

## **Undergraduate Teaching and Learning: disruption and tradition**

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Yesterday we heard about innovation in teaching, which came hard on the heels of a discussion of what “disruption” means in higher education. This session is really a continuation of that conversation, focusing as it does on student learning and student success. If we simply look at the volume of books and articles generated on this subject over the last few years, it is easy to conclude that it is a topic of unprecedented interest. More than this, there are many opinions on what constitutes a good undergraduate learning experience, as well as considerable debate about whether we remain committed to student learning given expectations placed on universities today to be everything to everybody. Universities serve as centres for research and innovation, community resources, economic drivers, and agents of social change. In the midst of all this, one wonders whether their most important enterprise, teaching and learning, sometimes takes second place.

The list of issues is substantial--the primacy of research and innovation at the expense of teaching, the continuing debate, at least in North America, about the relative merits of liberal arts education in relation to applied vocationally driven undergraduate degrees, increasing skepticism about the value of a degree, even as students continue to flock to our universities, employer dissatisfaction with our graduates, who they claim lack the communication skills and critical thinking expected of graduates, and serious questioning about how we use our resources in support of teaching and learning, a good part of which comes from tuition and the public purse.

The one thing we can conclude from this is that it is easy to criticize. For a long time now, universities have not so much sold education as they have a dream—go to university and get a degree, get a good job, and enjoy a good life. This is what every student wants, indeed what the parents of every student want, and it is this that is currently being questioned. We might ask, is the dream we are selling just that, something that never actually comes true? Is it just a product of good marketing intended to keep enrolments up, and something quite unrelated to what a student might either need or get from their education? In every weekend’s *Globe and Mail*, Canada’s national newspaper, there are full page advertisements from some of Canada’s largest universities. Usually featuring a famous or highly successful graduate, the message is clear: come to our university and you will enjoy the same success. I wonder? Do we really know or care about the kind of education we are delivering?

What then are we to do with this—fold our tent and go home? I think not. This is my 51<sup>st</sup> year in higher education. I first stepped foot on the campus of Indiana University as a freshman in 1966, and I have never, in fact, left the university world. More than this, I have remained in the classroom for my entire academic career, and this includes the last twenty as President of four very different Canadian universities. I don’t say this out of a misplaced sense of self importance or self-aggrandizement. Rather, if nothing else, it has given me perspective and a sense of history, and a valuable glimpse into the undergraduate psyche. Here I remain an optimist. Yes, we experience stresses and strains, as well as successes and failures. But what

we do remains in many ways sound, and we are, for the most part, doing a good job for students 50 years ago and we continue to do a good job for them today. This does not mean we are perfect. We don't get it right all the time. Are we sometimes self-satisfied? Absolutely. Have we changed? Yes we have. Have we responded to changing needs? Of course. Do we need to be more responsive? Yes we do.

So why then, all the criticism? Why do universities always seem to be under a microscope? The answer is not complicated. Universities and the students we teach are the future. They are the most important thing we produce; they are our intellectual capital. In bald terms, students are the product which society needs to thrive. On this, everyone is entitled to an opinion.

This will always be the case. But it also time to stop beating up on ourselves, and agonizing over the constant barrage of editorials telling us how we are coming up short. Certainly there are challenges, and we need to keep our students foremost in our minds. The conversation we are having today is only of many conversations occurring on how best to educate our students for the future.

How, then, should the conversation unfold? There are a lot of questions. But there are a few that I believe should be top of mind.

1. What must our students know and what is necessary for them to thrive? There is nothing secure about our world, the world which will become the world of our students. What learning outcomes should we expect of our students, given the ever accelerating demands of our world? What does learning mean for our students? And more important, how do they learn? Do we know—I am not so certain? This is where we must begin. Perhaps too often we teach in a way we know and with which we are comfortable, which may or may not have any relation to how students learn in their digital I-phone world. The courses we teach and the programs we offer are sometimes shaped more by faculty interest or by the whim of the moment rather than a thorough understanding of what an educated graduate should be in 2017, which is very different than the one of 2007 or 2027.
2. The last few years have seen considerable innovation, everything from on-line learning, blended learning, MOOCs, new and different kinds of credentials, collaborative learning and joint degrees. At the same time, we continue to do many things in ways we always have—students in a classroom and a teacher at the front—not necessarily because it is easier, but because, in the hands of a gifted teacher, it works. Learning does occur, and we must not diminish the importance of the student-teacher relationship, in which not only knowledge and understanding are passed on but also the passion and enthusiasm that are so much part of the learning experience. We know there are all sort of innovations in teaching, but let's not throw the baby out with the bath water. The question is how then are we to integrate the old and new?
3. Education has always been about both the private and public good. Increasingly, these two things are merging. Students today, perhaps because they see the world we have created and are unimpressed, view themselves as agents of change. They know they have to make up for our mistakes. This generation does have a social conscience. How, then, do we encourage and cultivate this sense of social engagement and incorporate it in our programs? We talk endlessly about STEM, and yes, we know how important it is. But it is only part of the future and certainly only part of our students' futures. Technology cannot fix problems that are

fundamentally human—hate, cruelty, suspicion, ignorance. The solution to human problems is human beings themselves. Our students know this and that it must be part of their learning. In recent years student engaged learning has reminded of what is of concern to our students, and we must ensure that it continues.

4. Do we know our students? Learning is for a lifetime, and we need to respond, as many have, to the new demographic of higher education. I often ask what do the following have in common: a twenty-eight year old divorced mother with two kids, a forty-seven year old unemployed forestry worker, and a foreign-trained but unemployable nurse recently immigrated to Canada? The answer: they were all students at a university of which I was President. They are also the changing face of higher education. It is not enough to assume that they learn like an eighteen-year old. With older students and students already engaged in working, there is an urgency and a focus that we cannot ignore. Nor can we forget that they often do not have four or five years to achieve their objectives.
5. What new structures do we need for undergraduate education? There are many who question the value of the undergraduate degree, and certainly there are many opportunities for students in community colleges and technical schools. We cannot ignore this, and indeed we need to accept that university is not for everyone. As well, we must ask whether the structures we currently have serve the interests of our students? Is the degree still working, and is it the case that the degree retains its preeminence? We live in a world of just-in-time everything. This is, perhaps regrettably, extended to higher education. We need to ask whether there is something sacrosanct about the degree, and already there has been extensive discussion about alternative credentials—certificates, badges—all offered in new and different ways. We cannot ignore this and simply keep our heads in the sand.
6. What are we doing for our faculty? Good teaching is hard. Are we encouraging good teaching, and more to the point, rewarding it. What supports do we provide? What incentives are there? Lots of schools have centres supporting the teaching enterprise. Are they a success? Are they doing the right things? Do we really reward good teaching, or are we still bound to the publishing treadmill where research output counts for everything and teaching for very little. And what truly does constitute good teaching, and how does it relate to how our students actually learn.
7. Every university wants to be like every other university. What room is there for differentiation, especially in relation to undergraduate education? As we confront the increasing costs of higher education, are there more efficient delivery models? Do we all have to be the same? Can we have teaching institutions which do not give in to the ever present pressure to be like everyone else and for which the learning enterprise is foremost. And for our group of IAUP Presidents, is it the same for everybody? Yes, we live in a global world, but is it that the needs of students are variable depending on country even while they share certain ambitions and needs. We are from many different places and cultures. Let us not assume that there is so some sort of sacrosanct homogeneity about higher education.
8. We have heard that what our students learn today will be obsolete in a few years. Is this true? Well, yes it is, but not entirely. We have heard a lot about disruption, and that this is the future of universities. Well, I am not buying it, at least not totally. We need to ask challenging questions about our obsession with change and with how it has taken on an almost iconic status

as the single dominating force of the future. Universities have long had two functions. They are about remembering, cultivating, and enriching the best of what we are—our true *humanitas*—but they are also catalysts for change—in the new vernacular—about disruption. Always these two things will be in dynamic juxtaposition with one another. Where in all this conversation about change and innovation is the discussion about what makes us good human beings and about how best to work and live in this new reality? The Arts and the Humanities, bring depth, a sense of history, an appreciation of who we are at our best—and indeed at our worst—and they bring joy. We owe this to our students.

One final word, disruption is nothing new. It constitutes our history and history is full of disrupters—Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Einstein—all turned the world on its end. Do we now add Steve Jobs and Bill Gates? Always there has been the need for people to appreciate and understand the nuances, consequences, and complexities of such change. Surely in this STEM crazy world, this has to be part of the learning our graduates take away, and it is to this that the Arts and Humanities contribute so much.

These are all big questions, and none of us has all the answers. Perhaps the most productive approach is to recognize that we must continue to ask the questions, and then, of course, find the answers, assuming always that we aspire to be the best, at least for a particular time. Best becomes a relative term; what is best today must be better tomorrow. As institutions which at once protect the best of the past and are agents for change, we are also ever evolving, and will forever be pursuing an ever receding goal. Inevitably we must question what we do because that is what we do best.