

editorial

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graphic by Aaron Ber

Are students just grist for skills mills?

The federal government is taking initiatives that could drastically change the way students are educated in this country.

Our educational system works on the idea of a well rounded, interdisciplinary education that teaches skills which are adaptable and flexible. It also works on the premise that not only do universities produce future employees, but thinking citizens as well.

But the federal government spent \$19 million on a report released this month that says universities should take a "complete change of direction", and focus learning only on job training and market demands. In other words, it wants universities geared towards "results" and away from "process".

Why are government officials advocating this?

Businesses are telling the government they are tired of spreading their resources thin. Companies would rather put money into one program, at one university, that is specialized to meet their needs, rather than a number of them. It would save time, centralize their resources and make them a more influential benefactor.

J.R. D'Cruz, a professor at the University of Toronto and a member of the committee that developed the federal report known as the Prosperity Initiative has said, "Right now we are encouraging mediocrity. You don't build excellent institutions by spreading your national resources evenly, you do it by specializing." In other words, resources should be focused on one "super" school that offered a high prestige degree.

In this model, students are considered a mobile population who will migrate from anywhere in the country to a specific location to attend their program of choice.

It only makes sense that businesses want to use universities to train future employees. A small degree of them actually spend money training their own and those that expect universities to do it seem to want more of a say on how it's done.

"Employers continue to complain that students are not ready for work and not familiar with the technologies they will use on the job," the federal report says.

On the other hand, York President Susan Mann keeps reassuring us there is nothing to worry about. In an interview earlier this year Mann told excalibur:

"This is true until you listen to the business people who say 'will you please send us graduates who can think and read and write, and we'll train them when we get them'.

"The government at the moment is interested in technological things, and things they think are going to be spurs to the economy. And eventually you'll get another government that will recognize that just generally bright, imaginative people with eyes and ears open to all sorts of things are what spur an economy. Those kind of youngsters tend to come from a liberal arts background."

Both Mann and the report are missing the point. Both responses beg the question, why are governments allowing private businesses to set the agenda for education in the first place? The government is telling businesses they can buy the privilege of influencing the system being used to educate people in this country.

Arthur Krugar, an economist and director of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) warns against overemphasizing job training. Closer ties to private business could risk:

- Universities turning into "skills factories" while doing little to achieve real economic improvements for students graduating into a recession,

- Training students for specific skills that may become out of date once they graduate into a dramatically shifting market,

- Leaving the humanities and the pure sciences suffering because they don't provide a quick enough financial return.

If the government follows through on the initiatives outlined in the report, schools could be offered up as sacrificial lambs to corporations, placing them at the mercy of the marketplace. Future employers could play a greater hand in defining and setting the terms of education rather than students and educators.

How much money has the federal government spent to ask students what they want from their education? PM

• After months of exhaustive research, here it is: *excalibur's* second-annual ranking of Canadian magazines. Last year's ranking brought howls of protest from publishers, who called us "not elitist enough" and "a rag." So this year, to make things more fair, we've subdivided Canada's 'zines into three categories. And rest assured, we've used the latest scientific survey methods and teams of glassy-eyed experts to determine exactly what's best for you.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Category 1: Interesting magazines with lots of neat feature articles

- 1) *This Magazine*
- 2) *NOW Magazine*
- 3) *Borderlines*
- 4) *Canadian Forum*

Category 2: More specialized interesting magazines

- 1) *Fuse Magazine*
- 2) *Our Schools Our Selves*
- 3) *Canadian Women's Studies*
- 4) *CineAction*

Category 3: Boring and sycophantic "comprehensive" magazines

- 1) *Saturday Night*
- 2) *Chatelaine*
- 3) *Canadian Living*
- 5) *Maclean's*

• **Mann Watch:** In case you missed it, *The Toronto Star* profiled York president Susan Mann this past Sunday. Their headline called her "well-suited for big job," but appeared over a photo of an incongruous-looking Mann dressed in her presidential robes while kicking up her heels with a lycra-attired dancercise class.

The *Star*, identifying her as "Sue," opened the story by describing how she tripped and stumbled during an inauguration ceremony last week. Friends call this "classic Mann," the *Star* reports.

Mann explained the incident: "Yeah, I tripped. The steps are all squishy there and ha, ha, maybe we need new buildings up here? My family was all in the second row. I reached over to touch one of them, and that threw me off balance."

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an excal supplement

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excalibur

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excalendar

Thursday, Nov 19
 Production meeting at 1:30 pm
 Staff meeting at 5 pm

All events in the *excalibur* office

Piece of mind:

"It's kind of serious if we have parents complaining as well as students."
 — Clubs Coalition Chair Judith Lewis reacts to complaints about a campus poster.