

Canada's international status enhanced by evolving post-secondary education opportunities

The future of Canadian universities – It's all about access



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Increasingly, as our students, institutions, businesses and indeed our country compete on a global scale, Canadian universities have an opportunity to demonstrate leadership by creating access to higher learning for more students.

While Canadian post-secondary education is in better shape than it has been for a long time, with increasing federal and provincial government funding for new research programs, research chairs and scholarships, our Achilles heel remains the issue of access.

We Canadians like to think that taxpayer support for access to higher education is a right for all qualified students, but it is really just a privilege for only some. Only those already accepted for the limited spaces available in public institutions have access to this taxpayer support.

Recent data are hard to come by, but in 2004 about one-third of qualified B.C. high school student applicants could not get access to university in B.C. And what happened to the much larger number who did not even apply or didn't qualify – the athletes, volunteers, musicians, leaders, who had other priorities than just academic grades?

Access is not about how much money we spend, but how we spend it.

Most universities consider a professor's time to be allocated about 40 percent to teaching, about 40 percent to research and about 20 percent service to the institution and the community. Using these proportions, we would see 40 percent of public funding going to teaching. Right now, many qualified students do not have access to that funding until they are accepted at a university or college, based essentially on high school grades.

So the first step to increasing access would be to make about 40 percent of government funding available directly to qualified student applicants, not only those two-thirds with the highest averages. This would allow them to make their own choices as to what and where to study, and would lead to greater responsiveness of institutions competing for students, producing more choice and opportunity for students. It would also result in a greater diversity in the student body, and eventually a greater diversity of educational institutions.

How would universities and colleges compete? One answer has to do with time.

Five years is the average time it takes for a student to finish a four-year degree, and six years is not uncommon. By delaying graduation, they clog the system and cut down access for new students. So one way to compete, cut costs and create more spaces would be to create opportunities for students to finish their programs faster.

About 25 percent of students drop out in their first year.

The reasons are varied, but mainly they need more support – in high school and after they arrive. I don't just mean counselors who see students after a problem develops, or tutors who focus on the academic subjects, or even dedicated professors who put students above their research, but "learning coaches" who deal with the whole student – a combination of counselor, tutor, friend and practical advisor – and lots of them.

That is starting to happen in Canada, and should be widely endorsed, not least by the public institutions, as it will broaden the spectrum of opportunities for students, at the same time releasing our research universities from the huge non-academic demands of undergraduate education. This will ultimately enhance Canada's international status as a provider of education, and as a leader in research and all its outcomes.

In 2002, Dr. David F. Strong – former president and vice-chancellor of the University of Victoria – brought together a group of academic leaders, business people and other outstanding individuals from Canada and around the world to provide groundbreaking educational opportunities for university students.

To ensure exceptional academic integrity, Dr. Strong secured the support of leading academics in Canada and abroad, led by past president of the University of Alberta, Dr. Myer Horowitz, to serve as UCW's chancellor and chair of its Academic Council.