A Brief History of Everything You Wanted to Know (About Professors and University Students)

Some time ago, Professor Clark at the School of Public Policy and Governance, University of Toronto, asked me to put together a snapshot history of student and professor life inside the university. Considering that the western tradition of higher education stretches back 2000-plus years, this is no easy chore. The following survey is notably brief and does not harbor pretensions as to comprehensiveness. At times it may read more like a history of the university than a portrait of student and professor life. However through the fluctuations of academia, a few things have held constant—students misbehave, professors complain, and both struggle to get ahead. This survey begins with the Romans and ends in the present with Canadian universities.

What we know about Roman education comes from an incomplete textual tradition but it is clear that there were diverse modes of schooling. Educating boys was undertaken in a fairly easygoing way. Parents could keep their sons at home and hire tutors; they could send them to a private school; or they could ask a family friend to mentor their child’s development. There did not exist a public schooling system or standard curriculums for students to learn. Schools could be set-up by anyone. The success of these schools was largely determined by how many pupils sought entry into the school and the tuition they were willing to pay. Despite this, there were touchstones that educated Romans were expected to have, such as basic literacy and familiarity with the canonical authors: Homer, Virgil, Menander, Euripides, and Terence (Morgan 2010, 19). Within school, examinations did not figure as an assessment technique. Homework was assigned but usually as preparatory material for future classes. The only hint of an assessment technique is routine competitions between students. Divided into two categories—athletic
and literary/musical—competitions were a venue for young Romans to demonstrate excellence in a field and earn a public profile (17-18).

Ultimately, education was not premised as training for a career but as an acculturation process. Morgan writes:

Education was seen principally as a quality of, and qualification for, the leisure life of the elite […] Education also implied a certain moral quality which the teaching of literature was supposed to instill. It identified the holder as Roman, in a sense which had nothing to do with ethnicity or citizenship, but which saw itself as part of a great tradition encompassing the known world and stretching back beyond the empire […] (23).

As the Republic gave way to the Empire, public interest was stoked in the subjects of grammar, philosophy, and rhetoric. Many cities began appointing professors to give public lectures, compose civic speeches, and act as a cultural status symbol for the community. These posts were most likely filled by public competition in the corresponding subject, with the winner receiving the job (21). Over time it was expected that the leading cities of the Roman world have grammarians, rhetoricians, and philosophers on the city’s payroll.

Prior to Diocletian, most Roman emperors were content to passively support education through personal patronage. From the Emperor Diocletian onward to the end of the empire, however, the imperial government paid closer attention to teachers. Under Diocletian, teachers were formally divided into categories and after 301 AD were assigned a pay scale. A teacher of letters was to receive 50 denarii per pupil per month; a teacher of arithmetic, 75 denarii; a shorthand writer, 75 denarii; grammarians and geometry teachers, 200 denarii; and orators or sophists, 250 denarii (22).

The relationship between Roman teachers and students is not easy to fully describe because of the absence of so many texts. However, some revealing instances have survived. In the late 4th century, the rhetorician Saint Augustine of Hippo ran a school, first in Carthage than later in Rome. In both cities he was disappointed by the calibre of
students in his classroom. He writes in his *Confessions* that in Carthage:

> At Carthage, on the other hand, the students are beyond control and their behavior is disgraceful. They come blustering into the lecture-rooms like a troop of maniacs and upset the orderly arrangements which the master has made in the interests of his pupils. Their recklessness is unbelievable and they often commit outrages which ought to be punished by law, were it not that custom protects them. (Augustine, 5.8).

The situation did not improve once Augustine moved to Rome:

> But I now realized that there were difficulties in Rome with which I had not to contend with in Africa. True enough, I found that there was no rioting by young hooligans, but I was told that at any moment a number of students would plot together to avoid paying their master his fees and would transfer in a body to another. They were quite unscrupulous, and justice meant nothing to them compared to the love of money. There was hatred for them in my heart… (5.12)

Without a state framework to develop and implement education policies, schooling was a market almost entirely driven by students—with almost predictable results.

After the fall of the empire, education in general retreated to the church. This is understandable, as the church was the sole employer in Europe that still required a literate and educated workforce. This was largely accomplished through an in-house education system sourced through monasteries and cathedral schools. As the church’s reach expanded across Europe through evangelism, its mission became more complex. Eventually, the need for specialized organizations to deliver advanced education became apparent, leading to the rise of the first universities in the 11th and 12th centuries. Unsurprisingly, for most of the middle ages the church was a significant player in academic affairs. However, the church was not the only academic player for all that time. After the 13th century, kings and princes became eager to have university-trained civil servants. Across Europe, emperors, kings, princes, dukes, and cities independently founded many institutions (Nardi 1992, 93). Increasingly, universities were used for secular purposes, although they never abandoned their religious framings. By the late medieval period, most students were not pursuing clerical careers but instead using the university to advance their own career by making high-level connections to commerce.
As the middle ages wore on, institutions other than universities were founded to provide specialized education. In Italy, merchants created institutions to train their sons in practical skills such as mathematics, accounting, and vernacular languages; Florence in particular became well-known for such schools. Jewish higher education also flourished but constant discrimination and pogroms denied them the opportunity to establish permanent foundations. Instead, students would attach themselves to recognized masters and study Hebrew, the Torah, and the Talmud under his tutelage (Sheffler 2010, 1068 & 1073).

Life in a medieval university would be unrecognizable to modern students and teachers. Social status was hugely important. It determined academic and social privileges within the school. Many schools had protocol officers to determine ranking and imposed heavy penalties for social transgressions. Teaching inside the medieval university was also unique to the time. Teachers worked in a fairly decentralized system. Each teacher ran his own school, which was federated with the university. For admission to a university, a student had to find a master willing to accept him into his school. Only then would the student be formally registered with the university (Verger 1992, 157-159). During his time in the teacher’s school, the student would silently attend lectures. Only at a time of the teacher’s choice would he proceed to test for his baccalarius degree. If the student continued his studies, he would now serve the teacher as a teaching assistant in the classroom as well as attend advanced lectures. Again, at a time of the teacher’s choice, the baccalarius would take his examinations for the doctorate (Schwinge 1992, 195-200).

Understandably, the relationship between student and teacher was close. Teachers were often in locens parentis—“in place of the parent”—and in some schools were legally responsible for the student’s conduct. If the teacher advanced to occupy a prominent place in the university or court, his former students would understandably highlight their connection to their ‘master’ and hope to use him as a valuable connection (Verger 1992, 158). However, despite these personal relationships, it also seems that most of the textual testimonies to the student—teacher relationship are less than kind to students.
Schwinges writes:

From the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries the same laments are heard again and again from all quarters. Students are bawling and brawling, carousing and whoring, singing and dancing, playing cards and chess, are addicted to dice and other games of chance, are up and about day and night, are swanking around in inappropriate, fashionable clothing, are behaving provocatively to burghers, guild members, and town law-and-order forces, are carrying arms, and are even making use of them. It is not the university and knowledge which attract them but the diversions and seductions of town life. (223).

To combat these complaints, many universities passed statutes to punish such transgressions. Universally, schools forbade students from carrying arms, wearing fashionable clothing, insulting fellow students and professors, and finally any contact—innocuous or not—with women (225-226).

At the beginning of the early modern period (1500 – 1750), many of these medieval regulations and expectations remained firmly in place. In many schools, they would remain on the books—though increasingly unenforced—until the 20th century. Despite this conservatism, the university did undergo significant changes after the middle ages. Crucially, the grip of the church on universities began to weaken as governments centralized their states, requiring a larger, well-educated civil service. This resulted in a sustained creep of the state into the affairs of the universities. As new opportunities opened up outside of the church, students increasingly pursued secular careers upon graduation, quickening the laicization of universities. Eventually many schools became auxiliaries to princely and royal courts. This trend saw many schools gradually washed of their ecclesiastical colours. Many professors were no longer required to hold holy orders and were instead appointed by the state (Vandermeersch 1996, 223 – 232). This is not to say, though, that universities became wholly secular institutions. Nearly every school claimed a denominational allegiance and demanded the same of students and professors. For example, England’s two universities, Oxford and Cambridge, required students and professors to be members of the state Church of England, a requirement
that was not waived until the 19th century.

Following closely upon this transformation was the export of the university model to European colonies in North and South America. The Spanish were quick to establish schools in Mexico and Peru to train priests for missions to the indigenous populations. In Canada, the French established a seminary in Quebec City in 1663 that would eventually become Laval University. Similarly, English colonists in the thirteen colonies set up their own schools to train priests for local ministry. These schools consciously imitated their European ancestors in curriculum and regulation of student life. Roberts, Rodriguez Cruz, and Herbst note:

[… tradition retained a powerful grip on the curriculum. While the colonial colleges in America tended to adopt Presbyterian models of collegiate government, they were much influenced by curriculum models from the older English universities. Lectures, expositions of text, recitation, declamation, and disputation as means of teaching show striking continuities with European practice. (273).

To staff these schools, faculty were either recruited from Britain or trained within the colonial system (276-277). There were, however, significant deviations from Europe. In the British colonies, schools were given a wide degree of independence. Denominations could set up their own institutions and the royal government was noticeably uninterested in promoting higher education. William and Mary College in Virginia is the sole example of an American school being founded by the British government—although schools could petition for and receive royal charters. Most importantly, the European emphasis on doctrinal allegiance had to be waived as a diverse colonial population made it economically unfeasible (273).

In Canada, higher education lagged developments to the south. It required the shocking effect of the American Revolution and the subsequent United Empire Loyalist migration northwards to trigger the foundation of a Canadian university system. These refugees brought with them a tradition and experience with higher education that was largely absent in Canada, save for Laval Seminary in Quebec City. Within the space of a few decades, Canada developed a system comparable to the American model. The most
notable similarity was a fairly relaxed attitude to doctrinal separation, although the initial set-up of Canadian schools would have suggested otherwise. Scarred by the trauma of war and exile, many United Empire Loyalists took a staunchly doctrinaire approach to higher education, resulting in many early Canadian schools being firmly tied to the Anglican Church (269). Personalities such as John Strachan, the first Anglican bishop of Toronto and founder of the University of Toronto, ferociously promoted education as a means to stabilize society along British lines and affirm allegiance to the mother country. These sentiments, however, were relatively short-lived in an increasingly diverse population. Dalhousie University in Halifax was specifically founded in 1818 on non-sectarian lines, becoming the first school in the British Empire to disavow religious affiliation. Within the space of decades, colonial governments across Canada moved to secularize public universities. By Confederation, most public schools in Canada were effectively secular.

The 19th and 20th centuries ushered radical reforms to universities. Beginning in early 19th century Prussia, universities gradually relaxed the classical curriculum to introduce a scientific spirit of inquiry and research. At first localized within Germany, thus causing this academic style to be known as the German Research Model, professors and students alike were encouraged and later expected to supplement lectures with research-based learning. From this theme gradually arose the notion of specialization in a particular field leading to the recognizable disciplines of today (Charle 2004, 47). The industrial revolution amplified the success of this model by monetizing research into real-world applications. These forces gradually improved the social status of professors, although connections and class background lost none of their power. In Canada, the research model was adopted after it had become widespread in Europe and the United States. The University of Toronto established the first Canadian research doctoral program in 1898, and reformatted their graduate program to arrest a pronounced brain drain to the United States. McGill was quick to follow Toronto and the research model subsequently radiated
from these two hubs (Shils and Roberts 2004, 176).

Since 1900, Canadian universities have expanded relentlessly, affecting the relationship between professors and students. By every measure this growth is the natural consequence of students responding to incentive—historically, graduates of higher education earn a premium on their wages compared to less educated workers (Clark, Moran, Skolnik, & Trick 2009, 51-52). Prior to the Second World War, life on Canadian campuses was fairly intimate. In 1910, the University of Toronto had a student population of 4 000, while McGill had 2 500, Queen’s had 1 500, and Dalhousie had fewer than 500 (Toronto 2002,). Since then, Canadian universities have ballooned. The latest figures reveal that are 69 000 students studying at Toronto, 21 000 at Queen’s, 30 000 at McGill, and 16 500 at Dalhousie (Toronto 2009, Queen’s 2011; McGill, 2010; Dalhousie, 2011). Significantly, social mores relaxed during this time, and universities responded in kind. The expectation that the school would regulate student behavior in *locens parentis* was strongly challenged by the student movement of the 1960s and such rules have since been washed off the books.

The shattering growth in student bodies has prompted worries about the quality of the student-professor relationship. In 2008, the University of Toronto commissioned a strategic plan, *Towards 2030*, to engage with the problems size presents. The task force reported that since 1998, the ratio of students to professors had increased by 70% from one professor for every fourteen students to one professor for every twenty-four students. This meant that Toronto’s faculty-student ratio was 60% higher than the American peer average and 20% above the Canadian average (21). As a consequence, positive student engagement with campus life, including professors, is troubled. The University of Toronto frets that chronic funding shortfalls, rising student populations, and aging infrastructure are retarding student engagement. The school notes in its strategic plan that:

One of our sources of performance metrics on student experience, the National Survey of Student Engagement, indicates unsettling differences when we compare Ontario universities to their peers in the United States. The intensity of student-faculty interactions at Ontario universities is at least 25% below that seen at US peer universities. Further, the degree of active and collaborative learning at Ontario institutions is lagging at least 15% below that of the US peer
group. Notwithstanding concerns over rising tuition levels, evidence from multiple indicators suggests that our ability to maintain—let alone enhance—quality is being severely constrained. (21).

This concern highlights the central dynamic of education and which we will conclude with—the transmission of knowledge between teacher and student. Although it is a patently obvious relationship, schools recognize that students need personal ties to professors to stimulate their learning. For most of its history, the university was an intimate site of learning that facilitated this goal. However, as figures show, fast growing student bodies are overwhelming this aim, ushering in a new and very different chapter in the history of the western university that has yet to be written.

References


