

Responses to my essay: Future directions for Queen's. Spring 2007

From Kim Nossal:

Political Studies

Dear Peter

Thank you so much for your thoughts. While I have not fully digested the implications of all of your comments, there was at least one thought that sprang to mind as I reflected on your essay, to wit: The ideas you propose are radical from a North American perspective, but this is how British universities have organized themselves at least in the past before Americanization has hit many universities in the UK. My understanding that the typical undergraduate degree in Britain features a three-year period of intellectual digestion listening to lectures, reading, and (on my side of campus, at least), writing essays before ones final exams (certification).

Could Queens as a university break with entrenched North American practice and instead embrace this kind British structure?

Let me make a concrete suggestion: in A&Sc we now have a situation where students no longer identify themselves as being in a concentration. Might now not be a good time when we can break the mold by reorganizing first year at least in A&Sc more along the lines that you advocate? See first year as that transition between high school and university, before they enter their concentrations. Focusing just on first year would not go as far as your proposal, but it might be more do-able politically.

Could I see reorganizing the first year course that I teach along the lines that you suggest? Yes. But it seems to me that it would have to be done within a broader framework where POLS was moving in tandem with other departments.

However, there is one fairly deep structural problem that would stand in the way of any multi-departmental restructuring. We would need to address the problem of what at Queens is euphemistically called the challenge: i.e., the fact that there are concentrations where demand for admission to that concentration exceeds supply, and where allocation decisions are made on the basis of performance in first year. One of the reasons why my students in POLS-110 are always so bent out of shape about assignments is that they know that how they perform will determine whether they are in the top 200 students who are admitted to a POLS concentration, or whether they are among those 100-150 students whom we turn away each year. While I really like your notion of de-emphasizing certification procedures, how to get around this other than by admitting to program right from the outset in order to give students the opportunity to be learners. (Another more wacky possibility might be to divorce first year courses from admission to concentrations by having concentrations administer admission exams in April though that would create all manner of pathologies, not to mention unintended consequences)

As I read your paper, the other thought I had was: how to get to there from here? Well, one possibility might be to work with the fact that at Queens a number of heads of department teach their departments first year course. Might a first step be to convene an informal meeting of those heads to see whether there is any interest in a cross-departmental collaboration on changing first year? If there is, perhaps we might want to take it to Alistair and the deans, and thence perhaps to COD.

What do you think?

But in the meantime, my thanks for getting me thinking about this.

From Peter Kennedy

Economics Prof at SFU

Undergraduate Colleague of mine (Arts '65)

I read your future directions essay with interest, Peter. You say a lot of things with which I agree, such as that less is more, that expectations are important, that the focus should be on what students learn not what we teach them, that good teaching is mostly about providing students with quality materials, and that our high schools have let us down. But on the big picture I cannot agree with you. Let me give you my opinion.

It seems to me that your first point, in boldface, sets an agenda for your essay. I agree that too many of our students are not serious about learning. But I would go farther than this and claim that a substantial majority of our students are not serious about learning. Furthermore, in my experience, most of these students are not, contrary to your opinion, more worried about marks than about learning. I believe that most of these students don't care about marks except insofar as they pass with a gentleman's C. Their goal is to get a degree, preferably without spending much time studying. I agree that many treat university simply as an extension of high school, and agree that this is our fault, not theirs. I also agree that we ought to take steps to make students learners, and that there are substantial benefits on both sides. What I don't find in your essay is a realistic answer about how this would be done. You have lots of general statements about the kind of things that should be done, but inadequate discussion of reasons why these things won't work. My overall impression is that you are out of touch with reality.

What is reality for me? I teach a large first-year course and find that between 20 and 30 percent of the students deserve Ds and Fs, which I give to them. The reason this happens is that these students won't make an honest effort to learn the course material, they refuse to understand things well enough to use them to solve problems, and they rely on memorization. It doesn't matter how much I warn them, or how badly they do on the midterm exam, they believe to the end that they will nonetheless pass the course. Why? Because my colleagues throughout the university have conditioned them to believe this. Their experience in other courses is such that only a very few students receive Ds and Fs; because of this, they find they will pass the course with a C despite knowing very little and understanding even less. And for most students all they want to do is pass the course with a C grade.

[One reason for our different experiences may be that you have not been teaching introductory courses (your views match more closely my experience teaching fourth-year students, and your examples seem to be from upper-level students, and good students at that), or, more likely, that Queen's has a different sort of student. I notice that when you speak of the demand on students' time you do not mention part-time jobs, for example. And you point out that Queen's gets very good students. And you can count on students seeking out Queen's rather than relying on commuter students for numbers.]

How can this culture be changed? It seems to me that the only way to change this is to somehow get the faculty to deliver the kind of course that requires students genuinely to understand concepts well enough to use them in practical, real-world-oriented problem-solving. And then give terrible marks to students who do not deliver. Your revised grading system, whereby in the first two years marks don't count other than for feedback (and permission to continue at the university) would be important here. During these first two years students would be forced to change their learning behavior; those that sink would disappear, and those that swim would create in the final two years the kind of world you would like to see.

Unfortunately, this will be impossible to achieve because you will not be able to get your colleagues to teach this way. Why? First of all, most are not capable of teaching courses at the required quality level. There is no way students will put up with such a system if the faculty cannot produce the requisite quality. My experience at Queen's was that the vast majority of my instructors were terrible teachers; I doubt that things have changed. Second, most will refuse to give terrible grades, either because they are afraid that by doing so they will bring upon themselves poor student evaluations, or because they simply do not have the internal fortitude to hand out large numbers of poor grades.

For many years now I have been trying to get my profession to change the way it teaches the large introductory course, by publishing relevant papers and by producing a suitable textbook, but with very little success. I have also become famous for a book which explains for students what is going on in their textbooks for upper level undergrad and beginning grad econometrics courses. Students love it, but a large percentage of instructors simply don't get it. What I'm trying to say is that most university instructors simply are not interested in, or capable of, the kind of quality teaching that you and I want to see become the norm.

Best regards, Peter

Date: Fri, 27 Apr 2007
From: **Christine Overall**
Philosophy
Dear Peter,

I'm writing to you from Halifax, where I am spending the year (almost over, alas) at Mount Saint Vincent University. One of the main reasons I applied for the Chair in Women's Studies was that I wanted to have small classes, where I could actually get to know my students, and work with them closely on their thinking, speaking, reading, and writing. That goal is rather unlikely at Queen's.

I'm contacting you now, though somewhat belatedly, because I very much liked your "Future Directions for Undergraduate Learning at Queen's". I enthusiastically agree with almost everything you say. The changing nature of both our undergraduates and our teaching environment is something that has me deeply worried. If it does not change, I may be tempted to take an early retirement, or buy myself out of even more courses.

I think university should be seen as a challenge, or a package of challenges, to think creatively (and also critically) in ways that the student has probably not been able to do before. It should be exciting, difficult, and even a little scary. (It was all of these things for me.)

I am puzzled by a feature of the growing participation rate in university education. About thirty years ago, it used to be said that only 15% of the population could handle university. (Of course, one could well raise questions as to whether all of that 15% were getting the chance to go.) Now, suddenly, university is the norm, and 25% are attending. Have people become smarter? Has university become less challenging? Or was the 15% figure wrong in the first place? If it was wrong, in what way was it wrong? Was 15% an empirical or a normative claim?

If there are real prospects of making progress on the issues you raise and the recommendations you make, then I would like to be supportive and involved. However, too many times I have seen nothing change at Queen's. If there is no hope, then I don't want to waste my time--and I can't afford to, both because I have lots of other things to do that I truly believe in and can make progress on, and because if I engage in a change project that has no hope of working, it contributes to lowering my morale.

I'm sure these comments sound very half-hearted. Nonetheless, I want to thank you for putting the document together and, if there is hope, I am definitely on side.

all best wishes,

And Christine's follow-up note:
Hello Peter,

I don't think I said much of value in my original message, but if you want to include it with the remarks you are going to circulate, then feel free.

As I read Peter Kennedy's comments, I was reminded of what a coward I have become with respect to grade inflation. I used to try to hold the line, but was told I was disadvantaging students unnecessarily. I also hated the pressure from students. Similarly, I used to write what I considered honest letters of reference. Apparently I got something of a reputation at Dalhousie for the kind of letters I wrote on behalf of our BAH grads seeking admission to grad programmes in philosophy. They learned, there, that it was "normal" for me to mention a candidate's weaknesses as well as strengths. But again, I have been strongly advised not to do this any longer, on the grounds that the slightest negative comment will destroy an individual's chances for admission to grad school (or, for that matter, for a tenure-track job).

Perhaps, when I return to Queen's teaching this fall, I'll be able to start over again, setting and keeping real standards at least for undergraduate marks. I no longer care (I think) if I have a low student enrolment; in fact, it might be something of an advantage. It's never good to teach students who think they are in a class that will give them an "easy mark".

I probably have something more intelligent to say on these topics than this, but at the moment I have too many other things to do (including grading). But please keep me in mind, if that's all right, for the meetings you are planning this summer. If there's real hope, I want to be involved.

best wishes,
Christine
Christine Overall, PhD, FRSC
Nancy's Chair in Women's Studies
Mount Saint Vincent University

Peter Taylor replies.

Kim Nossal points out one problem with removing certification assessment from 1st year and that relates to Departments with limited enrolment that rely on first-year courses to choose students for admission to their program. One “wacky” way around this, he suggests would be to have admission exams separate from course exams.

I can see the sense of this word “wacky” alright, but I’ve thought about admission exams for many years (e.g. in math for admission to 1st year) and the idea (like most wacky ideas) has some integrity.

We’ve divided assessment into two types, feedback (to the student) and certification (to others) but certification itself is of two types, *retrospective*, which measures how well a student has performed a task, and *prospective*, which measures how well equipped is a student to perform a future task. In some ways we’d expect these two types to have different certification instruments. Prospective certification is naturally more open, more imaginative, and draws for its material from a much larger pool of skills and knowledge. I can see how a prospective type of exam might “free” the examiner to ask a wider spectrum of questions which would give us a better idea of how the student has been spending the last half-dozen years, what sort of questions has he been thinking about. Such an exam might actually do a better job of delivering the “right” students into Political Studies or any other program. In some ways I find the idea of such exams attractive as the students can’t really complain that you haven’t explicitly prepared them well enough. In many ways, they’ve prepared themselves through many little decisions over the past many years on what to pay attention to and what to think and write about. It would be good if students were told early in high school that exams of this kind existed and might have consequences for them. In fact the whole high school culture might find it a somewhat liberating idea (scary too, but freedom is always scary).

Such a system would produce an extra load of marking, but it would be easier marking as really the only decision to be made is “yes” or “no.” In practice I suspect there’d be a bunch of clear yes’s and no’s, and then an undetermined pile which would take a second careful read.

Peter Kennedy has enormous teaching experience and has thought a great deal about these issues. He shoots from the hip and confronts us with a real challenge. It is possible that the ideas we are talking about here could work better at Queen’s than at SFU, but Peter suggests that Queen’s would have to have changed a lot from our time here together in the early 60’s, both students and faculty. There have certainly been changes but perhaps not in the right direction.

Are our teachers interested in or capable of what Peter calls quality teaching? Are our students interested in learning?

One thing Peter suggests is that the “feedback” exams for the first year or two might in fact be used to decide whether the student would be allowed to stay at Queen’s. I did not have that in mind, but it’s an interesting thought and ties in with Kim’s issue. Perhaps course exams in the first couple of years could remain strictly feedback (with no external consequences for the students—thus keeping us free from “the exam hall”) but that all students would write one or two general (subject specific) admission exams at some strategic point which would be used to determine whether the student should remain at Queen’s and in what program.

These are some key issues to talk about.

Christine Overall surely speaks for many of us. She says that she went to Mount Saint Vincent University to take the Chair in Women's Studies in order to have small classes, where she could actually get to know her students, and work with them closely on their thinking, speaking, reading, and writing. That goal, she observes, is rather unlikely at Queen's.

I guess that an increase in student numbers might make this even less likely, though I am not sure. When I was a student here in the 60's I was certainly happy in my first two years to attend lectures (if they were good!) and interact with fellow students. In my last two years, I did seek out more contact with faculty, but still my main scholarly interactions by far were with fellow students, with whom I learned a lot, even about writing and speaking as I recall seminars we ran in which we gave papers to one another without any involvement of faculty at all. Is this too much to hope for now? One learns to write and speak by doing it, and reading and listening to others!

And then there is Christine's 15% who can handle university. That's probably still roughly true (if university is what it should be!) and my objective is to give Queen's a larger share of that cut. But note that this 15% is not exclusively delineated by high school marks—far from it. Readiness, imagination and determination are key factors.

Finally, Christine declares that “if there is no hope, then I don't want to waste my time.” I couldn't agree more. I have also spent too many hours pushing for effective change. Is there hope this time? I believe there is. I believe there is a quiet crisis in the entire system. And Queen's, the mother of all Canadian universities, needs to lead the way through.

pdt