

## SPECIAL FEATURES / CONTRIBUTIONS SPÉCIALES

# Calling the Tune

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Autonomy is the issue facing universities. The much-heralded problems of declining enrolment and financial exigencies, while they are of concern, are not crucial because they are not central to the meaning of the university. Not only is autonomy a crucial issue, it is a moral issue. It cannot be resolved by counting students and basic income units, but only by the university and society engaging in a moral argument.

### Autonomy and Accountability in the University

University autonomy is crucial because it enables the university to decide who will teach, what will be taught and to whom, what research will be pursued and how monies will be spent. If the mandate of the university continues to be to search for truth, autonomy is important; if it continues to be to teach students and comment critically on society, or, as Northrop Frye says, ". . .to reflect the real form of society. . . ." (1971) autonomy is important.

Since the mandate of the university remains unchanged (for example, the *1981 Report of the Committee on the Future Role of Universities in Ontario* reaffirms the university's time-honoured objectives), autonomy must be preserved to protect the freedom academics need to search for and to teach the truth. Freedom and truth are so necessary for one another because knowledge is not found but created in the individual's mind, and, ". . . can only be validated — as opposed to dogma or speculation — by being subjected to the tests of free inquiry." (Searle, 1972)

Although the academic's need for freedom is generally accepted the need for institutional autonomy is being questioned. For example, in the United States McConnell sees autonomy as eroding while intellectual freedom is intact (1981). If the one is preserved as the other is eroded, which is preserved — academic freedom or freedom of speech? While the climate of freedom in a country influences academic freedom as well as the freedom of speech, the two are different; that difference stems from the unique character of academic life which makes it mandatory to speak and write about what one has discovered. However, determining whether academic freedom or freedom of speech is preserved, while it would clarify the issue, would not resolve it, since what must be determined is whether the university can *defend* academic freedom without autonomy.

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Universities need to be autonomous and they need to be accountable, and this tension between autonomy and accountability always exists. Society questions how the university makes decisions, how it spends its funds and what its faculty actually *do* with their time. The university pleads uniqueness and suggests society needs a voice from the tower.

This tension is as old as the medieval origins of the institution and as new as the present deterioration of autonomy in universities in Canada and the United States. The issue has come to the fore in Australia; in 1980, the theme of the Higher Education Research and Development Society in Australia was, "Freedom and Control in Higher Education." In Great Britain the University Grants Committee dramatically changed the understanding of autonomy by cutting student numbers and programs.

### **The Erosion of Autonomy in Ontario Universities**

In Ontario, university autonomy is the focus of increasingly negative tension between the provincially-funded institutions and the Government. The Government has said the objectives of the universities are to develop a more educated populace, to educate and train people for professions, to provide for study at the highest intellectual level, to conduct basic and applied research including development and evaluation, and to provide service to the community. Instead of dealing directly with the universities the Province appoints a buffer, the Ontario Council on University Affairs, to serve as "Ontario's independent advisory body with respect to universities. . . and certain other post-secondary educational institutions." (OCUA, 1974-75)

While the universities and OCUA have disagreements, they do agree funding is a problem. Even though the Government asks OCUA to suggest funding levels for universities, it does not necessarily take Council's advice and, according to the universities and OCUA, has underfunded the institutions for the past few years. Council says underfunding has strained the capacity of the universities to fulfill the Government's objectives and suggests the creation of a system of Ontario universities in which there is "quality and diversity." (1978-79)

Since its creation in 1974 OCUA has published yearly reports and these furnish a record of the tension between it and the universities. In the first report it refers to the universities as a "system"\* and says it will need to maintain a "Delicate Balance" between Government (its advisee) and the universities.

In its Second Annual Report (1975-76) Council wonders about autonomy and asks, ". . . is the restoration of the fee prerogative a constructive measure on behalf of university autonomy, or a move that would dilute the respective spheres of government and university accountability?"

\* Not everyone is as convinced as OCUA that the Ontario universities form a system. Dr. Winegard, then Chairman of OCUA, was asked if the idea of a system was generally accepted and said many faculty disclaim any notion of a university system in Ontario (1982).

By 1976-77, OCUA's third year, the concern is undergraduate education and its accessibility for all qualified applicants.

The active pursuit by Government of "accessibility for all qualified applicants" must be understood in the context of two specific points. First, what constitutes a "qualified" applicant has been left for each university to determine in the context of each of its programs. Second, it has always been understood that no applicant is entitled to a place in the program or institution of his or her choice.

In its 1977-78 Report, OCUA is beginning to muse about the future of Ontario universities and to question how autonomous they can be.

Without in any way attempting to provide answers, Council does wonder aloud about several matters. Should the present number of free-standing, autonomous institutions be reduced by closure or merger to ensure adequate support for those that remain? Should the number of institutions now offering graduate programs be reduced? Is it possible or desirable to rationalize the system by designating which undergraduate and graduate programs should be offered by which institutions?

In 1978-79 OCUA wrote "The Ontario University System: A Statement of Issues," in which its use of the word, "system," means ". . . different universities may fulfill different roles to accomplish the total task of the university sector." In the document the "excess capacity" for undergraduate Arts and Science students is questioned. On the one hand OCUA says:

Council is of the opinion that institutions should be left to adjust their operations to bring them into line with changes in demand for their services, and should be able to live within the resources provided through the current allocative mechanisms even in the event of severe enrolment drops.

On the other hand, it says:

The concept of institutional role differentiation in the Ontario university system is one that has been cited often, in recent years, as a desirable aim. With a future of falling demand for university level instruction, combined with financial stringency, the attractiveness of institutional role differentiation is likely to grow, at least from the perspectives of the public and the government.

On the subject of autonomy Council states:

In terms of their degree of independence, the institutions currently fall somewhere between full autonomy and total Government control. . . .

Council believes that it is important for all concerned to keep a watching brief on the extent to which a balance is maintained between public accountability and institutional autonomy.

The 1979-80 Report contains "System on the Brink," a financial analysis of

the universities, which says, "The constraint on Government expenditures continues to dominate the financial horizon in the Ontario university system."

On the issue of autonomy, Council says in its Advisory Memorandum 79-IV:

The area of institutional autonomy has received much attention and the variety of suggestions contained in the briefs reflects the widely differing opinions that exist regarding this issue. . . . On the financial side, each institution has complete control over the internal allocation of its revenue, the major portion of which is composed of Government grants. The universities, therefore, enjoy considerable autonomy despite the fact that they are primarily publicly funded. (1979-80)

In the 1980-81 Report there is another statement, "System Rationalization: A Responsibility and an Opportunity," in which OCUA clarifies its position by saying that persistent underfunding and decline in enrolment have, ". . . led Council and others to conclude that there is a need for system-wide consolidation and rationale." Council's mood is reflected in its use, on the title page, of a quote from A.J. Corry when, in 1968, he was Principal of Queen's, ". . . if the universities don't get together and do the job themselves the Government will step in and do it for them."

Autonomy and undergraduate programs come under scrutiny in the 1980-81 document, "It has become increasingly clear to Council, however, that this autonomous approach to undergraduate planning is no longer appropriate from a provincial perspective." Again, on the theme of getting on with "the job" OCUA reminds the universities that the Council of Ontario Universities said in 1976, "COU and the universities should commit themselves to continuing and expanding their efforts in planning and coordination. . . ." OCUA adds, "Unfortunately, even though COU approved these recommendations, no steps have as yet been taken to implement them."

Council summarizes its position on rationalization by saying:

Some universities view role differentiation as a threat to their autonomy. Council must point out that this need not be the case. In fact, the institutions are already differentiated to a very large extent. What is necessary now is that each institution recognize its own role, as well as the roles of the others and develop as a system, with each university channelling its initiatives in accordance with its role.

While in 1980-81 OCUA questions undergraduate programs, it returns to graduate studies as the place to rationalize. The importance for quality and diversity is omnipresent and OCUA maintains this stance when it suggests the fifteen universities look at the "sectors" in which they have greatest strength in doctoral enrolment.

### **The Universities Respond to OCUA: 1981**

Each year the universities submit briefs to OCUA; in 1981 they responded to Council's idea of sectors for graduate education and to the issue of autonomy in the following ways:

The Institute [OISE] favours the establishment of some form of strengthened central planning agency, provided it has some real executive authority, is not under the sole control of the universities themselves, and is committed to the support of quality programs in a context of societal needs. (OISE, 1981)

We endorse Council's intention to preserve as much autonomy as possible at the undergraduate level. Our endorsement is not because autonomy *per se* is desirable, but because a system of autonomous institutions has served and almost certainly will continue to serve the mutual interests of the public, the government, the students, and the universities better than any other system.

(University of Western Ontario, 1981)

On balance we do not believe the sector concept would serve Ontario well. The artificiality of some of the sector boundaries, the worrisome possibility of development within a sector producing weak or unnecessary programs, the inefficient use of graduate faculty across the system, and the lack of flexibility and possible stagnation, all argue against the sector concept in its simple form.

(Lakehead University, 1981)

We acknowledge the force of some of the criticisms levelled at the collectivity of Ontario universities by the report of the COU Long Range Planning group (for example, the dearth of Middle East Programmes). But to try and correct these minor imbalances by instituting a system of centralized planning carries with it the much greater risk that the very essence of each university, as a centre of learning offering a wide range of intellectual challenges to its undergraduate students, will be sapped. (McMaster, 1981)

The basic objectives of graduate planning should not be rationalization *per se* but quality and flexibility. There should be no graduate program in the Province that has not been proven to be of acceptable quality. In all great enterprises there is an inevitable element of risk. It is incumbent upon the universities of Ontario to minimize risk by guaranteeing the quality of what they do and, with government, ensuring that the scale of higher educational activities in all their rich variety, is appropriate to the social and economic goals of Canadian society. Attempts to regulate and plan in detail from the centre are likely to eliminate not only risk but individual drive, initiative and imagination which are the only real long term resources we possess.

(Queen's, 1981)

[W]e think that sectorial planning is not the right way to encourage the institutional role differentiation which is so praised by the Council. (Ottawa, 1981)

[T]he University of Guelph supports a more rational approach to planning within the system and an evolution towards a more harmonious and orderly interaction than has been the case in the past.

(Guelph, 1981)

The documents of OCUA and the universities reflect their struggle as to who will call the tune. OCUA's plan to create a "system" which will be characterized by quality and diversity comes into conflict with the universities' wish for quality and autonomy.

### The Need for a Moral Argument

In seeking to create a university system Council reiterates the importance of university autonomy at the same time as it gives increasingly pointed recommendations on ways to rationalize. Council's arguments for rationalization are based on underfunding and student numbers (whether they indicate declining enrolment or qualification for a sector). However, it is difficult to understand what numbers have to do with autonomy.

The issue of institutional autonomy cannot be argued on the basis of numbers, even when they are seen to represent quality and diversity, because university autonomy is a moral issue and must be argued from moral principles. Like other moral issues it is concerned with the quality of life and, since human feelings must be taken into account, moral judgments are not objective. "The idea that morality is an objective standard in our sense, or consists of such standards, seems to be inconsistent with the fundamental claim of personal autonomy in moral judgments." (Sprague, 1967) The criteria used in moral judgments are open to challenge and debate in a way that well-established criteria in other types of evaluation are not. However, Perry says, "Interpersonal arguments to *justify* moral statements can be successfully completed even if their truth or falsity cannot be shown." Moral reasoning needs "*relevant* facts, a *full* account, a *normal* state, an *impartial* and *universal* judgment." (1976)

The Council of Ontario Universities seems immobilized by this need to make impartial and universal judgments. However, Frye suggests:

If there is no moral concern for all humanity, and only concern for one's own society, then concern is reversed into anxiety. . . . Anxiety in this sense is a negative concern, a clinging to the accustomed features of one's society. . . ." (1967)

The universities assume their autonomy exists for great enterprises but Berdahl reminds them it may also serve parochial interests:

Just as we snorted at Charlie Wilson for saying what was good for General Motors was good for the country, so should we not delude ourselves that what's good for Guelph or Western or Laurier is necessarily good for Ontario. . . . You need some kind of countervailing force. (1980)

At the same time as the government is serving as a countervailing force, it needs also to be aware of its limitations. As Walley says, "When it comes to paying for pipers, the accident of having money to commission music was never any proof of musical knowledge or guarantee of good taste." (1964)

When the university is most true to its idea and ideal, it does fulfill its mandate and is accountable. Although the ideal is not possible, working toward it would engage the universities and the Government in a productive argument. Recognizing the issue as moral would place the argument at a level which makes it possible to find solutions offering the greatest good for the greatest number.

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