind of rule.

**EXCALIBUR:** Do you think that the policy of accessibility has made entrance into universities too easy, and that standards should be higher?

**BUCHBINDER:** I don't think there is anything wrong with the policy of accessibility. The standards have never been thrown



out the window. The question is whether the role of the university is one which is to deal with issues like social transformation, with issues like trying to educate the broadest possible group of people, or whether it's a narrowly focused institution which only takes a small group of people and eliminates others. It seems to me that the policies of accessibility were very good and very important. While I think I would favour policies of much more accessibility, and York is one of the universities that has tried to maintain that, I think that we're into a whole different atmosphere now. And so, the problem is only that the university itself is changing.

**EXCALIBUR:** Is the problem of underfunding solved by corporate involvement in the university?

**BUCHBINDER:** It's not that there isn't money; it's where money is put. In other words, during the period of contraction, the social services-universities, health care facilities and so on-were all cut back. It was the public sector that there were cutbacks in. During that period, it is possible to argue that the government was more interested in putting money into the private sector, to try their point of view, and generate more economic well-being. So the priorities changed. In the period where there was a lot of money, more of it went to the universities.

**EXCALIBUR:** What are some of the reasons for corporate involvement in the universities?

**BUCHBINDER:** Well, it's a very complicated problem. I think that on the face of it there's a lot of argument that the universities need to be more involved in research and development. Canada has been seen to lag behind in terms of the amount of money it puts into research and development compared to its trading partners. There's been more pressure recently from a number of institutions like the Science Council of Canada that one way of providing the needs for the new age of high tech, biotechnology and microtechnology is for the universities to provide a much more active role vis-a-vis the private sector in the creation of technology and transfer of that technology to the private sector. That, in turn, would bring funds into the universities. So the argument is made that it's a way of getting more funds for the universities, but also that the universities need to play this kind of role. Now, that role as it's defined by most of the corporations is (guided by) the need for research which leads to new products. There's a real emphasis on applied kinds of research.

**EXCALIBUR:** How will the Mulroney-Reagan free trade agreement affect universities?

**BUCHBINDER:** I think that the issue around free trade would be whether the mold of universities would begin to adjust itself; not to the kind of mold we have in Canada, but to the private mold that we have in the United States. The Canadian tradition, for all kinds of reasons, is a public one. The history of the

universities here is that they were secularized, where many of them came from religious backgrounds. I think there will be a lot of pressure against that with much more privatization. So, from that point of view, there could be a big impact.

**EXCALIBUR:** What is the most common misconception about the role of the university in society?

**BUCHBINDER:** I think there's a public debate around universities going on now, which really gives a picture of the university that is incorrect, or misleading; and that is a place where you have students that are pretty slack in what they do and professors that don't do very much and are protected by tenure . . . living off a kind of sinecure. That's the sort of image, it seems to me, that has been projected a lot in the media.

**EXCALIBUR:** Is this solely the media's image? How could it be changed?

**BUCHBINDER:** I think that there's a real dialogue that's got to take place. It seems to me that it's not only the media because one of the things that's happened in recent years with underfunding is that there has been a lot of pressure on the university to change. One way of getting the university to change is to create this kind of image.

For example, tenure. The tenure is not only a defense against the problem of a professor who is fired or reprimanded for speaking out on something, or for doing research which goes against established standards. It's also protection against the market. In other words, if you have a situation where there's less in the way of Greek studies now or Medieval History or something else you can't just close up a department. Without tenure, there's a good deal more managerial flexibility. If you're going to orient the university into the corporate model . . . say what we need, for instance, are more molecular biologists and fewer social scientists, then we (have to) get rid of social scientists and hire more biologists. If you don't have tenure, you can begin to do those kinds of things. It gives more "flexibility," but you don't end up with a university.

(In addition), I think in the framework of an economy (which is experiencing) hard times, where there is a lack of money, if you can say, well, these institutions aren't doing as well as they should be; they have to be more efficient; they have to operate better; you (will) justify the short-fall in funds. "It's not our fault for not giving them enough. It's their fault because they're not using it well enough."

**EXCALIBUR:** Taking into account the various images you've described, how would you describe the divisions within today's university?

**BUCHBINDER:** What we suggest in the book is that the university is an incredibly complex place and there are a number of intramural struggles that go on within the university. For example, the faculty itself is divided in ways that I've already talked about, between those who would see the university as following along in this "pursuit of excellence," if you will, and those who see the university as being more accessible to society as a whole. So, there's that kind of a division.

We've had another division that's emerged over the years as the management or administration of universities has become more and more centralized. One of the things that's occurred is that there's been more and more tension between faculty and management in terms of who runs the university. One of the things that happened during the period of underfunding was that many faculty associations unionized. With unions, you had a more adversarial flavour within the universities, but at the same time, the unions were necessary to protect the interests and the work of faculty. Another struggle that emerged from that was the kind of tension that could exist between a Faculty Association that's concerned with terms and conditions of employment and a Senate, which is concerned with academic policy. What's the difference? For example, is tenure and promotion a matter of academic policy or is it a matter of terms and conditions of employment? These are all struggles which take place within the university and between the various groupings within it.

**EXCALIBUR:** Is the university an accurate representation of a "society in miniature"?

**BUCHBINDER:** Well, the university is an institution in an organizational framework that certainly reflects what is happening in the society around it. So, in that sense, it's certainly a part of that society. It's not a society unto itself, although at times we like to think we are. So the things we've been talking about are responses to what's been going on outside.

**EXCALIBUR:** Would you agree that a university is meant to be a training ground for dealing with reality?

**BUCHBINDER:** Yeah. That's right. But not without tension. A good example of that is when staff have been on strike. A lot of students and faculty get upset and say this is somehow hurting the students. The question does come up: if the university is part of the "real world" then, isn't labour relations and the conditions under which a faculty and staff work of concern to students? Or should they be protected from those realities? The only power a strike has, in any unit, is if it interferes with the ongoing functioning of that unit. If it does interfere, then whose interests are hurt? Among the students there are divisions of opinion, aren't there? There are students who are very upset about it taking place and there are students who support it. So there's no unified response to it. The things we're talking about in the book would indicate that the university isn't apart from the society.

**EXCALIBUR:** Will the role of the university be changing in the future?

**BUCHBINDER:** What we've been describing, I think, is that it is changing. What we see is a university in transition. There are major developments going on within universities and we're trying to document some of that. What it will look like ultimately depends on the kind of struggle that ensues, and how it gets resolved.