

# “Students are neither children nor barbarians.”

## The case for parity

The assumptions underlying this discussion are at radical variance with the conventional wisdom concerning the nature of York and other institutions of higher education.

It is posted that: the university is not now primarily a place of freedom but rather a place of conformity, authoritarianism, training rather than learning for the vast majority of students; that staff are not employed primarily for their qualities as “helpers in the learning process”, but rather on the basis of the conservative criteria of a classic guild whose major purpose is self-preservation and self-perpetuation; that the primary interest of most staff members is not teaching but status, salary, comfort and professional advancement; that students are neither children nor barbarians to be civilized, but are sensitive, thinking adults, whose range of experience is different than, often more limited in range than, that of the teacher, but is not necessarily less valuable in the academic world for all that; that the “utilitarian” vision of the university held by some faculty as the ultimate horror is in fact an accurate description of the socializing role played today by the University.

### The mask of academic freedom

The rhetoric of academic freedom and academic competence is a mask for just this sort of “community of scholars.”

While the present university is the capstone in the process of training elites and their professional sidemen, and inculcates values which tend to alienate the “properly finished” student from the bulk of the population, the good university must be democratic in aim and form.

Its product should be a man with healthy (i.e. not elitist) attitudes toward all of his fellow citizens; with a capacity to think critically about his environment and his society, and to analyze the role which his work plays in helping or hindering the improvement of that milieu.

He should be a man who never takes the constituted authority's professions of wisdom at face value when he has the time, the interest, the personal resources to check up on its assertions.

He should, in short, be a free and equal member of a community of free and equal men (equal with respect to political power; not to personal qualities.)

He should also be a man capable of performing some specialized social role with a measure of competence at least equal to that demanded by society as a minimum criterion for useful fulfillment of that role with the exception of teachers, and some researchers whom the university does specifically train, however, university graduates should in general be equipped with a talent for learning about and adapting to their chosen profession's job requirement, rather than given specific job skills.

Given such a prescription for a good community, there arises the question of the relationship of student involvement in teaching, hiring and promotion to the achievement or approximation of such a goal. In the ensuing

discussion, equality with staff is assumed as a minimum requirement for the creation of the proper learning environment.

On almost all committees — from York's senate to the faculty of arts councils — majority student control could be justified on the grounds that the students alone are primarily interested in the creation of an environment where learning how to learn gets top priority. At least a parity position is also required to destroy the colonial mentality which the entire structure of education has up to now created in students (and most adults).

Free and equal men exist only in a context of equally shared power to shape the environment. After a transitional period in which the entire educational atmosphere is transformed, and teachers again become interested in teaching, the principle of equality of every staff member to every student will be perfectly acceptable.

In the transitional period, the principle of equality is best expressed through the instrument of parallel structures. The dangers of development of free men posed by a student elite are nearly as great as those created by the elitism of the faculty; thus mere parity on decision-making committees must be rejected. Joint-negotiating committees responsible to the two constituencies would work out details of agreements. This system is now in operation in PSA at Simon Fraser, in Social Science departments at Regina, in Political Science and Management at McGill.

### System of mutual peer education

The concept of a continuum of teachers and students proposed by Professor Etkin (a faculty member of U of T) is a fruitful one, so long as it does not lend to hierarchical patterns of human relationship. Teaching is, in fact, the best stimulus to learning. The best teacher (esp. in a tutorial role) is not an older student but one's peer, as experiments at primary and secondary levels have shown. Rather than extend the teaching assistant concept, which is not a very successful one, we should stimulate a system of mutual peer education under the guidance of an experienced senior specialist. This plan could be very usefully integrated with the Friedman-Aristol plan of giving students power to purchase their own education. Part of the purchasing power provided should be pay — as recognition for their teaching role vis a vis other students — while part must be subsidy (in the case of more costly courses) and part a loan. The Friedman plan of course requires elaborate safeguards to protect non-conforming students from governments. A grants commission on which students (or people directly responsible to them) had parity would go a long way to meeting this problem.

The power of appointment must devolve onto (1) policy committees based in the parallel principle and (2) ad hoc selection committees where decisions are made by representatives (rather than delegates) area.

There is no reason at all why students cannot get access to the same information presently available to staff on hiring com-

mittees — if the chairman and others with relevant information will provide it. Teaching ability most certainly can be assessed here — and there is an available student input from many other universities.

### A professor's past record

One of the disgraces of the present system is that while much of our hiring is done at prominent Ivy League and State Universities, in many of which highly respected and public student evaluations are published annually, those now in charge of hiring have apparently made no effort to find out what students thought at those institutions.

If the argument is advanced that a new professor would not want students to have a look at his dossier and we will thus lose good men, the response is that we must redefine what we mean by “good”. So much of the argument against student involvement in staffing repeated ad nauseum in briefs is based on the professor's unwillingness to be seen as a human being by his students.

We must demystify the teaching role and those who are unwilling to be judged by their actual rather than by their imagined qualities will have to be dispensed with. An analogy to colonial affairs could again be made: the white man took great pains never to appear in a human role before the natives.

In the case of promotions, the argument for equal involvement of students on a parallel structure basis is very strong. It is admitted by our most frank academics that they really know nothing about their colleagues' teaching performance. Yet the case against student involvement is usually based in arguments about the students' ability to judge one's professional contributions. This argument falls down, first, because the seniority and greater familiarity with research standards of certain students is overlooked; it is to be presumed that students, being, like staff, intelligent and concerned to put on a good show, will give a keen ear to the voices of the senior and graduate students among them who can help them to evaluate research and publications. In many cases, a mere reading of book reviews in professional journals would provide considerable enlightenment. The principle of collegiality, which is often invoked against student involvement, must simply be redefined.

Henceforth it will be necessary for faculty members to be able to get along as human beings with students as well as staff. Collegiality up to now has in any case often been used as an excuse for weeding out the non-conformist whose approaches to subject matter were often most stimulating to students. The truly destructive individual will be deprecated by students as well as faculty.

The argument that students will promote those who curry their favour seems based largely on the projection of guilt from old to young. The young are far less susceptible to the blandishments of apple-polishing than are numerous departmental chairmen and senior professors.

What has the professor to offer the student except a stimulating learning environment? Easy grading is more often regarded with contempt than with fondness, despite the myth reigning among the professoriate. Moreover — if we de-emphasize grades what has the professor left to offer but his creative faculties?

The most telling argument in favour of student involvement in hiring, promotion and tenure (if we retain it) is the far greater tolerance of the young for new and challenging ideas. While the professorial establishment has a vested interest in perpetuating the values and methodology demand for which is the source of its livelihood, students are interested only in approaches which appear to clarify the subject matter and bring it into a comprehensible context.

Adaptation to the rapidly changing world of ideas can only be assured by allowing students a key voice in shaping the curriculum of the future curriculum is made by personnel, as many have testified. If there is to be an argument about fads, let us at least be frank and acknowledge that the debate is merely about replacing the fads of the late “40s” and “50s” with those of the “70s”.

### Student involvement most important

Student involvement may be particularly important in the coming wave of furor over Americanization of Canadian campuses. There will certainly be stormy demands for more Canadians on the staff. The contemporary professoriate has tried to pretend there is no problem, while students are well aware that it is crucial. De-Americanization for the old guard will mean the refusal to hire young Americans or to promote recent additions to staff — and the debate is often not about that type of American; while students are apt to use their power to concentrate fire on the real threat — the Americans in tenured positions who have used their influence to de-Canadianize the Canadian university.

To sum up, the radical argument here presented is that to leave control of the teaching profession in the hands of the teachers leads to the dead-end of higher education — including the physical confrontations which have laid waste many American campuses.

That teachers have little interest in teaching and even less in the learning process is amply demonstrated. An American Political Science Association poll showed that teaching was the least of 10 factors considered relevant for promotion. Graduate schools, which train our professors, spend all their time professionalizing and none in inculcating approaches to teaching and learning.

Those who associate with professors on a basis of relative equality know that teaching is the last thing they discuss. Salaries, publications, status, vacations, tenure and retirement are uppermost in their conversations.

Students alone can save teaching for the taught, and make the university a place in which freedom, equality and the relevance to reality are permanent values.

(Adapted from Varsity)