

## University is for everyone

Ottawa *Citizen*, Tuesday 1 November 2011, and the website of the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Public Affairs (CCEPA); reprinted Vancouver *Sun*, 8 November 2011

Mark Mercer  
Department of Philosophy  
Saint Mary's University  
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3  
(902) 420-5825  
[mark.mercer@smu.ca](mailto:mark.mercer@smu.ca)

The two editorials on universities the *Citizen* ran Saturday [22 October 2011] got a lot of things right, but they got one big thing very wrong. Whatever the problems are that plague universities in Canada these days, the solution isn't to turn away young adults seeking an education.

The boom in universities in the last half of the twentieth century promised to create a place in a university for everyone who wanted one, and to a great extent the promise was realized. It also created a demand for education. Young people came to know that they could go to university if they wanted to, and that made them want to. The noble ideal of being an educated citizen came within the reach of just about everyone.

Canadians should be very proud of both these facts: that young people want a university education and that for most of them, they can have one. Sadly, barriers to university still exist for some people, and we need to identify and remove them. But progress to this point has been astounding.

The question now is how to provide everyone seeking a university education with a truly good one. How can we ensure that under the burden of numbers universities don't simply start pushing students through, unconcerned with whether they are actually learning anything?

Of course, the first thing to note here is that not all universities in this country are bursting at the seams. Universities in Ontario, and especially those in and near Toronto, are around or beyond their present capacities, and the *Citizen* is right to be worried about increases in class size and reliance on part-time professors. And yet, there are spaces elsewhere in the country. Universities in Nova Scotia, for instance, would be happy to have students from Ontario.

The idea that the answer to maintaining high standards at universities lies in getting prospective students to wonder whether they would be better off considering a training or trade programme, the idea bruited in the first of the editorials, belies a faulty conception of what universities are for. Universities are not for job training or getting into a career. As such, they are not in competition with colleges or vocational institutions.

Universities are about education, about learning for the sake of learning. A student takes courses in English so that she might respond intelligently to works of literature. A student takes courses in history so that she might reflect intelligently on the past. She takes courses in philosophy so that she might confront philosophical perplexity fruitfully. She studies biology so that she might see the living world as a biologist does. And so on through the disciplines.

As a student working toward her bachelor's degree, she becomes competent to pursue research or study in each of the various disciplines that make up her programme. But she also

acquires the habits of mind and the tastes of an intellectual: the ability to see different sides to an issue and to evaluate claims dispassionately, the ability to withhold judgement, the desire to figure it out for herself, a taste for controversy. If all goes well, she also acquires a little protection from all the pressures to conform that continually assault her.

There's nothing in this about preparing for a job or a career. University done rightly is great preparation for life, of course, and, thereby, indirectly it's preparation for success in work. The goal, though, is simply to study and learn.

After three or four years at university, a person, still young, can then begin her training for work. Graduate school and professional school are open to her, if she wants, but so, too, are college and the vocational schools the *Citizen* would have had her enrolled in before she experienced the life of the mind.

The *Citizen* editor who wrote that “bringing thousands more students into the system devalues each of the degrees they earn” must have been thinking that the point of a university is to bestow credentials on those who pass through it, credentials that employers look for. While it is true that the value of welding skills decreases as more people acquire them, that isn't true of education. That someone else is educated doesn't make my being educated any less valuable, either to me or to others.

If I were asked what stands between the student newly arrived at university and his education, I could go on at length about politicized teaching, large first-year classes, infatuation with technology, the concern that people not be offended, administrative encroachment on the prerogatives of departments and professors, teaching fads, grade inflation, the loss of academic freedom (especially by part-time instructors), standardization, conformism, creeping (no, galloping) professionalism, and disdain for the classroom (of the sort found in the second of the editorials, and in University of Ottawa president Alain Rock's remark that the ivory tower is finished). I'd also talk about unprepared students and the high schools from which they've emerged, though unprepared students don't threaten the enterprise nearly to the degree that disengaged students do.

The one thing of greatest significance, though, something that underlies many of the items on my list, is credentialism—the idea that the point of a university is to bestow credentials. Credentialism, in fact, is currently the great enemy of education.

University is for everyone, because education is for everyone. The trouble is, the universities themselves have been fostering the perception that universities are for gaining credentials, and they've succeeded even in fooling editorial writers. Yet, as universities come more and more to believe this line themselves, less and less will they be places of education.

Editorials:

<http://www.ottawacitizen.com/opinion/More+always+better/5590337/story.html>

<http://www.ottawacitizen.com/opinion/Learning+about+world/5590338/story.html>