

# York history prof co-authors book on state of universities

York professor one of three to write controversial study of current state of Canadian universities.

By KAI MAHABIR

"Our Universities are in a mess. There are far too many students who should not be there," says Professor Granatstein, member of York's history department, and one of the co-authors of *The Great Brain Robbery* (McClelland & Stewart).

According to the authors, universities in Canada should be meritocratic, that is, they should be selected based on some sort of competition. They argue that "Canadian Universities no longer take only the best students and no longer give their students the best education." Yet, as Granatstein says, "I don't think the intention was to be elitist. Many people have said that about the book. Our intention was to have good universities."

Basically, Granatstein would like to see the bright students given the opportunity to develop their brain power, and he emphasizes that universities should only be places for the wealthy but for all bright people regardless of their background; "we have to find a way to eliminate the dullards, not the poor."

"I think we can no longer say that someone coming out of high school with a 60 percent average is qualified to go to university. There has been grade inflation in the high schools over a 10 to 15 year period. These people are not ordinarily qualified. The state should not provide complete, open access to everyone."

According to Granatstein, these policies have resulted in large numbers of "incompetent students" and in our universities becoming "educational supermarkets." An incompetent student, as defined by Granatstein, is "one who

can neither read nor write, nor think." Though he does not outline exactly how to provide for it, Granatstein says the new system should retain some flexibility; "allowances should be made for late bloomers, I was one myself."

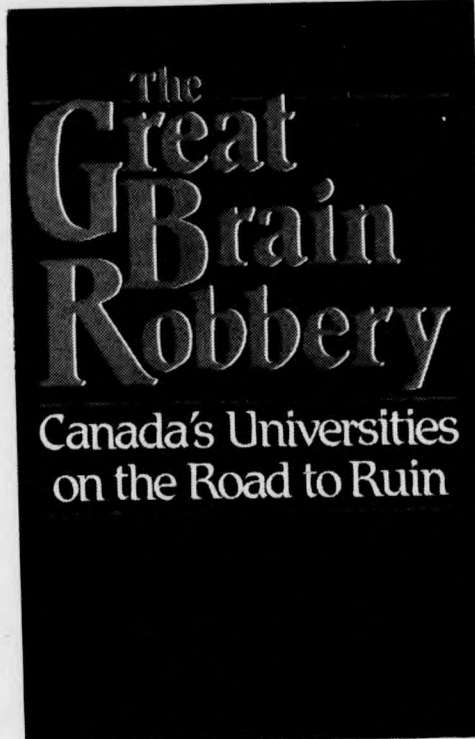
Granatstein feels that changing the admission requirements to university would improve the situation. While he completed three maths, two sciences, two French and two English courses when he applied to university, Granatstein does not want to see a return to the imposed general education standards of the past. However, he would like to see "some science, some math, substantial English, lan-

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guage, literature and composition training, some understanding of the country and the world in which we live, and an ability to speak French. I want to see some real standards."

He also feels that the universities are in grave danger of losing their autonomy, and having standards dictated by the provincial government. Shrinking budgets will result in "provinces telling the universities how to cut because universities don't know how to cut themselves." What's more, these cuts tend to be focused on smaller academic departments like Philosophy, a trend Granatstein views as potentially "disastrous."

Future cuts in these traditional areas, according to Granatstein could be avoided by eliminating costly duplication of specialized programs such as law, medicine, and certain graduate programs. He cites the two universities in Toronto, and the three universities in the Kitchener, Waterloo, and Guelph areas as some of the worst offenders. The book also calls for a review of standards for faculty members. "Job security has to go. The idea that we get tenure once and never has to be assessed again, in a way that can lose your job, gives a sense of certainty, does not give pressure to produce. I think pressure is a very healthy thing."



A book where picture of author should be.

Described in the book as "publish or perish," the authors want to see quality publications produced by the faculty, something to show that they have been developing their knowledge and remaining active in the academic community. He would like to see five year contracts replace tenure, with reviews to be conducted by a committee of peers. Granatstein argues that they should "do what is done now to get tenure, evaluate the work, read it themselves or get someone qualified to read it. Good teaching is directly linked to good research. It is directly in the student's interest to have teachers that are good researchers."

According to Granatstein, all of these changes should be put under the control of a committee of the best faculty members rather than involving the administration or student governments; "Our point is an ordinary undergraduate student passes through University in

three or four years. He is effectively there to learn. Now, no one would say for a minute that a student should not have a student government, to control all the various student activities, that's entirely proper. Bear in mind that a few years ago that didn't exist. Everything had to be approved by the President."

"Our objection is a student who is passing through for a couple of years, should have a right, a say in determining the policies of the university. That I think is not really a sensible idea. A faculty member who is going to be here for 35 years, is presumed to know more, presumed to have more commitment to the place. There really shouldn't be an approximately equality."

Despite the media attention raised by this and other books, Granatstein is not particularly optimistic about any immediate improvement. "I wish I really believed it would happen. All pressures are still very much to reduce the quality of education. It used to be that Canadian schools were good. Twenty years ago the University of Toronto gave one of the best degrees in North America. I don't think anybody would say that today. Now the wealthy are sending their children to American universities like Princeton, Yale and Harvard. That to me shocking, and disastrous in the long term."

While there is some statistical substantiation in the book, many of the authors' assertions rely too much on a consensus of opinion and an assumed authority on their part. Their statements and criticisms are often arbitrarily and weakly defined. Their assumption that most students know nothing about the quality of the education they are receiving, and that a good researcher is necessarily a good teacher are both highly questionable.

*The Great Brain Robbery* may raise some significant and serious questions about the quality of higher education in this country, and do so comprehensively; but what it doesn't do is outline any concrete solutions to them. The general suggestions, when they do come, are sometimes so impractical that they are unlikely to be accepted at any time by any University. Consequently, any belief that the book is a panacea for Canadian academic problems is ill-founded.

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