

## COMMUNICATION

### ABSTRACT

In the last eighteen months, University of Alberta Senate task forces have produced two reports analytical of that institution's extension function. Both concede the diverse contributions made in public service by the University and their growing importance, but report that institutional purposes in this sector are unclear and policies confused. Inferred from the extensive studies of these Senate bodies is set out an agenda of the central specific issues in public service which invite study and solution.

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### University Public Service: An Agenda for Action

Objectives in higher education are never too far from cash flow.

In the heady days of the 1960's, the stream of students to the universities — and thus of 'Full Time Equivalent Units' on which government funding is based — was in full flood. Money flowed like wine. The undergraduate student body exploded; the graduate school matured. New brick and concrete encircled quadrangles; academe flourished as a green bay tree. And the learning needs of the lonely adult student, as he attempted to upgrade his education on a part-time basis, through credit or otherwise, were relegated to the periphery.

But the scene has changed; financial depression in higher education is today universal across the continent. Coincidentally, as the flow of students — and thus, the flow of cash — waned, a normally apathetic public has become perceptibly hostile. To the 1960 battle cries of "relevance" and "participatory democracy", has been added "accountability". In the public mind has taken root something of the conviction that institutions are rather more concerned with serving themselves than with serving learners. Today, "learner-centered reform" is the current *mot d'usage*.<sup>1</sup>

One element of that reform is the easing of regulations so as to accommodate students who choose to conduct their learning on a part-time basis. Another is unexpected emphasis on "distance learning" pioneered in such a remarkably successful manner by the Open University. To which might be added the creation of university institutes — non-existent a mere half-dozen years ago — to improve teaching on the campus. Moreover, there is new recognition accorded the previously ignored adult student in extension classes, long accustomed to feeding on such crumbs as might fall from the academic table. Suddenly, in the pages of reports of official investigations into higher education across Canada, the obligation of the university to provide service to its public has become significant.

It is in this context that the Senate of the University of Alberta has, in the course of the last eighteen months, produced two Task Force Reports: "On

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<sup>1</sup>Dyckman W. Vermilye, ed., *Learner-Centered Reform* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1975), pp. ix-x.

the Future of the Extension Function”<sup>2</sup> and “The University in Public Service”.<sup>3</sup> Each is a product of objective inquiry by a group of citizens into the subject. Each reflects the approach, not of academics, but of laymen sympathetic to the institution but not integrated into it — and something of their bewilderment at its operating realities. And each is an expression of public sentiment which neither Government nor University ought wisely to ignore.

The “Senate” in Alberta universities is a body unique in Canadian university organization. Comprised in the main of private citizens appointed by both University and Government and elected by itself, it has a duty under the Universities Act “. . . to inquire into any matter that might tend to enhance the usefulness of the university.”<sup>4</sup> In its detachment from the internal conflicts and sometimes self-serving loyalties within the institution and through its statutory powers, its potential to serve as mediator between university and a sometimes distrustful and querulous public, is great.

The first of these two Reports had as its purpose

to assemble as varied a collection of opinions as possible and . . . to identify . . . the general direction for future activity [of the extension function] which the public expected. (p. 1)

Why, it begins, ought not the university merely to offer more of the same kind of extension activity that it has provided in the past? The answer, obvious to be sure, is that the proliferation of post-secondary institutions in Alberta during the decade has radically changed the *milieu*. Today, there is a large new demand for other levels and other kinds of educational experience, many of which are (and ought properly to be) met by these new institutions. In brief, “as needs have changed, so have the expectations of the people of Alberta about the extension function of their universities.” (p. 3)

In sifting through these expectations, the Task Force found that “the people of Alberta want ‘their’ University to be more involved in community affairs.” (p. 4) The avenues of this involvement are fairly explicit: an active role in the community as consultant and as *animateur*; the provision of ‘leadership training’ to community workers; aiding the community to initiate needed action; and the more generous sharing of institutional learning resources.

Adults wishing to complete a degree, the Task Force reports, want to be confronted with fewer stumbling blocks and to be helped with greater flexibility in “delivery systems” for higher education. As Vermilye puts it, the suspicion is about in the public mind that institutions have drifted from serving learners to serving the people who work for the institutions and run them and, moreover, they do not meet learning needs as much as they choose students who meet their own needs.<sup>5</sup>

Other issues concerned the Task Force. Funding of the extension function was found to be quite inadequate. The coordination of the University’s adult education offerings with those of other agencies deserved greater attention. The responsibility of the University both to evaluate the merit of its extra-mural

<sup>2</sup>University of Alberta, Senate Task Force on the Future of the Extension Function of the University of Alberta, First Report, *On the Future of the Extension Function* (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1974).

<sup>3</sup>University of Alberta, Senate Task Force on the Future of the Extension Function of the University of Alberta, Second Report, *The University and Service to the Public* (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1976).

<sup>4</sup>Government of Alberta, *The Universities Act, 1966* (Edmonton: Queen’s Printer), Chapter 105, Section 10.1.

<sup>5</sup>Vermilye, *op. cit.*, Preface.

programs on a continuing basis and to be sensitive to the evolution of its service role was critical.

The central concluding recommendation of this first Task Force Report,

. . . that the University of Alberta should make a university-wide commitment to the development of its role as a major community resource [with] status comparable to the traditional teaching and research activities of the university (p. 14)

provides the point of departure for the Report of the second Task Force.

The concern of that group was to resolve obvious confusion — compounded by uninformed assumptions in and out of the institution — about the ways in which the University *does* benefit the people of Alberta and the ways it *should* benefit the people of Alberta. Hence its aim, stated as

. . . an attempt to draw together all . . . related and unrelated ways in which the University attempts to serve the needs of the people who support it and to express some opinions about the future direction of the extension function. (p. 4)

In this culminating Report, the newly-created Faculty of Extension is perceived to have a primarily catalytic function in assembling and knitting together funds required from diverse sources, teaching resources from both community and the institution, and public demand for continuing education. Interestingly, it offers no comment on what insights from adult education as a field of theory ought to be made in its program or what research effort ought to guide its practice.

Community action, as one of the ten areas of extension activity it acknowledges, is seen as requiring the greatest delicacy of approach. Where, the Task Force speculates, does educational activity spill over into political or social activism? As to related concern for academic freedom, the Report concludes that most members of the University community have not shown any particular awareness of its rights and obligations.

There is, further, public suspicion of the academic's involvement in consulting.

The Report records

. . . confusion not only outside but inside the University . . . regarding a proper role for the academic. Does all consulting work add to the professional competence of the staff member involved? In some cases does the consulting activity take such precedence that the teaching function suffers? Are the guidelines governing consulting being adequately enforced? (p. 19)

The style of university organization, the Report concedes, makes the formulation of institutional policy difficult. There is little agreement within on what public service means. Among departments — even within departments — opinions and attitudes vary enormously, shaped by the nature of the discipline. Academic freedom, the Task Force concludes, seemingly includes the freedom of the individual to resist change and innovation. Policy change appears to be contingent on consensus of view. Communications failure (largely the fault of the institution and reflecting its lack of clear-cut policies) mature into public misunderstanding and suspicion. Open to question is whether the university as institution has any awareness of the consequences of the remarkable change in the environment of higher education.

The confident view of academe that all problems related to the university are soluble with more cash flow is seen as unwarranted. But, at the same time, the lack of policy of Government *vis à vis* education — its calm assumption that institutional public service responsibilities can be met by a simple rearrangement of internal university priorities — is held to be unrealistic. Indeed, the Report quite properly asks, *ought* government to lay down institutional policy about service to the public?

This is the dilemma. On the one hand, “. . . positive financial incentives by the Provincial Government could enable individual faculties to do much more in the meeting of continuing education demands.” (p. 29) On the other hand,

the missing links, in our opinion, are the University’s own clear conception of the future pattern of continuing adult education, how the University fits in to that pattern and what resources the University needs to fulfil the demands. (p. 29)

To which is linked the critical problem inherent in any change in the institutional policy on public service:

. . . “policy” of the University means different things at different levels. The operational unit of the University is the department and even that has limited control of the individual staff member. If policy is to be established it must involve both broad direction by the General Faculties Council, and some consensus at the department level about how GFC and faculty policy are to be made operational. (p. 29)

While acknowledging that the Special Sessions Office of the University (which is responsible for the institutional credit work arranged off the campus or supplementary to the conventional academic term) and the Faculty of Extension have central roles to play in determining extension policy,

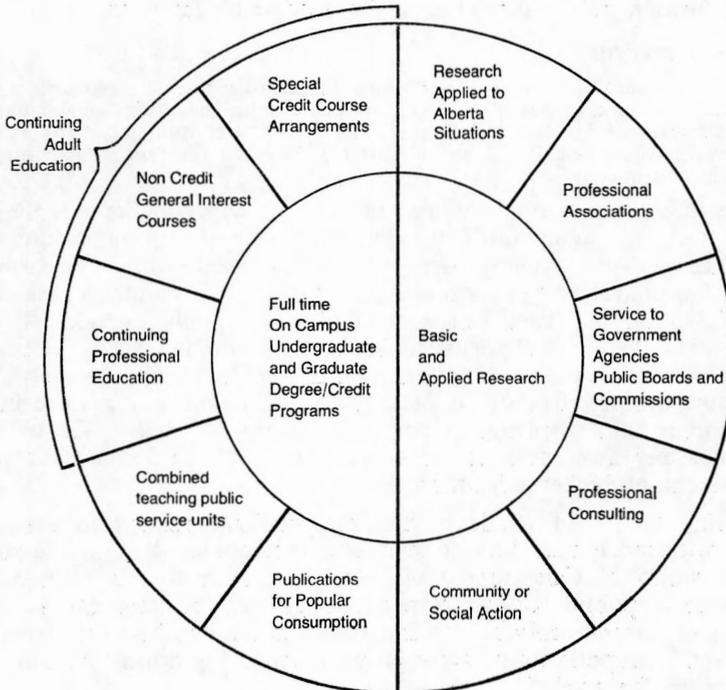
. . . their power to act will always be conditioned by the autonomy of the individual faculty and department to accept or not accept any policy derived exclusively by them. (p. 29)

Without a delineation of an institutional policy on public service, the existing *ad hoc* arrangements for university adult education will continue.

The central conclusion of the Task Force is that

. . . the University of Alberta should make a university-wide commitment to the provision of continuing adult education as the *primary* focus of its extension function. (p. 1)

That function is graphically represented thus:



But prescription follows diagnosis. As the Task Force Report itself concedes, academics are not given to sudden gyrations in policy. What will eventuate from their response to the earnest work of these two citizen Task Force groups remains to be seen.

If the University is moved to act on these Task Force recommendations, a detailed examination of these issues, among others, might comprise an action agenda:

#### *Finance*

What volume of funds ought realistically to be provided for the extension function and on the basis of what formula?

What proportions of its total is it reasonable to expect from government, participating students and external sponsors?

#### *Internal Working Relationships*

Within what kind of administrative framework ought the policies and programs of various continuing education agencies within the university to be rationalized and coordinated?

#### *External Working Relationships*

Within what kind of framework ought the policies and programs of a wide variety of external agencies involved in providing continuing education (community colleges, other provincial universities and a great host of business, governmental and voluntary groups) to be linked?

#### *Student Body*

What segments of the population ought the university particularly attempt to serve through continuing education?

Given the demand of the adult to be involved in the planning of his education, through what mechanisms can his views best be reflected in the university's continuing education councils?

#### *The University's Extension Program*

What guiding philosophy and what specific goals ought to characterize the university's extension program?

What standards ought it to maintain?

What balance should exist within the various components of its program?

How ought that program be evaluated?

#### *Staffing the Extension Program*

What elements in recruitment policy ought to guide the selection of those who will undertake the university's extension work, from on or off the campus on a full-time or part-time basis?

Relative to their colleagues within the institution, responsible for its intra-mural work, how ought their responsibilities to be defined, how ought their work to be evaluated, how ought they to be rewarded?

*Physical Plant and Equipment*

What requirements in, and utilization of, facilities for use in the university's continuing education program ought to be anticipated?

To what extent and how best might the learning resources of the university — books, audio-visual materials, the broadcast media — be deployed in meeting the learning needs of the public at large?

*Research and Training*

To what extent, through research in adult education as a field of study and through the provision of training in that field, ought the University to serve adult education practitioners?

**RESUME**

Au cours des derniers dix-huits mois, les comités d'évaluation du Sénat de l'Université de l'Alberta ont produit deux rapports analytiques sur l'organisation des cours publics de cette institution. Tous deux reconnaissent les diverses contributions faites dans le domaine du service public par l'Université et leur importance croissante mais ils signalent aussi que le but poursuivi n'est pas clairement exprimé et que les politiques d'application sont confuses. Partant des études extensives que représentent ces deux rapports, le présent article propose un programme de travail et soulève les problèmes spécifiques qui, dans le domaine du service public, demandent étude et solution.