

# THE FAILURE OF THE COLLEGES

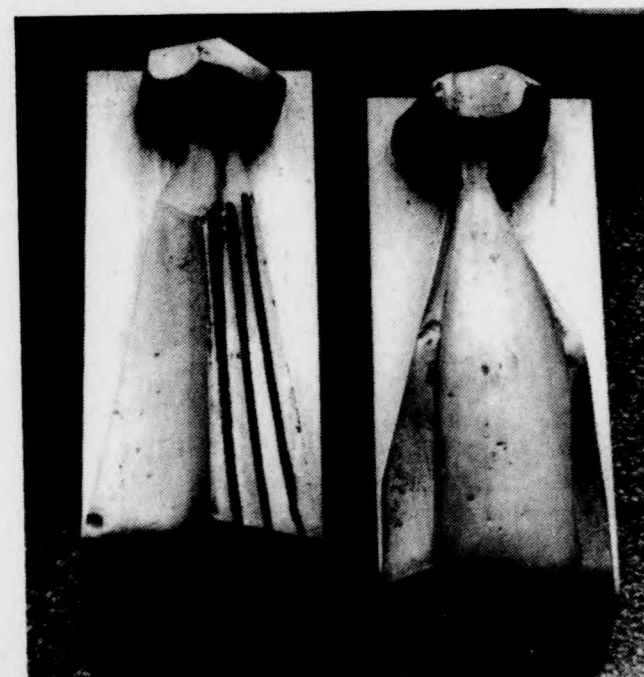
## THE NEED TO REFORM

York's college system has been a contentious issue ever since the university realized that its original Master Plan was unachievable. After years of debate, President Harry Arthurs will be releasing a document outlining his vision for the future of the college system. Though certain details have yet to be worked out, this discussion paper will essentially be the basis for the reforms. The entire process really started last January, when the President appointed Kenneth Hare, Provost of Trinity College at U of T, to examine the existing problems and make recommendation on how to improve the college system. The Report sparked a lot of debate within the York community, but every indication from the administration says that its principles will be the foundation of the President's proposals. In the following feature, Excal's Stacey Beauchamp and James Flagal look at the Hare Reports, its criticisms, and the problems currently plaguing the colleges.

Many York students are probably not aware of the drastic changes to the university college system which President Harry Arthurs will be announcing this week. Then again, many students probably don't even care. But that's all one ever hears around campus; how apathetic students are about what goes on in their university. Simply accusing the overall student attitude for this problem is not just futile, it's also unfair. Certain structural problems within our present college system have simply been ineffective in integrating the students into the York community.

The signs of these failures are everywhere. Ask any student hanging around Central Square what college they are affiliated with, and most of the time they hesitate in their response. "Calumet . . . I think." Next thing you know, they're digging into their wallet in order to check their York ID card and see if they were in fact right. Then ask them if they have attended any college functions lately. "Lately? I have never even attended a function in all the three years since I've been attending York. What the hell are colleges for anyhow?"

The sentiments expressed by this York student are not new; in fact they are the impetus for the reforms



The colleges have historically been very autonomous from the rest of the university administration, and the reforms hope to centralize their function.

Photos by Babak Amirfeiz

which the system is about to experience. Somehow, over the years, the college system lost its main purpose. It never managed to live up to the potential which its founding fathers felt the system originally had.

According to the Hare Commission, a report on the colleges conducted last spring, the original concept of York University was a "small unitary institution offering a new and richer alternative to the rigidities of the University of Toronto and its peers in size and ambitions." In simple terms, the college system was supposed to offer students a smaller forum within the context of a larger university and make it easier for people to interact and become involved in campus life. Students would have something tangible to identify with, rather than feeling as though they were just another number at York University.

According to York Provost, Tom Meininger, "York achieves its best sense of community when it achieves it in a college setting, but the current problem is that it is only a real opportunity for a small percentage of the population." That small percentage is largely resident students. For some reason, the college system simply has not been effective in integrating the vast majority of York students into the campus community. A survey conducted by Professor Michael Ornstein of the Institute for Social Research demonstrates this reality.

In his study, conducted in March of 1987, Ornstein concludes that "In the aggregate, commuter students have very serious dissatisfactions with the college system." On a scale of one to nine, with nine being the most favourable rating, only 8% of commuter students polled gave the college system a rating of eight or nine. This is in stark contrast to resident student responses: 44% of those polled gave their college experience a rating of eight or nine.

There was also a large difference in the contact which commuter students had with college officials as compared to resident students. According to the study, "92% of commuter students had no contact at all with the masters of their college," while only 50% of those resident students polled said they also had no contact with their master. And these disparities are consistent right down to contact with other college members. Whereas almost all resident students polled said they often interact with other college members, "Nearly one-third of the commuter students had no contact with other students at their college."

Another example is college activities. According to survey, a total of 80% of commuter students did not take part in any college activities, whereas only 45% of resident students elected to opt out of such activities.

But Ornstein explains that the overall rating which commuter students give to colleges is not because they refuse to get involved. As he put it, "It is possible to make very little use of a service and be completely satisfied with it." He concluded that, "Commuter students' low ratings of the colleges are not simply the results of apathy; there is genuine unhappiness with the colleges." And Ornstein also noted that if colleges are going to be successful in attracting more commuter students, then they must concentrate on first-year students. According to his findings, students, both commuter and resident, will be consistently active in campus life throughout their post-secondary career, so it is critical to get them involved in campus activities in their first year at York.

Yet the college system has lost its ability to attract large numbers of commuter students. The reason behind this and other failures of the college system was largely historical; it never developed along the lines its creators planned for it.

The decision to adopt a college system was made in 1961-62, and since that time it became a definite part of the planning stages for York campus. It was envisioned that the entire campus would revolve around the college system, with a central administration and student government coordinating the different constituencies. According to the report, however, the colleges were conceived long before the students who were to use them attended the university. As a result, they were built "in accordance with the frankly nostalgic preferences of the organizing group." And perhaps that's where the system's first major flaw existed; the idea looked great on paper, but in reality it simply could not cope with changing trends and still fulfill its original objectives.

How could the creators of the college system ever know that the government was going to place a construction moratorium on new physical facilities over Ontario universities? York's original Master Plan called for the establishment of 12 colleges, with room for a total of 15,000 students. Today, over 31,000 students are crammed into eight colleges on the Keele Street campus, a situation which York's forefathers could never have anticipated. And in fact, as the Hare Commission Report demonstrates, the number of students becoming active participants in their colleges decreased as York grew. With the size of the student body expanding at such a rapid rate, and the absence of government funds to construct more buildings in order to accommodate this growth, the administration was forced to move some facilities into college space. Again, this was something which the creators of the college system had never envisioned. This prevented the fellows from having their offices within their designated college, and the Hare Commission felt that this weakened any "developing sense of collegiality."

This is why college system reforms are really long overdue. The campus has never constructed the physical facilities which the colleges required to fulfill their function and the student body grew far beyond the estimates which the system was suppose to accommodate. And so, a new definition and strategy for the colleges is desperately needed; one which recognizes the problems which the colleges face today, their shortfalls, and the facilities they will have at their disposal.

It was for this very reason that Dr. Ken Hare, Provost of Trinity College at the University of Toronto, was hired to head a commission devoted to studying the future role of non-faculty colleges at York. The commission also included York Professors Jane Banfield Haynes and John Saywell, and they began their hearings last January. The Hare Commission essentially recommended that the colleges be redefined to include "special cultural/intellectual identities." The authors feel that: the colleges should each be specialized; that new colleges should be built only when they can be combined with a residential space; that membership in a college should be voluntary, rather than mandatory (with the exception of first-year students); and that an "adequate income" for the colleges should be maintained.

Hare's suggestion that colleges affiliation should be entirely voluntary for all but new students was also recommended in the Gilmor Report, and the Student Relations Committee (SRC) Paper. The SRC which had commissioned Paul Gilmor, Provost of the University of Guelph, to study goals, funding and organization of student governments at York, recommended that students have a choice between joining either college or faculty-based student governments. Hare essentially incorporated the same recommendation, but for different reasons. According to the report, with such a policy in place the student would use the college more often, because he/she would look at belonging to a college a privilege, rather than an automatic occurrence.



A survey conducted by Professor Michael Ornstein says that only a very small percentage of commuter students are satisfied with the current college system.

In his critique of Hare, Professor Maurice Elliott, the Master of Winters College, said that the university has "many students who have neither intellectual nor cultural interests as they might be traditionally understood within a university." As a result, making college membership entirely voluntary will eliminate York's ability to "provide an environment which allows even one or two to surprise themselves." He does not denounce the concept, rather he is skeptical that the students will be able to receive enough information on the colleges to make an "intelligent" choice as to whether or not to belong to a college.

David Lumsden, Master of Norman Bethune College, is especially worried about the financial ramifications for colleges if a policy of voluntary affiliation were adopted. He fears that colleges would engage in "deleterious competition" in attracting new members, and that some may even lower fees in order to be more appealing to students. If faculty governments were set up, Lumsden says, the budgetary pie would be split even more among student governments, and in the end the campus would be left with organizations without the requisite funds to offer good programmes and services.

Another suggestion of the commission was the creation of "special identity colleges," which will have a closer relationship to the faculties, especially the Faculty of Arts. But Elliott feels that strengthening that

relationship would make the Faculty of Arts bigger than it is now, a move that would smother creativity among faculties. Elliott feels that college fellows now enjoy their college affiliation, largely because their activities are very separate from their departmental roles. Merging these roles, says Elliott, may discourage college fellowships.

Another problem with combining college and academic life, would be to discourage some students who wish to belong to a college, simply because that college is separate and distinct from their course of study. But Ross Rudolph, an assistant to the Dean of Arts feels that students identify themselves primarily with their programme of study. It would be beneficial and attractive to students if there were a closer association between colleges and student academic organizations. According to Rudolph, "York has outstanding programmes, but does not have associated activities. But the colleges have the budgets and the extra-curricular involvement. It would be a very good thing if we could bring these two things together, so that interests are complementary, not competitive."

The Commission believes that giving such identities to colleges will "provide a focus" for them and attract students who share a common interest. In fact, top officials inside the administration have hinted that this is the kind of plan which the President Arthurs will be announcing this week. The Report gives many sugges-

tions for such a system. For example, it recommends that a college be devoted to public affairs, another focusing on international and multicultural affairs, and another on arts. The report also recommends that colleges be set up strictly for first-year students, and another strictly for women. In addition, Hare suggests that the role of Calumet College be redefined.

The commission felt that since Calumet now lacks a residence and space for fellows, it is not being used to its full potential. It suggests that Calumet become a college for mature students, who are "not particularly attracted to any others." The commission feels that "colleges are at their best when they are genuinely interdisciplinary and culturally diverse." Elliott agrees with these approaches in principle, but insists that there should be a more careful discussion on the identities of the colleges.

The commission also points out that York has a very unique administrative hierarchy, with the colleges distinctly separate from the central administration of the university. Only recently have there been committees established which are comprised of administration, and college members. In all other ways, however, the colleges are extremely detached from the administrative structure of the university. The Deans were uninvolved in the colleges, and as a result college affairs "occupied little of their time or concern." In addition, administrators, vice-presidents, and their assistants have rarely had any real involvement in the college system.

In 1984, the decision was made to appoint a Provost whose "mandate was to initiate or develop student services both in cooperation with the colleges and independently, if appropriate." Now the Provost has become the only "formal link of the colleges to the central administration, save for the Presidential power to appoint masters of colleges." The commission found that the relationship between the Provost and the college masters has been a tense one. Some of that tension can be blamed on the fact that the masters had specifically asked for a vice-president in charge of college affairs, and instead, they got the Provost.

According to Elliott, even though the Provost was not exactly what the college masters wanted, they are still "better off many ways than they were four years ago." He, however, feels that improvements can still be made.

Furthermore, Hare recommends that a council, made up of college masters, Deans of Arts, Fine Arts, Science and members of the central administration, be integrated within the present hierarchy. According to the commission, the appointment procedure and function of masters should also be reformed. The President should appoint each master for a five-year term upon the advice of a committee of deans, department heads, and programme coordinators in Arts, Science, and Fine Arts. They should keep in mind at all times the special identity that their college holds.

Masters, says Elliott, should possess certain qualification in order to become a good leader to the college, and effectively deal with students and the administration.

Finally, the report suggests that fellows now show very little interest in their respective colleges. The masters were urged to screen fellows more thoroughly, and to choose them with the college identity in mind. It is not entirely the fellows' fault that they are not very involved, says Elliott. In fact, he further states that "given the way that the colleges have been treated, surely it is remarkable that fellows show any interest at all."

To most York students the terms master and fellow mean little. Few could identify their college master or fellows if they saw them on campus. But if York is going to develop a system which will truly integrate resident and commuter students alike into campus life, then masters and fellows will have to have higher profiles. The administration has already decided to side with Hare and focus their reforms on the college system while keeping it very much intact. Evidently, administrators believe that the system still warrants support, and that the SRC suggestion that faculty governments and organizations separate from the colleges would eventually weaken that system.

It's true that the principles of the college system, as envisioned by York's founding fathers, are admirable. But can they actually work in practice? So far the system has failed terribly in its efforts to ensure that the vast majority of students remember York for something more besides studying. Yet as these historic changes are being implemented, so few of us will be paying attention. Perhaps Ornstein is right when he says that the changes will only have an effect on first-year students. If that's the case, it will be years before we really know if the President's reforms are truly effective.