Professor laments program cuts in Faculty of Education

By Ronald Hansen

Program revisions in the Faculty of Education include unfortunate cuts that promise to alter the nature of formal education in southwestern Ontario.

Beginning in September, those studying to become elementary and secondary school teachers will no longer be able to specialize in visual arts, drama, physical and health education, geography, family studies, native studies, and individual and society. The technological studies diploma program will also cease.

Excluding these subjects from the teacher education landscape will not only change the nature of formal education in the region; it also signals the failure of a decades-long social experiment.

In response to the explosion of secondary school programming in the 1960s, teacher education became a critical industry in Ontario. In the process of meeting this need, Althouse College sought a home at Western and set upon securing its place in the halls of academe. That process took several years and was anything but smooth. Questions about the importance and place of “Education” among the university disciplines were raised and debated. At the time, the diploma program for technological studies was the largest program at the college. How could the recruitment, preparation, and certification of technical teachers be university academic material? There were doubts it would be a good fit.

As such, technological studies became a barometer of sorts for a 50-year tension in what eventually became the Faculty of Education at Western. That tension exists to this day because of the fragile position of the Faculty as a whole in the university family of disciplines. It also helps explain how a faculty could be so ruthless in deflecting its obligations to the profession. When one institutional level is ruthless with another, the behaviour repeats itself always in a perceived downward spiral.

As well, the short-sighted decision to cut these programs could have ripple effects across the education system in Ontario. It also traces to a class and institutional struggle that has not been resolved. These revisions are yet another effort by the Faculty of Education to prove to the university that it belongs. With the removal of the perceived non-intellectual subjects, the Faculty of Education will finally be coveted and no longer an institutional appendage. Or will it?

Brewing in a larger economic context is a nationwide job skills and labour shortage. We don’t have sufficient trades people to keep up with the needs of business and industry. Reports on the magnitude of the problem are starting to quantify the economic impact. It figures to be a long-lasting shortage with billions of dollars in productivity...
and job opportunities at stake. Can we afford to lose technological studies teachers? How can we cut this program at a time when the skills shortage and the need for technology teachers and programs, and the research on behalf of them, are so acute? Who could possibly be responsible for this kind of top-down leadership?

Flash back to the end of the Second World War. England, among other countries, was struggling to give formal education a boost with returning soldiers to educate, not to mention the children of their families. After much debate and politics the formula for expansion was to be a shift to something called the comprehensive secondary school. A system of technical institutes was not thought to be academic enough for the complex and exciting future, so academic programs preparing students for a university education was privileged.

Abandoning the institutes wasn’t going to be so easy, though. The compromise was a social experiment that would marry the two forms of learning in one new institution. Both programs would be equal and education would become the great place to propagate egalitarianism.

Canada chose, as it often does, to follow the British lead and expand its secondary schools using the same model and experiment. It appeared to be successful in the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s. However, it began to lose sight of its purpose in the mid-’70s when the curriculum in Ontario secondary schools took a noticeable shift towards the academic subjects. This shift is now generally recognized to be tied to mass higher education. Yes, the university sector in Ontario was now under pressure to accept and formally educate the thousands of students graduating from secondary schools. And, in order to do so, a more academic ethic would have to be instilled among teachers, administrators, and policy makers across the secondary school system.

The universities got their way, and before long the Ontario curriculum became university dominated to the exclusion of the experiential subjects. Sure, there were valiant efforts to balance programs but we can now see how futile those efforts on the part of the Ontario government have been and how the university apparatus has influenced public education policy and practice.

The one experience at Western which fleshes out how tenacious the university is about its role in the credential society happens each year at convocation. The technological studies diploma students, who complete the same blend of courses as their general studies colleagues, were denied the opportunity to receive their graduating credential in alphabetical order with others enrolled in the Faculty of Education.

These students repeatedly asked the dean for an explanation and were told they were an exception, an aberration that had to be dealt with separately. That form of discerning behaviour will not leave my memory. That practice will now silently end without any redress. It is disgraceful.

The stigma associated with technological learning and thinking aside, how can a faculty that preaches the virtues of equity and diversity contradict itself in its actions? Someone should be held accountable, and perhaps acknowledge that a real problem in public education is that it is not as egalitarian as it purports to be. Ironically, isn’t it the university where such program and policy contradictions are supposed to be exposed, debated, and resolved?

Premier Kathleen Wynne, formerly the provincial education minister, has recently announced a high-level table on technological education in Ontario. While it is encouraging to know that the province is investigating the plight of technological education as a program in Ontario schools, I am not optimistic that meaningful action will follow. A thorough review of the recent abandonment of this program at Western needs to be undertaken. The Faculty of Education and those who were responsible for cutting these essential programs should account for these decisions.

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