

University Reform: Long Overdue

By Rod Fraser



University Campus in Upstate New York

With Ontario facing large budget deficits for the foreseeable future, there is fertile ground for cost cutting in its bloated university system.

A few years ago, the Liberal government decided Ontario's Colleges of Education were producing too many graduates. Rather than cut the enrolment directly, they did so in a way to increase overall costs (for students as well as taxpayers). One year Bachelor of Education degrees were expanded to two years.

Given that teachers were trained over two short summer sessions in the 1960s, when there was a shortage, it beggars belief that a two-year program

is necessary. It was a policy, cynically designed to preserve jobs at Colleges of Education in Ontario.

Here is an excerpt from a 2013 article in *The Globe and Mail* that explained the policy,

"Ontario will cut the number of new teachers who graduate every year in half and increase the length of time it takes them to complete a degree, The Globe and Mail has learned."

"The move is aimed at curbing the growing glut of would-be teachers who cannot find work in their field... The government will keep the number of college spaces at 9,000, but, with the extra year, each cohort will contain only 4,500."

This is just one example of how our university system is bloated, expensive and unresponsive to Ontario's needs. Rather than maintaining unnecessary jobs for college professors, the government's priorities should be educating our young people at a reasonable cost.



Here is a thoughtful reform that might make the system more effective and responsive to students and taxpayers.

In Europe, the average bachelor's degree takes three years of study, and a further year will earn you a master's degree. In Ontario, it is still theoretically

possible to earn a three-year bachelor's degree, but you have to do it online and/or part time. The norm is a four-year degree.

In the U.K., the three year degree is achieved by eliminating the first-year general education courses that have little to recommend them. They are a shallow introduction to a subject, best covered (if at all) by high school courses in grade eleven or twelve.

A university student in the U.K. chooses an area of study and plunges right in at the second year level (compared to a similar degree program in Ontario). They study items of substance in their chosen major from the get-go.

According to Maclean's, the cost to students for one year of university averages \$9,300 in Ontario for those who live at home (\$20,000 for those who live away). If you lived in the U.K., you (or your parents) would save one year's tuition. Why? Because your course of study would be three years, rather than four. MacLean's says the taxpayer would pocket another \$20,000: A handsome savings that would go a long way toward eliminating Ontario's budget deficit.

I graduated from York University with a three-year degree in 1979 (when they were commonly available). A few years later, I went on to graduate school in the United States. I can affirm from my own experience, a three year degree is more than

adequate to handle the work of graduate school. Frankly, a high school diploma would have done as well (aside from the fact that I wasn't very mature when I graduated from high school).



The Quad at a University in Ontario



So with this as an introduction, let me suggest a few additional reforms for Ontario's universities.

- Change all university courses to a semester system, so a three year degree might easily be completed in two full calendar years.
- Encourage co-operative programs, where a course of study runs for three full calendar years, with one semester of work experience

offered after every two terms of academic work.

- Hire teaching staff without the prerequisite PhD degree. A master's degree with lots of real life experience (and possibly one or two authored books under their belt) might be a better fit in many faculties, such as business, engineering, architecture, law and medicine.
- Offer teaching contracts of one, three or five years, rather than a lifetime sinecure.
- Academic staff should be focused on teaching. Those who wish to complete research projects in any year, would apply with a specific and useful project in mind.
- With the removal of research responsibilities, academic staff should handle a larger teaching load and focus on their students.



What about those students who would like to obtain a decent job, without the cost and time commitment of three years of university. Currently community colleges teach applied skills and do it very well. While three year diplomas are the norm, two years of study might be better. For many lines of work that require practical experience (coupled with book learning), there is very little that can't be taught in two years of intensive study.

There should also be other alternatives. Emp-

employers often hire university graduates, not so much for their education, but to ensure they are hiring persons with the required cognitive ability to perform on the job.

I suggest an examination (optional for students) might be taken after completing high school. It would test students for reading comprehension, high school mathematics, literacy and writing ability. The test scores might then be added to a résumé when students apply for jobs.

I suspect many employers would be impressed with this innovation, and as it became more popular, it might become a requirement in the hiring process. It would have the additional advantage of encouraging high schools to emphasize the teaching of the above-mentioned skills — to ensure students develop the cognitive abilities valued by employers.



States like Vermont and California allow young people without a law degree to articulate with a law firm, with a view to writing their bar admission examinations, and become lawyers, without a mountain of student debt (or a law degree). So far, a minority of students have taken up this challenge, but the practice should be encouraged and expanded.

Coupled with the cognitive ability test mentioned

above, law firms in many jurisdictions might well employ young people who hope to become lawyers in this manner.

If it works for lawyers, it would certainly work for engineers, architects and accountants. Many young people might prefer to earn a salary while studying to become a member of a coveted profession. And where there is choice and opportunity, society is always better off.

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