

*Speaking notes of Dr. Robert Campbell, President, Mount Allison University, and Chair,
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AUCC WORKSHOP ON TRANSFORMING CANADIAN UNDEGRADUATE EDUCATION
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INTRODUCTION

- This is an important moment for Canadian Universities, and for AUCC's heroic and noble ambition to re-calibrate and re-vitalize itself for the next 100 years
- Indeed, at the heart of constructing what has been termed the 'new narrative' for Universities – more on this later – is the ambition to re-consider and animate what might have been neglected over the last decade: **The centrality and importance of the undergraduate experience**
- Being here at Pier 21 and in the Maritimes is a double metaphor for AUCC in general and for me personally
- Let's start with Pier 21
- Earlier Paul quoted Roberta Jamieson who characterized Pier 21 as the personification of the promise of what this country holds
- I would like to suggest that Universities have been - and should continue to be - Pier 21s for past, present and future Canadians
- A few meters from here, an ordinary-looking ship – the *Grote Bier* - docked in the spring of 1953 after an oceanic journey from Rotterdam
- A Dutch family left the boat with armfuls of blonde children to make their way through the new Canadian landscape
- Neither parent had a university education: their youth and education had been experienced in the Depression and in Nazi -occupied Holland
- Notwithstanding this, and notwithstanding that they had but a few dollars when they arrived - all seven of their children went to university
- I was fortunate to marry one of those children,
- She went on to do her doctorate, write ten books, win a teaching award, head a national association, win a Governor General's Prize, and become a member of the Royal Society of Canada
- For the Verduyn family, Pier 21 and Canadian universities provided a gateway to an amazing world of opportunity, to personal happiness, and to deep and consequential engagement in their community and in the world
- Over on the clan Campbell side, my ancestors arrived in Canada a bit earlier than the 1950s, but the story centers again on Nova Scotia
- The gateway to the new world at Pictou was, 'encouraged', by the English
- But the narrative of Canadian promise, and of the universities as gateway for the Scots Canadians was no different than in the Dutch story
- My father grew up in a large farm family, a bit of a way from here, in Margaree Forks, Cape Breton
- As for my in-laws, the war had important consequences for him
- He exited Cape Breton via the RCAF,
- which in turn landed him in Montreal and at McGill and later at the University of Ottawa,

- where he met my mother who, like him, was from a large rural family with no university background
- McGill and Ottawa provided the foundation for a successful career and the education of their children, two of whom in turn went on to get doctorates
- And both of those two children began their university educations at a NS university, which cannot, alas, be identified for competitive reasons
- Thank you for indulging me on this biographical introduction
- I appreciate that many of you in this room could tell a similar and likely more exciting story than this one
- It is the noble and thrilling story of economic and social mobility and progress for vast numbers of ordinary Canadians
- I tell it here today to give a substantive face to what I think should be **a** – if not **the** – central feature of the Canadian universities’ new narrative
- Like Pier 21: **Canadian universities personify the promise of what this country holds for its citizens**
- Canadian universities offer ACCESS and provide PERSONAL opportunities – as a portal through which individuals gain access to an amazing world
- And, in the process, these real individuals go on and make an enormous contribution to their communities
- Typically: they tend not to go to jail, they lead healthy lives, they make economic and social contributions, they volunteer and connect to their communities, and from time to time they make really outstanding scientific, cultural or economic initiatives or inventions – that in effect pay for the costs of all of the education provided to their peers
- In short: these university graduates add more to society than they take out of it, and in the process, they strengthen Canada, its communities and our families
- This, I believe, should be the starting point for our ‘new’ narrative about Canadian Universities:
- That they are tied at the hip to Canadians, to their communities, to our families and to individuals, in an aspirational, experiential and deeply consequential way
- This should not be the narratives’ exclusive focus but, rather, its foundations
- All the rest emanate from this
- And this promise, this foundation, rests on the quality and effectiveness of the undergraduate student experience

THE AUCC EXPERIENCE OVER THE LAST DECADE

- So, why are we here this weekend, and reflecting on themes and notions that likely strike all of us at this moment as self-evident truths
- I think that for a number of university Presidents and senior administrators, their experience with or at the AUCC over the last decade has been a frustrating one – until recently
- This is not to point fingers at the AUCC, which is – after all – simply a servant of the university membership
- And, to an extent – in my view - the collective university membership has lost its way over this period

- Again: this is not to point fingers or get high and mighty (which is tough to be from Sackville in the Tantramar Marsh)
- But we all know what universities have gone through over the last decades:
- Massive enrolment pressures
- Cyclical waxing and waning of government support
- Funding and revenues that have not kept pace with costs, which have been driven by unionization, professionalization, technology, and expectations
- Growth in facilities pressures/ deferred maintenance
- With increased expectations of collegiality, accountability and transparency
- In short,
- uncontrollable upward expenditure pressures + uncertain revenue growth that has not kept pace with cost pressures + relentless expectations, pressure and scrutiny from governments, media and publics
- In my little lifetime as an administrator since the mid-1980s, I have mainly managed crises, become clever at juggling loaves and fishes, improving my cheerleading and fundraising skills, and doing advanced work in alchemy
- To be honest, I have been part of the universities' struggle to control and contain unit costs (primarily through increasing class size, substituting part for full time labor, and general program rationalization)
- And I was part of the process of overseeing the expansion of research and graduate agendas in response to what has been both external AND internal forces – and I have benefitted personally/professionally from this
- Paralleling this experience has been a secular shift in governments' PSE expectations to a focus on 'outputs' and 'impact' on issues like productivity, innovation, competitiveness, commercialization, employment and so on.
- governments in the mid-1990s and after – particularly the feds - offered financial incentives for universities to embrace their agenda,
- So it was pretty much inevitable that universities – with AUCC help – would shift our focus and attention to ever-narrowing policy and financial issues, to help maximize the revenues from research and related areas to help to keep ourselves afloat
- As a result, the focus has been what might be characterized as 'cherry picking' the university promise and experience
- The focus has been way down at the end of the university funnel – at grad studies, R&D, big science
- All the while, in my view, increasingly neglecting to consider what is going on way back upstream at the entrance of the funnel that feeds and generates the high end outputs
- In my view, though, we likely lost the foundational narrative thread in this process – imploding our vision and narrowing our focus on simply the high end outputs of the university system
- In the process we lost sight of the broader promise of the universities and lost connection with our broader communities
- This was the Presidential and AUCC world that I joined in 2005,
- And it was quite a distance from my tutorials, and my personal and scholarly and community experiences as an undergraduate at Trent
- and a near planetary distance from my day-to-day reality at Mount Allison

- Like the rest of you in this room, what had motivated me to be a university administrator was an affection and respect for the university experience
- In a collegial, self-governing system. I felt a responsibility and a desire to improve my university's capacity to maintain or indeed improve the quality of the student university experience
- But I found myself on a very different planet
- Allow me to abuse my family yet again
- The Verduyn's are in the monument business and we spend a lot of time in graveyards – where we often amuse ourselves by making up epitaphs to put on people's tombstones
- I do not know about the rest of you, but I would be pretty disappointed if, at the end of a career in university, I looked down and saw that my tombstone read: "He fought hard for the indirect costs of research".

THE UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE

- The irony of this story is that the overall quality of university staff, infrastructure and programming has likely improved in my lifetime:
- The university that I first attended is a zillion times higher quality place today than it was back in the day
- But we all feel and know that the character of the undergraduate experience has deteriorated in our lifetimes, especially so in the last decades
- And we know in our heart of hearts that this experience can and should be much better
- Overall size of many universities has become problematic
- Class size has deteriorated
- Increasing use of contract teaching
- Less personal interaction and immediacy
- Financial pressures seeing students going to school part-time, commuting, and working
- Faculty less inclined to spend the last hour with students
- Too much emphasis on testing and not enough on writing and talking
- Shifting away (distracting?) from academic/classroom experiences to ones at the margin as a way of keeping students happy
- Institutional focus and valuation of research versus teaching
- And so on
- All this results partially **but not exclusively** from financial necessities and demographic realities
- But it also reflects **internal or domestic choices**, many of these played out in Senates, Faculties and university discussions,
- There has been an institutional willingness to let the costs and opportunities of undergraduate education be the dependent or left over variable in budget and policy discussions
- The 'high end' envelopes are often if not typically cross-subsidized by the undergraduate envelope
- So: as we begin to unravel and roll back this state of affairs: we will confront two separate but interrelated questions:
- the Financial question of how we Square the Circle of Quality vs. Costs

- The institutional or cultural context where much of our community may not actually see a problem, or accept that this is a problem that is ‘theirs’

THE STUDENTS ROLE IN ALL THIS

- Going forward, the students’ potential role in all of this is not clear to me
- On the undergrad level, one thing is for sure is that most of the students here today will not be here in a couple of years
- By the time they figure things out, it is often too late.
- And in the process, they find just enough that is good in the experience to keep them loyal and contented if not happy
- I have found this particularly frustrating in the last few years, where any possibility for tactical strategic or policy alliances have tended to be undermined by two competing discourses that students have found more compelling or attractive:
 - The first is the student debt/tuition debate
 - at the margin, here, our interests tend to diverge:
 - as I joke to our student leaders, my job is to maximize the revenues at our disposal not to minimize them – or how else can we maintain quality?
 - The other discourse is the job/employability one;
 - As the parent of four yet to be privatized children, I am sympathetic to the broad issue;
 - But I fear a potential ‘baby and the bathwater’ scenario here
 - A related issue is the question of student ‘engagement’
 - This is a highly attractive notion for a key feature of the undergraduate experience
 - But it presents a cultural challenge as well internally at our institutions
 - For example: not all faculty would conclude that attending this workshop is worth of a university credit
 - And this also presents challenges in terms of where we put our resources at the margin – the last 100k
 - Job counselors? International exchange coordinators? Directors of the center for engaged learners? Directors of the Writing Centre? A sociology professor? Or a lab technician....
 - At Mount A recently, to my surprise, we funded a job counselor at the margin for the last 100k....
 - In any event, as we pursue our ambitions for improving the quality of the undergrad experience, we are going to have to find a way to get an equilibrium amongst a number of agendas that do not sit very comfortably together at present

SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS

- Even more surprising to me has been society’s and parents’ tolerance of this situation
- Here, I genuinely believe that we have somehow cut ourselves off from what should be a consequential community political constituency for us
- The general public has been remarkably tolerant of what has been a deteriorating situation – one that they do not put up with in the health sector
- If they do buck up, they direct their gaze at us and not at governments to control fees – rather than asking about the quality of the undergraduate education and experience that their children are getting

- This issue strikes me as a key challenge for the new narrative or how we go about operationalizing it – we have got to get the parents and families on our side
- This takes me to another issue facing many of us:
- The hard reality is those things that we consider to be the essence of a good undergrad experience are not particularly on society's or parents' radar – for any number of reasons that I cannot go into here
- But let me share two disturbing dimensions of this that I then experience at Mount Allison
- We think that we have a pretty good Mount A 'brand': Maclean's, Rhodes Scholar winners, esteemed graduates in high places, positive student endorsements, loads of good publicity about things our students and faculty do, beautiful campus, no strikes, good media and government support, loyal alumni, etc.
- All this is GREAT
- BUT
- We are in the middle of a branding/marketing exercise : and our recognition is trivial in the Maritimes and negligent to zero in the rest of Canada
- And, despite a professional and sophisticated recruiting team and approach, a fabulous and generous scholarship and financial support program, and all our brand and program values and attractions – we struggle – STRUGGLE – to attract 750 new students each year
- So, for my friends at Acadia, and X, and Bishops, etc:
- we are looking at this exercise with some mixed feelings
- On the one hand, our big challenge is how to sell our experience in a world where it is not understood or appreciated in any basic conceptual sense
- On the other hand, to the extent that the broad university system is able to project a more humane and liberal undergraduate experience, will this actually harm our capacity to attract students?

SO:

- I appreciate enormously Paul's comment about the range and variety of university types and experiences I Canada
- This should be valued, lauded and encouraged
- We do not need or should not want a one-size fits all approach
- And we should consider ways of actually differentiating our system to a greater degree, as we strive to find ways to enrich the undergraduate experience in each of our different institutions

MY TOP TEN ACTION LIST

Conclude by using my funnel metaphor to unpack a top 10 list of issues to consider in the vision for the renewed undergrad experience, aligned with the new narrative:

1. At the Mouth of the funnel: ACCESS

- Connect to our communities: make ourselves more open; show our values/promises; make ourselves attractive; use our communities as a political force
- Ensure accessibility: ensure that we get to new Canadians, rural and small town, aboriginal, boys, first-generation attendees, transfers from colleges,
- Work more closely with high schools to ensure skills/aspirational connectedness

2. Within the funnel: QUALITY EXPERIENCE

- Be self-conscious about what we think are the core ingredients of a quality undergrad experience: read/read/read, write/write/write, talk/talk/talk; transferrable skills; national/international; engagement; personal connectedness to faculty, staff, community, other students; research experience; social engagement; physical and mental health:
- NOT EVERYONE CHOSE THE SAME: look to differentiation
- Develop appropriate/different metrics/measurable
- Finance/Incentives/Tools/financially firewall: we need more sophistication in how we financially model for these experiences/quality; the Sustainability/Quality matrix

3. What comes out the Funnel: COMMUNITY AND NATIONAL RESULTS

- Foundation or stepping stone for next steps: grad or professional schools; community engagement/involvement; employability; research/knowledge;
- Track and Measure and Evaluate for Feedback; communicate to publics
- This is our story: teaching/training; producing knowledge; creating opportunities for and benefitting the community; site for major public discussions

CONCLUSION

- Thank you again for this opportunity to share some thoughts/ideas
- Thanks also for your commitment to this important project
- Good luck to all in the workshops, which I look forward to
- And Good luck in your own universities as we seek to improve the quality of our students undergraduate experience on all of our campuses.