



## Vivant Professores

Without having conformed to a particular plan, the articles that accumulate for an issue like this will often cluster around corresponding axes of concern. The explicit context of several of the articles here is the university; in the rest there are clear implications for “higher” as well as the other levels of education. The options on which they dwell can all be said to be unsettled — and moreover, are unsettling — in the practice of university education today.

But among those who practice in universities one is not always allowed to assume the term “education.” Many professors resent their activities being included under that general rubric, and spurn the words and thoughts of those who discourse in this vein. They reject, as if instinctively, the proposition that education is what universities are really for. (Very few will be reading this journal, having glanced at its name.) Oddly enough, however, they may consent to discuss the proposition so long as the phrase “higher education” is used; clearly this is felt to be different not merely in degree, as the comparative suggests, but in kind, from what is done in “education”.

The persistence of this point of view as a predominant force in universities — and particularly in those like McGill that claim strong continuities with tradition — hardly allows one to dismiss the phenomenon as simply the mechanics of snobbery and status-mongering at work within the structure of an exclusive club, tempting as the many parallels may be. Is it merely the perversity of the excessively privileged that most academic faculty will maintain — in the face of assumptions by almost everybody else that they are there to teach — that the true purpose of a university, from which they may not swerve, is to strive for a loftier end which they alone may determine and judge?

It is the pursuit of excellence to which they point, with reverence, uttering the unchallengeable word with that special bating of the breath reserved by public men for holy matters. It is indeed a powerful word, for its pursuit implies

both an aspiration that can never be attained, ensuring that whatever is excellent is itself doomed to be excelled, and a calling that must seem to raise the devotee above others who, while they many admire excellence, have nevertheless not given a life's work to it. And on this side of the coin academics are not always so scrupulous as to have kept apart the business of excelling where it applies to going beyond previous human understanding, and the business of excelling where it means outdoing other, present, human beings. When you get right down to choosing who shall be in your company in this pursuit, excellence entails elitism — too often achieved by relatively crude or lazy methods of election.

Universities historically grew out of societies of scholars; teachers and students alike belonged to the collegium. It is still the ideal of modern academics that their student colleagues be those who already share their conviction and skill in the study that leads them on. Even the more arrogant and egocentric professors hardly object to permitting the attendance at their activities of those who have proved their ability and dedication, whether as imitators of a model, as fellow discussants, as targets for constant challenge and correction, or as apprentices in more or less humbling tasks. Any of these relationships may constitute "higher education"; the two criteria are the indulgence of the academic, who continues unswerving in that primary pursuit of excellence, and the competitive dedication of the student. All this must seem to professors a far cry from the hurly-burly of the schools, with their purveyance of mediocre information to hordes of inattentive youth by teachers apparently serving no other cause.

To academics and to artists alike must be accorded the right to pursue the unreachable as a means of exacting meaning from life. Like the aristocrats who formerly furnished them their livings — and whose life style many university faculty emulate to this day in manner, hours of work, and fondness for rank and ceremony — they contribute little to society's gross product but much to its colour and spirit. Compared to the artists, academics are fortunate in the solidity of their institutions, in which they pass lifetimes of security and comfort. But are they not entitled to object, considering the history of those institutions, when they are called upon to accept as "students" large numbers of people whose interest in their particular line of study is at best indirect and whose achievement in it is by no rating excellent? The use of universities by society to supply in the requisite large numbers its more highly-skilled professionals seems natural enough to those raising taxes for the purpose; but to the professors themselves it can seem an outright perversity in the light of their tradition.

In that light, they would be in error. The tradition has included from earliest times the admission to instruction of those who were never expected themselves to serve learning with lives spent in study. Just as artists then accepted with more or less grace the commissions of their patrons to apply their art to mundane uses, so academics have always more or less put up with the offspring, willing or unwilling, of those who would pay them. And then as now, who could tell what might not happen through serious teaching to change a student's mind and the course of a life? In 1629, at the University of St. Andrews in

Scotland, James Graham was by all accounts a pretty unsatisfactory student, squandering his time at golf and the butts, shooting arrows over the college tower and into the hat of the sheriff. But he was to excel in life as a poet, and as a military leader, and as the supreme follower of his king's lost cause. Along such unanticipated avenues for the pursuit of excellence he so stirred the imagination of his European contemporaries that they named the year of his victories "Annus Mirabilis", and entitled him "The Great Marquis" of Montrose. The honour roll of those who have learned at universities, but have not joined the learned, is brilliant and unending.

The spirit of scholarship that has been communicated to such students, and has animated their teachers, is not so narrowly defined as — nor is it entirely dependent on — the concept of research that sometimes appears to have taken its place as the touchstone of reputation in modern universities. It has its reflective and harmonising function, alert to the wider implications of the advances made by that aggressive mental engineering on local sectors of the frontier of human knowledge. The communication of research to one's colleagues has its recognised apparatus of conference, publication, and reward in academic life; the communication of reflection, to all those potentially able to understand, deserves no less attention and respect. The quality of a professor's teaching is as much a symptom of underlying scholarship as is the quality of research reported.

The articles that follow here reflect concern for the reconciliation of similar issues. The student body of McGill (Frost and Rosenberg) has steadily developed from a "Protestant" majority enrolled in Arts to a composition more representative of the population and more interested in training for the professions. Its revolutionary impatience of a decade ago (Rocke Robertson) among much else had its teeth into the quality of teaching in the university. The facts of multiple ethnicity in the Canadian population (Buchignani) demand a revision of the national historical myth, and a recognition of individual ethnic identities in education. The academically-postulated dependence of national culture on the language of education (Magor) assumes oddly enough in law the total lack of dependence of religion on that same language.

Minogue acidly argues for a decent respect for the limits of what it is possible to teach, and for recognition that the existence of a discipline and an authority come before any ambition to meet by teaching any alleged social need such as "political literacy". Examining the pursuit of excellence, Jorgensen points to its assurance of vitality in music teaching, where dabbling invites a sort of mental death. But withal (as we learn in no uncertain terms from Dussault) excellence, discipline, and authority in universities, unapplied to the needs of human life, soon become its deadly enemies.

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