

A BREATH OF LIFE

By: Dave McCurdy

Imagine, if you can, a university close to Edmonton which emphasizes education and personal fulfillment rather than the mass-production of depersonalized robots tailor-made for the unemployment rolls. Imagine a university which emphasizes personal contact between student and professor rather than teaching the greatest number of people possible with a minimum of effort. Imagine a university which emphasizes informal learning at the student's own initiative rather than from formal lectures. Imagine a university which gives the student considerable freedom in choosing his own course of study rather than subjecting him to rigid course requirements.

Heard enough? Figure it's just another idealist shooting off his mouth about some future Utopian society? Well, if Athabasca University ever gets off the ground, you may have to eat your pessimism.

Athabasca University will be Alberta's fourth university, and will be located in St. Albert. Dr. T.C. Byrne, the university's president, figures it will commence operation around 1975, with an initial enrolment of about 2000. Most important of all, though, it will, at least temporarily, incorporate a system of learning new to the field of Alberta post-secondary education.

One of the basic features of Athabasca is that it will concentrate entirely on undergraduate arts and science programs, with graduate studies and professional schools being excluded. Also, the university will emphasize teaching rather than research.

This is the result of one of the major assumptions made by the Athabasca powers-that-be— that there are in Alberta many students interested in pursuing a course of study in the arts and science who would like to do so in an environment different from that of conventional universities. Such an environment would feature close contact between student and professor; an informal, spontaneous method of learning; and great student responsibility in deciding his own course of study.

In the Athabasca model, lectures as such will be optional; in many cases they will cease to exist. The emphasis will instead be on having the student do research on his own, using the professor as an aide and general mentor rather than as virtually the sole source of knowledge. Such use of the professors will be accomplished by the use of tutorials, which will be discussions rather than lectures. It is hoped that these tutorials will provide inspiration, leaving the actual communication of information to other means.

Because the student will be left on his own to a great extent in obtaining information, the library will assume great importance— in fact, Dr. Byrne hopes that at Athabasca the library concept will be expanded in such a way that the library will become the central learning resource of the entire university. It will include much more than just books— it will include non-print materials which some students will find highly valuable, and it will try to benefit students by arranging print and non-print materials into organized learning packages emphasizing the major topics of discipline.

The basic unit of the university will be the module or college. Each module will contain about 650 students and 25–30 faculty members of varying interests and from various disciplinary areas. Thus the original university will consist of three such modules. The faculty-student ratio will be kept constant at 25–1.

Because the modules will be heterogeneous in member interest, the university will tend to emphasize interdisciplinary study, including study in some areas which heretofore have not been concentrated upon by post-secondary institutions.

The enrolment number of 650 for each module was decided upon, says Dr. Byrne, because "it enables the modules to achieve some measure of intimacy among their members, while at the same time providing each module with a fair cross-section of the university community and allowing the modules to operate in a reasonably economical manner."

The module will, then, replace the traditional department as the basic unit of the university, but with a very important distinction: all the Athabasca modules will be similar in size, and all will represent a cross-section of the university community in terms of field of study. Consequently, if and when the university grows, it will grow by simply adding more modules, rather than by enlarging the modules already existing.

"This module concept," says Dr. Byrne, "will enable the college to maintain its original intimate, interdisciplinary nature even if it grows to a large size. This is an advantage not enjoyed by most universities,

some of whose departments often become unmanageably large. It is important to remember, though, that the university need not grow any larger than its original size of 2000 students.

Within each module, the students will choose their programs of study in consultation with their professors. Dr. Byrne expects it will take time— "at least one semester" — for students to find out what direction they want to take in their studies; until they have reached some sort of decision in that regard, they will be "feeling the university out" to see what it has to offer them.

The university will concentrate on four general areas— humanities, communications, the human community (which includes the social sciences), and environmental problems involving the natural and physical sciences.

The one major new area involved here is that of communications, which will link written and spoken language and involve such areas as the media and their uses, the psychology of communication, mathematics, computing science and other linguistic disciplines.

One of the major interests of Athabasca will be involvement in the community. It is expected that, in their course of study, many students will venture out into the field to better understand the problems of the community and to see how they can fit into the community and help it solve those problems. In this respect Athabasca will be something like a trades college in that it will try to prepare the student for some sort of worthwhile vocation in the community, be it in business, industry or government. Dr. Byrne feels that "work in the community will greatly increase the student's usefulness in whatever vocation he takes up after graduation from university."

In order to help the student adapt to his community after graduation, Athabasca University will offer an optional fourth year of study after the first three years have been completed. Such a fourth year would provide the student with an opportunity for intensive work in almost any field he chooses — be it preparation for integration into some field employment, or preparation for graduate study or entry into a school of some sort (such as law, medicine, or dentistry). "In fact," comments Dr. Byrne, "we hope to leave the fourth year program almost entirely up to the student. It will offer him a wonderful opportunity to concentrate on something he is interested in, whatever that may be. One of the major possibilities would be work of some sort in the community, but we have no intention of restricting it to just that. I'm sure students will be able to make up their own minds as to what they want to do with their fourth year."

Dr. Byrne expects that initially Athabasca students will not differ greatly from their counterparts at the

University of Alberta. Like U of A students, they will generally be 18 - to - 24 year-old residents of the Edmonton area, and will be graduates of the area's high schools. Many of them will not have made a vocational choice at the time they enter university. This is where Athabasca comes in.

"However," says Dr. Byrne, "before long, we may find that Athabasca attracts a totally different group of people than the clientele of U of A. We will attract students who find that Athabasca's particular mode of operation suits their unique need. Who knows, this may be a totally different group of people than the group that attends other universities.

"The important thing is that Athabasca will attract people who have particular needs at some stage of life which they feel we can fulfill. So we may become a sort of 'drop-in centre' for people who come to university for short or long periods to become more knowledgeable, to seek a career change, to add or substitute new dimensions to their personal lives, or to stay mentally alert and 'up with the times' as they grow older."

Dr. Byrne, a sixtyish man who was formerly deputy minister of education in the provincial government, exudes cautious optimism in the potential of Athabasca University. However, he is not kidding himself. "Many universities have started out as departures from the normal type of university and have had to gradually revert to that 'normal type'. Such a change is often brought about by faculty who become dissatisfied with the lack of research possibilities at such a university; it is sometimes brought about by students who wish to pursue a more 'usual' method of learning in university; and it is sometimes brought about by pressure from the community in which it is situated, when the community wishes to have a more conventional university within its bounds, and will not co-operate with the university's aims. A good example of this is York University in Toronto. It started out as a 'model' university, but has now become a university like all the rest of them because of pressure from within and without. There is, of course, a very distinct possibility that the same thing will happen to Athabasca; we'll just have to wait and see what happens. I personally am hoping that Athabasca will be able to remain unique.

"We're hoping that the community will see it has much to gain by co-operating with our plans. We believe that graduates of Athabasca University will be well equipped to make a valuable contribution to their society through the unique education they will receive at Athabasca.

"The main thesis of Athabasca is that a small college can become successful if sufficient support is available not only from personnel and systems, but from society at large as well."



This is Athabasca University, and if the provincial government has anything to do with it, these imposing edifices you see in the fore-ground will likely be the total extent of the new campus.