

## Foreword

### *The Landscape of the Contemporary University*

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**ABSTRACT** *Universities are being fundamentally transformed—facing formidable external and internal pressures to focus research on what is deemed practical and economically beneficial and to narrow education to preparing students for the job market. The university's traditional mission is being compromised by underfunding, by policies of Canada's research funding agencies, by inappropriate university research collaborations, and by growing reliance on exploited contingent academic staff. Diminished academic freedom and ineffective collegial governance both contribute to and are the results of these changes. Academic staff can work to reverse this. A start is to reclaim their voice in governance through creative use of collective bargaining, to reinvigorate academic freedom through exercising their collective agreement rights, and to engage the public in what is happening within universities.*

**KEYWORDS** *Communication; Activism; University*

**RÉSUMÉ** *Les universités sont en train de subir une transformation fondamentale—elles font face à de formidables pressions internes et externes pour axer leur recherche sur des projets supposément pratiques et rentables et pour offrir une éducation qui se limiterait à préparer les étudiants pour le marché du travail. La mission traditionnelle de l'université se voit compromise par le sous-financement, les politiques formulées par les organismes subventionnant la recherche au Canada, des partenariats de recherche universitaire inappropriés et une dépendance croissante envers un personnel académique contingent et exploité. Ces changements sont à la fois le résultat et la cause d'une liberté académique en décroissance et d'une gouvernance collégiale inefficace. Les membres du personnel académique pourraient cependant renverser ces tendances. Pour commencer, ils pourraient reprendre leur influence sur la gouvernance en ayant recours de manière créative à la négociation collective, ils pourraient renforcer leur liberté académique en assumant leurs droits tels qu'établis dans leur convention collective, et ils pourraient davantage aviser le public de ce qui se passe au sein des universités.*

**MOTS CLÉS** *Communication; Activisme; Université*

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It is not an original insight to note that universities in Canada and elsewhere are being fundamentally transformed. Over the past several decades, there has been a burgeoning literature on higher education describing this transformation, most commonly under the rubric of corporatization. Universities have been characterized as becoming knowledge factories (Aronowitz, 2001), with reference to the corporate corruption of higher education (Washburn, 2005), the corporate campus (Turk, 2000), academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), and the commercialization of higher education (Bok, 2003). All of this literature points to a fundamental shift in what universities are, or at least what governments and much of the private sector want universities to be, and what many within the university community are prepared to become.

Instead of serving as society's institutions dedicated to the advancement of human knowledge, the education of students for all aspects of their current and future lives, and the preservation and transmission of our cultural and intellectual heritage, universities are being pressed to adopt a narrower mission. They are increasingly expected to be engines of growth, focusing on research that will "pay off" economically and that will resolve practical problems identified by governments, corporate partners, or funders. Educationally, the mission is being reduced to preparing students for employment.

These changes are not occurring in isolation from what is happening in the larger society, but are part of an increasingly pervasive framework of neoliberalism in which progress is seen to derive from individuals competing freely in international markets. In this framework, the role of the state is to remove impediments to the free play of market forces, which means that public institutions are to be privatized or at least to be pressed to function as if they were private. This framework runs contrary to the very essence of the university as it has evolved over the past several hundred years—an institution based on collegial governance (an organizational structure in which academic decisions are made by the academic community) and on academic freedom (the right of academics as teachers and scholars to follow their own professional judgment and not be bound by conventional wisdom nor the dictates of governments, administrators, donors, alumni, parents, or special interests).

From a neoliberal perspective, the nature of the university is seen differently. Educationally, students are primarily economic agents, and the core social relation between students and the university is as buyers and sellers of services. Academic staff are thus viewed as service providers to be guided by the market principle that customers (the students) are sovereign. In relation to the university itself, academic staff are no longer the academic governors, but rather sellers of services in a competitive academic marketplace. Research, too, is to be market relevant.

### **Undermining the university's role in advancing knowledge**

In this neoliberal context, the advancement of knowledge is not to be left to the professional judgment of faculty who, as Stefan Collini (2016) notes, are seen as "retaining their archaic structures of self-government, their gentry-professional ethos and their blinkered devotion to useless knowledge" (p. 33). Guided by such a framework, the Canadian government has directly and indirectly been reshaping academic research.

Its allocations to Canada's three academic research funding agencies—the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), and the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR)—have been falling in real dollar terms since 2007. The biggest drop has been to the humanities and social sciences, which have seen their real dollar base funding decline more than 14 percent. Natural sciences and engineering have experienced a decline of 5.6 percent, and health sciences funding has dropped by 8.6 percent.

Of the new money the federal government allocates each year to these funding agencies, it has frequently attached strings to limit their autonomy with respect to the research each can fund. For example, in 2013, the federal government directed that all of the new funding for the three agencies was to support “research partnerships with industry through the granting councils” (Government of Canada, 2013). In 2015, of the new money given to NSERC, two-thirds was “directed to collaborations between companies and researchers from universities and colleges under the new consolidated suite of similar business innovation programs,” and the remaining third was “directed to industry-driven research initiatives at Canada’s polytechnics and colleges” (Government of Canada, 2015).

The federal government has also changed the membership of the governing councils of each of the academic funding agencies. Historically, they were made up primarily of academics who were expert and active researchers in the fields for which the funding agencies provided support. No longer. On the SSHRC governing council, there is no one from classics, history, visual and performing arts, linguistics, communications, anthropology, criminology, education, law, or psychology. Instead, the majority of its members are from the corporate sector, economics, business, as well as professional academic administrators, and the head of heavy apprenticeship trades at a community college (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2016). The governing council for NSERC has no biologists, no chemists, no physicists, nor any mathematicians. Five of its 13 members are engineers, one teaches business, four are corporate executives, two are professional administrators, and the final member is a political scientist (Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, 2016). The 16-member governing council of CIHR fares best, with half its members being academic physicians and medical researchers (although some have primarily administrative positions). However, an equal number are not researchers but professional administrators, as well as the chair of Barclays Capital Canada, the former CEO of Têlé-Québec, and the deputy minister of health (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2016).

Not surprisingly, the directions from the federal government and the people it has named to the funding agencies’ governing bodies have shifted the agencies’ emphasis to what former University of Toronto President David Naylor (2013, March 27) has called “fettered” research – “match-funded, industry-facing research with an applied orientation” (n.p.). Some of the agencies’ programs go so far as to allocate academic research money so academics can meet the specific short-term need of an individual corporation (Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, n.d.). The changing pattern of funding agency priorities is most clearly visible in data provided by NSERC. Since 2011–2012, funding spent primarily on graduate student scholarships, fellowships,

and postdoctoral researchers declined by 20.2 percent in constant dollars. Expenditures for scientist-led discovery research and equipment to sustain that research was reduced by 14.9 percent. By comparison, support for fettered research was increased by 25.4 percent (Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, 2012-2013; Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, 2015-2016).

Concurrently, academic research is being compromised as university administrations seek out research and programs collaborations with industry and wealthy donors. While such collaborations are not new, the neoliberal ethos, coupled with inadequate public funding, have contributed to a growth in universities accepting collaborations in which the university willingly cedes to its corporate or other non-academic partners control of academic decisions, thereby sacrificing the university's integrity (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2013; Washburn, 2010).

Finally, the university's mission to advance knowledge is being diminished by university staffing decisions that result in a significant proportion of faculty no longer having research as part of their job duties. While there are only anecdotal data for Canada, there is every reason to believe that the pattern is similar to that of the United States for which there are good data. These data show that almost three-quarters of academic staff in American degree-granting postsecondary institutions are neither tenured nor tenure-track (American Association of University Professors, 2015), and hence are neither paid nor supported for undertaking research. It is simply not part of what they are hired to do. Their ability to conduct research on their own, which many try to do, is made very difficult because, as contract academic staff, they do not have the necessary institutional support for doing research, have little or no job security, are paid poorly, have little say over their working conditions, and often have to teach much more than a normal "full-time" load of courses to earn a percentage of what regular academic staff are paid (Bauer, 2011; Doobie & Robinson, 2008).

The decision taken by university administrations to increasingly rely on academic staff in contingent positions also weakens the institutions' educational mission. While the burgeoning numbers of contract academic staff are mostly good scholars and dedicated teachers, their working conditions make teaching excellence difficult. In addition to often having to accept burdensome workloads in order to make a modest living, contract academic staff typically have little opportunity to shape the curriculum for the courses they teach, often learn of their assignments with inadequate time to prepare, and rarely have suitable office space and facilities to support their teaching and to assist their students. Since they are only paid for time in the classroom, they are challenged to give students the time outside of class that proper postsecondary education requires (Bauer, 2011; Bousquet, 2008; Coalition on the Academic Workforce, 2012; Doobie & Robinson, 2008; House Committee on Education and the Workforce, 2014).

### **Eroding the foundations of the university**

The changes described above are made possible by, and are simultaneously causing, the erosion of the foundations upon which the university is based—academic freedom and collegial governance.

Originally developed to protect academic work from inappropriate interference by external forces, academic freedom is now being undermined internally within the

university. Under attack is the scope of academic freedom, which has four core elements. The first two are the freedom to teach and the freedom to conduct research based on each academic's best professional judgment, not beholden to prevailing orthodoxy or outside interests. The third element is "extramural" academic freedom—the ability of academics to exercise their rights as citizens without sanction by the university administration or board of governors. The final element is "intramural" academic freedom—the right to comment publicly on any aspect of the university, which is necessary if the university's academic life is to be collegially self-governed.

In 2011, on its one hundredth anniversary, the organization of Canada's university administrations released a new policy statement that attempted to narrow academic freedom by making no reference to either extramural or intramural freedom (Universities Canada, 2011). Academic freedom is also being endangered as universities increasingly expand the proportion of their contingent academic staff. It is very difficult, in practice, to protect the academic freedom of those with little or no job security. If they offend the administration, a donor, a powerful special interest, or an influential politician, they do not have to be fired (triggering an academic freedom complaint), but simply will not have their contract renewed. No mention need be made of the real reason, unlike when a regular faculty member is disciplined or dismissed.

Finally, academic freedom is being threatened by universities adopting respectful workplace policies that mandate "civil" and "respectful" behaviour. These policies set up an elaborate investigatory and enforcement regime that is similar to that for dealing with harassment and discrimination. Jamie Cameron (2014), one of Canada's top constitutional law professors and an expert on free expression, has written about the attempt to regulate speech deemed to be disrespectful as if it were harassment or discrimination:

When and in what circumstances another person might take offense at things said in a certain way is unpredictable and highly situational. Civility policies necessarily lend themselves to selective enforcement: though most will not, some offenders will be singled out for institutional attention: by definition and in practice, even-handed application of the standard is impossible. Short of a pattern of behaviour that satisfies definitions of harassment and bullying, mere rudeness and a lack of courtesy is just too pervasive and constant to be sensibly regulated. (p. 293)

That said, respectful workplace policies are proliferating, with serious consequences for the exercise of academic freedom. Four of many examples illustrate the problem. Ken Luckhardt, on the eve of his retirement as a contract faculty member at King's University College, was permanently banned from campus for writing to the principal advising him not to appoint two colleagues to replace the director of his program who had resigned in protest over university efforts to change the program. Luckhardt's criticism of colleagues was deemed vexatious and objectionable—a claim a subsequent Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) investigation found to be without merit (Katz & Haxell, 2013). Ana Isla, a Peruvian-born Indigenous faculty member at Brock University, was subjected to almost a year of uncertainty about her future under the university's respectful workplace policies

for her public criticism of a university-sanctioned program that was run as a partnership with the Roman Catholic Church (Baker, Gabbert, & Stewart, 2015). Thomas Dockerty, an internationally acclaimed professor of English at the University of Warwick was suspended from his job and banned from campus for “inappropriate sighing,” “making ironic comments,” and “projecting negative body language” when interviewing candidates for a job (Jaschik, 2014, October 31; Morgan, 2014, March 11). In the case that had the highest international profile, Steven Salaita was dismissed from his new appointment as a professor of Indigenous Studies at the University of Illinois because the chancellor deemed his passionate tweets about the Israeli bombing of Gaza to be uncivil (Heins, 2014; Jaschik, 2014, August 6). Such actions not only affect the targeted faculty but also create a chilly climate for academic freedom throughout the wider academic community.

Despite these challenges, academic freedom is still alive, albeit contested, at Canadian universities because it is vigorously defended nationally by CAUT and protected through contract provisions in virtually every academic staff association’s collective agreement. The same cannot be said for the state of the other foundational basis of the university—collegial governance.

The concept of collective academic self-governance is simple, but was never fully embraced in North America where governance of universities has been divided between a non-academic board of governors that controls the financial and administrative decisions of the university, and a senior academic body, in most instances called the senate, that has authority over academic matters. In practice, even this more limited conception of collegial governance has been imperfect at best, as major inquiries over the last half century have documented (Bourgeault, Benjamin, & McGovern, 1993; Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2009; Duff & Berdahl, 1966; Jones, 2002).

When, as commonly is the case, important university matters are a combination of financial, administrative, and academic elements, the board of governor’s financial and administrative authority dominates at the expense of the academic body (the senate). But, even in purely academic matters, the collegial governance ideal is being seriously eroded in practice. As the 2009 CAUT Ad Hoc Advisory Committee on Governance reported:

Academic staff at universities and colleges are familiar with the increasing centralization of administrative power and the growth of a managerial culture which marginalizes the role of academic staff in decision making. In the face of centralization, the traditional collegial role of senates has been undermined. At some institutions, Senate is chaired by the President. At many, the composition of senate has been changed, reflecting greater administrative influence and presence. Few Senates play any meaningful role in terms of finance and budget considerations; more and more Senates are left with truncated academic planning and as an audience for Presidential and Board reports (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2009, pp. 4–5).

Flawed as the reality of collegial governance has been, the fact that structures of collegial governance exist in law and policy continue to give academic staff an opportunity to make a difference.

### **What is to be done?**

Academics experiencing the gradual but profound changes to the nature and role of the university have commonly chosen to engage the issues by examining and writing about them. Many of their works have been insightful commentaries, analyses, and critiques; yet, the degradation of the university continues. Analysis and critique are necessary for any possible success in remedying the situation, but are not sufficient. Simply studying, describing, and commenting on what is happening is a hollow exercise if that work is not part of deliberate action to reclaim the university's role in advancing knowledge and extending its educational mission to the broader population.

The traditional ideals of the university are worth fighting to restore. They are aptly summarized in the University of Toronto's (1992) Statement of Purpose, which affirms that the university must be:

dedicated to fostering an academic community in which the learning and scholarship of every member may flourish, with vigilant protection for individual human rights, and a resolute commitment to the principles of equal opportunity, equity and justice.

Within the unique university context, the most crucial of all human rights are the rights of freedom of speech, academic freedom, and freedom of research. And we affirm that these rights are meaningless unless they entail the right to raise deeply disturbing questions and provocative challenges to the cherished beliefs of society at large and of the university itself.

It is this human right to radical, critical teaching and research with which the University has a duty above all to be concerned; for there is no one else, no other institution and no other office, in our modern liberal democracy, which is the custodian of this most precious and vulnerable right of the liberated human spirit. (p. 3)

Fulfilling this mission necessarily makes the university threatening to powerful interests that benefit from the status quo economically, socially, politically, or culturally. Overcoming the attacks on academic freedom and reversing the erosion of collegial governance are necessary for the university to be able to move back to fulfilling its unique societal mission. The tools to do so are readily available, should academic staff mobilize themselves to use them. For collegial governance, this requires vigorous and creative use of collective bargaining as detailed in a CAUT discussion paper more than a decade ago (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2004). For academic freedom, the right to which is already spelled out almost universally in academic collective agreements, the matter is simpler—it requires both individual and collective action. As the eminent University of Toronto historian and formidable public intellectual Frank Underhill (1959) said almost 60 years ago, “The best way to defend academic freedom is to exercise it” (p. 16). This must be coupled with the commitment by aca-

democratic staff associations to vigorously enforce collective agreement protections for such actions.

In addition, academic staff and their associations must take the lead in raising such matters publicly, explaining how the public is harmed if the university is reduced to a research arm of industry and government, and if its educational vision is restricted to preparing students for what their employers want.

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