

Trailer-park U:

*Mark Dickerson and Greg Flanagan. Calgary Herald. Calgary, Alta.: Feb 24, 2003. pg. A.11
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Two professors rue chronic underfunding at the U of C and call for a public debate

Calgarians need to rally behind their university. The University of Calgary has suffered extensively since deep provincial government funding cuts began in 1994, and is facing a crisis. The U of C has been particularly hard hit due to the phenomenal growth of Calgary's population and to the increased proportion of young people seeking a university education to pursue a career.

Established in the 1960s as a branch of the University of Alberta, the U of C became an autonomous institution in 1966. With substantial support from the provincial government, it became one of the up-and-coming institutions of higher learning in Canada.

The investment in human capital has had a profound effect on the educational advancement, prosperity and creativity of the public in Calgary and southern Alberta. The resource industry can find an educated workforce at its door step. But the present crisis jeopardizes the university's opportunity to offer Calgarians a continued array of quality programs.

There has been restraint. Faculty and staff have taken lower salary increases (for example, most recently 7.25 per cent over two years versus U of A's 13.5 per cent over three years) and have continually fallen in national salary rankings -- this, in a city with the country's highest inflation rate and many alternative employment opportunities.

Until now, the university has taken all qualified students, and class sizes have grown enormously in order to spread the costs. Now, "temporary" trailers appear around the campus, and retention and recruitment of faculty has become a problem.

Under pressure to be world-class, yet falling in annual media ratings, the university has hit the wall. To address a \$12-million deficit over each of the next two academic years, president Harvey Weingarten has prescribed cuts to people and programs, reduced student intake, raised fees and is contemplating differential tuition.

But the cause of the crisis is underfunding in a university that serves one of the most rapidly growing populations in Canada. Full-time student enrolment has grown 25 per cent since 1995. By comparison, enrolment has grown 13 per cent at the University of Alberta, 15.7 per cent at Athabasca University and 8.8 per cent at the University of Lethbridge. Yet, the provincial grants per student in 2001 were about the same as in 1990.

Moreover, the University of Calgary receives some \$1,000 less per student than the University of Alberta. This difference amounts to more than \$24 million per year. At the national level, the U of C's per-student grant was approximately \$1,200 below the average in 1998 (as reported in Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, The Canadian University in Profile).

In response, the U of C has raised tuition to more than double the cost of a decade ago. For this, it gets a more crowded university and more stressed faculty.

Differential fees for some high-demand, high-earning programs such as medicine, business administration and law are also being contemplated.

In a recent presentation at the U of C, former provincial premiers Peter Lougheed, Bob Rae and Frank McKenna argued that funding allocations to universities should be considered an investment. This idea is borne out in figures Weingarten has cited.

For example, the higher the level of education, the lower the rate of unemployment. The Alberta average rate of unemployment in 1999 was 5.7 per cent -- 10.9 per cent for those with some high school, 5.3 per cent for high school graduates, and only 3.4 per cent for university graduates. Additionally, employment participation rate rises with education level and evens out between the genders. And, the average salary in the Alberta workforce, at all age levels, is substantially higher for those with university degrees.

Investment in higher education has a very real dividend in higher tax revenues. Yet, high tuitions deter individuals from getting this education. The province's investment in the U of C is below what is needed to ensure a young university can meet the challenges.

A university education is a necessity for citizens in the age of globalization, and in a province where employment opportunities depend on post-secondary education. The tragic fact is almost no public debate is taking place on the issue. It's high time Calgarians start some public dialogue on the financial crisis facing the U of C.

[Illustration]

Cartoon: (See Hardcopy for Illustration)

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