

## Myopic Underfunding, Neoliberalism and Survival of the Fittest at the University of Saskatchewan

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As a USask faculty member for more than twenty years, I am deeply concerned about the declining quality of our university. Since 2012, the province's focus on so-called 'efficiencies' has resulted in a severe increase in class sizes, reductions in course choices, and the creation of temporary as opposed to tenure-track positions. This may have created the impression of fiscal savings for the university on the surface but in reality, the cost of this is transferred to students and to society by lowering the quality of education and weakening the ability of our graduates to "be what the world needs."

I hope you share my view that our university should first and foremost be a place centered on enduring academic values: the pursuit of knowledge, quality education, the fostering of human development, academic freedom, critical thinking, and independent thought. The hemorrhaging of tenure track teacher-scholar faculty, along with support staff positions, throughout the campus undermines these values and harms our academic programs and research. We need long-term, values-based decision making, not short-term, profit-driven decision making. The commodification of

USask will damage our society and economy for generations.

Why and how has this happened?

### Neoliberalism in Post-Secondary Education

Our decline stems from neoliberalism: the revival of nineteenth century ideas that business and the private sector should have the dominant role in society and that government should have much less. As labour studies experts, Stephanie Ross of McMaster University and Larry Savage of Brock, explain: "Neoliberal advocates envision a university oriented primarily towards the needs of employers in a competitive global economy."<sup>1</sup> In this milieu, academic work has been "fragmented, deskilled, intensified, and made subject to greater levels of surveillance, hierarchy and precarity."<sup>2</sup>

Ross and Savage describe the neoliberal university as having certain noticeable features: declining government funding, rising tuition, and reliance on fundraising; top-down corporate structures that diminish the role of the faculty collegium in decision-making; university boards made up largely of representatives from the business

community; the shift of decision-making away from faculty toward administrators; the related phenomenon of administrative bloat in a more and more complicated bureaucracy; a spectacular upward redistribution of resources among university personnel toward administrative functions and away from academic faculty and staff; the installment of business-types who 'clean house' by removing those with long standing historical memory of 'how things were done'; reframing students as "customers" of education rather than learners; profit-generating models where university funds get directed toward revenue-generating programs and removed from others; revenues shifted away from education quality and toward student recruitment, marketing and PR; seemingly permanent restructuring, with numerous teams of administrators tasked with leading strategic planning, creating internal "efficiencies," and rebranding; a kind of permanent state of crisis where faculty and staff are enlisted to deal with these 'permanent emergencies' by doing more and more with less and less;<sup>3</sup> and the precarious situation for contract faculty and staff "who are expected

to continuously demonstrate their worth to the university for fear of not being renewed.”<sup>4</sup> Do these features sound familiar?

During the 2000s, University of Saskatchewan senior administrators spoke loudly and often about the need to promote research across campus and to attract and retain quality teaching/research faculty: a bright future for our province and the health of our society, it was acknowledged, depended on this. But when do we hear our leaders talk about the need to retain quality teacher-scholar, tenure-track faculty today?

The public record reveals that a downward spiral in provincial government support for the university took hold in the Spring of 2012, as costs totalling nearly \$100 million – for the completion of the Health Sciences Building, campus building maintenance, and other facilities—were suddenly and unexpectedly transferred from the province to our public university.<sup>5</sup> By January 2013, the gloomy *TransformUS* cost-cutting process was initiated in response.<sup>6</sup> It was around this same time that the “lines” which had always guaranteed a set number of tenure-track faculty positions to colleges and departments were quietly eliminated. Faculty tenure-track along with staff numbers have been in major decline ever since, even as the number of students on campus and tuition costs have dramatically increased.

What can be done about this today?

### **The Need for Equity, Quality, and Unity Among Faculty**

To influence what happens in the future on this campus and reverse this decline, we as faculty need greater equity among ourselves and to stand together in unity as a collective. We can accomplish a great deal as faculty if we retain many of the same core, collective interests and values and *if we choose to stand together*. Without this sense of common purpose and unity, however, the situation for faculty and the quality of our campus will continue to decline.

A question for us to consider: How can faculty have unity if tenured and tenure-track teacher/scholar positions are constantly being replaced by other configurations envisioned by university administration, including: without-term instructors on year-to-year contracts; two and three year faculty contract and term positions; five-year contract positions with no possibility of renewal; and now teaching only tenure-track positions, a feature of the new Collective Agreement? It’s not difficult to imagine where this is all going. This division of faculty appointments and responsibilities, along with temporary contracts, is exactly the kind of muddled confusion that neoliberals promote: fragmented labour with the whole job of the academic professor being broken down into functional

components – teaching, research and service—assigned to different faculty members whose work “can be valued differently and whose discretion is uneven.”<sup>7</sup>

If trends of the past dozen years continue, teaching-only faculty will almost certainly be given even more and larger classes as enrolment continues to increase and the positions of retiring or departing teacher/researcher faculty members keep being eliminated by attrition. This for-profit, as opposed to a quality-driven, objective continues to shift our Provincial University in the direction of a community college, teaching-only campus, retaining only those researchers who can attract the most money. In the spirit of neoliberalism, fewer and less broadly skilled professors will be tasked with accomplishing more and more work amidst ever-growing student numbers.

Is all of this *really* what Saskatchewan, let alone the world, needs?

Let’s all give some careful thought to how we can restore and retain the quality of our university as a place focused primarily on the pursuit of knowledge and the development of a well-rounded, engaged citizenry. We’re all in this together. It’s our choice whether we quietly acquiesce to harmful and seemingly relentless austerity and commodification, or if we instead work toward rebuilding whole and stable faculty positions, and if we unify, speak out, and defend our university and its future.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage, “Work Reorganization in the Neoliberal University: A Labour Process Perspective,” *The Economics and Labour Relations Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2021): 496.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 495.

<sup>3</sup> Features paraphrased from *Ibid*, 500-502.

<sup>4</sup> Quotation in *Ibid*, 507.

<sup>5</sup> Transferred debts are described in the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan, Debates and Proceedings [*Hansard Transcripts*], Vol. 54, No. 24A, March 29, 2012, p. 886; *Ibid*, Vol. 54, No. 25A, April 2, 2012, pp. 902-903; *Ibid*, Vol. 54, No. 27A, April 4, 2012, pp. 963-965; *Ibid*, Vol. 54, No. 28A, April 5, 2012, pp. 995-996; *Ibid*, Vol. 55, No. 7A, November 5, 2012, 1747-1748; *Ibid*, Vol. 55, No. 17A, November 22, 2012, pp. 2135; *Ibid*, Vol. 55, No. 31A, March 12, 2013, p. 2634.

<sup>6</sup> *Hansard Transcripts*, Vol. 56, No. 55A, April 29, 2014, 5245-5246; *Ibid*, Vol. 56, No. 57A, May 1, 2014, 5269-5270.

<sup>7</sup> Ross and Savage, 502.

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