



TRENT UNIVERSITY ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

**The Experiences of Students Today.**

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May I thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today, on this issue: the experience of students today. I have prepared a somewhat dry dissertation, but if you would indulge me for a few minutes, I would very much enjoy entertaining questions and commentary. This is a topic close to my heart, and I am honoured to share some of my thoughts with you.

There are many issues which the students of today face, far too many for me to explore with you in the limited time we have. I would, however, like to highlight three which I consider of immeasurable significance. They are, accessibility, quality, and personal development.

I interpret accessibility in its broadest sense, that is to say there is more than one side to this debate. Over the past thirty years, Ontario and Canada have been witness to a system of mass education. One which has increased the number of students who have benefitted from tertiary level studies. There are many areas of accessibility which one might explore. Some of these include gender issues, harassment and discrimination issues, tuition fees and student loans, and a host of other worthy topics.

I would, however, like to point out one in particular which is unique to the mass of high school graduates of today. High school graduates are faced with one major barrier to their access to university education, namely: the cut-off. Simple supply and demand economics dictates that in an environment of scarce resources, demand for the limited places at university will increase. The price, for the past three decades, has in large part been marks - that is the entering cut-off grade determined by each university. As universities began to close their doors to candidates with lower Grade 13 averages, the marks cut-off became somewhat similar to the old Gold Standard. It served as a bench mark against which all entering student grades could be measured.

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Unfortunately, recent activity has emulated the effects of President Nixon's termination of the gold-backed dollar. Varying standards and assessment levels in high schools across our province have made the Ontario University Admissions system very much like an monetary exchange broker. Unfortunately, the universities cling in large part to accepting the average of a student's six best Grade 13 courses in admissions decisions. This has had the effect of accepting 100 Italian lira on par with 100 American dollars.

To carry on with my economic analogy, what we are witness to, is a major inflation crisis in high school marks. Just as the value of the dollar is weakened in a climate of high inflation, the value of a particular cut-off grade is shaken by the inflation of Grade 13 averages. Recent articles by somewhat conservative interpreters, have decried some students for their 'functional illiteracy'; some professors complain of universities becoming 'centres for remedial learning'. Though somewhat harsh, there is indeed a grain of truth to these accusations.

My point has been to open another dimension to the accessibility issue. Many pundits have laid all of the responsibility for resolving accessibility problems square on the shoulders of the universities. I simply wish to remind those who believe so that there are more actors at play here than meets the eye.

Now, I will be the first to admit that I cling to an old fashioned vision of university education. I believe in knowledge for its own sake, and that a university's fundamental purpose must always be the honest pursuit of knowledge and understanding. This, romantic notion need not be a relic from the past, for it is inevitable that our institutions of higher education will change and evolve. What it lends, however, is a consistency of purpose to the role of a university; beyond its physical structures and organization, this fundamental role is paramount.

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This I fear, is where the quality in our education is in danger. You will recall my concerns are of accessibility, quality, and personal development. The universities of today are very much victims of their past successes. With so many applicants clamouring to get into the university system, we must be wary of overloading ourselves to the point that existing structures cannot support a basic standard of quality in higher education.

A business paradigm has taken hold of the public policy agenda, one which has brought with it the practice of cost cuts, efficiency analysis and rationalization of services. The effect of these cuts has been what I term the 'commodification' of the university experience. This issue touches at the heart of this year's Alumni College theme: Consumers or Scholars. Are the students of today merely consumers, avidly purchasing degree credentials. I both fear so, and hope not.

The burgeoning of pre-professional undergraduate programs such as Commerce, Engineering and Teacher Education are evidence for this trend for careerism and narrow path specialization. But one would be wise to remember the words which Governor General Georges Vanier recounted at Trent's Opening Ceremonies in 1964:

It is said that we live in an age of specialization, that because man has accumulated so much knowledge, it is best for the student to learn a great deal about a very little. This is a process which has been described as the study of more and more about less and less until eventually one knows everything about nothing. [This] saying...underlines one of the great shortcomings of the specialist, namely: that frequently his learning is so narrow as to deprive him of the broad knowledge and understanding essential to balanced judgment. According to this classic criticism, the specialist is in fact not an educated man at all. He is one who never learned what to do with a living after he had earned it.

The alternative to the specialist, on the other hand, is supposed to be the man with a broad and balanced education who develops body and mind so as to

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be generally capable in the world about him. This is the man whom some call a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none. Certainly there is this danger. But on the whole, it is probably easier for the man with a general background to deepen his knowledge of a particular area, than for one who is highly specialized to broaden his.

Students today presume that university education is not only right for them, but that they must acquire that precious degree credential to be worthwhile to society. I believe that many students have been lured to university with not just an expectation, but an anticipation that it is the only course towards success in life.

In our fiercely egalitarian society, we seek at all ends to level the playing field so that the weak, the underprivileged and the underrepresented are given a fair chance. That is indeed a noble aim; that is why accessibility is so important to all students. However, I contend the policy of mass education is failing students in general.

Based on the business paradigm, the policy makers view education as a "more for less" issue. They want more students to pass through the higher education system, while at the same time spending less on the production of graduates. Herein lies the greatest danger to quality: students are being treated as numbers. They are viewed as materiel to be processed and packaged like deli meats as their faces are blurred and stamped over by student numbers and computer files.

What is missing in the production line is the human dimension. Trent's founding president, Professor Tom Symons, stated it clearly and eloquently thirty years ago: "education is, inescapably, an individual experience". Inescapable because we are dealing with human beings, individual since each human being is unique and will always remain so.

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So, then, what do the students of today take into consideration when looking for a quality education? Again, I can only speak for myself, but I cannot hope but believe that some of my opinions are shared by many of my student colleagues. I consider attention important; by this I mean demonstrated individual concern by one's teachers, be it through the grading of papers, the availability of faculty for office hours or simply the willingness of professors to seek informal contact and friendship with students. I believe quality education must incorporate an atmosphere of mature inquiry, rather than the prevailing trend of high-school 'coolness' in being aloof of the world around us. I consider quality education to go beyond the academic opportunities for student excellence, and that extra-curricular involvement in the university, in athletics, or in the wider community is just as beneficial or more so than essays and exams.

What I have summarized in my past few words, is the essence of my concept of the university's fundamental role to students: their personal development. Of accessibility, quality and personal development, it is the last which I hold most dear for it is and must be the aim of any education, be it university, college, high school or otherwise.

All of you here today are here for your personal development. Your essential aim is to leave this place with something more. One need not quantify that, nor would one necessarily wish to do so. Students of today need those same elements of personal development which made their parents so eminently successful. They need a sense of purpose for themselves in society. They need a feeling of value in what they are studying and planning to pursue. Most importantly they need hope that their contributions will be just as valuable, if not more so, than those who passed before them.

Accessibility, quality, and personal development are complex and deeply

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[N.B.: This page was lost in the time between when it was written and now. What follows is a succinct ending (2003-11-04) that the author believes fits the case.]

... inter-related issues.

Ten years retrospect corrects the slightly confusing reference to Nixon and the Gold Standard as a reference to the President's floating of the dollar. More precise explanations of those events are undoubtedly available readily online. The intent of the initial metaphor remains intact.

With (in Ontario, Canada at least) the end of the Grade 13 level, and the “double cohort”, the prescient remarks made in this decade old paper still ring true. I stand by all thrusts in this short commentary, and hope its general remarks serve to illuminate and guide those following its presentation.

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