



**UNIVERSITIES AFTER A MILLENNIUM:
WHITHER OR WITHER?**

*Professor Patricia Marchak, F.R.S.C.
Department of Anthropology and Sociology
UBC
October 5, 1996*

Biographical Note: Recently retired as Dean of the Faculty of Arts at UBC and Chair of the Board of Directors of the BC Building Corporation, Professor Marchak has published numerous articles and books on resource industries, economic development, industrial change, political economy and political ideologies. She is on the Board of Directors of Ecotrust and is a member of the Forest Appeals Commission of British Columbia. Her two most recent books are *Logging the Globe* and *Racism, Sexism, and the University*.

According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the first university was established in 859 in Fez, Morocco; the next one in Bologna, in 1000. If we include the ancient Greek philosophical schools as forerunners to universities, this is surely the oldest surviving institution. An institution with that longevity deserves attention, and when it is facing tough times we need to concern ourselves with it.

Universities are under fire everywhere these days. They are accused of failing to teach well, or of failing to teach the right subjects, of being elitist or of being too democratic. They are accused of being too western in orientation or of failing to respect the western tradition. The technological revolution, demographic change, and globalization are all having an impact on universities, and everywhere they are struggling with declining funds and many expensive demands. What I propose to do this evening is discuss some of the changes in the university's environment that make this a critical time for this institution. Please note that I am discussing these changes, not advocating them. I, like many of you, have loved this community as well as this institution, and I find some of the changes disconcerting.

Technological Revolution

A technological revolution is underway and it has the potential to provide high-quality interactive computer education to a mobile, multi-lingual, highly diverse global population, and to do this with minimal professorial support staff and low space demands. This form of education can be and already is being produced by private companies.

In some fields, the traditional format of lectures, seminars, labs and tutorials was already outflanked by television three decades ago. Students could learn about lost civilizations or the habits of fieldmice without introductory university lectures. Traditional undergraduate structures were not immediately threatened because television stations could not give credits for courses and viewers had no control over viewing schedules. Now with both video and interactive computer technologies, where students control the timing and the computer itself can provide the testing, traditional classrooms are obsolete in fields where close personal supervision or intense interaction are not essential.

For example, one can learn most languages today through interactive computer programs combined with audio/visual programs. Students will benefit from participation in conversational groups and access to a technical advisor when they run into a glitch, but they do not really need a professor of literature to teach them verb declensions. Another example: the British broadcasting system, together with Britain's open learning institute, is creating a magnificent sequence of Shakespeare's plays, directed and acted by the best Shakespearean troupes, with commentaries by leading scholars, all on CD-ROM and soon to be available on the world market. Science courses are already available on the web, and while laboratory experience is still essential in many fields, much of the rest of the standard undergraduate science curriculum can be produced through the multi-media technologies. In the social sciences, reproduction through multimedia will improve most offerings, especially where maps and visual aids add to the learning experience.

Established universities and upstart private companies are now

competing for a market that is sure to expand. Institutions based anywhere in the world can provide degree programs on the web or by distance education in competition with existing programs at local universities. As more and more of what is called education becomes a commodity in privatized global markets, such competition will become ever more fierce. Up-front costs are heavy. But the saving will be on professorial faculty numbers as programs displace them. Survival for faculty members will depend on ability to do the research and development for new programs, and there will be competition for contracts.

Credentials will follow the technological possibilities. If students can learn a course at home via computer and video technologies, the university need only devise testing methods. The assumption that learning requires so many credit hours of class time is already passé.

A likely outcome of technological change in any event is de-emphasis on the kinds of credits, diplomas, and degrees of the past. New situations tend to oblige us to recreate accreditation systems, just as occurred when the crafts system gave way to industrial capitalism in other fields. In fact the university is the last of the crafts guilds to face change. With its student apprentices, graduate student journey-persons, masters and doctors, its organization could only survive as long as the students needed the faculty.

Such sweeping changes as these will not occur gently. Faculties everywhere are organized, articulate, increasingly litigious, and militantly opposed to downsizing of either their salaries or their numbers.

Faculty members will argue that a major part of the learning process is embedded in the interactions between teachers and students in classroom and informal settings; that education does not consist simply of mastering grammar rules or the basic principles of economics. And they are right.

But the contest is not between the ideal they describe and the computerized alternative. The ideal is already gone, buried in large class sizes and stretched-out teachers. Students are no longer a homogeneous group of young people just out of high school. They are

all ages, both sexes, often have families and paid work, and they have very little time to interact on the models of an earlier era. For them, interaction with computers, supplemented by occasional discussions with faculty or meetings with other students, is a means of acquiring an education that would be otherwise inaccessible. For the society, an end result is achieved at an affordable price, though its quality may be dubious.

Government and Business Interventions

The technological revolution and global marketplace strategies create a very different context for universities than in the past. No longer does an institution have a near-monopoly on higher education for a local population, and that raises the question of whether provincial governments should provide the funding for institutions that are now part of a global marketplace.

Governments of all ideological stripes are now pressuring universities to find private funds. As well, they are enjoined to put more of their efforts into short-term vocational training and programs based on co-op and contract partnerships -- as they are called -- with business. The B.C. Government has increased funding for vocational programs and decreased it for other aspects of university education. A quasi-governmental task force called the B.C. Labour force development board advised government to transfer funds from universities to vocational training in a paper released some months ago. The board's members are almost all from the business community and labour unions.

Dr. Robert Allen of our economics department rebutted the arguments. Through examination of Statistics Canada data on jobs and salaries, he demonstrated that a university education was still superior to vocational training for individuals and for the society and economy. John Dixon and Stan Persky published eloquent rebuttals of the board's recommendations. And Mary Russell in UBC's social work school published a thoughtful essay on the Gove Commission report on child welfare, arguing that its recommendations could only be met if social workers were provided with more extensive

education. But the government seems to have listened to the board, not its critics.

Students As Consumers

The pressures imposed by governments and businesses include a very different version of a university than was current when thee and me were young, Maggie. Students are paying higher tuitions, governments are demanding accountability on their terms, employers are demanding products that enhance their profit margins.

The atmosphere of the marketplace pervades the university today, and arguments on behalf of quality education, the kind that is supposed to inculcate skepticism and encourage wisdom, are not high on many business agendas. No longer education for its own sake, or the cultivation of the mind, the search for truth, the love of perfection, sweetness and light. When education is a commodity, those who can provide a competitive product for a demanding market will survive; the others will go to the wall. There is no measure of quality beyond the market.

The market model for business schools across the continent involves two intersecting markets. The main one is business, where prospective employers participate in establishing the curriculum and, hopefully, hire the products. Students provide the consumer or subscriber market. Business schools listen to business and do market surveys before deciding on their particular specializations. Some of their programs are designed with international students in mind, and schools are moving into distance education, sub-contracting arrangements, and various other modes that were pioneered by international businesses but never before used by university faculties. As noted in a recent newspaper report on this, business schools are now being run as businesses.

Another model of the student-as-customer is more muddle-headed, replete with 1960s-style rhetoric. Students are to be viewed as customers and faculty should provide them with reference services. Faculty should not impose their values or educational priorities on students. We are informed, indeed, that to do so might hinder

creativity and learning. One way of phrasing this comes from a brochure that reached my desk when I was dean of arts. It says that faculty should be primarily designers of learning methods and environments, unlike old-fashioned faculty who were teachers. Those old-fashioned people are claimed to have thought of students as passive vessels to be filled with objective knowledge. Now we should think of knowledge as “constructed in a personal context.”

Customers are always right, of course, and one does not evaluate them. Once past the initial entry levels, consuming students, according to those who use this terminology, should select their own courses, move from one level to another as they desire, and eventually gain accreditation without much in the way of academic expectations, course requirements, or grading in the process. They cannot fail, and if anyone says a disparaging word along the way they can complain.

The Legacy of Growth and Diversification

Three major changes have occurred since the end of the 1940s. One was growth and diversification as higher education became a major component of democratic, industrial societies. The second was demographic change in all western societies, and in universities. And the third is the commodification of education already mentioned.

Consider the process of growth and diversification. It was predicated on a laudable intention, the democratization of higher education. But there was very little planning involved. Since funding was available, faculty and administrations avoided conflict by giving every subject equal standing. Every teacher had the right to provide a course in his or her speciality whether there was student demand or not. Subjects that had never before had academic clothing were re-cast. New departments and new degrees proliferated. The curriculum became a cafeteria, where students designed their own education in view of their career intentions and with no necessary reference to such old fashioned notions as development of the intellect, exposure to rigorous analysis, acquisition of skills in research and rhetoric, or acquaintance with whatever was currently

regarded as great works. Faculty members relinquished intellectual authority beyond their own narrow specializations. Even there they avoided departmental squabbles by negotiating trade-offs: allowing others to teach whatever they wanted provided others allowed oneself to do the same.

The expansion was pushed further by ambitious administrators and departments who measured their prestige by the number of graduate students they attracted and the dollar funding they obtained for advanced research. Like corporations that grow and diversify, universities became so large, so diffuse, so multifaceted that their diverse parts lost contact.

As is so often the case, the problems of one era grow out of the benefits of a previous one. There is no doubt that democratization of higher education over the past half-century has been a great boon to both individuals and society. The expansion of intellectual skills has benefited everyone, but it brought with it some unintended costs. One was that as more people obtained bachelor degrees, the market value of the degrees declined. Then the push was on to increase access to graduate programs, but again, the market value of degrees diminished. Then as chance had it, the economy ceased to grow at its 1970s rate, and universities lost their expansionary movement. By the mid-1990s, there are large and numerous undergraduate and graduate programs, insufficient funds to maintain them, and the academic job market is shrinking. Because we allowed growth to occur without imposing academic criteria, we are unable to make decisions about what to keep, what to cut; what matters most and what matters less.

Demographic Change

Decisions at this stage must take into account the demographic changes of the past few decades. The university for most of its long history was a male preserve. The democratization of the post-war period included equal entry for female students. By the mid-1990s three quarters of undergraduate students in arts and education faculties, half in law, medicine and science are women. In the humanities

and social sciences, half of masters students and a third of Ph.D. students are now women. The trend clearly is toward continuing feminization of universities and their numbers are increasing most rapidly in the liberal arts. Though senior faculty are still predominantly male, a third of faculty recruited in the last half dozen years in the humanities and social sciences are women, consistent with their proportions in the Ph.D. recruitment pool.

Ethnic heterogeneity is more difficult to measure, but certainly students at this and other Canadian universities are increasingly multi-cultural populations. I doubt if there is one dominant ethnic group at UBC in the mid-1990s.

These two demographic changes present challenges to universities that were unimagined by the more homogeneous institutions of the past. One of these is to figure out how to teach a multi-lingual as well as multi-cultural population.

Languages of Instruction

Universities have long required basic competence in the language of instruction, English in this part of Canada and French in Quebec, for entry to credit courses. UBC has an entrance examination to screen students, and requires those who fail it to take remedial non-credit courses before they can enter the required courses in first year English. A couple of years ago the Faculty of Arts at UBC adopted a policy that in all courses where written work in English is required, a portion of the grade should be assigned to competence in use of the English language. All of these actions are now controversial. Not only students but some administrators argue that it is parochial and discriminatory to expect all students to be capable of communicating in English. In part this reflects the pressures to internationalize education.

But international students are still a small proportion of the total population at Canadian universities. Many more students with diverse cultural roots are Canadian citizens and residents. The debate over the continued monopoly of English as the language of instruction involves many of these students. Our elementary schools

will soon be offering language instruction in some of the many Asian as well as European languages of our multicultural population, and it is reasonable to ask not whether but how the university can change to accommodate its multicultural population.

We do offer courses in other languages but these are specialized literature courses. We have no courses in, say, philosophy, biology, or geography, where instruction is offered in other languages or where students can choose a language of instruction. Obviously the implications for present faculty would be enormous if such a requirement were introduced, since few could re-tool and offer their courses in several alternative languages. As well, the overall cost of instruction would be prohibitive.

The language issue will become more prominent in the next few years. At some point universities are going to have to make public decisions about languages. They will have to either radically change their offerings to accommodate a multi-lingual population, or insist on academic standards in one language. What is not reasonable is to permit entry to students who clearly cannot cope with the language and expect them, other students in their classes, and the faculty to somehow muddle through — or to maintain requirements for English and then call professors racist if they insist on proficiency in English.

The “Western” Canon

A changing gender ratio and ethnic heterogeneity of the student body have brought about some changes in what is called the canon of the liberal arts. The heterogeneous population now studying at universities in Canada may have a reasonable complaint when it comes to the curriculum’s emphasis on the western scientific tradition, literature, philosophy, and social sciences. Only two decades ago, when asked what is the function of a university, I and many others would have included in our response: to transmit our cultural heritage to another generation. Obviously the cultural heritage is much more complex now than it was when Canadians were predominantly of European descent.

But while the discovery of women's literature and translated versions of work by writers outside the European tradition has changed the curriculum, the questioning of what used to be the canon has now become a more general questioning about how great works are identified, who chooses them, and for what purpose?

There are two very different answers to those questions. One is the argument in the tradition of Cardinal Newman, Matthew Arnold, and many of their intellectual descendents who would defend the original curriculum or a modified one provided it challenged the minds, developed skeptical and critical dimensions, enlightened the spirit, encouraged a search for knowledge and even more, for virtue and wisdom. If the great works that once served a male undergraduate population are no longer acceptable on gender and ethnic grounds, then the addition of female and non-western male writers would be acceptable provided such offerings meet the criteria. The criteria for scholars in this tradition has to do with quality, even though the nature of quality is always problematic.

Critics more sympathetic to critical theory, post-modernism, post-structuralism, and deconstructionism might argue to the contrary that all activity, including the development of a curriculum, reflects the interests of those who engage in or defend it. All knowledge is gendered, rooted in ethnicity, region, religion or other biographical conditions of the speaker; that is, all knowledge and values are subjective. The great books tradition, say the critics, was an ideological underpinning for imperialism, racism, and patriarchy. Matthew Arnold and Cardinal Newman were leading spokespersons. To simply replace them with a few different voices would not fundamentally alter the arrogance of the entire system.

The debate on the canon rages in the humanities and has deeply penetrated the social sciences. It has had little perceptible effect on the sciences where another tradition, realism or western rationalism, has long organized knowledge and the pursuit of it. This tradition embeds two basic ideas of the university. One is that truth exists independent of human perceptions of it. The second is that in seeking truth, the personal characteristics of the seeker are irrelevant. These two ideas gave the stamp to the university as a unique institu-

tion. Unlike religious institutions, the university did not seek knowledge through revelation, and was not dependent on guru-like transmissions of insight. Empirical science imposes strict demands on those who seek truth. The rules of inquiry are explicit and objective.

The post-modernist attack on the canon in the humanities and the method, or more, the basic mind-set of the social and physical sciences, goes well beyond an academic debate. For if we choose to embrace that view, then much of what passes for higher education is nothing more than the exchange of personal and subjective opinions about the world. The entire crafts organization of the university comes into question. How can merit be assessed if all criteria are subjective? Thus examinations, tenure decisions, publications and all else become ideologically suspect.

I personally take the view that reality does exist beyond human perceptions; thus for me, the seeking of a correspondence to truth and the sober attempt to be objective make sense. One who takes the rationalist position, however, cannot ignore the legacies of history in the European and also many other cultures. Sexism and racism appear to be universal issues, and every contemporary society in a globalized economy is struggling with problems of gender inequities and ethnic conflict. That universities have discriminated against women, aboriginal peoples, and non-Europeans is undeniable though the discrimination was systemic and rooted in their larger cultures. That the curriculum reflected and no doubt still reflects human prejudices is obvious. Certainly our universities have to grapple with these moral and intellectual issues.

History of Discrimination

In taking the position of the realist rather than the post-modernist, I do not imply disbelief in the reality of discrimination. But for universities the question at the base of all this is: is there a common purpose in this institution, can we sustain the western rationalist tradition more particularly, and still ensure that all peoples, both genders, and persons of numerous philosophical and religious traditions, feel comfortable in the university?

I actually think not. If the university is maintained as a secular institution, then many of its teachings will offend one group or another. Whether it is the theory of evolution, an interpretation of the history of a particular religion, a critique of a female writer's work, or the conventional version of how aboriginal people came to North America over the Bering Strait, there are potential objectors who will perceive these statements as racist or sexist.

Further, while much of the open debate swirls around sexism and racism, there is another *ism* moving into the vacuum that universities have created precisely because they have not defined who they are. This *ism* is fundamentalism. It is not peculiar to one religious viewpoint. Secularism, pluralism, and tolerance for diversity are evils in many fundamentalist lexicons, and if the university takes an excessively puritanical position in its definition of racism, it runs the risk of opening up the debate on the legitimacy of secularism. Individual faculty members practising what they regard as normal scholarly activities are potential targets for dogmatists of all creeds.

So this debate over reality is not merely academic. As a society we do have to decide whether all versions of everything are equal, whether anything is more true or more important than any other things, and whether there is an intellectual direction to our academic institutions. If we cannot make those decisions and stick with them, then perhaps it is time to replace expensive universities with alternative institutions that cater to selected populations or, as profit seekers call them, niche markets.

The larger politics of gender and multi-culturalism play themselves out at universities. This is not a new phenomenon; students are young, energetic, and idealistic. They have always sought to change the world, and when they are concentrated together on a university campus, they have the momentum to mount their claims. One might say more power to them, but there are some drawbacks. One is that the tolerance, pluralism, courteous allowance for all points of view — in short, freedom of speech aspects of universities — are at odds with narrow language codes and perceptions of sexism in actions that are — whether we like it or not — normal behaviours in society at large. Something has to give if we accept a code of zero

tolerance.

The other drawback is that the university is not a microcosm of the society at large when it comes to its capacity to deal with many of the claims. We are not set up as courts of law; we do not have stringent disciplinary procedures; our long history of relatively democratic decision-making and consultation is not conducive to hop, skip, jump rules governing personal behaviour.

Universities and Intellectual Life

A burgeoning literature decries the decline of the university on the grounds that the curriculum has lost its bite, that what now passes for an education in the humanities is pabulum, served cafeteria-style. Intellectual rigour, academic standards, uncomfortable demands for genuine learning have been replaced, say the critics, by fear of offending anyone, zero tolerance, and incapacity to distinguish between — to quote Howard Bloom — Chaucer and batman comics. It is not that the western canon has been replaced by an equally demanding other cultural heritage, but that it has been replaced by paralysis of the spirit. That is what is causing the death of the university, according to these critics.

A measure of this paralysis might be noted in contemporary mission statements. Universities of the past had their Latin mottos. But their governors felt no need to enunciate mission statements. Over the last decade, facing declining public funds and increasing public demands, mission statements have proliferated. The one at UBC is typically superficial: “to be world renowned.” Another phrasing of it is, “to be second to none.” These vapid statements epitomise the dilemma of the modern — or perhaps post-modern — university.

Universities did once have a mission, unstated because it was self-evident and unambiguous. The mission was, as the sciences continue to believe it is now, to seek truth and to impart such truths as were found to another generation.

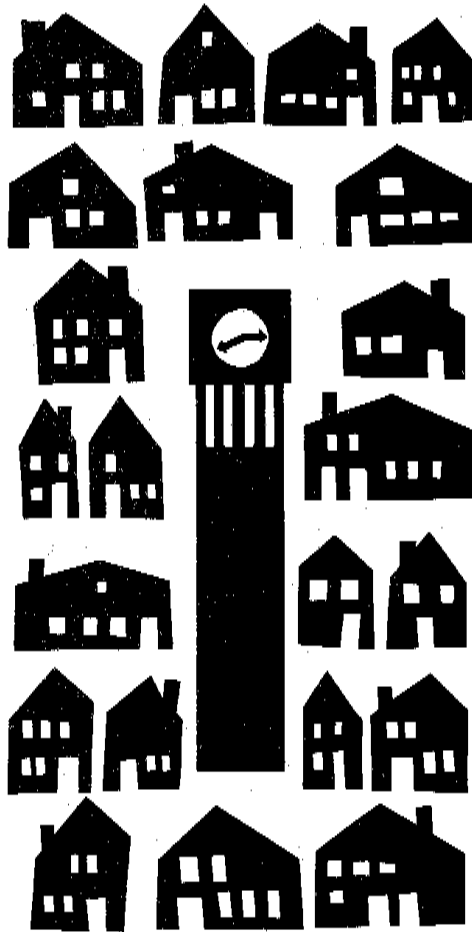
Lost missions imply a loss of identity, and some writers argue that universities have, indeed, lost their bearings. Whether we

think the changes are good or bad, there is little doubt that universities are not what they used to be nor are they likely to persist in a recognizable form in the future.

Technology, globalization, and the pressures of the marketplace are all pushing toward a dismantling of the large university. In its place, institutions will become established for niche markets, providing their wares in various languages and training their students for a global marketplace. Science, as long as it is useful, will continue to receive funds either from private or public sources, but even science faculties will have to compete for students with private institutes and global invaders.

If alternative research and educational institutions can perform many of the functions now undertaken in universities, and do it at lower cost to the public purse, do we still need these expensive institutions?

I think the answer resides in how highly we regard the secular, skeptical, persistent questioning attitude of the university, and how much we appreciate the tolerance, open debate, and demands for intellectual rigour. These are the hallmarks of the university in contrast to all other institutions. I believe, contrary to some of the university's critics, that universities have been a force for the good and will continue in that role if allowed to survive. I think we need them as we try to address pressing ecological issues, the politics of the global economy, world poverty, and the evolution of multicultural societies. But there are many opposing voices, strong counter-currents of change, and their survival will depend on a strong social will to keep them alive.

INSTITUTE MEMORABILIA**The Vancouver Institute**

Saturday Evening Lectures 1974
Instructional Resources Centre (IRC)
Lecture Hall No. 2
University of British Columbia
At 8:15 p.m.