

By J. Paul Grayson

RESEARCH IN FOCUS

Who Goes to University and Why?

BECAUSE OF DRASTIC INCREASES IN tuition fees, the media are giving more and more attention to university students in Canada. Unfortunately, when compared to the Americans, we know relatively little about this group. The likely reason for this sad neglect is that the research culture of most universities does not include institutional self-analysis. Often the little research that is done is kept confidential lest competing universities find out about it. As a result, we know more about sports heroes than our university students and when things like tuition increases occur, we can only speculate as to their effects on students. Because of this neglect, in 1992, through its Institute for Social Research, York University began a systematic program of studies that follows students from the end of high school to the completion of university, and into the work force. In order to place this project in perspective, it has been necessary to examine work carried out on Canadian university students. The most important aspect of this work includes findings on who goes to university and the reasons students give for wanting a university education.

Who Goes to University?

Historically, in English Canada, the few universities that existed were the preserve of middle- and upper-class White Anglo-Celtic Protestant males. Starting in the 1960s, however, the number of Canadian universities increased dramatically as did the number

of female, low-income, and immigrant students. By the 1980s the participation of females in the 18 to 21 age group in higher education actually surpassed that of males. Information on the family income of students is harder to obtain but there is no doubt that in many universities, the sons and daughters of the relatively well-off began sharing their classrooms with students of working-class and immigrant origins.

A few years ago, students entering the University of Calgary, King's College at the University of Western Ontario, the University of Toronto, Nipissing University, Ryerson Polytechnic University, the University of Guelph, and Brock University all filled out the same questionnaire, in which they were asked various questions on their high school experiences, backgrounds, aspirations, and so on. Although this information cannot be used to typify all Canadian universities, it represents the largest single block of detailed information available on students entering Canadian universities. These institutions will be referred to collectively as the "Group of Seven". Data from these and other universities suggest considerable overall socio-economic and racial diversity within and between different universities. This does not mean that all universities have a diverse student body.

How Wealthy Are Parents?

Information on the family incomes of students entering the Group of Seven are surprising. Twenty-three percent

come from families where the annual income is less than \$30,000! (The average Canadian family income is approximately \$50,000). A further 26% come from families in which it is estimated that parental income is between \$30,000 and \$49,999. Those whose parents earn from \$50,000 to \$74,999 make up 26% of first-year students. The families of the remaining 25% earn \$75,000 or more.

A survey of students coming to York University shows that low-income students also are well represented at York. Of students who replied to the survey, 21% come from families earning less than \$26,000 per year. Among Group of Seven students, 23% come from families earning less than \$30,000 a year.

Only 12% of York's students came from families where the annual family income was \$100,000 or more. If only the range \$75,000 or more is considered, it is found that as many York students as Group of Seven students (25% in each case) came from this relatively high-income category. Information such as this suggests that university education has been accessible to relatively low-income students. Whether this will remain true once the full impact of tuition increases is felt is difficult to say.

HOW MUCH EDUCATION DO PARENTS HAVE?

AT DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY, 49% OF STUDENTS IN A FIRST-YEAR SURVEY SAID THAT EITHER THEIR FATHER OR MOTHER ATTENDED UNIVERSITY. THIRTY SEVEN PERCENT OF GROUP OF SEVEN FATHERS, AND 26% OF GROUP OF SEVEN MOTHERS, HAD COMPLETED UNIVERSITY.

IS There Diversity?

For some time, the number of female students in Canadian undergraduate programs has outnumbered males. This is evident in enrolment patterns in both the Group of Seven and York University. In the former, 60% of students entering first year were female; in the latter, 62%.

In recent years, increasing numbers of non-Whites from the Third World have immigrated to Canada. It is not surprising, therefore, that only 65% of students entering the Group of Seven considered themselves White. By comparison, at the University of Victoria, a survey revealed that 90% of entering students considered themselves White. Approximately 68% of students entering York could be defined as White.

Additional evidence of diversity in some Canadian universities can be seen in language usage. For example, of an entering class in at the University of Toronto, only half of the students had English as a first language; moreover, discipline/college-based differences were considerable: whereas the first language of two thirds of students in Victoria College was English, in engineering it was only one third. Among students entering the Group of Seven, 68% learned English as a first language. Sixty percent of the York students stated that they spoke English in their households while growing up.

Where Do They Live?

For some students, going to university means leaving home and friends. Among Group of Seven entrants, 44% of students left home to attend university. Among this group, the largest single number, 28%, reported that they would be in residence. Of those who did not leave home, 56% stated that they would be living with their parents for the first year. Even those who did leave home did not go far. For example, 63% of all students (not just those who left home) were attending university 60 or fewer



Photo courtesy of Health Canada

kilometres from their permanent residence. At the other extreme, only 6% were in a university 500 or more kilometres from home.

Information from other universities indicates that the situation of Group of Seven students is typical. For example, a study showed that 53% of students at Dalhousie came from the Halifax area and 42% reported living at home with their parents. At the University of Manitoba, 66% of first-year students resided with their parents.

Sixty one percent of first-year students at the University of Victoria resided with their mothers and/or fathers. Roughly a similar number of students at the University of Alberta, 67%, also lived at home. By way of comparison, approximately 90% of first-year students at Queen's, and 68% of those at the University of Guelph were in residence.

How Are Universities Chosen?

In general, students can be viewed as progressing through three stages before entering university. In the predisposition stage, students decide whether or not to attend university. For some, such as those from families where

both parents attended university, non-attendance has never been considered an option and the predisposition stage is conceptually irrelevant. In the search stage, students initiate enquiries about various options available to them and begin to focus on specific institutions. In the choice stage, students finally decide on a specific university.

Unfortunately, available Canadian data do not shed much light on how and when students decide to go to university and/or how they choose their majors; nonetheless, information from York, the University of Calgary, and the University of Victoria indicates that while the decision to attend university may occur long before first year, a decision regarding which university to attend may occur much later. To explain, at the University of Victoria, 59% of an entering class stated that they had decided to go to university before entering high school. In a study of first-year chemistry students at the University of Calgary, researchers discovered that 41% of students decided that chemistry would be their university major while they were still in high school; 17% had made up their minds in junior high school.

When it came to deciding which

university to attend, only 32% had decided on York by November of the final year of high school, when applications were submitted to Ontario universities. Between then and April of the following year, an additional 41% made up their minds to attend York. During June, the month in which students received acceptances from Ontario universities, an additional 24% decided on York. The remainder made decisions in July. It is interesting to note that in making their decision only 3% thought *Maclean's* annual ranking of universities was very useful.

Why Do Students Go to University?

Having made their final choice of which university to attend, independent of size of university, location, and where students live, when asked why they go to university in general, and to their chosen university in particular, students right across the country give roughly the same answers. Students go to university for intellectual development and so that they will be able to get a job on graduation; in many cases there is little difference in emphasis that is given to these two objectives. Students pick particular universities usually because of the reputation of the institution or because of the programs offered. The frequency and consistency with which these answers are given suggests that students may rationalize their choices in common terms.

At the University of Guelph, in a study conducted in the first semester, it was found that 83% of males and 86% of females said that obtaining knowledge and skills applicable to a career was an important or very important reason for going to university. In contrast, only 61% of males and 70% of females said that intellectual development was an important or very important reason for being there.

Similar findings come from a first year survey at Dalhousie. There, 82% of students in first year reported going to university to become a better educated person. An equal percentage were at

Dalhousie to qualify for a high-level occupation. At the University of Alberta, 68% of entering students said that preparing for an interesting career was a very important reason for going to university. Fewer, 41%, were there to obtain a good general education. Figures from the University of Toronto are comparable. Eighty percent of students entering the university said that getting a good job was one of the reasons they were there. Seventy-nine percent also stated that learning more about something that interested them was a reason for going to university.

How Are Particular Universities Chosen?

In terms of choices of specific universities, 56% of students entering the Group of Seven said that a good academic reputation was very important in their decision. Academic reputation of the university was also mentioned by 67% of first-year Dalhousie students when explaining why they went to that institution. A similar percentage of University of Toronto students, 66%, noted academic reputation as a reason for their choice.

While the foregoing information highlights the importance that students give to academic reputation when deciding which university to attend, it may be misleading to assume a “rational choice” process in which students decide which university to attend only after weighing the advantages and disadvantages of all universities to which they are accepted. The fact that approximately 50% of students entering York could afford to go out-of-town supports this contention.

Is a Degree Important?

In general, the vast majority of students entering universities believe it is important to obtain a university degree. For example, 65% of Group of Seven students said that obtaining a degree was essential. Similarly, at the University of Guelph, 74% of males,

and 78% of females in the first semester thought that a university degree was either extremely or very important.

In a survey at York University, only 44% of students stated that it was very or extremely important to obtain a degree from York University. (Surveys carried out at the end of first year, however, show that 90% of students felt that it was very or extremely important to get a university degree.) A larger 62% stated that it was very or extremely important to obtain a degree in the faculty in which they intended to enrol. In essence, getting a degree was the biggest priority; getting it from the faculty in which the student wanted to enrol was second; obtaining a York degree was third in priority.

What Are Students' Plans?

Information from several universities indicates that at entry, students have ambitious plans. For example, among Group of Seven entrants, 50% expressed the intention of obtaining a Master's or a Doctor's degree! An almost identical number at the University of Guelph had similar intentions. Among students entering York, 29% aspired to a Master's, and 10% to a doctoral degree.

Conclusion

Although there may be exceptions, there is evidence of considerable diversity on Canadian university campuses. The university is hardly the preserve of the rich, whites, or males. Accessibility is not a myth in this country. Whether or not increases in tuition fees will reduce accessibility is difficult to say.

It is equally clear that many students go to the closest university although most say their choice of where to attend is based on academic considerations. Nonetheless, when asked why they want a university education, similar numbers refer to the need to enhance job prospects as to a desire for intellectual development. ■

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