

Do Universities Still Need their Campuses?

Ian Winchester
University of Calgary

In the beginning, as with Bologna in 1108 or Oxford in the early 12th century or the medieval university of Paris, universities were places where students and teachers might congregate in buildings on a physical place of pleasant land. The great universities of today such as Oxford, Cambridge, the Sorbonne, Harvard, Stanford and their Canadian ilk all across the vast country of Canada like the University of Toronto, McGill, UBC, the University of Alberta (and the University of Calgary from where I am writing) all have remarkable and beautiful campuses with many useful buildings upon them.

The things taught today in all of these universities are much the same as they were when the European university movement began. Students wanted to learn about history, ancient and modern languages, philosophical questions, religious studies, the arts, practical and important disciplines relating to medicine, law, engineering. And after the advent of Galileo and Newton in the 17th century the whole array of modern sciences and their applications beckoned and became permanent parts of the university as an expanded kind of universal institution. And for all of these things we continue to need know there were since the beginning, older scholars willing to teach.

Perhaps because the climate of the large part of Europe (a climate with spring, summer, autumn and winter requiring from time to time to be indoors and warm) all such places had buildings where students could eat, sleep, attend large classes, or intimate meetings with their tutors or teachers. All such universities necessarily had many buildings of many different kinds.

The question I wish to ask today is: Are such spaces and buildings still necessary in a world with many more possibilities for students to gather and teachers to teach? In other words do we still need campuses for universities?

I am thinking especially of the experience of the whole world during and after the universal presence of COVID 19, a plague that affected us all and killed many. For during and after covid we found ourselves having developed entirely new ways for students to gather

and to be taught by those who knew what they wanted to learn. For example such powerful ways of presenting many students and instructors simultaneously on computer screens as Zoom and Microsoft Teams were developed rapidly and almost universally used during that covid period.

The whole effort of that time was to keep people at a physical distance from one another so that they might not catch or spread this terrible plague, covid 19, to others. So we have some four or five years with total isolation of teachers and students. The only exceptions was where wearing masks and the being in special physical places was necessary such as in a laboratory, in a library, with a patient, working on building things together or in Engineering schools that required close human contact and the like.

We learned to teach K-12 school students living in their own homes and not going to school using computers connecting the teacher and the students on line. And the faces and voices of teachers and students could easily be present so that complete isolation was avoided or even superseded by another kind of necessary intimacy. One parallel development was that mothers and fathers were often also home to avoid unnecessary contact with others. So the home schooling movement expanded greatly and almost universally as a side effect of these generally new approaches to teaching and learning.

At the present time governments and businesses are now trying to bring back to their physical spaces, offices and laboratories many of the people who had been dispersed by the necessary protections for covid. Public schools have largely returned to the pre-covid ways with both students and teachers returning all week to their schools and playgrounds. But at many universities it has been possible to teach many courses entirely on line.

The most striking implication of this possibility is that many of the offices and lecture halls set aside for teachers and teachers are largely empty. International students even local students are now often able to take their degrees without having to pay for food and lodging and local travel in the town where their university happens to be located or at their university itself.

One example is the faculty where the Journal of Educational Thought is located, the Werklund School of Education. While from time to time the teaching faculty in a given specialization gather for

particular meetings, in general these university teachers in graduate programs there still largely work from home and teach their courses at the graduate level largely on line using Zoom and its ilk.

This means that our offices and teaching spaces for are largely empty. This seems to be largely true for the rest of this university with respect to the programs and the arts and wherever access to physical things (laboratories, civil engineering) or present people (medicine, kinesiology, teacher training).

Except for a very limited exceptions university teaching and learning could be done with Zoom like teaching and learning provisions. Our libraries are now possible to be digital facilities and not large rooms full of heavy books.

So the easy conclusion is that we might easily close down most if our physical facilities that make up our present university campuses. Or at least strongly reduce these.

What arguments might we then offer to instead maintain the present arrangements with large physical spaces and a multitude of splendid buildings that must be largely supported by our governments?

It seems to me that such arguments must be made by all the faculties in universities like the one where the *Journal of Educational Thought* is editorially found. So I would propose that the new editor of our journal arrange a special issue dedicated to the topic of the present necessity of maintenance of the physical campuses that are continuous with the entire history of the university movement.