

## **Those who can't teach**

Despite claims to the contrary, university professors still concentrate far too much on research, at the expense of their students

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Fifteen years ago this fall, Stuart Smith issued a major report on the state of undergraduate education in Canada. His Commission of Inquiry on Canadian University Education ("the Smith report") found that the drive to publish had come to dominate the university's mission, with professors largely ignoring their teaching duties in favour of research.

Smith recommended that universities find ways to re-balance the priorities of the professoriate and also provide more incentives for teaching. His suggestions included broadening the definition of "scholarship" to include pedagogical innovation, insisting on minimum teaching loads for all faculty, and allowing new hires to decide whether they wanted to be evaluated, for purposes of promotion, on the basis of their teaching or their research.

In response, this country's university presidents put their hands on their hearts and solemnly swore that they would work very, very hard to put undergraduate teaching at the top of their to-do list.

No point beating around the bush here: They failed.

Teaching continues to trail research as an institutional priority, and if anything, things have gotten worse over the past decade and a half. This is not to say that institutions are completely inactive on the teaching front. Unlike 15 years ago, most universities now have "centres of teaching and learning" where instructors can actually get some assistance in terms of developing useful pedagogies. Some of them are actually quite good (take a bow, UBC). Generally speaking, the whole teaching and learning movement is much more developed (and can obtain significantly more resources) than a decade ago.

That said, the movement has not had the impact that was expected.

The teaching and learning centres are by and large used by anxious new faculty members, full of terrified energy and looking to make a mark. Older professors generally eschew these centres, and universities make no effort to force them to upgrade their teaching skills. Given the fact that there were hiring freezes (or near-freezes) in place through most of the 1990s, this meant that very few universities can boast a professoriate that has ever been near a teaching and learning centre.

But it's not as though most of these new faculty are actually interested in teaching. In the 1990s, one of the mooted solutions to the funding crisis was to pension off all the old

fogies who didn't want to teach and hire vibrant young professors who would be willing and able to shoulder greater teaching loads. That didn't happen.

Indeed, some departments continue to put new faculty on reduced teaching loads for the first few years of their probations. Why? So that they can prepare for their tenure review by producing as much research as possible.

Most of them welcome the break from the classroom, knowing full well that hiring, tenure and promotion are granted entirely on the basis of research potential and, later, success. In an increasingly competitive academic job market it is publications -- not teaching evaluations -- that win the top positions and the lucrative salaries.

It isn't just the professoriate that is in it for the money. Right about the time of the Smith report, Canadian universities lost the ability to leverage more dollars per student out of the public treasury. When governments weren't actually cutting funds, they were funding student growth but not actually increasing their expenditures per student. A few years later, universities lost the ability to persuade parents to pay more as well, and politicians responded with tuition-fee freezes.

Today, the only reliable source of new money that is left comes out of the research tap, which governments -- with not-always plausible visions of high-tech spin-offs in their heads -- are only too happy to leave open.

To accuse universities of doing it only for the money is slightly unfair. However, it is important to recognize that in virtually every respect, academia is a prestige market. That is, the currency of the academic realm is status, the self-reinforcing circle of earned reputation and respect that accrues to researchers from their peers, to schools that can attract these researchers, and to students who are fortunate enough to attend these schools.

Because the coinage of academia is status, it is crucial to note that what backs up this coinage, the "gold standard" if you will, is not teaching but research. This is because teaching is an essentially local business.

Almost by definition, teaching occurs in a small room, at a certain place and time, in front of a restricted number of people. This makes it nearly impossible to build a reputation as a good teacher outside of one's own department. Sure, other professors might hear from their students about the teaching abilities of a colleague, as might a few professors at other institutions if some of his/her students go on to grad school elsewhere. But fundamentally, no one is going to become world-renowned because of great teaching.

Research, on the other hand, is a global currency. In virtually every major discipline, the serious scholars in every country go to the same conferences, read the same journals, and, increasingly, share ideas and works-in-progress on the same websites and listservs. The

truly excellent can easily be identified, celebrated and rewarded (or, given the nature of academe, reviled and pilloried) by the aggregate opinion of the world's top scholars.

The fight for reputation is so intense that everyone is required to perform to higher and higher standards -- something that is not necessarily true of teaching, where professors jealously carve out mini-monopolies of certain subjects within their own departments.

Paradoxically, the massive emphasis on research and the looming explosion in graduate studies are sowing the seeds for a coming revolution in undergraduate teaching.

The growing pressure to put more resources into research is driving us toward a two-tier system in higher education, where institutions will be divided into those that do research and those that do not. Within each institution there will also be divisions between professors who will focus on teaching and those who will primarily do research.

The most important aspect of this bifurcation of the professoriate is that it gives us a golden opportunity to get undergraduate teaching right, since it will create a class of professors whose salaries, bonuses and promotions will be based entirely on their ability to teach.

This development will be bitterly resisted by many in the profession. A lot of guff will be heard about how teaching and research are just two aspects of the same business, and how good research makes for good teaching -- a claim that has no basis in fact. But fate leads the willing and drives the unwilling, and the emergence of the two-tier professoriate is probably the best way out of what has become an impossible situation.

It won't quite be what those university presidents promised 15 years ago, but we'll get it right in the end.

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