

Research Notes / Notes de recherche

Faculty Members' Attitudes and Perceptions About the Quality of University Education: An Initial Exploration

Louise Alexitch
university of saskatchewan

Stewart Page
university of windsor

Many researchers and educators (e.g., Segal, 1992; Smith, 1991; Wright & O'Neil, 1994) have examined how budget cuts to post-secondary institutions, as well as demands that universities be more responsive to the "marketplace," have affected the quality of undergraduate education students currently receive from Canadian universities. Research on this topic has primarily focused on students' reactions to the changes in universities, and on students' increasing concern with the employment utility of a baccalaureate degree (Astin, 1985; Roscoe, Kennedy, & Brooks, 1986). However, few studies have been conducted on how these pressures are affecting the attitudes of faculty members concerning the current direction of university education, and how their attitudes may be influencing students' views about university education.

Professors can greatly influence the academic and personal development of students in post-secondary institutions (Pascarella, 1984; Theophilides, Terenzini, & Lorang, 1984). For example, Theophilides, Terenzini, and Lorang (1984) found that students who sought contact with professors outside the classroom, to discuss both course-related and other matters, viewed a liberal education more positively than did those students whose contact with faculty members consisted of informal socializing. However, some recent studies (e.g., Crespo & Acevedo, 1991; Siegfried & Raymond, 1985) have noted that professors may hold values inconsistent with a providing a liberal education to students. Moreover, Remigio and Page (1991) found that students perceived faculty members as having values primarily oriented around financial and career goals.

Because professors can play a significant role in students' aspirations and intellectual development through their interactions with students (Pascarella, 1984; Theophilides et al., 1984), it seems important that professors' current attitudes toward higher education be examined. If professors are conveying

utilitarian values, they should be aware that these values may limit students' futures by not encouraging the flexibility, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills essential to the workplace (Anisef & Baichman-Anisef, 1991; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1991; Evers & Gilbert, 1991).

This study¹ was conducted as a preliminary investigation to examine the following questions:

1. What are professors' views about the purpose of university education?
2. To what extent are professors satisfied with the current quality of undergraduate education?
3. What types of advice are professors providing to students?

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed through university mail to 200 faculty members randomly chosen from each of three discipline areas (Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, and Sciences) at a southwestern Ontario university. Participants were assured that data would be kept confidential and anonymous.

Forty-eight professors (24%) completed the survey.² Of these, 39 respondents were male (81%) and 9 were female (19%); their average age was 51.4 years ($SD = 8.93$). Half of the participants were full professors. The mean number of years teaching was 21.89 ($SD = 9.66$). Twenty-five respondents (52%) were from Social Sciences, 13 (27%) were from Arts and Humanities, and 10 (21%) were from Sciences.

Measures

Participants completed a 44-item questionnaire designed to assess their views about university, their satisfaction with the quality of undergraduate education, and the types of advice they provide to students. Items on the questionnaire were adapted from similar surveys administered to students by Alexitch (1994), Astin (1985), and Katchadourian and Boli (1985). The survey consisted of both 5-point Likert scales and open-ended questions (to elicit more in-depth responses). Many participants generated multiple responses to the open-ended questions, and responses to these questions were categorized by each of the authors to increase reliability.

Purpose of University Education

Two open-ended questions assessed professors' views about the purpose of a university education: (1) What role(s)/purpose(s) do you feel that a university education should serve? and (2) Of those you listed above, which do you feel is the *one most important* role/purpose of university education?

In addition, participants were asked to rate the importance of four reasons for pursuing a university education on a series of 5-point Likert scales (1 = Not Very Important, 5 = Very Important): (1) Intellectual (seven items; e.g., to learn how to think critically); (2) Career (five items; e.g., to acquire marketable skills); (3) Social (three items; e.g., to make new friends); and (4) Avoidant (four items; e.g., to get away from home). We used the mean item rating for each category in our analyses.

Participants also rated the importance of various reasons (e.g., useful in career field) for choosing an area of study on seven 5-point Likert scales (1 = Not Very Important, 5 = Very Important).

Satisfaction with University Education

Three items assessed the level of professors' satisfaction with the quality of undergraduate education: (1) How satisfied are you with the quality of university education that students are currently receiving? (1 = Very Dissatisfied, 5 = Very Satisfied); (2) What do you like about the quality of university education that students are currently receiving? and (3) What do you *not* like about the quality of university education that students are currently receiving? The format of the last two questions was open-ended.

Advice Provided

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to describe the type of advice/information they usually provide to students.

RESULTS

Responses were examined on the basis of: (1) the entire sample, (2) respondents' discipline area (i.e., Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Sciences), and (3) teaching experience (years of teaching).³ Only statistically significant differences on the basis of discipline area and teaching experience are presented.

Purpose of University Education

Out of 120 responses concerning the purposes of a university education, the most frequent responses about a university's major purposes were: to impart knowledge and new ideas ($n = 40$), to help develop critical-thinking skills ($n = 25$), to promote personal growth ($n = 21$), and to prepare students for a career ($n = 19$). Moreover, 16 (33%) respondents believed that the university's most important role was to impart knowledge to students.

When asked to indicate the importance of various reasons for pursuing a university education, Intellectual reasons ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.52$) were rated only

slightly more important than Career reasons ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.74$). Social ($M = 1.74$, $SD = 0.53$) and Avoidant ($M = 1.62$, $SD = 0.62$) reasons were rated low in importance.

The importance of attending university to improve literacy skills was rated significantly higher by professors in the Arts and Humanities ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 0.65$) than by professors in the Social Sciences ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.25$); $F(2,45) = 5.23$, $p < .01$. In addition, respondents' teaching experience was positively correlated with the importance of attending university to learn critical thinking skills, $r = .31$, $p < .05$, but was negatively correlated with the importance of attending university to make new friends, $r = -.39$, $p < .01$.

Participants rated the importance of choosing an area of study because it had interesting topics ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 0.59$) and was intellectually challenging ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.71$) higher in importance than choosing an area of study because it was easy to obtain high marks in the courses ($M = 1.38$, $SD = 0.67$).

As a reason for choosing an area of study, the importance of the quality of teaching in courses was rated more highly by professors in the Arts and Humanities ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.76$) than by professors in the Sciences ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.32$); $F(2,45) = 4.84$, $p < .05$. Lastly, respondents' teaching experience was negatively correlated with the importance they placed on choosing an area of study because it offered many career options, $r = -.30$, $p < .05$.

Satisfaction with University Education

Respondents were only moderately satisfied with the quality of university education students currently receive ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 0.92$), with the majority of respondents (83%) rating their satisfaction as "3" or less on a 5-point scale.

In general, out of 48 responses indicating satisfaction, the most common responses were the structure of undergraduate programs and the course options available to students ($n = 16$), the quality of teaching ($n = 9$), and the calibre of the professorate ($n = 7$). Out of 85 responses indicating dissatisfaction, the most common responses were the increased enrollment leading to overcrowded classrooms ($n = 23$), the lack of emphasis on developing students' critical-thinking skills ($n = 16$), and the outdated and poor condition of equipment and research facilities ($n = 10$).

Advice Provided

From 88 responses describing the types of advice faculty members usually give to students, we found that professors frequently gave advice pertaining to program/degree requirements (e.g., selecting courses) ($n = 22$), career decisions (e.g., career options available in area of study) ($n = 21$), and graduate/professional schools (e.g., entrance requirements) ($n = 22$). Professors less frequently

provided advice on academic skills and performance (e.g., how to write essays) ($n = 9$), personal development (e.g., help with non-academic problems) ($n = 8$), and intellectual development (e.g., encouragement to expand perspectives) ($n = 6$).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our findings showed that professors in this study believed a university's primary purpose is to impart knowledge and new ideas to students. Moreover, professors reported that students should pursue a university education and choose an area of study for primarily intellectual or learning-based reasons. Although professors thought that students could also obtain career preparation in university, they indicated that this motive for attending university should be of secondary importance. In addition, the greater the respondent's level of teaching experience, the greater the importance placed on a learning-based conception of university education.

The perceived purposes of a university differed according to professors' disciplines. In general, faculty members in the Arts and Humanities rated learning-based reasons (e.g., quality of teaching, developing literacy skills) for making decisions about university higher in importance than did professors in the other fields. Similarly, Eison, Janzow, and Pollio (1993) found that professors in Engineering and the Natural Sciences were more extrinsically and career-oriented than professors in the Humanities.

Respondents also reported that most of the advice they dispense to students concerns programmatic issues (e.g., course selections, degree requirements) and career issues (e.g., employment available in the discipline). Very little advice deals with intellectual issues (e.g., critical discussion of topics), academic skills (e.g., time management, essay writing), or personal problems. Based on these responses, there seems to be a discrepancy between what these professors believe is the purpose of university education and the type of information they provide to students. If they believe that the purpose of a university education is to impart knowledge and to help students develop intellectually, why are they not giving students advice that supports this view?

Although the limitations of this study make it difficult to answer this question adequately, a partial explanation for the discrepancy may lie in respondents' feelings about the quality and direction of undergraduate education. Whereas some expressed satisfaction with certain aspects of universities (e.g., the variety of programs and courses available to students), many professors in this study expressed dissatisfaction with large classes and widespread underfunding. Some of these individuals may feel compelled to provide career and programmatic information, even though they do not consider this the essential purpose of a university, to meet student and university demands. In addition, our findings

indicated that this discrepancy may be more pronounced in particular disciplines, such as the Sciences.

Lastly, this study's relatively small sample size, and the fact that it represents professors from only one institution, means that we can only draw tentative conclusions about faculty members' attitudes. To determine our findings' generalizability further research is needed with professors from different universities across the country. In addition, given the pressures many Canadian university teachers face, and previous research showing professors' potential impact on students' academic and career development, further research is warranted to examine some important issues raised in our investigation. For instance, if some professors are indeed providing primarily career and programmatic information to their students, as the findings here suggest, what effect is this having on students' development?

NOTES

- ¹ The study is based in part on Alexitch (1994).
- ² Although the present sample is small, its demographic structure closely matches that of Canadian faculty members in terms of age, gender, and professorial rank (Statistics Canada, 1993).
- ³ Gender differences were not formally examined because there was a disparity in the numbers of males and females who responded to our survey.

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Louise R. Alexitch is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology, University of Saskatchewan, 9 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, S7N 5A5. Stewart Page is a professor in the Department of Psychology, University of Windsor, 401 Sunset Avenue, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4.