THE CANADIAN UNIVERSITY
Three views from the corner office

FIAT LUX: THE LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES 2020

BY Louis P. Visentin
President and Vice-Chancellor, Brandon University



What is the single most important issue facing "the university"? If you read University Affairs or the CAUT Bulletin you might be inclined to think it is one or all of the following:

Tuition deregulation, indirect costs, student recruitment, deferred maintenance, capital campaigns, faculty retention, Online-U, safe workplace or poisoned environments, labour relations, athletic scholarships, commercialization of research, Maclean's rankings, research chairs, tuition hikes, smart classrooms, and student debt load.

The above reads like the agenda for an AUCC meeting of university Presidents. From UBC to Brandon to Memorial, these are important issues for all institutions; issues that are often difficult, divisive, costly, and at best, time consuming. We fret about them. We plan. We mobilize resources to deal with them. We work and we hope.

CLIMATE OF CHANGE AND THE E-WORLD

As these issues indicate, the world and how we know it has changed dramatically in the last ten years. It is termed Post-modern in the cant of casuists from the land of Lacan, and is a much different reality than the 60s and 70s in which most administrators and professors matured. The world à la 2001 is connected, culturally diverse, non-linear, and global, with an accent on partnerships, quality, complexity, and a high rate of change.

At the same time it is filled with cultural paradox. We think globally and act locally. Mergers abound but small is beautiful. The emphasis is on mega or nano, including universities. We have mass production multiversities and boutique emporiums of elitist values rooted in the distant past. The intellectual "Sears and Saks" operate side by side with the electronic opportunists of distance education. E-Us offer e-degrees and diplomas ad libitum at less than bargain basement prices.

Online Universities, Consortia and Corporate America have invaded cyberspace. There are new entries into the education market every week and this proliferation will continue. The market capitalization of the twenty or so corporate players already on the horizon approached 10 billion in June of 2000. Of course the former don't include consortia like the Unext.com:Cardean University, Global University Alliance, Scottish Knowledge, the Mercury Group of Malaysia, and our own Canadian Virtual University. Does this indicate change? The terse answer is yes. These new forces will serve the demographic and developmental demands of the Third World and of local governments concerned with rural access. Is this new e-world leading us further into the maw of consumerism, utilitarianism, and specialization? No doubt yes, and with a minimalist curricula to match. It is a new environment to which we must adapt. This has all been made possible by the new broad-band communications technologies.

While some academics and critics rebel against technique as an intellectual abomination that only serves the gods and gurus of commercial technology, there is a nagging suspicion that new technologies have changed our world in a fundamental way. I think it has and there are many examples.

KNOWING, TEACHING AND LEARNING

If the goal of our system is to teach students how to know, then the computer and its allied technologies have changed everything. Consider how technology has allowed explorations in: cosmology, the human genome, the fine structure of the atom, the nature of fractals, population dynamics, economic modeling, geographical information systems or digital art. Not surprisingly, computers have changed what we know about these topics, how we know, how we apply knowledge, and who can access this knowledge. It has allowed for an element of design and understanding of the underlying architecture of knowledge, heretofore impossible to achieve, a jump to another level of abstraction. Simultaneously, it has changed how we know each other. It doesn't end there. At a time when we need synthesis and multi-disciplinarity, newer consilient search engines will generate and synthesize knowledge across disciplines and provide tools for a different kind of creativity.

THINKING AND OTHER LEARNING CONUNDRUMS

The technology debates are helping us to focus our attention on the most important aspect of an academic community: our consumers. What are the things that our students are most in need of learning ... so that they can make a living, live together, and live well? Have we imparted the right content? Have we enhanced thinking tools? Are our students truly literate across disciplines? This is what education is about after all. In the chain of knowing, data is not information and information is not knowledge. Knowledge is not understanding, and understanding is not wisdom. The hope has always been that a university education will spark the internal imagination and improve understanding. Given the turmoil and transition in our world, it is questionable how successful we've been.

Stated in another way, universities need to teach students how to know, as well as impart and improve the thinking tools that are at the heart of creative understanding. Described by Robert Root-Bernstein in "Roots of Genius", these include observing, abstracting, analogizing, empathizing, dimensional thinking, transforming, and synthesizing. Critical thinking and productive thought do not only mean being exposed to the narrative, projection and parable of textual literacy. Great books are

not enough to impart modern literacy or "lateracy". We think in words, numbers, shapes, sounds and sensations. Our internal imagining is constructed by a combination of mimetic visualization, the logic of data and external experience. To quote Root-Bernstein, "Productive thought occurs when internal imagination and external experience coincide. It is the task for educators to reunite the two."

RETHINKING LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCE: GOODBYE TRILLING

With this in mind, we need to question our curriculum — questions that are framed in the context of what it means to live in the world of today and tomorrow. Three guiding principles come to mind: beauty, truth and the common good ... for today and tomorrow. How do we achieve the level of abstraction needed to know the world we actually live in without some exposure to a curriculum with breadth. Just what should that be?

We live in a world permeated by the fruits of mathematics, science, and technology. Modern literacy means going beyond just textual and numeric understanding. It is a context that would make Lionel Trilling, the twentieth century's most influential literary critic, uncomfortable. The new curricula incorporates philosophy, literature, languages, and history but includes more of the sciences, mathematics, computation, music, and art (including the performing arts). This philosophy mirrors the Swedish approach to education, which begins with a science core and expands from there ... not the reverse.

It sounds more like the trivium and quadrivium of medieval times. The liberal arts of that era were defined as subjects which one was expected to study after basic instruction in literacy, in other words, Latin and Greek. The trivium was grammar, logic, and rhetoric. The quadrivium included arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy. These latter four were all connected through mathematics. All of this was considered important for anyone pursuing law, business or politics. A social conscience with a mathematical twist.

HOW ABOUT EMOTIONS AND EXPERIENCE

Needless to say we do little or nothing to educate in the realm of social or emotional development. If Daniel Coleman is right in saying that emotional intelligence is twice as important as cognitive skills, then we are educating the wrong people with the wrong curriculum for the wrong world. It's perplexing and sobering that we admit students on the basis of their performance scores related to cognitive intelligence and we are even ranked according to how many of them we have.

Emotional intelligence is very plastic and continues to reshape itself through repeated experience. How do we build this into curricula? We need another renaissance. A new enlightenment if you will, and perhaps we have one in our midst. We need a melding of the world of experiential knowledge with the symbolic, theoretical and emotional. The step from knowledge to understanding and wisdom is one that demands the fusion of the image, object and sentiment. It must be an entangling of the tactile world of the senses, with the noetic. All this in a curriculum? Take two parts Galileo and add one part Michaelangelo. Now there's a good start: Physics and Fine Arts. Then there are the professional schools. Still feel comfortable?

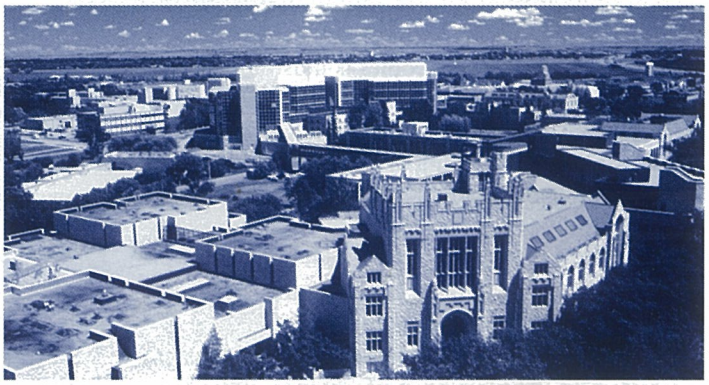
MEANWHILE IN 'O CANADA WEST'

This is Brandon, Manitoba. It is the centre of Canada, a place of boundless horizons, fields of sunflowers, wheat and prairie roses. These lands are filled with memories of trappers, traders, and the Hudson's Bay Company. It's where the West begins and where Dobjanski is not a foreign name. Brandon University is where Tommy Douglas was "senior stick", and is the home of the Bobcats, who bow to no one. The School of Music is internationally renowned, and the liberal arts and sciences are alive and well.

There's change in the wind.

MAKING THE GRADE MEASURING UP TO PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

BY Peter MacKinnon
President, University of Saskatchewan



The public fascination with "winners" and "losers" is as old as Cain and Abel. In modern times this fascination has taken a new twist: a desire to rank everything from consumer products to health care providers. Higher education has not been immune to this trend. American universities and colleges are ranked annually in U.S. News and World Report, while in Canada Maclean's magazine has been ranking Canadian universities since 1991.

These comparisons have arisen to satisfy a public need for informed decision-making. Prospective students in Canada face a dizzying array of post-secondary education choices, from apprenticeship programs to business and technical training schools to community colleges and universities. New competitors such as online universities and private institutions add to the mix. How is a prospective student to choose?

The more significant the purchase, the greater the amount of information a buyer seeks in order to feel comfortable making his or her decision. Consider the amount of information gathered by a prospective car buyer before making a choice. Consumers who are in the market for major appliances turn to resources such as Consumer Reports. When one considers how much more significant the choice of higher education is, it is not surprising that prospective students and their families yearn for an objective third party to provide comparisons of institutions.

Rankings appeal to a basic human yearning for simplicity. However, in higher education one size does not fit all. Unlike many consumer purchases, the choice of higher education is a