

Blame the teacher.

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For some reason, when there are discussions about shortcomings in our education system, such as the recent *Globe* editorial “Canadian universities must reform or perish”, there is a call to blame the teachers, or, when we talk about universities, we blame “underperforming” professors.

If we find that police are not capturing all the criminals, the call is to give them more power. But with teachers, the call is to fire them.

Suppose we gave university teachers more power. Let them choose as students only those who have sufficient preparation. Let them choose the class size, so that students will get individual attention. Let them give scholarships to students, so they won't have to work part-time jobs. If we had done this, students' undergraduate experience would not have “deteriorated”, as Robert Campbell, President of Mount Allison University in New Brunswick claims.

But we know that university teachers don't have the power to actually make these kinds of decision. Instead, university decisions are all made by the university presidents and their administrators, and approved by their Boards of Governors. They decide who is admitted to the universities, and which students will be permitted to register in which classes. In fact, professors are assigned to teach the classes that the administrators decide they should teach, in the classrooms the administrators decide to assign, with whatever class size the administrators decide on.

University presidents over the last many years have decided to increase tuition, increase class sizes, and to use part-time extremely underpaid contract academic staff – people with no job security whatsoever, lacking even offices or other essential tools to do their jobs. The presidents have done this mainly to save money. A lot of the money saved has been used to cover the costs of “deferred maintenance” of buildings and to build new buildings, and even to hire more administrators. In general, universities have admitted as many students as they could since student tuition and government grants based on enrolment are the main sources of revenues. Faculty are a main cost, so increases in faculty numbers have been held far below increases in student numbers.

The decisions taken by the university presidents over the years are not unreasonable. But the results are causing concerns. Many young people who are registered as full-time students are not really fully engaged in their studies because they spend so much time on part-time jobs just to pay ever increasing tuitions. They also feel lost in extremely large first-year classes with hundreds of students, often taught by part-time faculty who simply aren't available and aren't paid for consultation.

As a recent report of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) states, it is only recently that the university presidents noticed that the experience of undergraduate students has deteriorated. The university presidents ask themselves: Whose fault is this? The answer, given by the AUCC (which represents university presidents) is: it's the unionized faculty's fault. They aren't good teachers! Perhaps the time will come when the university presidents will admit that they themselves, faced with budget constraints, made the decisions which make student engagement difficult.