

Universities and Politics: The Canadian Context

Peter C. Emberley, *Zero Tolerance: Hot Button Politics in Canada's Universities* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1996), 313 pp.

Cynthia Hardy, *The Politics of Collegiality: Retrenchment Strategies in Canadian Universities* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 232 pp.

Stephen Richer and Lorna Weir, Eds., *Beyond Political Correctness: Toward the Inclusive University* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 272 pp.

The challenges we face in higher education are hardly unique to the United States. Yet it is infrequently that we cast our glance beyond our national borders to look for informative experiences and solutions.

Canada, for example, is experiencing a period of particular challenge and change in higher education. Faculty strikes, once relatively rare, have occurred at several campuses in recent months. Cash-strapped and politically conservative provincial governments have pushed universities toward more "American" models of funding, with students paying higher tuitions. The political issues of broader society have found focus and forum on campus.

Three recent books discuss a gamut of these circumstances. The first of these, Peter Emberley's *Zero Tolerance: Hot Button Politics in Canada's Universities*, is the work that has found broadest public readership. Indeed, it has been a Canadian best-seller. Emberley, a professor of political science at Carleton University in Ottawa, writes of higher education somewhat from the critical perspective of Charles Sykes, Dinesh D'Souza, and Harold Bloom. But Emberley professes, with justification, to have written "a book that does not bury Canada's universities, but praises them."

Emberley nominates a rogue's gallery of those who would divert the greater university mission to their own ends, and divides them into two rough camps: the corporate right and the cultural left. The right would starve the liberal arts curricula for the advantage of narrow, careerist training, while the left would strangle its essence by the suppression of real inquiry and discussion.

Zero Tolerance has two substantial strengths. First, it is a comprehensive, if sketchy, summary of political and economic crises faced by Canadian higher education in recent years, from the legacies of the Lépine massacre of fourteen

women at Montreal's École Polytechnique, to the ideological foundations of the current Ontario government's assault on university funding. Second, the book, particularly early on, is an eloquent and forceful argument for the liberal arts as the *raison d'être* of higher education and universities. (Emberley is also head of Carleton's newly established College of the Humanities, a four-year honors program.)

The book does, regrettably, weaken to the point of exasperation as it moves toward its recommendations. Emberley, for example, advocates the complete spin-off of professional programs, such as education and business, from the university to technical schools. That's hardly compatible with his calls for more community service and involvement by universities and their faculties. He decries the movement of placing more financial burden on students, seeing higher education as a general social benefit, yet endorses differential tuition burdens by major and degree levels on the anticipation of graduates' financial gain.

While Emberley chooses to regard the debates and issues of "political correctness" as problems conjured by the ideological left, *Beyond Political Correctness: Toward the Inclusive University* throws the ball—hard—back into the conservative court. The introduction, by editors Stephen Richer and Lorna Weil, sociologists at Carleton and York Universities, respectively, sets the tone. "Neoconservative PC is an ideological move aimed at halting" anti-racist and feminist initiatives within universities, Richer and Weil write. "Recycling hyperbolic anti-communist rhetoric, neoconservatives dismiss human rights initiatives as forms of intolerant fanaticism and oppression." The editors obviously feel that offense is the best defense, and those sympathetic to their viewpoint will find the essay rousing.

The objectives of the book are broad, and as with nearly all anthologies, the selections are of irregular quality and interest. Fully a third of the book is devoted to a tracing of the anti-PC movement and its philosophic roots. Special attention is devoted by several authors to the braided development of anti-PC rhetoric in Canada and the U.S. The treatment is thorough, and overly so; the tone is that of linguistic archeology. A few entries are weak; a joint essay by two graduate student colleagues is hyperbolic and maudlin.

But there are more that are strong. Among these are a three-author piece, "Academic Freedom *Is* the Inclusive University," and Jo-Ann Wallace's "'Fit and Qualified': The Equity Debate at the University of Alberta." This reviewer found particularly interesting editor Richer's own essay on the rewards and frustrations of a male instructor as he attempts, with irregular but general success, to incorporate a feminist perspective into his teaching.

More PC conflicts of note in recent years in Canadian universities have

revolved around gender than around race, and so the book concentrates more on the former dynamic, while a comparable American work might have focused more on the latter. Nonetheless, *Beyond Political Correctness* is a helpful source for those who would seek to better understand PC debates, and perhaps to see their educational practice improved by that understanding.

The last of the three studies, Cynthia Hardy's *The Politics of Collegiality: Retrenchment Strategies in Canadian Universities*, is a gem. Hardy investigated the responses of six Canadian universities (McGill, Montreal, British Columbia, Simon Fraser, Toronto, and Carleton) to precipitously reduced government funding. She conducted the investigation primarily through numerous interviews at each campus, determining relative interactions in each institutional case between traditional, collegial cultures and emergent managerialism, i.e., centralized bureaucracy. Her general finding, demonstrated most particularly at the University of British Columbia, is that collegiate and managerial cultures can work together to find broadly acceptable, if painful, solutions to financial crises. Collegiality and managerialism need not be polar opposites. Managerialism at expense of collegiality is neither the sole nor the desirable response to tough economic times.

Hardy is a fine writer, and her perspective from McGill's Faculty of Management, rather than from the discipline of higher education, provides perspectives and references often absent in education's strategic planning literature. The appendix, on her case study methodology, is very good, and instructive both in philosophy and practice for those who would conduct qualitative research in a university context.

A possible limitation of Hardy's work is that the case studies were conducted in the mid-'80s, and so should not be consulted as descriptions of current institutional circumstances. But everything old is new again. Canadian universities in most provinces are confronting new waves of cutbacks, and certainly we in the U.S. may expect continuing challenges of this nature. Those who are engaged in these challenges, and who seek alternatives to the view that "we've got to run this place more like a business," might do well to have a copy of Hardy's book at hand.

—Marc Cutright

David W. Leslie and E. K. Fretwell, Jr. *Wise Moves in Hard Times: Creating & Managing Resilient Colleges & Universities*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996), 288 pp. \$32.95.

The main objective of this book is to alert institutional leaders and faculty to the underlying changes that threaten higher education and to signal to them

steps they should take to regain the trust of the community and the state. "We undertook this study," write the authors, "because by 1993 it had become clear that a deep economic recession and fundamental changes in state and federal support were having a serious impact on higher education. As the study progressed, however—it extended from 1993 to 1995—the authors say they identified a crisis that went beyond the fiscal, "a crisis of confidence and a crisis of values." These are large claims and would be a matter of considerable concern if supported by external evidence. The authors selected thirteen colleges and universities for study ranging from universities that were ranked Research I in the Carnegie classification to small colleges that fell in the baccalaureate category using a set of criteria showing how they were reacting positively to the pressures placed upon them.

Since financial and other pressures on higher education are a world-wide phenomena, the study is potentially important, and institutional heads and others are entitled to expect from the title some signposts as to how to deal with the problems they are wrestling with. Unfortunately they will not find them here. What this book lacks is a clear analytical framework or evidence that the authors have penetrated further than skin deep into the institutional strategies of the institutions they have studied. The range of institutions is too wide to reach common prescriptions except at a superficial level, and the absence of hard research evidence to support the authors' conclusions renders them much less useful than they might have been. The book is strong on generalizations—"Strategy is the operational plan for realizing a vision," or "The most compelling argument for entrepreneurship in our view is that it works," or "We boiled these different approaches down and found one overriding theme: Institutions have to define and seize control of planning their own futures,"—but does not provide the arguments to underpin them.

In my experience, universities and colleges put under pressure by a combination of external pressures and internal failures to adapt to them quickly enough have to make tough decisions to survive. The first and most crucial area of decision-making must be financial, and in view of the authors' statement that a changing financial climate represented a starting point to their study, it is surprising that they did not spend more time considering in detail what the appropriate institutional response should be. In fact they devote only five pages to financial matters and emphasize that they are not "accountants," but you do not need to be an accountant to recognize that managing a university in times of financial stringency requires a financial strategy and financial decision-making. To begin with, institutions should take all possible steps to remain in financial surplus, unless they plan to incur a deficit as part of a deliberate plan to reinvest in physical plant, new programs, or people. Operating year by year

in deficit can be a managerially debilitating experience, while maintaining a surplus even at the cost of difficult decisions over personnel can provide a platform for future development. There is no discussion about long-term financial planning—a one-year plan appears only to be envisaged—but experience elsewhere shows that a five-year financial plan, updated annually, represents a basic necessity in periods of financial uncertainty. The authors rightly condemn economizing on physical maintenance as offering hostages to fortune in the future, but it is difficult to agree with the statement that “indicators do not—and cannot—provide any sort of detailed analysis of financial condition” when the U.S. system provides a wealth of institutional comparative financial detail that ought to prove invaluable to lay boards and senior managers in assessing the overall financial trends and the performance of their own institution. Fundraising, treasury management, investment policy, earned income, giving more attention to claiming indirect costs on research, and identifying intellectual property rights are all part of the armory of institutions facing hard times but are given scant, if any, attention in this study.

But two of the largest gaps are in considering the role of lay trustees and the part played by human resource management in rescuing institutions from difficulties. The authors make it clear that in their visits to institutions, board members were among the individuals they interviewed, but no coherent view emerges as to the part lay boards, might play in defining strategy, redirecting resources, or in bringing a distinctive external experience to bear on the affairs of academe. And yet it is in times of rapid change that university and college CEOs might expect to get best value from their boards, which should contain CEOs and others from companies and other organizations that have been through similar periods of stress. If lay boards are to fulfil their legal responsibilities, it is in such times that they can give the most support and help to their institutions.

Universities and colleges are, above all, labor intensive businesses, and getting the best out of staff, whether faculty or administrators, picking good people, motivating them and helping them to realize their potential is an essential task for senior institutional managers. Never is this more important than when institutions are under pressure and high levels of performance are required in research, teaching, fundraising, or in redefining priorities. The authors rightly identify undergraduate teaching and the identification of an admissions strategy as increasingly important components of a financial strategy and suggest that the following represent the critical questions that need to be answered:

- “Who is likely to want what kind of education, where, when, and at what

price?

- How is this changing now and how is it likely to change in the foreseeable future?
- Are these trends likely to generate more interest in and support for what the college or university now does well?
- Or are they likely to generate more support for different programs?
- What is the competition?"

What these questions omit is the performance element: how good are we at marketing? How good is our analysis of long-term demographic and socio-economic trends? Can the director of admissions deliver? How quick are our response times? Strategic plans are of little value unless they are implemented. Implementation of policy is an underrated skill. The authors are only too conscious of potential faculty or even legislative resistance to program closures and seem reluctant to recommend them. But El Khawas's study at its midpoint, tells us that 40% of institutions had eliminated academic programs in the recent past (El Khawas, *Campus Trends*, ACE 1994). So we must conclude that institutions generally take a more determined view about program closure than one may conclude from Leslie and Fretwell's sample of institutions. More important than closing programs is taking the more positive line—going on the attack—by creating new programs and looking for new markets.

Managing universities and colleges successfully in a period of financial stringency and political change is part strategy, part opportunism, and part a matter of personal chemistry. The most important ingredient is the creation of a robust organizational culture that puts quality at the top of its priorities. Maintaining morale, institutional optimism, and ambition are the best guarantees of weathering the downturns of the external environment. "Wise moves" will not seem wise for long unless they are based on unsparing analysis, good leadership, and high quality implementation skills. U.S. higher education is notable for its resilience—life was tough in the 1970s and institutions bounded back; in the early 1930s enrollment declined by over 8%, income fell by 31%, and salary cuts averaged between 10% and 15%, but five years later the system had recovered. We should not confuse a downturn with a crisis.

— Michael Shattock