

## Building a Global Public University

### Introduction

While York University has a series of documents outlining future visions for the University (e.g. *Provostial White Paper*, *UAP 2010-2015*, *YUFA Strategic Vision*), there is a continual need to update these visions. The long-term *Provostial White Paper*, for example, emphasized promoting academic quality through engagement; these are apple pie concepts no-one can be against. However, they are also generic goals to which many other universities strive (e.g. Simon Fraser, Bristol, Cambridge, Tufts, and others all stress the importance of ‘engagement’ or being an ‘engaged’ university).

Institutionally, York is both the same as other universities and distinct from them; quality and engagement identify us as the same, but we need to identify something that sets us apart. It is, in this regard, pertinent to ask a simple question: what is the purpose of universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

We repeatedly hear that universities must adapt to a changing world in order to survive, remain relevant, and retain public legitimacy. No matter how we define this adaptation of our universities, it has been used to justify a number of significant and detrimental changes: declining government and by extension public support; rising dependence on student fees and by extension enrolment numbers; growing use of performance measures and targets to direct academic activities; implementation of budget measures that focus on specific forms of valuation (e.g. monetary); erosion of collegial governance; etc., etc.

As a consequence, universities in general and York in particular need to reassert and rebuild their position and role as sites of the [knowledge commons](#) – that is, as repositories of humanity's knowledge and learning, produced by faculty and students dedicated to the *public* pursuit and dissemination of knowledge, going beyond financial motivations or incentives.

### York's Role in Society

In this context, York University has to protect its role as a knowledge commons or it will lose its institutional purpose. We have to work together with other universities, not compete with them. We are [different](#) from each other already; competition merely leads to self-defeating imitation and convergence around lowest common denominators. We have to look beyond our parochial context, without losing sight of the communities we are embedded within. We have to find ways to collaborate across borders and without concern for those artificial boundaries to the knowledge common. We have to work for the diverse, multicultural public in Toronto, Ontario, Canada and most especially around the world. In this sense, we have to strive to turn York into a *global public university*.

When writing about *the* public, it is important to acknowledge that this does not refer to an amorphous mass of people; we are all part of multiple, diverse and distinct *publics*. Rather, *the* public refers to the objective of pursuing the public interest by being publicly engaged; by contributing to public policy and public debate; by doing public activism and public advocacy; by producing public art and public science; by promoting and leading a public renaissance.

It does not mean, however, that universities should only engage with publics as those publics demand; it means that universities have an important role building society, in changing how publics think through education and research. Faculty and students must imagine what our societies could become, and this is a central task of any university like York. Our role is to challenge the various publics who make up our constituents (e.g. students, communities, government, etc.) around the world; we point out unpalatable truths, we provide a site of dissent, we provide evidence and normative judgements that do not fit neatly into the status quo. Universities challenge the common sense, we do

not simply pander to dominant prejudices or social values.

## Specific Recommendations

What does York need to do to achieve this goal of becoming a *global public university*?

1. *Board of Governors (BOG)*: if we want to be a global public university we need to reflect this fact at all levels of the University; a BOG dominated by business interests, especially financial interests, is not a good starting point. The BOG needs reforming so that it includes more public voices – people from civil society, government, charities, and other parts of the non-business world. We need a BOG that reflects the diverse publics we must represent, and reflects the goal to be a university for the *public* interest as opposed to *private* interests, and a university that challenges rather than panders to the status quo.
2. *Management*: there is significant disconnect and distrust between the senior administrators and employees at York. While it is not easy to determine how we got to this point, it is important to address if we want York to achieve its goals (whatever they may end up being). We need to end the emergence of a managerial class at York; that is, a group of people who take on management responsibilities and never return to employee status. Consequently, faculty need to take their service responsibilities more seriously; we need a better understanding of how the University works *and* does not work. For example, it would help to establish a transparent, consistent and democratic process of consultation and decision-making for major institutional changes.
3. *Faculty*: faculty renewal is touted as key to the University's future across institutional vision documents. It is clear that York's reputation is built on the work of its faculty members, meaning that faculty have to take all their responsibilities for teaching, research and service seriously. It means faculty have to come to campus more, we have to be visible and present in order to do our job. In particular, we have to change a culture in which service is seen as a burden. Service is the very basis of collegial governance and how York operates; without it we cannot protect York as a knowledge commons. And, if the purpose of universities is to be that knowledge commons, then we need faculty to do research as well as protect and disseminate that research; we have to find ways to support the continual production of knowledge throughout our faculty's careers.
4. *Staff and Other Employees*: while faculty are usually the focus of vision documents, we also have to remember the vital role played by staff and other employees at York. As an analogy, faculty are like cars (some are speedy, other rundown), but staff and others are the infrastructure required by faculty if they want to go anywhere; we can, in this sense, replace a car here and there (no matter how speedy it is), but if the infrastructure is broken then the whole institution does not and cannot work. We therefore need to support the work that staff and other employees do.
5. *Students*: students have a central place at any university, but this does not mean that the desires of students take precedence over every other concern. That being said, if we want to build on York's distinctiveness then we need to be more adventurous in how we organize our programming; for example, maybe the age of traditional disciplines is ending. One suggestion is to reorient York around interdisciplinary programmes drawing from a range of faculty expertise; for example, instead of political science we offer Global Studies; instead of economics we offer

Inequality Studies; instead of cinema we offer Creativity Studies; instead of biology we offer Life, Environment and Sustainability Studies; etc. Traditional disciplines could remain as minors, providing the specific theoretical and methodological framework each student prefers. As a consequence, we need to ensure that faculty can be flexibly allocated to different units, to suit their academic goals.

Kean Birch  
Department of Social Science  
November 2015