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Higher learning

An examination of specialized research versus university teaching

By **Cindy Robinson**

Like many Canadian universities, Carleton considers research to be an integral component of the institution's identity.



But has the expansion of research activities outstripped the significance of providing undergraduate students with a well-rounded education experience? Carleton University Magazine recently spoke with two academics to find out.



Allan Tupper, formerly a political science professor at the University of Alberta, is now the associate vice-president, government relations, at the University of British Columbia.

Allan Tupper is concerned about the type and quality of education Canadian undergraduate students are getting. The co-author of *No Place to Learn: Why Universities Aren't Working* — a thought-provoking book in which he argues that Canadian universities place too much emphasis on specialized research and too little on teaching undergraduate students — Tupper says that post-secondary education is in a state of crisis.

anybody.”

“I don't think that anyone is really debating the point that undergraduate programs have been allowed to atrophy in many universities for a considerable period of time,” he says. “Some will clearly disagree with why that has been the case and what should be done about it, but I think the basic premise is not really being challenged by

According to Tupper, BA/70, DPA/71, MA/72, universities are failing Canada's undergraduate student body because the current system rewards research findings more than the role of instructing and imparting knowledge in the classroom.

“The larger point is that university research has become far too narrow,” he says. “The undergraduate student is best served by professors who think broadly about their fields, about how things interconnect, about the larger issues in the field of study, not by professors who are very consumed by their own ongoing research that is very specialized.”

Carleton's vice-president (research and international), Feridun Hamdullahpur, argues that highly specialized research is necessary and unavoidable, and that it actually enhances the undergraduate experience.

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Feridun Hamdullahpur
(Photo: Tony Fohse
Photography)

"Whether we want it or not, research will become more and more specialized. Researchers come to a more focused problem because many aspects of the broader problems have already been addressed," he asserts. "But also, Carleton's experience with our students shows that they would like to see a very senior, high-calibre research professor in front of them."

Tupper is skeptical about the type of professor being placed in front of the undergraduate student body in Canada. He argues that inexperienced teaching assistants shoulder more of the undergraduate course load than the experienced, high-calibre professor Hamdullahpur cites. In fact, Tupper's findings suggest that many professors are asking for reduced teaching loads in order to focus more on research.

"Canadian universities are doing an inadequate job of getting the proper professors in front of the students. The place you want to put your top talent is in the first and second year classrooms. Not enough thought goes into who teaches undergraduate classes, and what their skills are."

The difficulty in improving undergraduate education, Tupper says, is a nation-wide university system that promotes professors and disburses perks, such as travel allowances, based on research findings rather than teaching performance. Though Hamdullahpur agrees that "undergraduate education at Canadian universities has its own problems and challenges," he claims these are a result of chronic under-funding, not an institutional focus on research.

"If you take research out of the equation totally, you will still see crowded classrooms, you will probably find fewer qualified teachers, and you will probably see that the reason this has happened is purely because of the financial considerations which are influenced by the provincial governments," he says.

Indeed, the base budget, or per-student funding that provincial governments provide to Canada's universities hasn't kept pace with the costs of university education. Special research funding provided through partnerships with the government and private businesses are necessary to attract and maintain the best professors, and boost the university's bottom line, says Hamdullahpur.

"Carleton has 28 research chairs through the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada and the Canada Research Chairs, and these 28 people carry a half teaching load. But I wouldn't have these 28 people had the research funding not been available. In terms of availability and the professors that we have, research is definitely helping."

Despite their differences in opinion, Tupper and Hamdullahpur do agree on many of the fundamental questions, such as the importance of scholarly work, and the significant impact university research can have on the Canadian economy. But how can Canadian universities grapple with the multiple priorities of providing a strong undergraduate education, and attracting the best professors, while allowing professors to focus on research?

"We need to re-establish a better balance between the undergraduate experience and other university functions," says Tupper. "Of course, the balance can be rectified and new priorities can be established."

Hamdullahpur is equally optimistic about the future of undergraduate education and the roles research and teaching play in the university setting.

"I think the challenge of the 21st century university is to be able to recruit



and retain the best students and the best professors, and to be able to do that, I think we need to be very strong in research," he says. "Teaching is not a trivial exercise. It's a huge responsibility and it's a huge undertaking. But I believe that it is not impossible to find good researchers who are also good teachers at the same time."

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