

# **Robert Dickeson: Right for Ontario?**

**An Analysis of Program Prioritization by  
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Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations  
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Who is Robert “Bob” Dickeson and why should we care? A lot of people on campuses across North America are asking that question these days. His name is popping up everywhere that controversial cuts to university and college budgets are under discussion. And he is apparently coming to many universities across Ontario. His particular brand of “program prioritization” has been implemented at Guelph, Laurier, York, and Brock, with at least seven more institutions set to adapt Dickeson’s process soon.

Robert Dickeson has a political science degree from the University of Missouri, and began a career in university administration in Arizona in 1969. From 1981 to 1991, he was president of the University of Northern Colorado. He also served on advisory bodies to the Arizona and Colorado state governments. For the next two decades, he moved into private consultative work and took on administrative responsibilities with agencies on the interface between higher education and business. Specifically, he served as president and CEO of Noel-Levitz Centers, Inc. (dedicated to helping institutions “meet their goals for enrolment and student success”). Then, as senior vice-president of the USA Group (a major US provider of private student loans), he helped guide that organization’s transition into one of the US’s leading private philanthropic foundations, now known as the Lumina Foundation for Education. In that role, he became a significant voice for cutting spending on higher education, through a 2004 Lumina publication, *Collision Course: Rising College Costs Threaten America’s Future and Require Shared Solutions*.

In 2010 Dickeson became the driving force of a new private consulting agency, Academic Strategic Partners, based in Golden, Colorado, which has been hired by several universities and colleges to undertake a process of “prioritization.” This is his consultative specialization, building on his record of weeding out tenured faculty at Northern Colorado (which prompted an investigation and censure by the American Association of University Professors) and his short book published in 1999 entitled *Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services: Reallocating Resources to Achieve Strategic Balance* (revised and updated in 2010). Dickeson and his associates have promoted their process through a number of two-day workshops, run through Academic Impressions (an organization offering “educational products and services that help institutions tackle key, strategic challenges”).

The Dickeson model is typically ignored by large, research-intensive universities. The testimonials on the Academic Strategic Partners website are from Northern Kentucky University (Highland Heights, Kentucky), Drake University (Des Moines, Iowa), College of Notre Dame of Maryland (Baltimore), Shepherd University (Shepherdstown, West Virginia), and Western Carolina University (Cullowhee, North Carolina). In Ontario, larger institutions like the University of Toronto or Western University have so far indicated no interest in Dickeson’s prioritization insights. None of the self-styled front-rank universities in Canada nor the ivy-league institutions in the US has turned to Dickeson for advice.

We need to look more closely at what this consultant is selling.

## An Inadequate Diagnosis

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Dickeson's book is blunt about his view of the basic problem in higher education: "The real culprit is the needless proliferation of programs" (xxi). At the head of his "seven postulates" for reform, we find the statement that "Academic programs ... constitute the real drivers of cost for the entire enterprise, academic and non-academic" (15). He provides no evidence for that claim, and indeed, a few pages before, he admits that "institutions are spending less on instruction" and "an increasing share of 'education and related' expenses are directed towards administrative support and student services" (3), and sixty pages later, notes, in passing, that support staff have increased at twice the rate of instructors. But, throughout the rest of the book, the possibility that a major part of the "problem" could be disproportionate increases of expenditures on administration is swept aside and ignored. The problem is simply a "bloated curriculum" (22) with too many programs.

Johns Hopkins political scientist Benjamin Ginsberg offers an alternative perspective. In his widely read 2011 book, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administration University and Why It Matters*, he documents a dramatically larger increase in administrative and professional staff within US universities and colleges than the growth in faculty over the thirty years before 2005. If one decides that administration has been responsible for a disproportionate share of the rising costs in post-secondary education, then a starting point for a process of "reform" would be a searching inquiry into administrative growth and a serious effort to reduce those costs **before** turning to academic programs, which are the core of higher education. Administrators should serve academic programs, not displace them. Arguably, Dickeson has got the cost problem backwards.

## Scapegoating Faculty

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For Dickeson, the main culprits for cost increases are the university and college faculty. He peppers his text with disparaging remarks about professors who are myopically specialized and self-interested, who are overly egalitarian, who are hopelessly mired in tradition, who never reconsider old programs, and who circle the wagons to block any change. He likes to drop into his discussion examples of outrageous faculty behaviour, including scurrying off campus at 1:30 p.m. (107) He never stops to consider that they might perhaps be heading home to write a book chapter, mark essays, or review a manuscript. Nor does his claim that faculty are all incapable of and opposed to reconsidering existing programs describe the careful work that Faculty Councils and Senates at many institutions have undertaken over the years to review, revise, and redirect academic programs.

## A Flawed Assessment Process

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Dickeson's prioritization process requires evaluating all programs simultaneously according to common criteria. He recommends ten:

1. History, development, and expectations of the program
2. External demand for the program
3. Internal demand for the program
4. Quality of program inputs and processes
5. Quality of program outcomes
6. Size, scope, and productivity of the program
7. Revenue and other resources generated by the program
8. Costs and other expenses associated with the program
9. Impact, justification, and overall essentiality of the program
10. Opportunity analysis of the program

If you recoil slightly at the business-school vocabulary, he points to such a "distaste for business concepts or idioms being used for campus phenomena" as one of the obstacles to be overcome (41).

How can we begin to fill in boxes under some of these headings? The consultants seem to have their biggest impact on the process at this point. Dickeson provides some 150 questions that can be asked to test programs against the overarching criteria. These data points become the "template" that supposedly can be applied evenly against all programs, and that generates the data on which judgments about priorities can be made. This type of exercise is often lauded as "evidence-based" decision-making. Too often, however, a glut of data can impair good decisions. The volume of data that Dickeson proposes to be gathered together from every program is staggering. It is hard to imagine how an ad-hoc task force could possibly sift through it in a few months, let alone how meaningful comparisons can be made across the university from this crush of metrics.

Most troubling is how we could quantify much of what he proposes. "Program Outcomes" seems particularly daunting. Dickeson points to "test scores on nationally standardized instruments that measure attainment" (78), which obviously do not exist in Canada. He wants measures of "the degrees of student satisfaction, alumni satisfaction, employer satisfaction" (78); use of "alumni records and placement data" to measure program success; and evidence of "the track record of graduates on state professional licensure and certification examinations" (79); Where are we supposed to get measures of that kind, especially for the thousands of our students who graduate with non-professional degrees? Without that kind of data, how can programs be ranked, other than through subjective judgments?

The recent experience with the Dickeson model at Guelph is telling. The final report of their Program Prioritization Project (PPP) notes that the information collected was remarkably

incomplete and uneven.<sup>1</sup> “In general,” the report’s authors state, “programs had difficulty putting together compelling evidence benchmarking their indicators of demand, size, quality, and costs.” These difficulties “affected their scoring and final ranking” (11). The scoring nonetheless proceeded. It was done by a twenty-one-member task force divided into four panels over a thirteen-week period. Each member provided an individual score for a program for each of the ten criteria, which was fed into the PPP database system. Each group then met together to discuss any variability in their scores and agreed on an overall score that put programs into three ratings:

1. Below Expectations
2. Meets Expectations
3. Exceeds expectations

How much confidence can we put in such rankings? What role should they play in future decision-making about particular programs? This process seems seriously flawed from start to finish.

## **What to cut?**

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Guelph’s PPP did not recommend specific cuts, but simply “identified areas of strengths and weaknesses and areas that are candidates for further consideration for investment, reinvestment or divestment as well as areas that have revenue growth capability” (13).

In the ensuing process Dickeson generally warns that weak programs might try to cling to university mission statements, which he finds “notoriously overbroad” (37), and thus too easily used to hold onto programs that should, in his view, be axed. An institution’s role and mission “should permit only those activities that need to be done and that the institution and its people do well” (51). What, then, is likely to be on the chopping block? He rightly suggests that every situation will be unique. But he does throw in a few examples. On “campus after campus,” he says, some disciplines have been rated as “marginal”: foreign languages, anthropology, geography, and geology. He also notes that “recently minted programs in ethnic or gender studies or interdisciplinary programs that seek to integrate studies in area or geographic or thematic ways” could also suffer (85).

It is important to note as well that, in his exhortation to colleges and universities to do less, he also expects them on the whole to do less research: “today’s institutions should be shifting relative attention away from research, except, of course, for the 282 institutions where significant research or doctoral-level program pre-eminence is a clear expectation” (42). He

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<sup>1</sup>See [http://media.zuza.com/2/5/25b4df43-8622-49a0-9a01-fcedf0d09731/Program\\_Prioritization\\_Process\\_Task\\_Force\\_Report1.pdf](http://media.zuza.com/2/5/25b4df43-8622-49a0-9a01-fcedf0d09731/Program_Prioritization_Process_Task_Force_Report1.pdf)

argues that universities should pay attention to the “enormous pressure to shift the pendulum toward teaching the undergraduate student and a corresponding pressure at non-research institutions to get back to the teaching business” (46).

## **Disrespect for Collegial Governance**

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Dickeson recommends that decision-making in the prioritization process should by-pass established academic channels. He quotes favourably a forty-year old assessment of university governance as “a crazy quilt of hierarchies, committees, and overlapping jurisdictions” and “archaic, inefficient, inhibitive to necessary change, and not even very comfortable.” In his own judgment, it is the university governance system that “got the campus into program proliferation in the first place.” Governance units “tend to base decision on territorial and turf issues,” and therefore the results of their deliberations “will manifestly not fit the scope and depth of the task, or presumably rise to the high calling of this special purpose” (113-4).

He also pays virtually no attention to faculty unions, probably because they are far less significant on US campuses than they are across Canada. He concedes that the meaning of collective bargaining for prioritization is “a knotty one,” suggesting that faculty may have “foreclosed their participation in this management-governance function by accepting membership in a bargaining unit” (115). Ontario faculty associations will certainly beg to differ, since there are clauses in most collective agreements that cover some of the issues he is raising, especially about the kind of layoffs of tenured faculty that he is promoting.

## **Do We Need Him?**

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In so many ways, Robert Dickeson has built his supposed expertise and consulting career on a process that is deeply flawed and inappropriate for Ontario’s universities. His process is not sensitive to the unique nature of higher education in the province, he is excessively biased against faculty from the outset, and his methodology all but precludes useful outcomes. I see no need to expend the valuable and scarce resources of our universities on hiring him and his colleagues as a consultant in any prioritization exercise. We can do better on our own, with respect for collegial governance and the values of our institutions.

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