

A Talk Delivered at the Jay Newman Award Ceremony at the University of Guelph,  
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## **CONSUMERIZING THE UNIVERSITY<sup>1</sup>**

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I want to thank Bill Cormack and the Academic Freedom Committee for honoring me with the Jay Newman award. It is always nice to be recognized, and it is especially nice to be recognized for the framework, the philosophical underpinnings, of one's life work. It is also an innovative award, most unusual. However, I should also note that I am a bit embarrassed to receive an award for "integrity". I do not envy the Committee that had to sort through nominations to find the person they considered the most worthy. How do you measure integrity? Do I have more integrity than others? I doubt it, but am happy to accept the honor in the spirit in which it is offered.

I also want to thank the faculty association, its staff, and the committee for their courtesy and their efforts in making my visit here possible. And to congratulate the faculty members whose teaching is being honored here tonight.

Academic integrity has many aspects. But among the most important is the role of the university with respect to teaching. This necessarily involves a consideration of the proper relationship between faculty and students. Since the presentation of teaching awards is the centerpiece of this evening's activities, this relationship is an appropriate focus for my brief remarks. In honoring the teaching function of the university, it is perhaps appropriate to consider

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<sup>1</sup>I recognize that "consumerizing" is not yet a word – but it seems to fit.

the threats to the teaching function, as well as other functions, of the university.

My vision of the university is quite simple and not very original. The university consists of three groups: (1) administrators and administrative staff whose job it is to make the university operate smoothly with minimal interference to the other two groups; (2) students whose job it is to master a body of information, to develop inquisitive and creative minds, and to prepare for careers; and (3) faculty whose job it is to transmit knowledge to students, to foster a critical mind set, and to develop new knowledge through research, broadly defined to include creative writing and fine arts.

The traditional roles of the university, and the centrality of academic freedom in the institution, have always been under threat. The problems are not new, but the mix of pressures and the means of resisting them have changed over time. There are at least two major types of pressure that impinge on this complex story: (1) the ideology of administrators and governing bodies; and (2) pressures, largely financial, exerted on administrators and the university as a whole. My remarks will touch on both of these.

Returning to the three groups constituting the university: Any institution of whatever kind needs administrators. An educational institution has students. What separates the university from other institutions is the reliance on faculty to create new knowledge. We are not all superb researchers, and not everyone can win a Nobel prize. Yet teaching and research go together and reinforce each other.

I was part of a delegation from the faculty association that was sent to greet and meet a new president of Memorial in 1990. It was all very friendly. He assured us that he had once been a member of a union so there should be no labor problems. Sure! Then he, a scientist and

government administrator, assured us that university faculty could be either good teachers or good researchers, but not both. This statement was troubling. Of course, he was dead wrong. I assume that the goal of all faculty is to excel in both roles. During my graduate days at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, the heights to be dreamed about in my corner of that world were those occupied by such academics as Arnold Zellner and Arthur Goldberger in the Department of Economics and George Tiao in Statistics. These people turned out a steady stream of high quality and often seminal research papers while elegantly presenting material in brilliant lectures which clarified some very arcane material. Their dual accomplishments were the goal, something to be strived for, never to be reached – but there is an old saw that it is the journey, not the arrival, that matters.

But what can be said of teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What factors impinge on teaching methods and choices in ways that undermine academic freedom and what can be done to minimize or eliminate their effects? I'll only mention two of many. One is class size. When I started teaching at Memorial University, I gave weekly written work. Classes were relatively small and the grading was manageable. By the time I retired I had reduced the written work requirements in most classes to a midterm and a final examination and perhaps a term paper, but only when the class was small and I could monitor student work from notes, to draft, to redraft, to final copy. Only the final copy was graded, but I think I encouraged writing and research skills, and minimized cheating. Weekly quizzes to encourage the students to read the required material were gone. What was possible with 20-25 students in a class was no longer possible when classes reached 70 or even 100 students. The “official” controlling factor for many classes these days is the size of the classroom – not exactly a pedagogical criterion. Academic freedom

conveys the right to teach material in the manner the instructor believes is most effective.

Packing too many students into a classroom is not intended as an attack on academic freedom, but in essence it is. Here we have financial pressures on the university impinging on academic freedom. Collective agreements usually do not offer strong defenses against this problem - they should.

The second factor is the matter of textbook choice. One of the first assaults on academic freedom in teaching that I encountered came in the early-1980s when the administration insisted that a faculty member in a single section course use a specific textbook which he disliked. When the faculty member refused, he was removed from the classroom. The faculty member was stiff, unbending and determined. What started as a vendetta against a difficult faculty member soon evolved into a serious threat to the academic freedom of all faculty. Ultimately a University Senate committee was established to look into the textbook matter. In the United States around the time of the first World War, secondary school teachers lost the right to choose texts. This may have been a progressive move given the lack of training of many teachers at the time. But as far as the committee at Memorial could determine, at the university level, the choice of texts was a teacher's option, if only because of the faculty member's training and expertise. The Senate concurred and the matter of textbook selection was more or less put to rest, recurring occasionally only in the context of multi-section courses. Memorial's Collective Agreement now prevents the removal of a faculty member from the classroom in a situation like this.

The idea of standardized texts in such courses might be seductive, but it is an unnecessary threat to academic freedom. The role of teachers in multi-section courses, as in any courses, is to teach a body of material. Teachers often have strongly held views as to how the material should

be presented. The textbook is one element in a course, the teacher's style of presenting the material is another, and the teacher's judgment concerning the material is a third. The material should be covered, but how it is covered varies from instructor to instructor. Standardizing textbooks, when not all teachers in the course agree on a text, is an unnecessary regimentation of the course. With different teachers leading separate sections, the classes will not, cannot, and should not, be identical. Textbooks are only one source of difference. The right of faculty members to choose textbooks they deem appropriate to their teaching function was a battle won by a consortium of the most militant and the most conservative academics. What a pleasure when it works out that way.

Threats to teaching, encroachments on academic freedom, deteriorating working conditions, and declining relative incomes have been among the forces leading faculty towards unionization. Yet university faculties have been slow to unionize. After all, the university is supposed to be governed collegially, so why adopt a potentially adversarial model? I do not know what the trigger for unionization was at Guelph, but it usually is a defense mechanism against actions of the administration.

What led to the unionization of Memorial's faculty?

The president who had dominated Memorial for many years retired in 1981. He was replaced by his Vice-President (Academic) who immediately made a major change: his door was closed to faculty, literally as well as figuratively. Suddenly there came a whittling away of faculty authority. The math textbook case arose at this time. The new president adopted what he considered a military chain of command structure. Grievances were usually generated at the department head or decanal levels. The senior administrators were seen to back their more junior

colleagues regardless of the merit of the individual case. There were no procedures for settling grievances. This did not keep them from occurring, it only made them worse and more frustrating. They never seemed to go away. In addition, faculty salaries, which had been competitive with other Atlantic universities and peaked in real terms a few years earlier, fell dramatically relative to other universities. The faculty's position in terms of our role in the university, our ability to teach as we deemed appropriate, and our pay were all deteriorating.

Our response to the deteriorating working conditions, the threats to academic freedom, and to our diminishing financial position was to unionize. Like many other Canadian universities, Memorial had (and has) a very conservative faculty. Agreement to unionize was difficult to obtain. Twice under the old president we had tried to unionize. Both attempts failed. The president had too much support and was believed, I think correctly, in general to be working to develop the university and to strengthen the faculty. With the deteriorating conditions under the new president, once the certification campaign started, we soon had enough support to go to the Labour Relations Board.

The university challenged our application. At one point during the lengthy hearings the then Vice-President (Academic) explained to the Board that managing a university was just like managing a fish plant, a shockingly crude view made even more offensive by the fact that the Vice-President (Academic) did not consider the remark offensive, just plain common sense. The Board ordered a vote, which the union won handily. We negotiated for nine months, came within several hours of a strike, and finally settled on a contract. We received a 29.9% pay increase over three years, after which we were still the lowest paid of Canada's medium and large universities. We also negotiated reasonable working conditions, collegial procedures for hiring, promotion

and tenure, favorably settled nearly 20 outstanding grievances and settled an outstanding ten year old CAUT censure case involving academic freedom.

But signing and ratifying the Collective Agreement were not sufficient. In the first year of the Collective Agreement we had many grievances and 18 arbitrations over a large number of disparate issues, something of a record among Canadian universities. The administrators simply ignored the agreement whenever they deemed its requirements inconvenient. We won most of the arbitrations and established that the union was prepared to defend the Collective Agreement with all the resources available to it. Through its negotiations and its grievance procedures, the union of librarians and faculty members became a strong and effective voice in resisting encroachments on academic freedom and the academic process in general.

In every subsequent round of negotiations, the main battle has been to retain the working conditions that we had previously negotiated. The second round of negotiations was troubled, but nothing like the third round.

That was when the administration abrogated the existing collective agreement (which had expired) and unilaterally imposed its own set of terms and conditions. We knew this was possible, but we had been assured by the CAUT not to be unduly concerned because (to paraphrase) “no administration would be so stupid as to abrogate an agreement because they would only create antagonism against themselves, and they eventually would have to accept the new negotiated agreement anyway – so why would they do it.” Well, that did not take into account the peculiar disposition of Memorial’s administration at that time. To make a long story short, in response to the abrogation the union was unified as never before, most of the new terms and conditions were illegal, and those parts that were not illegal were eventually superceded by

negotiated terms. The administration had really wanted two things: tougher working conditions – they began negotiations with a proposal for a “normal” teaching load of twelve semester courses a year – and an easier layoff clause. These were, according to their publicity releases, absolutely essential for the university’s future. According to the administration, the university was facing a massive financial crisis that required Draconian measures.

In the end, our negotiators did make workload concessions, but before the concessions could be activated, the Collective Agreement required a complicated process during which the administration had to open their books fully to justify the new increased workloads. The concessions were never put into effect because the protections in the Collective Agreement were strong and because the economic crisis these concessions were supposed to respond to was largely fabricated. Similarly, we ended up with a better layoff clause than we had before: there would be no layoffs during the life of the agreement.

While financial stringency could make the defense of academic freedom and of reasonable teaching and research conditions difficult to maintain – but of course they must be maintained – our negotiating difficulties had only a veneer of financial causality; this was in fact a battle over ideology. Several senior Memorial administrators, at about this time, prepared a pair of quasi-academic papers in which they were kind enough to explain their hostile actions.

They objected to what they described as “volunteer work” which they believed, correctly, “features prominently” in the academic life of faculty members. By “volunteer work” they meant that faculty choose their own research topics, where and whether to publish the results, which conferences they attend, and where they will spend their sabbaticals. Worse than that, from these administrator’s point of view, faculty had a considerable say in which courses they teach and

which committees they sit on. These administrators stated that “Academic work allows personal choice to employees beyond any degree available to all but the formally self-employed.” Yes, of course, and so what? Research, teaching, the quest for knowledge, the need for social criticism, the search for truth were all reduced to varieties of irritating self-indulgence. Memorial’s administrators unashamedly pronounced: “The institutions must control the voluntarism.”<sup>2</sup>

There was no consideration in their paper of the professionalism of faculty, the years of education and training, their disciplinary expertise. I earlier commented that what separates universities from other educational institutions is the development of new knowledge. This is very difficult, if not impossible, in a regimented environment.

Perhaps the key point is expressed by the choice of words of these administrators. The authors stated that: “In fact, in universities the employees pretty much decide on their own which *‘products’* will be developed, for *‘sale’* to its students and its community (italics added).” The central image of this sentence, of education as a commodity, captures the essence of the consumerist ideology that underpinned their thinking and I fear that of many administrators today.

But that was not enough. In the second paper, the report of a task force on university priorities led by the same set of administrators, the emphasis was on the empowerment of the student, one of the negative legacies of the 1960s. What the task force saw was a need to shift “from faculty productivity to student productivity, from faculty disciplinary interests to what students need and want to learn ... [to] fundamentally challenge the historical focus of the

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<sup>2</sup>Tuinman, J., W. Thistle and J. Strawbridge, “Workload: the Memorial University Perspective,” a paper presented to a meeting of the Vice-Presidents of Canadian universities, 1997.

university.”<sup>3</sup> Although not stated so crudely, the university is conceptualized not as an institution

for the development and transmission of knowledge, but more like a store, where instead of a faculty/student relationship, there is a sales clerk/customer relationship. And, as we all know, the customer is always right. A faculty member’s expertise is not important: it is what the student at the moment thinks he or she should learn. Maybe the fish plant analogy was not so bad after all – if we came to adopt these views.

The university administration did not win its war on “voluntarism”. But consumerism and student empowerment are still with us. There is increased pressure on faculty to cater to students: Memorial now forbids “pop” quizzes; there is pressure for increased grades and overall grade inflation; there is pressure not to flunk students (after all, with a declining demographic, universities are competing for students as never before). Memorial now has a Division of Marketing and Communications, and you can see their slick advertisements while munching popcorn in many cinemas in Atlantic Canada. With faculty and perhaps departmental budgets determined by student numbers, there is additional pressure on faculty members not to “stress” students, or to overburden them; or to assign work during “semester break”; or to criticize them except maybe very gently.

At MUN, one recent battle has been over student evaluation of teachers (the course

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<sup>3</sup>Tuinman, J., W. Thistle and K. Keough (co-chairs), *Task Force on University Priorities and Resources – Final Report: A Discussion paper on University Transformation Principles, Strategies and Priorities*, published as a supplement to the November 13, 1997 issue of *The Gazette*, a publication of Memorial University.

evaluation questionnaires – CEQs). Some universities have had these forever, and they are viewed benignly. We have not seen it that way.

In our union's view, the CEQs continued the consumer view of the university, a further attempt in effect to establish within the university a paradigm of consumer satisfaction. The student wants "value for money" and, considering the administration's empowerment argument, the student's view of what he or she values is likely to be high grades rather than an education. The effect on the instructor, particularly part time and untenured faculty, is to try to placate the students, so you are chivied along in your teaching in ways you might not otherwise go.

The CEQ is a document, prepared by students anonymously, that evaluates the faculty member. The results may affect the faculty member's income and future, although a carefully worded Collective Agreement can protect against the explicit use of CEQs in this way. Still, the CEQs may influence administrators who see them even if their explicit use is prohibited. If your promotion or salary may depend in some fashion on student evaluations, then, in the interest of improving his or her CEQ scores, the instructor may well make an effort, however subtle, to give the customer what he or she wants, and that is not necessarily hard work involving much writing and critical evaluation.

Since the administration had proposed CEQs at negotiations and had them rejected, MUNFA took their imposition to arbitration. On the issue of whether or not they could be imposed – made compulsory – we lost, partly on the basis of a poorly worded passage in the *CAUT Guide to the Teaching Dossier* which the MUN administration, and then the arbitrator, took to be acceptance of mandatory course evaluations. On the subject of generally circulating the results of the evaluations, we won, at least in part. Now a faculty member can opt out of

having his or her results circulated. In this the union relied primarily not on the Collective Agreement but on privacy legislation

What is the upshot of all of this? A combination of tuition increases, financial pressures on universities, a “managerial” approach on the part of university administrators, and an ideological shift in the attitudes towards student/teacher relationships, have to a considerable degree negatively impacted the education process.

Part of the problem has nothing to do with administrators. Newfoundland, for instance, has always had serious difficulties with its school system. Many of our entering students are poorly prepared in math and English, and often know very little world, Canadian, or local history – knowledge that is necessary to provide a framework for studying literature and a host of other disciplines. The coddling of students is endemic in school systems. Since students are often deficient in preparation, the university has two choices: attempt to bring weaker students up to par; or just ignore the problem, which must drive down standards for everyone. This is an old problem and I think the universities should return to an old solution: compulsory first year programs at least for those who need them. If these filtering courses fail to bring students up to university standards, the students should leave the university and faculty should not be under undue pressure to keep them. Such classes would have to be small to be effective and would be expensive courses to run, but they would serve a crucial educational purpose. This approach would not work if faculty budgets were determined by student numbers. The incentives would be all wrong.

All this may sound gloomy, yet this is not a story of the collapse of civilization. Universities and their faculty members turn out the best and the brightest; we train minds to be

critical; we have an impact. We need to understand our complex roles as teacher/researchers, we need to defend our academic freedom in all its manifestations, and we need to oppose both the obvious and subtle encroachments of consumerist ideology in all its slick disguises. In so doing, we all share in the glow of academic integrity.