

# Do you feel unmotivated at

by Stuart Mackay

In these excerpts from the Students' Union's submission to the Senate Commission on University Purpose, SU RESEARCHER Stuart Mackay looks at what motivates students to want to learn, and how the U of A measures up as a center of learning.

"Curiosity is the very basis of education and if you tell me that curiosity killed the cat, I say only the cat died nobly."

- Arnold Edinborough,  
Columnist and public speaker  
in the convocation address,  
University of Ottawa,  
October 1962

If we were asked what the purpose of the university should be and we were told to limit our response to one sentence, we might say that the purpose of a university should be to encourage and facilitate learning.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

- Charles Dickens, from  
*A Tale of Two Cities*

At its best, a university community of scholars bound together above all by a common commitment to learning. It is then a place where dedicated, enthusiastic scholars teach and learn in an atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect. Such a university values and encourages independent thought and scholars there learn not just facts and professional skills but as well, the principles themselves of intellectual inquiry. At its best, the university is a place where students can participate in the cultural, political, and social life on campus in order that, as individuals, they can evolve and grow not just in intellectual and professional terms, but in what may be called social terms as well.

The University of Alberta is in many respects just such a place. A university at its worst, on the other hand, is populated by disinterested teachers and disenchanted students, both of whom play the academic game well enough to get by but little more. On such a campus, mediocre effort is, in fact, enough to get by. Nevertheless,

the grade has become supreme and, in effect, whether or not students actually learn the material at hand has become irrelevant. It is as well a place where students can go in order to stay out of the job market for awhile and it is where students learn facts and vocational skills and little else. Finally, it is a place where many students question the relevance of their being there but don't feel they have any options.

The University of Alberta is clearly a university at its worst in some respects too.

We can say that there seems to be three relatively distinct types of reward which an individual can gain through learning at a university:

- 1) Self-reward — the work is of itself (intrinsically) meaningful and/or enjoyable to the individual.
- 2) Institutional reward — on condition that the individual learns, he or she receives, where applicable, accreditation, or salary and benefits, or even possible, tenure.
- 3) The recognition, respect and approval of others (colleagues, superiors, peers, friends, family, etc.) — again on condition that one does the necessary work to merit such esteem.

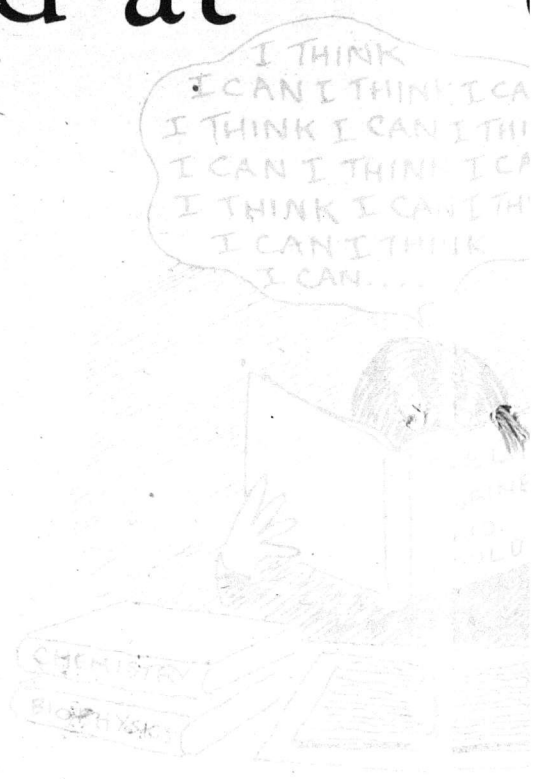
## Without counselling, students may not be aware of the full range of post-secondary options...

When we described a university at its best, above, we were describing a university where all scholars were highly motivated to learn. When we described a university at its worst, we were describing a university where no scholars were motivated to learn.

The University of Alberta is, in reality, a little of both and somewhere in between these extremes.

How do we explain the existence of a significant number of poorly motivated students at the University of Alberta? If we accept that the level of motivation in students tends to roughly correspond to the level of rewards available, why do some students feel poorly rewarded by learning at the University of Alberta? If we say further that the purpose of this University is to encourage and facilitate learning, then this University community should be concerned when the University fails to do so.

It would be difficult to enunciate all the reasons why some students might not feel rewarded by studying at the University of Alberta. We do wish, though, to discuss certain explanatory factors which seem particularly significant.



1) Some students registered in programs appropriate to them.

It seems evident to use that some programs which are truly appropriate or relevant too often, students seem to be meeting social university at all and perhaps by registering.

In fact, university is only one post-secondary Alberta. For that matter, post-secondary education not represent the only places where people advance themselves. They are simply colleges where people can learn certain specific skills or fields.

It seems to us, though, that the university is more prestigious than other types of education and, unfortunately, that a university education qualify oneself for an interesting, well-paying job.

It has come to our attention that certain students at the University of Alberta receive their first day of counselling on their first day of registration. One of the reasons that students make inappropriate program choices: students very often don't receive guidance or counselling.

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