

# Reprise of the Dark Ages?

By Barry Kavanagh

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Just over a year ago, I was asked (as a professor from Seneca College) to participate in a TVO panel on education. When my opportunity came to participate, I related the college's experience over the past dozen (or more) years which, simply put, was that we had seen new students come to us each September with progressively-weaker academic capabilities. This on-going weakening of high school graduates' academic abilities had two very noticeable results: i) we were forced to continually weaken our programs by removing topics from the curriculum in order to finish the subjects in one semester — a fair estimate was that 25% of the first-semester curriculum had been removed over the years; and ii) in spite of this weakening of the subjects, our failure rate has continued to grow until it reached an alarming rate of 50% a few years ago.

I further recounted that among the large number of failures on the first-term test, there was now (past few years) a group of students who awaited the return of their test papers with smiles of anticipation — they were sure that they had done well. When they saw their marks (between 0% and 7% or 8%), the smiles were replaced: first by puzzlement and then by looks of despair as they quickly realized that their college career (after only four or five weeks) was already over. Some of these puzzled students have told me that they studied for the test just as always, and some of them related that they had never failed before.

When I finished my brief remarks, both panel members from the education bureaucracy rushed to comment. The superintendent from the York Region Board made several comments, the gist of which was that we were not doing our job; apparently to this bureaucrat the high failure rate in the first semester was proof of our negligence at the college. The Director of the North York Board said that she certainly supported the superintendent's comments and went on to say that "you have to meet your clients where you find them" — apparently meaning that we should teach her graduate clients (we call them students) at whatever level of education they bring with them.

We do have clients. They are the employers of our co-op students and of our graduates. In the Civil/Resources field, we promise the co-op employers that our first-level students will be able to perform a wide variety of Civil/Resources functions, including surveying, materials testing and construction inspection. We promise the employers that our graduates can perform a wide variety of planning, design-related and construction-related activities. Our graduates who, for example, find employment in municipal design (sub-divisions, roads, sewers, etc.)

must be skilled in algebra, geometry, trigonometry, calculus, hydraulics, mechanics, hydrography, provincial design standards, etc.

If the North York Board sends us students who do not have the abilities as indicated in the provincial high school curriculum, we cannot simply adjust our curriculum to accommodate these unfortunate students and still have any prospect of reaching the program objectives expected by industry. Contrary to these bureaucrats' very public and very unfair accusations, the faculty of Seneca College are doing a great job — especially considering the handicaps placed on them by our deteriorating educational system. These accusations are not isolated cases — we have been hearing them for years. These bureaucrats and their posturing are not unique — I believe that they speak for the system.

The colleges are trying to “meet the students where they find them” by spending millions of dollars on remedial courses so that under-educated students can later proceed with a college education. This diversion of scarce post-secondary funds into remedial education occurs despite the expenditure of 70% to 80% of all municipal taxes for the same elementary and secondary education. What impact does this diversion of post-secondary funds have on the teaching of technology? We are in the midst of a world-wide technological revolution; we are trying desperately to keep up with the explosion of new technologies for our students — ie, new equipment, new curriculum, faculty up-grading, etc. We have little or no funds for any of these vital activities but are forced to spend millions of post-secondary funds on elementary and high school education because the educational system is not working for many of our children. The teaching of technology in Ontario is becoming an endangered species. Unless something is done to correct these problems, our technology education could become extinct. The impact on the province's economy will be disastrous when that occurs.

In 1492, many sailors of the Columbus age were loath to sail too far, as they feared that they would fall off the edge of the (flat) earth. Such thinking was, of course, a produce of the “Dark Ages”, a period which repressed most intellectual thought. Seventeen hundred years earlier (250BC), people not only knew that the earth was spherical, but they had actually performed measurements and calculations to determine the circumference of the earth to a respectable degree of accuracy. What caused the Dark Ages? What causes a society to turn its back on learning and other intellectual pursuits?