



Universities are part of the problem

Until they tear down the barriers to women, the poor and minorities, reform will never happen.

By LOIS CORBETT

When Canadian universities threw open their doors to the public back in the 1960s, post-secondary education critics said the elitism of the university system would be eroded with every eligible body that desired a higher education allowed to enter through the ivy gates.

But that didn't happen. While university enrolment continues to increase, the community remains elitist, with the majority of students, faculty, and administrators representative of a small but powerful white male sector of society. Allowing women, poor people and non-whites to enter Canadian universities could not change the fundamental flaw in an education system that builds barriers to them in the first place.

And the caretakers of universities aren't about to change. When the Royal Commission made its report, the caretakers responded because they felt threatened. They told the commission its work was "flawed", "sneering" and "naive", not because it failed to look at the fundamental sexist, racist and classist barriers the universities themselves maintain, but because it attacked their well-being.

The university community's insistence on the maintenance of its status quo by the government defeats its own attempt at reform and disregards critics' demands for a more accessible university education. Maintaining the status quo, that level of operation now in place, is not just a coat of paint on university walls; it is the wall that is in place to protect the system for its creators, a wall so strong that with status quo funding, it will never crumble. The wall has never been attacked or dismantled, even with the addition of token bricks of programs designed to meet "special" demands.

The commission almost talked about one of the bricks: the small number of female faculty members in Nova Scotian universities. In 1984, there were only 380 women professors and teaching staff out of a total 1,885 faculty, a mere 20.5 per cent. The figure represents an increase from

1971, when women made up 15.4 per cent of the province's faculty and teaching staff, but the commission says that's not much of an improvement. Recruitment of women to faculty has not equalled the recruitment of men, with 2.8 men hired from 1972 to 1984 for every woman.

But the commission dropped the brick. In its two-page discussion of the underrepresentation of women on university faculties, the commission said it could not believe that the root of the problem lies, "except perhaps in some departments, in an unshakable prejudice against employing women, but rather in the small number of women who hold the minimum qualification for employment as a faculty."

So the commission noted the problem, but rejected the argument. It said universities do not discriminate against hiring women, but few women have the makings of faculty. It artificially separated the reasons women don't pursue doctoral degrees from the prejudice women face at every level of the university system. It refused to blame universities for their sexism, and it didn't discuss sexism as something maintained by the education system.

The commission admits, for one paragraph, at least, that the problem may "lie less in the condition of study required for doctorates than in social attitudes toward women studying towards this degree or toward women as academics." As a solution, the commission offers "better guidance counselling, at both the high school and university level. Intellectually brighter women should be directed towards an academic career, for which the prerequisite is the notably arduous and time-consuming doctoral degree."

Some solution. Women don't need better guidance, but better opportunities. They don't need male academics laying out the pros and cons of pursuing an academic career. They need opportunities in careers that are women-defined and women-valued. They need the work they do at universities, in homes and in the workplace valued as important and necessary. They

need the freedom to pursue their interests in an environment free from sexual harassment and violence against women. Women have to fight for equality every day, and the university community is no haven from that struggle.

The problems women face daily in universities are extensions of those they experience in the male-dominated society. When the university community constructs walls to shield itself from society, it uses the same fabric to maintain the barriers against women, the poor and minorities. As a product of male dominance, the universities in Nova Scotia pay tribute to the society men have created for their own survival as a powerful elite. And the commission falls into the same trap, with its recommendations for a core curriculum, an entrance exam and higher tuition fees.

The core curriculum would offer a survey of Western European thought, "entirely oriented towards Western male culture, a program designed to reinforce the myths about Western civilization," says Margaret Fulton, president of Mount St. Vincent University. In a society faced with the dilemmas of genetic engineering, environmental pollution and nuclear proliferation, "perpetuating the culture is no longer acceptable if we intend to get ourselves in the twenty-first century," she says. "The system needs to be challenged, not reinforced, and the job of universities is to challenge, not entrench, mythologies."

Fulton may think the job of universities is that of challenge, but it's hard to challenge society and maintain the artificial separateness universities claim they need. While recognizing inequalities in society, universities refuse to accept responsibility for maintaining those inequalities and creating new ones. The universities have grappled with the division between the poor and the rich in society, or between men and women, between black and white. It refuses to admit its deliberate extension of classism, racism and sexism and pays lip-service to criticism directed towards it from these groups.

The commission does no better. Its recommendations will serve the university crisis, not change the reasons for the crisis. If universities put a limit on enrolment, of will effectively limit what little access there is to post-secondary education for women, the poor and minorities. Higher tuition rates will force more poor people out of university and discourage even more than the already high fees do now. The core curriculum will devalue all non-white-male culture and perpetuate myths about these important cultures. An entrance exam will cater to those who made it in the secondary education system established by the dominant culture, those in rich, urban high schools: schools that teach Canadian history with no mention of women or native people, that instruct basic physics and chemistry with no discussion of the social context within which science is carried out and applied, the limits to scientific enquiry, and the possible social responsibilities of scientists.

At a time of great economic pressure, when the fabric of social structure is stressed to the limits by unemployment, inflation and global tension, universities are still confusing their beliefs and practices with facts. It is easier for universities to concentrate on trying to change society's problems without pulling out its roots for examination.

David Suzuki, Canada's popular geneticist, uses the example of tuberculosis to demonstrate the role universities should take in education. "Scientists pinpointed the tuberculosis bacillus as the cause of the disease and so focused on finding a drug to kill the bacteria. But we all harbour this bacillus; some of us come down with the disease because of the socio-economic factors impinging on us.

"Racism, oppression, and poverty, not the bacteria, are the real causes of tuberculosis, but it's far more difficult to change those conditions that to kill the bug. With powerful DNA technology, will it be easier to "solve" the problems of racism by eliminating race, or pollution by altering people to tolerate higher levels of dirt?" he asks.

The walls of universities in this province, and in Canada, are held together by that dirt; cold, hard dirt that can't be changed unless universities are willing to throw the walls away altogether.