

University funding is at a crossroads

ROBIN VOSE

COMMENTARY



Commentator Robin Vose argues the future of New Brunswick depends on maintaining our capacity to provide students with world-class university educations. PHOTO: SUBMITTED

A crisis is brewing on New Brunswick university campuses.

Despite occasional increases in narrowly “targeted” funding (usually to benefit the private sector), and welcome initiatives to provide new administrative student services or improve accessibility for some low-income families, we are in increasingly serious danger of losing our actual capacity to provide students with reliable, high-quality, comprehensive educations in many disciplines.

At a time when broad professional expertise is more necessary and valued than ever before, all over the world, our province has seen a gradual erosion in terms of its capacity to fully train its university students. This essential work is done by university professors; and our numbers are in a worrisome state of decline at a time when we are needed most.

Where I work, at St Thomas University, 12 out of 21 departments currently have one or more empty faculty positions—some of which have remained vacant for years.

Another half-dozen or more full-time professors are likely to disappear this year, signifying a reduction of 20 per cent in our permanent faculty complement.

In some departments losses have been truly catastrophic—in my own discipline we lost a third of our regular teaching capacity over the last five years due to non-replacement of faculty members, while in smaller departments even the loss of a single professor can slash course offerings by half.

Such shortfalls cannot be made up simply by turning to a “just-in-time” model of scrambling at the last minute to hire precarious part-time or temporary contract workers to fill the most obvious gaps. We need to hire more professors, and we are failing to do so above all because of a lack of steady, reliable, adequate funding from the provincial government.

Public funding of university education is one of the most important investments any government can make in society’s future generations. Dollars spent to encourage new research, to ensure student accessibility, and to hire the highly-trained professors who make it all come together, have been shown over and over to pay healthy dividends down the road.

Not only do individual graduates benefit from higher lifetime earnings, greater employment flexibility, and even better health overall—the work that they do benefits society as a whole, whether in terms of buoying the local economy or helping to solve community problems.

Beyond all the well-documented economic reasons for investing in higher education, it is also simply the right thing to do.

Education should be for everyone, and it should be not only functional or utilitarian but also liberatory. No price can be put on the pure joy and empowerment that result from intellectual discovery, from artistic expression, or from realizing the true extent of one’s potential to make a difference.

New Brunswick students deserve the chance to explore their interests and passions, and making it possible for them to do so is absolutely essential to building the sort of healthy and forward-looking province we all want for our children and grandchildren.

This is why strong, well-funded, diverse university curricula are so essential to students throughout this province—in English and in French, for newcomers and for Aboriginal learners.

We need programs that focus on the full range of topics that make the university sector truly “universal”: from the physical sciences and engineering to the arts and humanities. And we desperately need to grow beyond traditional subjects, in particular by embracing the challenges of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and more fully integrating Aboriginal experiences and aspirations into our approaches to public education.

The languages, histories, and world-views of Canada’s First Peoples deserve the same funding for research, pedagogy, and dissemination as has previously been made available to their European analogues. This sort of vital and innovative work cannot be done properly by leaving it to a shrinking professoriate, to volunteers, or to poorly-paid contract workers who are somehow expected to develop new research and teaching directions in their free time.

Maintaining our capacity to provide students with world-class university educations, and above all to improve and broaden the sorts of new subject materials they can choose to study, urgently requires the sustained hiring of whole cohorts of new, permanent, full-time university professors who are supported by a full range of training and research resources.

The future of New Brunswick depends on it.

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