

Business presents concerns to Bovey

This week, when the three-member Bovey Commission presents its findings on the future of Ontario universities, a clear business 'direction' may be evident

By ADAM BRYANT

Since its inception, the three-member Bovey Commission on the Future Development of the Universities of Ontario invited both the universities and representatives from the private sector to submit suggestions on ways of improving the system.

The commission, headed by retired industrialist Edmund Bovey, is submitting its recommendations to Ontario's Minister Of Education, Bette Stephenson, today.

One of the tasks Stephenson set for the Bovey Commission was to investigate the alleged decline of academic standards in Ontario universities.

Many corporate executives who have addressed the issue say it is essential that entrance requirements be increased if Ontario is to enjoy a higher level of academic excellence in the future.

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce, which represents 460 corporations and 150 community chambers, suggested that not only should the admission process be made more selective, but that a province-wide system of examinations in core academic subjects should be implemented.

Allan R. Taylor, president of the Royal Bank of Canada—which spends more than \$1 million a year to upgrade the basic mathematics and communications skills of its employees—is adamant about raising entrance standards.

"We should make it impossible now for students to leave high school . . . without total command of the English language, written and oral," Taylor said in a recent speech.

Many business executives have insisted that tenure must be abolished as it is partly to blame for the decline in academic standards. One reason tenure was originally established was to protect professors from being fired for the opinions they espouse. Freedom of speech, however, is now protected by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Ontario Human Rights code.

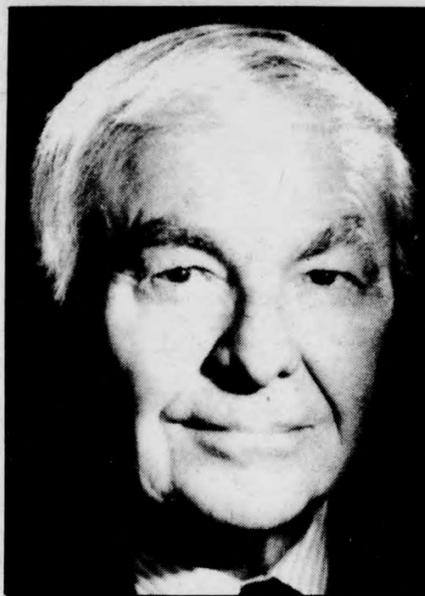
Other methods that have been suggested for ensuring academic excellence include requiring students to study a core curriculum regardless of their major area of study and establishing an annual university-wide review of the grading procedure to ensure that tough standards are maintained.

Even though academic excellence is perceived to be declining, the most urgent and pressing problem facing Ontario universities today is underfunding. Revenues are increasing at best marginally while costs are rising at a drastic rate in all areas. The problem has inspired many comments from the business sector, and again, some are more realistic than others.

Most of the corporate executives who address the issue of underfunding have called for an increase in tuition fees as a partial solution. All point to the fact that Canadian tuition fees are half to a third that of the public universities in the US, thereby trying to justify their claim as being not unreasonable. Though raising the fees would generate some extra revenue, the overall effect would not be entirely beneficial as André Picard, a Canadian University Press reporter argues.

Given that tuition fees contribute only about 8 percent of universities' budgets," Picard said, "the net result of raising them, even dramatically, would be negligible, and the real effect would be to lock out the poor and middle class students who aspire to higher education."

Many other short-term methods for correcting the funding problem have been suggested by the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, including making grants payable only to the university and administering stricter means tests, as businessmen are worried about the student



Commission Chairman Edmund Bovey

abuse of the grants. They also suggest that universities require professors to teach one extra hour per week, thus enabling universities to employ fewer people. The Chamber admits their suggestions are based on the experiences and perceptions of businessmen, and not research.

Though all will agree that universities are underfunded, instances of revenue mismanagement within the individual universities have been cited by businessmen as part of the problem.

Royal Bank President Allan Taylor thinks administrators should enlist the help of businessmen to rectify the problem.

"There has to be a more realistic approach to attacking costs and improving productivity in universities," Taylor said. "Whether they have advisors from the business community or from their own business schools, universities have to start developing a real strategic planning capability."

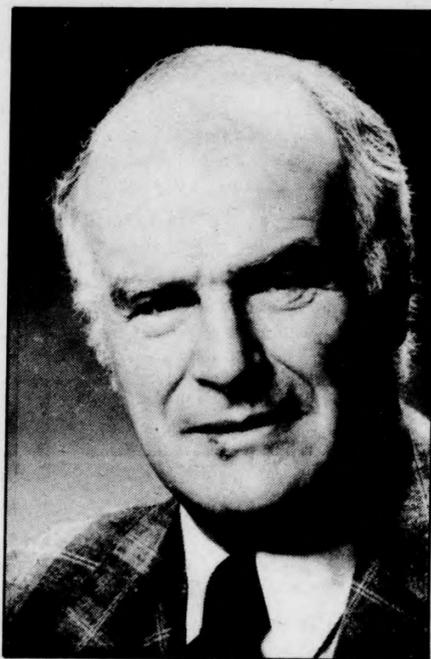
Taylor's idea of a cooperative relationship between businesses and universities has received much attention of late. A recent article in *The Financial Post* examined ways in which the business sector's need for technology is drawing innovative companies into closer cooperation with universities. Though stolid academics would argue that the business world has no place in institutions of higher learning, specific examples show that such a marriage can be financially healthy.

Consider, for example, the University of Waterloo, which received \$13-million last year in royalties from technology licensing and research for the private and government sectors. It is a trend the Ontario government

applauds—evidenced by the fact that of the \$45.4-million allocated this year for capital building projects at Ontario universities, Waterloo's computer science department will be getting \$31.1-million.

In addition, the school's entrepreneurial attitude has resulted in the formation of more than 50 high tech companies by faculty and students. It is this type of interaction between business and universities that executives are saying is mandatory if Canadians are to compete internationally and enhance their living standard.

The Bovey Commission has thus had 10 months to assess the problems that are currently plaguing Ontario universities. When they release their report this week, it will be evident to what degree they consider the suggestions from the business community outlined above. Yet, many feel it is too great a problem for the Commission to address in only 10 months' time.



Commissioner Fraser Mustard

It is the opinion of many that the dilemmas of Ontario's universities cannot be solved by a temporary commission. A committee of York administrators gave expression to this widely held viewpoint in its brief to the Bovey Commission.

The major conclusion reached by the committee was that, "If the Province is seriously committed to the principle of system-wide development and the optimum use of resources, it should establish a body . . . with adequate resources to engage in planning on a full-time basis."



Commissioner Alan Watts

