

265. University amalgamation from an academic point of view

Halifax *Chronicle Herald*, under the headline “University mergers could provide critical mass for intellectual pursuits”

Thursday 28 June 2018

<http://thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/1580544-opinion-university-mergers-could-provide-critical-mass-for-intellectual-pursuits>

Mark Mercer
Department of Philosophy
Saint Mary’s University
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3
mark.mercer@smu.ca

Should two, three, or more Halifax or Nova Scotia universities merge to form a single institution? Perhaps Saint Mary’s and Mount Saint Vincent should get together on one campus, or perhaps one or both of them should be folded into Dalhousie.

Maybe Cape Breton students, professors, and programs should move to Wolfville. And wouldn’t the future of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design be more secure were NSCAD under the wing of Saint Mary’s or Dal?

These are perennial questions in this province. And people in other provinces are asking the same questions about some of their universities.

The arguments we hear in favour of amalgamation tend to be economic. We’re told that amalgamation will save money. It will save money by eliminating a large number of highly paid administrators, for instance, or by reducing purchasing and maintenance costs.

There are strong economic arguments on the other side, of course. Those opposed to amalgamation suspect that closing down a campus and expanding another would cost a hefty sum, and they fear that the economic shock to cities or communities that lose their university would be devastating. There’s also the cost to parents of supporting children who can’t live at home anymore because there’s no longer a local university.

When it comes to academic, cultural, or other considerations apart from economics, though, every reason we hear favours maintaining our system of many independent institutions. Each university has its own character and strengths, each brings art and culture to its community, and much of what is special about our smaller universities is because of their small size.

Right now, the majority view is that even if amalgamating a few of the province’s universities makes sense economically, amalgamation is nothing but a bad idea academically.

I want to challenge that majority view by developing a strong academic rationale for amalgamation, a rationale that so far has been overlooked. Whether in the end amalgamation is wise depends on weighing a host of reasons for and against, but it’s important to know that the matter does not come down simply to economics vs academics.

Universities serve many good purposes and ends. They prepare young people for jobs and careers by giving them the knowledge, skills, and discipline employers are looking for. They open students’ minds and widen their horizons.

They pass on to the next generation the heritage of the peoples and communities of the nation. They create caring and responsible democratic citizens capable of thinking critically

about matters social and political. They are an engine of social and economic mobility for people from disadvantaged or marginalized groups.

They produce understandings, ideas, and technologies that government, industry, and business can use to solve problems and make life better for all.

Each item I've listed, though, is something extrinsic to activity within the university itself. Intrinsic to the very idea of a university is simply study for the sake of study.

Study for the sake of study, though, is at risk in universities in Nova Scotia and in much of the world. The idea that the activity of study can be prized for its own sake does not resonate widely in our society, not even among university students. Our universities are valued mainly for their effects.

I'd like to suggest that a good way, if not the best way, to preserve universities in our province as places in which scholars and students can gather to engage in study for its own sake is to merge a few of them. Since study for its own sake is a minority taste, only in a large institution will that minority be large enough to survive.

If we look at enrolment in classes in the more abstract or theoretical areas of learning, we will see dismally small numbers. Second-year courses in Aristotle draw poorly in each of the universities in this province, and upper-level courses in British literature between the wars, say, or philosophy of mind attract even fewer students.

Now, if only five students register for a course at, say, Saint Mary's, that course might well be cancelled. The same is true at Dalhousie and the Mount. Yet were those students who wish to engage in study for the sake of study together at one university, the course would have fifteen students and so it would proceed.

Merging universities would bring together those professors and students given to study for the sake of study in numbers large enough for their interests to be met.

One might object that the best way to preserve institutionally study for its own sake is to designate a single (small) university the province's liberal arts university, and make study for the sake of study the explicit reason for that university.

I don't think that this would work. Students just out of high school often will not value study for its own sake until they have had experience in an abstract or theoretical course. The designated liberal arts university will, then, not draw enough recent high-school grads to fill its seats.

Another reason is that interest in study for its own sake remains fairly high among professors. Removing the abstract and theoretical courses from most universities and locating them in just one will both waste teaching talent and demoralize many professors.

Of course, if people, including, importantly, students, believed that the extrinsic goods of university were produced by study for the sake of study, then they would have reason to support universities as places of study for its own sake. But the argument that the best way to jobs, citizenship, technology, and the rest is through liberal education has been around for decades now, and it has persuaded few. Even if it is a sound argument, it has not proven itself an effective one.

In the end, then, since study for the sake of study, which is the very heart of the university ethos, is a minority taste that enjoys little public or institutional support, those of us who prize it and want it preserved have a strong reason to back university amalgamation.