

January 2004

Letters

Letters appear in the language submitted

Nice look

We circulate every issue of University Affairs in our office here at Western. Congratulations on the new look – same great stories with an even nicer look and feel. Keep up the good work.

Terry Rice

Mr. Rice is associate director (creative services) of communications and public affairs at the University of Western Ontario.

Don't blame the policy

J. Paul Grayson's negative experiences with Research Ethics Boards (["In my opinion," University Affairs, January 2004](#)) reveals problems both with these bodies and with researchers' reactions to their sometimes questionable judgments. He reports that he has encountered REBs which, taking a "fundamentalist" view of ethics, fail to recognize the minimal-risk nature of the survey research he is proposing, and interfere with its conduct. In several situations, he says, REBs appear to act "on the basis of individual preferences uninformed by disciplinary expertise."

There is relief from these con-straints in the very ethics "legislation" under which researchers and REBs supposedly labour, the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Human Subjects* (www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/english/policystatement/policystatement.cfm).

Importantly, early in the document the policy statement specifically enjoins REBs to avoid "formulaic" applications of any ethical principles; principles are to be applied "in the context of the nature of the research and of the ethical norms and practices of the relevant research discipline." Fundamentalist or other doctrinaire approaches to ethics by REBs are not allowed; the needs of survey researchers for methods which do not overly sensitize subjects, and which preserve experimental conditions across samples and situations, are protected under this provision.

Meeting some adequate standard of "free and informed consent" seems to be the crux of the

difficulty Dr. Grayson's work has encountered. While the Tri-Council policy speaks of informed consent as being "at the heart of ethical research involving humans subjects," the policy allows for numerous exemptions, including the argument that "the research could not practicably be carried out without the waiver or alteration."

The legitimacy of waiving free and informed consent provisions to preserve naturalistic conditions in minimal-risk research is recognized as essential to validity. The policy states: "subjects may be given only partial information or may be temporarily led to believe that the research has some other purpose because full disclosure would be likely to colour the responses of the subjects and thus invalidate the research." Also, "where possible and appropriate" and "proportionate to the sensitivity of the issue," subjects may later be debriefed to assure their consent, but even in cases where subjects are not fully satisfied, their participation rights are not absolute: "In cases where a subject expresses concerns about a study, the researcher may give the subject the option of removing his or her data from the project. This approach should be used only when the elimination of the subject's data will not compromise the validity of the research design, and hence diminish the ethical value of participation by other subjects" (emphasis added).

As a former REB chair, I have observed that many researchers are poorly informed of the content of the Tri-Council statement and, because of this, timid about asserting their rights when faced with ultra vires behaviour from REBs. They also tend to be reluctant to serve on REBs themselves, when doing so would permit them to represent their own disciplines, and to defend the work of other researchers. As a consequence, some REBs are populated by well-meaning but essentially uninformed individuals, many of whom, incredibly, do little or no research.

Part of the solution, it seems obvious, is in researchers' hands. Meanwhile, it appears that Dr. Grayson and his students have excellent grounds for appeal of the inappropriate treatment received from their REB – another recourse required by the Tri-Council statement (articles 1.10 and 1.11) which researchers rarely access.

Patrick J. Fahy

Dr. Fahy is a professor in the Centre for Distance Education at Athabasca University.

Autre point de vue

J'ai lu avec intérêt l'entrevue qu'un de vos journalistes, Sylvain-Jacques Desjardins, a faite avec Jean-Guy Blais et qui est publiée dans le dernier numéro sous le titre « À bas les palmarès ». Les opinions de M. Blais y sont présentées sans que le fond de la question ne soit débattu.

C'est moins la diatribe de M. Blais qui m'intéresse que le fait que l'étude qu'il conteste soit celle d'un des professeurs de l'école que j'ai l'honneur de diriger. Il me semble nécessaire que Richard Marceau, professeur et coauteur dudit palmarès, ait l'opportunité de faire part de son point de vue pour que le monde académique puisse se faire une idée. Il aurait sans doute été intéressant que les deux entrevues soient côte à côte mais je crois qu'un droit de réplique dans un prochain numéro s'impose. Je crois que l'évaluation des institutions d'enseignement est un sujet important et que pour faire progresser le débat, on ne peut se contenter d'un seul point de vue.

Luc Bernier

M. Bernier est directeur de l'enseignement et de la recherche à l'École nationale d'administration publique.

Note de la rédaction : Nous avons invité M. Marceau à donner son point de vue dans un prochain numéro d'Affaires universitaires.

Retirement options

Rosanna Tamburri's article, "Rethinking the rules on retirement", ([University Affairs, December 2003](#)), presents a comprehensive overview of this controversial issue. Nevertheless, there are other alternatives to mandatory retirement.

Early retirement before age 65 is no longer an absolute, although it is a convenient point for financial planning. Late retirement after 65 may appeal to some (in jurisdictions where it is allowed) who have the opportunity to continue productively in their life's work. Partial or phased retirement may be chosen as a method of adjusting to a new stage of life through career flexibility, or it may be a compromise position achieved through collective bargaining.

Can mandatory retirement be justified? Not on the grounds of mental capacity, for studies in gerontology indicate that intellectual ability can be maintained by most adults well into their 70s. On the other hand, academic competence is affected by motivational and attitudinal variables, some of which can be remedied by programs of professional improvement offered by university teaching services.

The chief objections to mandatory retirement are of two kinds. From the legal point of view, it contravenes Section 15 (equality rights) in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, along with the spirit of human rights legislation in some provincial jurisdictions. On the psychological side, retirement may be accompanied by a loss of role and status, lack of companionship with colleagues, disruption of basic life routines, and other symptoms of deprivation and isolation.

Arguments in support of mandatory retirement at a specific age generally refer to the following categories (planning, renewal and competency) but these can be refuted:

- Planning: it's possible to implement broad academic and financial plans that provide faculty members with a choice of retirement date.
- Renewal: early retirement incentive plans may be effective in encouraging senior faculty members to retire voluntarily, thus opening new positions for younger people.
- Competency: studies have shown that there is no evidence linking cognitive and intellectual abilities with advanced age.

The document *Human Rights and Aging in Canada* (House of Commons, 1988) described the negative aspects of mandatory retirement: obvious age discrimination, wasteful of potentially productive labour and of capacities for judgment developed through long experience, psychologically and financially destructive. It concluded: "federal and provincial governments [should] undertake the complete abolition of mandatory retirement, with the sole exception of a limited class of occupations involving public safety."

James Hartman

Dr. Hartman is senior academic editor, distance education program, at the University of Manitoba's continuing education division.

Fearless self-exposure

Although community colleges have been spared the national ranking game, Douglas College in suburban Vancouver shares the desire of the eight universities mentioned in your December 2003 issue (“Canadian schools take part in U.S. student survey”) to focus instead on assessing the teaching and learning environment. To our knowledge, Douglas College was the first Canadian institution to participate in the companion survey for two-year institutions to the National Survey of Student Engagement, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement.

Whereas participants in the survey for four-year institutions do not necessarily publish their institutional results, Douglas College has made its results public – warts and all – at <http://iresearch.douglas.bc.ca/reports>. Former student surveys have demonstrated for years that postsecondary institutions across Canada do a good job of educating students. Canadian universities and colleges need not be reticent about sharing feedback from current students if it will help us to do an even better job.

Bob Cowin

Mr. Cowin is director, institutional research, at Douglas College.

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