

Carleton's painful next step toward excellence

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ABSTRACT

Carleton's challenges are not unique; Canadian universities have been painfully modernizing for over 10 years, seeking to overcome decades of lacklustre performance. [...] the late 1990s, most Canadian universities were sheltered from global competition.

FULL TEXT

Carleton University is booming with new construction, a new website, and new ambitions to become a nationally respected, research-intensive institution.

These changes are being promoted by senior administrators intent on moving Carleton from laggard to leader. Their efforts matter, because the nation's capital has only two major universities to its name.

Until recently, Carleton has punched below its weight, although its reputation grows from year to year. With new energy and ambition, it is seeking to make a real jump forward.

Real change will be painful, however, as there will be winners and losers. Carleton's success will require public scrutiny, pressure, and support.

Consider what happened this fall, when reformers asked the union to consider changes to Carleton's tenure system. Tenure is crucial to democratic society because it protects academic freedom, but it is also a great privilege. Access is supposed to be policed by impartial professionals working with clear rules, but on this count, Carleton's standards fall short. Many faculty members know this to be true, but few are willing say so in public. Carleton's provost broke that taboo this fall, acknowledging in writing that Carleton's tenure system needs greater clarity and rigour.

He proposed delaying tenure to candidates' sixth year of employment – standard practice elsewhere – and including external evaluations in candidates' tenure files.

Both changes are much needed. Today, Carleton's faculty apply for tenure after only three years on the job, giving them little time to amass a record of substantial achievement. As a result, tenure committees can demand only the bare minimum. The short probationary period also provides poor incentives, pushing faculty to quickly publish mediocre work rather than work longer on more serious pieces.

And outside evaluators are crucial, of course, because they are unencumbered by internal politics, commitments and pressures.

Shortly after the provost's suggestion, the university began confidential negotiations with Carleton's union. The reformers had not mobilized sufficient grassroots faculty support, however, and the initiative stalled.

The union's concerns are clear. Led by individuals anxious about any management-led change, it questions the need for better faculty quality control. Some also fear that Carleton will become a less congenial place to work, undermining its reputation as an oasis of calm amid the increasingly cutthroat world of competitive academia. The union's concerns are worth considering, but its interpretation is not the only valid one. There are other views, including those of the many superb Carleton faculty who would easily earn tenure under a more demanding system. Students and taxpayers must also be heard, and they may say that only the best academics should succeed.

Other issues are holding Carleton back, including outdated hiring practices that leave much to be desired. One recent tenure-track job, for example, was advertised for only a brief time in a marginal employment bulletin, and no

effort was made to recruit internationally. Faculty queries were then rebuffed with vague assertions of unwritten procedures.

This incident highlights another key Carleton challenge: governance. Much of the university's business is conducted behind closed doors, and ordinary faculty are often shut out of major decisions. More often than not, greater transparency, consultation and debate will lead to better policies.

Carleton's challenges are not unique; Canadian universities have been painfully modernizing for over 10 years, seeking to overcome decades of lacklustre performance.

Until the late 1990s, most Canadian universities were sheltered from global competition. Strict academic employment laws gave preference to Canadians, and low pay drove many ambitious Canadian professors to leave. Things changed when the Chretien government injected new money into the system. With these funds came new and tougher questions, and overseers began demanding tangible evidence of quality, impact and achievement. Simultaneously, Bush-era politics began driving many professors northward, and a rising Canadian dollar made local salaries attractive. Employment laws eased restrictions on international recruitment, and a new cohort of globally competitive faculty began joining Canada's universities.

Many of these changes have been positive. Professors are being asked to publish more peer-reviewed research in better journals, and new teaching methods and ideas are trickling in. Fresh talent, knowledge, and skills are entering Canadian campuses from all directions.

Not everyone is happy, however, and some academics and unions are fighting back. The balance between reform and stasis is different at each institution, and every university will wind up in a different place.

To help Carleton succeed, the university needs more public scrutiny, engagement and support. The faculty union is one legitimate stakeholder, but other groups should also have their say. Students, parents, and taxpayers should ask tough questions about Carleton's tenure and hiring practices and demand clear, satisfactory answers.

Carleton is a good university; my graduate students in international affairs are among the best I've ever taught. Some of its departments, moreover, are among the best in the country.

Like any organization, however, Carleton can do better. Real improvement will require new standards, procedures and commitments to signal and enforce the university's new-found appetite for excellence.

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