

Canadian Response to the Australopithecus Afarensis (Lucy) of Higher Education

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Dr. Gamble identifies the Lucy of higher education woes in the United States, but is the situation the same in Canada? The answer is both yes and no. There is no question that the Bekkermanisation of higher education had found fertile ground in Canadian post-secondary institutions. Like their counterparts south of the border, the "happy customer" model of higher education and the consequent marketing of university education and, of course, the measurable indicators evaluation of acquiring knowledge, exploring ideas, and the pursuit of artistic expression have afflicted Canadian universities.

The main difference is that the "Bekkerman infestation" in Canada is less virulent than what is observable in much of the United States. Virtually all Canadian universities and colleges are publicly funded. The result is that each institution is essentially a carbon copy of the other and faces similar internal and external problems, creating commonality rather than competition. The government funding of Canadian universities, while having its share of intrigues, is not as open to politician-interference, as is the case with many state-funded institutions in the United States. Finally, no Canadian university or college is in the position of being a football/basketball programme with some courses attached to it. Television deals do not pre-empt regularly scheduled administrative duties such as running institutions of higher learning.

What ultimately tempers the flirtation with the United States education-as-corporation model by Canadian university and college administrations, however, is a difference in cultural values. In Canada, education, like health care and social assistance, is perceived as sacrosanct. Universally accessible post-secondary institutions are manifestations of a deliberately chosen governmental structure. So while Canadians whine about tax rates and rising tuition, they know that in comparison to their American cousins, their children will not have to mortgage their futures to receive a first-class post-secondary education.

But the Canadian paradigm also is flawed; its problems come to light when there is a shift from the administration-faculty relationship, the focus of Dr. Gamble's article, to the student-faculty relationship. For many Canadian students, the "happy customer" mantra of the Bekkerman philosophy has mutated in Canada into one of student entitlement. Endemic in Canadian colleges and universities are students who have the attitude that, as part of their national birthright, they have an entitlement to their degrees, to good/excellent grades, to professors gifted in entertainment, all without having to allocate any of their own time, effort, or money. If a student fails to obtain the requisite degree, personal responsibility is evaded.

Faculty members encourage the student entitlement attitude in a number of ways. The most prominent forms of encouragement occur when faculty members grant paper and exam deferments because deadline imposition is perceived as outmoded, arbitrary, formalistic, or too bothersome. And, of course, grades are inflated under the guise of either the inexactness of evaluation or the fear that a bad grade will hurt the chances of a student for a job, scholarship, entry to professional or graduate school. In both cases, deferments and grade inflation, better to pass on the problem than to take responsibility. Naturally, student sign-up is the *sine qua non* of a caring professor; this is enhanced by lax grading.

The student entitlement mentality is also fostered by faculty indifference, which ensures nothing is done to challenge or capsize that mindset. Faculty indifference to students arises from three primary sources: personal and professional burnout, preoccupation with political activism, and a lack of imagination as evidenced by the proliferation of theory. Burnout results in faculty members who have

lost the spark to teach, do research, or engage students in the debate of ideas. While it is customary to think of burnout as a near-retirement scenario, it is actually more common amongst faculty who actively seek university administrative office or those who, in mid-career, see themselves overtaken by younger, more gifted colleagues and thus become disillusioned and more interested in travel and gardening.

Political activism has superseded genuine intellectual curiosity. For instance, history is interpreted and evaluated to reflect current political values instead of being examined in its own socio-political context. Any and all debate of controversial topics has been neutered because the fear of offending other faculty members and special interest groups is greater than the belief that professors are paid to help students analyze, defend, and challenge issues they will have to grapple with as leaders and citizens of their communities and nations. The pursuit of knowledge, which can only be done with an open mind that constantly questions its own motivations and methods, is accepted only if it reaches a politically expedient conclusion. Courses, research, and administrative responsibilities become means to pursue and promulgate political agenda; learning and actual intellectual inquiries are distant concerns. Today's "isms" and the backlash to them ("bisms"?) flourish with a total disregard for students except as pawns to be inculcated and then sacrificed on political battlefields.

Finally, the student entitlement stance is enabled by faculty member's lack of imagination. Theory-laden articles are but one example. Theoreticians have long touted themselves as occupying the top of the academic hierarchy. Indeed, theoreticians with fresh insight can revolutionize entire scholarly disciplines. But alas, these thinkers are few and far between. The more familiar scenario involves faculty who become self-proclaimed theoreticians. They "borrow" someone else's theories, which usually have originated in social contexts, academic disciplines, and languages they do not understand, and then slap these theories onto their own subjects like a template. All that is left to do is fill in the blanks, no original thought required. Theory is simply a tool and the type of theory chosen always determines the outcome. Feminism, for instance, is a tool that always ferrets out evidence of patriarchy; the conclusion, regardless of specifics, is always the same. This lack of originality in theoretical application is of no concern to faculty members, however, because a well-worn

theory is easily disguised by jargon and gnarled grammar. While political activism may be the antithesis of intellectual integrity, regurgitated, half-baked theories make scholarly research appear inaccessible and thus irrelevant. Students become cynical. If what faculty members offer is pat, but incomprehensible, why bother to engage with the material at all? So instead, many students wait out their years of education in a state of mental inertia, counting down the days until degrees will be handed to them.

Some Canadian students actually are interested in learning and pursuing knowledge (yes, they do exist). How can they contend with faculty apathy and the pervasive student entitlement ethos? Here is where the Bekkermanization of students (as opposed to the Bekkermanisation of universities and colleges), in a moderate form, may have a positive impact. Embracing some of the consumer model concepts and applying them to their time at university can help students get more out of their post-secondary years. Specifically, the responsibility of being a self-starter, the lateral thinking involved in marketing one's skills and the love of learning necessary for leadership and market adaptability all form the interface between consumerism and a proactive approach to education.

No matter how intelligent and enthusiastic a professor is, self-motivated students always do better than their passive counterparts. Why? All education is essentially self-education. At best, professors are only learning facilitators; they cannot magically funnel facts and skills into their student's heads. At worst, when professors are jaded and indifferent, students need to take even more responsibility for their own educational experiences. This means becoming self-starters who view their courses and contact time with faculty members primarily as starting points for their own research interests as well as their own in-depth interrogation of the topic at hand.

If independence and motivation are required to become successful self-starters, then lateral thinking is important for the practical application of university degrees, particularly degrees in the humanities. Students who enroll in university because they think that a job will be handed to them automatically after they graduate are mistaken. They are not owed employment just as they are not owed a degree. Instead, students need to learn how to market themselves and their skills. For instance, what can a student do with a degree in English? At the end of their degrees, students who major in English

should have the following skills. They should have an understanding of English-language literature as well as the socio-political factors that have influenced writers in various time periods and places. English majors should have a thorough command of the mechanics of the English language. These students should also have superior abilities to analyze the structure and content of any text they encounter as well as have honed their library and Internet research skills. Furthermore, an English degree means that students should be able to make connections between diverse texts and ideas. They should be able to formulate an opinion or argument, support it with evidence and communicate their position convincingly in a written format. Finally, these students should be able to handle large volumes of work and be able to meet deadlines. In other words, English majors are highly employable people, but it is the students' responsibility to market their degrees effectively. They need to learn how to convey to perspective employers that their liberal arts skills are transferable to a wide variety of jobs.

Learning for learning's sake is a valid and noble undertaking, but it also has a social derivative: the best leaders tend to be well-rounded individuals. It only makes sense since a love of learning is indicative of intelligence, a quality usually found in leaders no matter what their professions. A love of learning also gives today's students a broad knowledge base to inform their decisions when they become tomorrow's vanguard. For instance, Political Science, History, Philosophy, and Classics disciplines with no discernible jobs attached, all require students to study the contexts and causes of social events and ethical concerns from different epochs and regions that still have relevance today. Also, a love of learning gives students the adaptability to acquire new skills and switch careers if so required. Conversely, the narrow, task-oriented learning found in the purely technical training of some vocational schools only gives students the skills to deal with technology that may be obsolete by the time they graduate. When students enroll in university and college programs, they must make a life-long commitment to learning, the success of their careers and our country depends on it.

The bottom line is that the future is not as bleak as Dr. Gamble predicts. Although many Canadians abhor the rampant commercialization south of the border, the adoption of some consumer concepts could help remedy the student entitlement attitude

that is endemic here. In other words, there is no need yet to cry for a Royal Commission or to submit dutifully to an earnest CBC made-for-television movie or even to strap on a pair of snowshoes and tramp stoically into a white-out. Bekkerman's Lucy is simply a matter of prospective and application.

(Disclaimers: This response reflects, both faithfully and not all, the views of a graduate student (a consumer) who was recently a teaching assistant for a Shakespeare course and a mid-rank professor at a professional school who enjoys teaching, research, and the circus that is university life.)

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