

Reflections on My Return to Saskatchewan by Brian Christie

Back to Saskatchewan

In November 2003 I returned to Saskatchewan after twenty years in Nova Scotia, moving from Dalhousie University to the University of Regina. It's natural in such circumstances that a variety of comparisons comes to mind: then and now, there and here, at the institutional, provincial and regional levels.

This is, in fact, my third time in Saskatchewan. Raised and educated in Ontario, I spent two summers in the early 70's (more than 30 years ago!) teaching summer school and living on campus at the University of Regina. Then, after several years as a faculty member at universities in Manitoba and Nova Scotia, I returned in a staff position with the Saskatchewan Universities Commission in Saskatoon, also teaching part-time at the University of Saskatchewan. When the Commission was closed in 1983, I began a twenty-year tenure at Dalhousie University in Halifax, creating the institutional research and planning office, later renamed the Office of Institutional Affairs.

I am now Director, Resource Planning, at the University of Regina, with responsibilities in institutional planning support, financial planning and budgeting, institutional research and the generation of management information. The position at Regina has much greater involvement in the budget preparation while I no longer have the mandates that I had at Dalhousie for overseeing the quality assurance (academic unit review) process and shepherding the review (internal and external) of new academic programs.

Then and Now

From my perspective, the most striking change that has occurred in Saskatchewan higher education during my time away is the growth and maturation of the University of Regina. Student numbers at the U of R have more than tripled to almost 13,000, old programs have grown and new ones have appeared, additional buildings have filled out the main campus, and research is expanding, with funding more than doubling in the last four years alone. The main campus, which on my first encounter was several buildings placed apparently randomly in the midst of windspent raw prairie, is now organized in a circle of attractive, connected facilities enclosing and surrounded by meticulously manicured grounds. There are full-grown trees where previously nothing stood or spindly saplings bowed to any breeze! Adjacent to the central complex are the striking new home of First Nations University of Canada and a burgeoning research park.

Beyond this, however, and much more significant, are the sense of confidence and pride in achievement, the commitment to an ethic of service to the community, and the culture of collegiality and coherence that characterize the University of Regina today. The thirty years of accomplishment since the University of Regina obtained its independence from the University of Saskatchewan have dissipated the need to aggressively defend the university's right to exist and its dedication to social justice and accessibility.

This is not to say that there is not still an underlying sense of rivalry between Saskatchewan's two universities. After all, these feelings exist to a greater or lesser extent in most provinces and certainly were present in the relations in Nova Scotia between Dalhousie and a number of the other universities. Historical grievances and the ever-present competition for scarce provincial funding naturally generate less than amicable relations at times. But these feelings seem to have diminished and become less overt over the years in Saskatchewan, aided perhaps by a new funding formula that, to a large extent, depoliticizes the division of provincial operating funding and by the deliberate adoption of a less combative style by the administration at the U of R.

There and Here

The post-secondary cultures in Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia have many similarities and some decided differences. On reflection, three of the latter stand out.

a) Government Relations

The first difference involves the nature of the relationship between the universities and the provincial government. In both provinces, there is currently a single provincial department responsible for all levels of education. Here it's Saskatchewan Learning. And in both provinces the institution-department intercourse is essentially with a branch of the department, although in Nova Scotia the universities still deal with the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission regarding new program approvals and academic quality assurance processes. What differs are the extent and intensity of the contact with government officials. Whereas in Nova Scotia I would typically have only one or two contacts per month with someone from the Department of Education, and perhaps an equal number with Health Department officials, here I am in almost daily contact with people in Learning and frequently spend the better part of a day in working sessions with representatives of various branches of the department and counterparts from other post-secondary institutions, oftentimes not just the universities. In an approach that is unique even in Saskatchewan, the post-secondary sector, under the leadership of Saskatchewan Learning, produces an annual sector plan complete with a performance measurement (accountability) framework.

Each university has its own liaison officer in the department, as do other elements of the post-secondary sector. There are regular monthly meetings of officials in the universities branch with the vice-presidents and selected administrative directors of the university. Key university planning documents are shared in draft form with Sask. Learning officials for comment and early advisement. Projects such as a proposed graduate follow-up survey or a recent high school leavers (i.e. Grade 12) survey are planned together, with participation that includes the universities, the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology, the regional colleges, the private proprietary schools, and Aboriginal institutions.

This degree of collective activity and interaction between and among institutions and government is very different from that in Nova Scotia. How much it explains the

more generous financial treatment of the universities by government, in both operating and particularly capital funding in recent years, I don't know, but it may well be an important factor. Regardless, in Saskatchewan there is a much greater culture of shared endeavour among the department responsible for education and the post-secondary institutions than is present in Nova Scotia where, sadly, higher education seems almost to be an afterthought.

b) Resource Planning

The second significant difference relates to the portfolio of responsibilities in the U of R's Office of Resource Planning and, indeed, the very title of the office. While much has been written, by Dan Lang for instance, on the need for and means of integrating planning and resource allocation, only in Western Canada have I encountered, at least in this country, organizational structures that facilitate this objective. At the University of Saskatchewan the Office of Integrated Planning and Analysis headed by Barrie Dubray covers a broad mandate including integrated institutional planning, institutional analysis (Rob Schultz and his staff), and budget planning. At Regina, the Office of Resource Planning has much the same mandate (with considerably fewer people I might add). At the University of Alberta, the resource planning office combines integrated planning, budgeting, and financial analysis and forecasting, while a separate Strategic Analysis Office handles the fact book and other institutional analysis activities. There is even a nascent Western Association of Resource Planners.

While I was present at budget committee meetings at Dalhousie as a resource person, here at Regina, in addition to being one of the four members of the committee (the others are the vice-presidents), I have the responsibility for the logistics of the budget process. At Dalhousie, the key support to the budget committee was provided from Financial Services (and very ably, I might add). There are other important differences. For example, the Dalhousie's budget committee's membership was representational. Also, Dalhousie, like a number of other Canadian universities including the University of Saskatchewan, relates faculty/college budget allocations to enrolments through a formula calculation. The U of R's process does not, relying still on the request model, with a number of "opportunities funds" to seed-fund initiatives. While it's too early for me to comment in the relative merits of the two approaches, the integration of planning, budgeting, and analysis at some universities in Western Canada holds considerable promise for furthering the achievement of an institution's mission, goals and performance targets. And it makes for interesting work!

c) Enrolment Management

The third significant difference between the two provinces, and particularly Dalhousie and Regina, has to do with student recruitment. Over 90 per cent of the undergraduate student population at the University of Regina is drawn from Saskatchewan and we have more undergrads from other countries than from other provinces. When the double cohort doubled our intake from Ontario, the number

remained a single digit. This is a marked difference from Dalhousie that leads Canadian “medical-doctoral” universities in its out-of-province recruiting: 40 per cent of first-year students “come from away”. While Dalhousie has had an active and extensive enrolment management strategy and process for a number of years, my initial conversations on this topic at the U of R usually began by defining enrolment management. However, facing a declining provincial high school demographic – a projected one-sixth decrease in high school graduations in the next decade – we are beginning to explore how enrolment management can occur here. The University of Saskatchewan is a bit ahead of us in this regard having introduced a new recruitment strategy and added resources in this area in the past year.

A Noticeable Cultural Difference

One other difference, perhaps of less significance but indicative of a cultural variation, is worthy of remark. At Dalhousie I was regularly engaged in meetings that began at 4:00 p.m. and ran to 6:00 p.m. Here they are rare. In part, it appears that there are just fewer committees that involve faculty members whose teaching schedules require late afternoon meeting times. Certainly, there are important committees with faculty representation, including the Board of Governors; but at Regina much more of the “business” of the university is in the hands of administrators, academic and non-academic.

There is another possible explanation for the dearth of late afternoon meetings. Folks in Saskatchewan are crazy about golf. Every town of any significance has a course and there are more golf courses per capita in this province than anywhere else in the world, or so I’ve been told. I’ll leave readers to speculate about why this is so. The length of the summer days is certainly a factor.

A Final Word

I would be remiss if I did not include some words about the late Neil Southam. Neil served the University of Regina for over forty years in a variety of capacities, much of that time in institutional analysis. He was the acting director of resource planning in the period before I arrived here and was instrumental in convincing me to leave Dalhousie, after many productive and enjoyable years, for the University of Regina. Neil continued to work in Resource Planning after I became director and his advice and support were invaluable in my early months. Neil was planning to retire in early 2005 and so we had begun preparations for his departure. Sadly, his untimely death intervened. Neil’s tenacity in investigating issues, his inquiring mind, and his wry sense of humour are remembered at the University of Regina and by many in the institutional research community. Thank you, Neil.

September 28, 2004