

No More Weeding Out

Here are some policies to encourage universities to help their students to succeed.

By Rod Clifton

Last spring, I participated in a seven-day stint at the Canadian Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in Halifax. The annual gabfest is known informally as “The Learned’s”, but even so its name does not prevent some foolish things from being said.

Eleanor Duckworth, a Canadian teaching at Harvard, told a large audience that the right-wing premiers in Ontario and Alberta were under-funding university education.

Likewise, Kathy Sanford, an education professor from the University of Victoria, told us that universities are too accountability-driven, and that professors should resist this trend by ceasing to give their students grades. By the way, she too said that universities are under-funded.

Moreover, our registration packages included post-cards that we were asked to send to legislators protesting the under-funding of Canadian universities.

Similar concerns were expressed at a recent Canadian Association of University Teachers forum, where students, professors, and MPs argued that student fees were increasing largely because universities were under-funded. At this forum, Libby Davies, a New Democrat MP, stated that immediate steps must be taken to roll back tuition fees and provide long-term, stable funding.

The facts, however, do not fully support the ideological rants of my colleagues. Statistics Canada recently reported that in 2000-2001 the total expenditure for universities from all levels of government was around \$16 billion and, as a percentage of the GDP, Canadian spending out-ranked all of the other OECD countries.

Moreover, in the last 40 years, university graduates with a bachelor’s degree increased by more than 500%. There have been even greater increases in the percentage of graduate degrees awarded.

Over that period there was an increase in the number of Canadian university professors. In 1960, there were 7760 professors, and in 2001 there were more than 34,000. Canadian universities are spending more but the faculty are enjoying it less.

For a variety of reasons, one of which may be a desire for additional revenue, many universities are accepting more and more students into their first-year programs. Unfortunately for these students, attrition is a big problem in many universities.

Hard data on attrition rates are understandably difficult to obtain, but the Office of Institutional Analysis (2002, p. 60) at the University of Manitoba reports that only 25% of first-year full-time students received degrees in four years, and only 51% received degrees in six years.

Similarly, a study that I conducted found that approximately 17% of full-time students enrolled in first-year programs did not register for the next academic year, and about 28% did not register for the third year.

University administrators are accustomed to receiving more and more money for enrolling more and more students. But this policy wastes public funds. Thus, I propose three over-lapping policies designed to encourage universities to be more efficient and to reduce the numbers of students who leave before graduation.

Standardized Admission Tests

Many of the students who drop out do so because they have not been adequately prepared in the required literacy and numeracy skills. Consequently, most universities are forced to offer expensive remedial programs.

If all entering students were ready to do university-level work, then professors would be in a better position to teach the material. Thus, standardized admission tests would force secondary schools to do a better job of preparing students for higher education.

Staged Tuition Fees

My second policy suggestion is that students should pay lower fees for first-year courses because they are in classes that are generally much larger than higher-level courses. Consequently, first-year students subsidize second- and third-year students. Thus, fees for first-year courses should be significantly lower than fees for the second- and third-year courses.

As well, this measure would provide an incentive for universities to help their first-year students progress to the succeeding years.

Sliding Scale

Finally, governments should use a sliding scale to provide grants to universities on a per-student, per-year, and per-program basis. If each full-time student’s grant is worth \$10,000 per year, my proposal would see 80% of the grant (\$8000) transferred to the university in the first year.

The percentage of the grant would increase to 100% for subsequent years. And the remaining \$2000, plus a 10% bonus, would be transferred to the university on the student’s graduation day. Thus, universities would have an incentive to improve their retention and graduation rates.

Conclusion

Together, these three policies would encourage universities to be more careful in selecting students and then ensure that the selected students progress quickly and smoothly from first year to graduation.

Once universities have shown they can improve their graduation rates, their professors could go to “The Learned’s” and discuss legitimate ways of increasing funding — as opposed to signing silly protest cards.

(Adapted with permission from “What can be done about the ‘under-funding’ of Canadian universities?”, www.fcpp.org. Dr. Clifton is professor of Sociology of Education at the University of Manitoba.)