

U of A prof. says not enough attention paid to teaching

Prof: Brains are not being robbed

by Ann Grever

Dr. Alexander Matejko is a sociology professor at the U of A. For the past 15 years, Matejko has taught on campus. Gateway reporter Ann Grever recently interviewed Matejko regarding the recently released *The Great Brain Robbery*. Matejko also expressed opinions regarding the quality of education at the U of A and in Canada.

The controversial book, *The Great Brain Robbery*, written by three Canadian university professors, attacks the Canadian university system and every aspect from administration to the generally poor quality of students.

According to what you've said before and according to your notes on the subject of education you believe that education should be based on cooperation between teachers and students. In *The Great Brain Robbery* the authors attack on students' contributions would not do much to encourage this. They reject student evaluation, students getting to know their professors, calling it the buddy system, and they reject the students' ability to even choose their own courses. How do you feel about this?

I think there are two aspects in the mutual relationship between students and teachers at the university. One, of course, there must be a certain measure of good will on both sides, that teachers should have a good will to teach and, of course, it is always quite a problem because, traditionally, much more emphasis has been given to publication and research than to teaching. Therefore, there is a problem about how to motivate teachers to teach well.

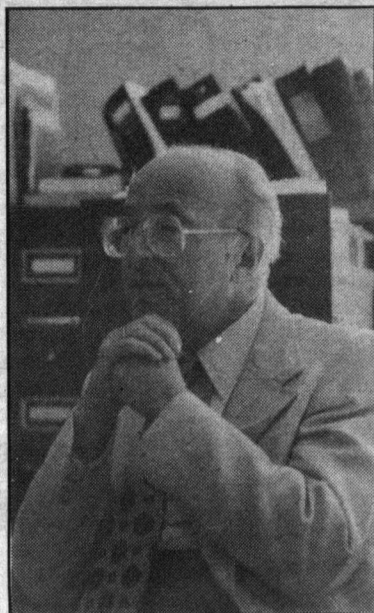
On the side of the students there is also a problem when they come to the university. We have to remember that students only pay one tenth of the cost and, therefore, it is very important for them to be motivated to really gain out of the university, which is a very expensive institution in terms of the social cost. Therefore it is extremely important to create a situation in which the student has a very strong motivation to learn at the university and not to just gain grades. I always compare bad education with the idea of the gas station, with the teachers being gas station attendants who put gas into the tanks of students - who come one after the other. I think this is a distortion of the whole idea of university learning. It should provide a very strong core of knowledge and skills which consist of a meaningful relationship between conceptualization and the execution of certain knowledge items. Any type of university education which doesn't give the basic elements of any skill, and is limited to just filling the tank is a bad education, as I understand it.

Where does publishing come into the question of good education?

Well, that is quite an important point. I can't imagine a good teacher without a considerable amount of study. I am not saying that publishing is the only proof of a teacher studying systematically, but it is an important part.

According to a Gateway article earlier this month, a Political Science professor, Dr. Leon Craig, circulated a letter stating good teaching goes unrewarded. What do you feel is the true situation at the U of A?

We have quite a good experience with the peer evaluation in my department. I think peer evaluation is a very well qualified opinion. On the other hand, I am very much in favour of evaluation by students, but I must say that the student evaluation should not be treated as the most valuable and important evaluation. I don't think as teachers we



Dr. Alexander Matejko

are here for some kind of cheap popularity among students. For me, what is really important is quality learning and this is not an easy thing. So I don't think that we are here just to be popular because we give good grades, or because we are good buddies. We are teachers and we should be like good coaches in sports. I mean that we should give people quality education. And if somebody doesn't like a given teacher, every student is free to drop the course.

About the situation of publishing at the university. If publishing is so hard to do and so expensive, according to *The Great Brain Robbery*, and professors under tenure are not obligated to publish, do professors avoid publishing here at the university?

I have, for example, last year published two books, ten articles, and 20 book reviews, and I have personally not found it at all difficult to publish. Of course you must be entrepreneurial to develop contacts with several journals and publishers, but I think it is, in general, more and more difficult to publish something because the publication basis remains the same and the number of professors has grown considerably in the past 20 years. Therefore teachers find it very difficult to pub-

lish. This is a serious problem, and I think that we should move to a new form of publishing such as computerized 'paper banks'. This is something that has already been experimented with. Instead of depending on expensive printing, we should depend much more on computerized paper banks.

Back to the subject of quality education, why are our diplomas no longer worth anything? Do you agree with *The Great Brain Robbery* that by raising tuition, abolishing tenure, establishing a core curriculum and reorganizing the university bureaucracy the universities will be saved from 'ruin'?

First of all I don't believe that the situation of the Canadian universities is that dramatic. We have tremendous resources. We have thousands of very good teachers. We have many educated students. We have very good libraries, including very fine film libraries. We have, as an example, accommodation which is much better than that in even developed countries. The problem is according to my mind that we don't pay enough attention to genuine quality teaching.

Would a core curriculum help that?

Definitely. Because without a core curriculum, the student more or less accidentally collects courses which, taken together, represent a chaotic basket, whereas a core curriculum is something which allows students to make a nice progress from basic to more sophisticated subjects.

You've mentioned chaotic course selection by students. Are they responsible for their bad education?

I don't blame students in this respect. I am rather inclined to blame people who are just not aware how important it is to help the student go through this very complicated way of study. And I think the medical students did a very nice work publishing this guide on medical studies, and we need such guides on many other programs in order to make it very clear to students how they can really succeed with the quality learning at the

university.

I think that it would be a great thing for our university if we introduced the tutorial system, which would help students gain some good professional guidance in the process of learning. I think that with all the resources we have at our university the potential for high quality learning is good.

So you don't have any problems with, as in *The Great Brain Robbery*, government funding the universities and professors being lazy and students mediocre.

I think we are obliged to take very seriously any criticism and the cheapest way is just to reject any criticism because it hurts us and it hurts our vested interest. Because it fits in well with our natural inclination for laziness. I am not interested in whether the type of diagnosis offered in the book is valid or invalid. I think any criticism which shows our potential weaknesses should be very seriously considered.

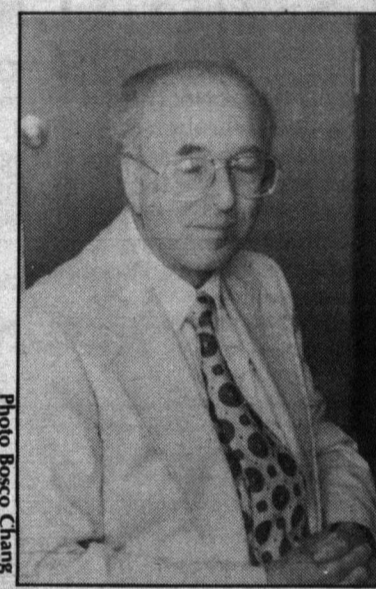
Do you think the book itself is a serious criticism of problems here at the university or do you think it is overly dramatic?

In the market society we usually do business shouting and I think this book is very much within our customs of a market society. They are shouting loudly in order for others to listen and whether it is good or bad, it is our tradition, and is exactly how innovations happen in our type of society.

About the whole viewpoint of the *Great Brain Robbery*, it wants the universities to go back to the good old days, when universities were elitist, they provided education to a few, and put out broadly educated, liberal arts based 'renaissance' people. Perhaps the reason for the dete-

rioration of university education is because they are clinging to old fashioned ideas of education which are extinct in today's highly specialized scientific and technological world.

I'd like to emphasize one point which I feel was not adequately emphasized in the book. We have a duty as teachers, students and administrators to give the best to achieve quality learning at our university. Of course, I agree that on one hand university should train people who would find application as experts, as specialists in various fields in the Canadian economy, but on the other hand, we have a duty to produce enlightened, responsible citizens and only a very good general background is able to provide this. Of course, there is not any return to the elitist model of education. But



"University is not an absolute right for everybody."

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