

York University's 25th Anniversary: Age of strife gives way to grades craze



Excalibur's Elliott Shiff continues his series on the history of York University. In this installment, the movement from the '60s era of protest to the current concerns of underfunding and overcrowding are examined.

The economic prosperity enjoyed by North Americans in the mid-'60s had a profound effect on university life. Campuses across North America became a focal point for challenges to the prevailing value and belief systems. Conceived during this volatile decade, York University was constantly adjusting to the many new demands that were being placed on the universities.

Professor Joan Stewart recalls that the mood of the times was reflected by student's views toward grading. "This was a little later than 1965 but there were a lot of people who didn't believe in grades. They were questioning a lot about the system. I was on an Arts committee at that time and we did a survey of classes of what kind of grading they would prefer and there were several choices. One was sort of like we have now, then there was the choice of fewer grades and the final alternative was no grades at all, and that was overwhelmingly voted for." Drawing a comparison over a span of less than 20 years, Stewart says, "You could do the same thing now and people wouldn't know what you were talking about."

Student concern over the relevance of classes and the teaching of sterile information led to one of the few organized revolts to ever take place at York University. In the 1968-69 curriculum, students were required to take at least one course in the humanities, as well as one social science, a natural science, and a course entitled "Modes of Reasoning." According to Stewart, "Modes of Reasoning had been taught for ages as introductory philosophy. They didn't have enough professors to teach it so it was one of the first courses to be taught by graduate students." Explaining the background to the ensuing protest, Stewart says, "I think it was badly taught and never really fully explained. A lot found it terribly irrelevant and they would not tolerate it as a compulsory course, so they



Government cutbacks forced students to go to extremes to draw attention to their plight in the late '70s.

Other widespread concerns on campus included the Vietnam War and an intense interest in Canadian nationalism. There was a great deal of anti-American sentiment on campus which was magnified due to the large number of American faculty on campus. Many of the faculty and graduate students were Americans who had left the US during the Vietnam war. Stewart recalls having grad students "roaring into my office day after day who were draft dodgers."

Deborah Hobson, although not a draft dodger, was one of the American faculty who came to teach at York during this period. In response to the anti-American sentiment on campus, Hobson had mixed feelings about the students' concern. "I was very sympathetic with the desire to Canadianize universities but on the other hand I felt somewhat annoyed about the form that it took," Hobson says, adding, "It was an anti-American sentiment but the reality in my field, the Classics, is that when I look at the traditional universities in Canada, it's

government's decision to invoke the War Measures Act in October of 1970. A rally was held around the flagpole in front of the Ross Building, attracting close to 1,500 students. "It was the only demonstration I have ever seen at York where people really did turn out," Stewart remembers.

York also had its share of unsuccessful demonstrations. Stewart recalls having a student who wanted very badly to organize a demonstration. At that time the Founders dining hall was the only place where students could eat. One evening the Board of Governors decided to throw its annual dinner for the full faculty (a practice that has since been discontinued) which meant that the students couldn't eat there. This particular student thought that this warranted a demonstration. According to Stewart, "He advertised all over the campus in order to get the demonstration started. However, the Board of Governors ordered a whole bunch of Kentucky Fried Chicken, and the students thought that was wonderful, so nobody remembered except him."

Almost immediately after Watergate, North America was plunged into the oil crisis, and suddenly the economic factor became a prime motivator. "In this short time we went from a class full of students who didn't care about grades to a group that were in a panic over their marks," Stewart says.

Clifford Jansen, a sociology professor, refers to the period between 1972-74 as "the lean years" during which people started dropping out of university in droves all over Ontario. York, still in its early years at the time, was particularly hard hit. "It was a very tense period here," Jansen says. "Everybody was coming up with their two cents worth on how to educate the students at York." Jansen and fellow sociology professor Paul Anisef were asked to come up with a proposal. The proposal that came out of their study was the winter/summer sessions which they saw as a necessity to accommodate the influx of foreign students who were used to a different timetable.

Jansen was also asked to complete another study, around this time period, on what students at York were concerned with. His conclusions indicated a dramatic turn-around within a very short span of time. Among Jansen's findings were that students were mainly concerned with matters directly relating to academic pursuits.

This sudden change in emphasis was also evident at the faculty level. Due to the large decrease in the student population at York there was now an overabundance of faculty. Jansen relates how during that period the BOG made a proposal to fire 160 professors but the major stumbling block was trying to decide who to let go. "If they got rid of the newer professors the older ones would have to teach enormous classes while if they fired some of the older ones they could greatly reduce their budgets." This, Jansen says, was the prime factor behind the creation of unions to campus; to protect the interests of the different inter-faculty groups who were not getting a great deal of direction from the central administration.

This lull in enrolment was then followed by a massive influx of students returning to the university system. "Eventually the students who thought a BA was useless found they could not find jobs, so they flocked back to the universities," Jansen says, "so that we have this overcrowding at York that we never had before." York was not able to accommodate the influx, and as a result, tutorials which used to have about 10 students were filled to the brim with 25. "To us that used to be a classroom," Jansen laments.

Jansen, who has been undertaking studies about students and their basic motivations and concerns at the university level, draws a comparison between makeups of York students over the years. "When I first came here we had very articulate students; students who wanted to participate in running things. Progressively we got to the point where they ended up running things. There were no students on the Senate, BOG, or faculty bodies but we opened all of that to them. However, the people who you open up these opportunities for are not the same ones who fought for it. They eventually graduate and new students come in and take the whole thing for granted."

The period of empty halls and classrooms at York was followed a few years later by the overcrowding era. Between 1973 and 1978 the university went through radical shifts in enrolment. According to Jansen, the York students at this time were "illiterate students, who at most could spell their names." Jansen, who had returned from a sabbatical in 1976, was "completely aghast" at the quality of the students, blaming their "illiteracy" on the rise of open schools and reformed high school curriculums in the late '60s.

According to Jansen, since 1978, there has been a more serious effort on the part of students at York. "I find a 50-50 split among most students in my class. Half of them are really good while half make me wonder what they are doing here. We haven't got back to an excellent type of quality but I think we can get back to that."

The hardest adjustment Jansen has had to make over the years is the obsession he finds among students with respect to their grades. As opposed to the early days of the University when many courses abolished grades altogether, Jansen says he has never fully adjusted to students coming into his office and demanding higher grades.



WHO ORDERED THE PRUNE DANISH? Sit-ins such as this, outside then-President Macdonald's office, have been a key instrument of student expression since York's inception in the '60s.

really did rebel."

The September 18, 1969 *Excalibur* ran a story entitled "Modes the First Successful Classroom Revolt," in which freshmen of 1969 were informed about the previous year's student victory. "It was initiated by first-year students who simply became too frustrated by a compulsory course called Modes of Reasoning to remain still any longer. The lectures to which 1,800 students were subjected twice a week were boring to the nth degree and the content was so irrelevant and unreal as to make one think the professor who originated the course first conceived the idea while watching *Twilight Zone*."

The student boycott of the course paid off as Modes of Reasoning was dropped as a required course. That, in turn, is how the College Tutorial came into being, which was a substitute for the Modes requirement. The College Tutorials began as very small group courses which every first-year student could take. "The topics were everything you could imagine," Stewart chuckles. "There were certainly a lot of people who thought they were not academic or respectable. Of course the titles might not tell you what went on in them, if they went on at all."

the English influence that has ruined the university."

Hobson also has some not-so-fond memories of the experimental direction of classes in the early days of York. "I had three Teaching Assistants in my course who were very revolutionary. We let the students do stuff like suggesting the mark that would be appropriate." This was not just limited to the students, however, as Hobson remembers one of the TAs suggesting that Hobson and the other TAs take the final exam and grade each other on it. "That was one of the most depressing teaching experiences I ever had, dealing with those TAs," Hobson laughs.

The large amount of student activity at the time was largely the result of the economic security of the 1960s. "It was an easy time," Stewart recalls. "There were no problems as far as getting jobs was concerned." Student activity abruptly ended with the conclusion of the Vietnam War, followed by Watergate. "Watergate went on for a long time, and it fulfilled a lot of people's desire for proof of how truly corrupt government was," Stewart says, adding, "and in Canada at the same time we had the FLQ crisis and the War Measures Act."

At York, students came out strongly in support of the