

# *Forum / Tribune*

## About Us: Reflection and Dialogue on the Purpose of University Continuing Education in Canada

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article is a response to Scott McLean's (2007) CJUCE Forum article "About Us," which set out the claims that university continuing education (UCE) units make about themselves on their websites. Using the activities of the Legal Studies Program of the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta as a reference point, this article suggests that the activities of UCE units may not be as bland as their purpose statements suggest. The ability of those statements to represent the visions of UCE units is questioned, as is the adequacy of the processes by which such statements are generated. In doing so, the author exposes the need to catalogue what UCE units are actually doing and reflect on why we seem to need to downplay some of those activities. The article concludes with the suggestion that in presenting

### **RÉSUMÉ**

Dans son article, Gander répond à l'article "About Us" [à notre sujet] de Scott McLean, se trouvant dans le Forum de la RCÉPU (2007). McLean exposa les énoncés que font les unités d'éducation permanente universitaire (ÉPU) à leurs propres propos dans leurs sites Web. En utilisant les activités du Legal Studies Program [programme d'études légales] de la Faculté d'éducation permanente à l'Université de l'Alberta comme point de référence, Gander suggère que les activités des unités d'ÉPU pourraient ne pas être aussi banales que le suggèrent leurs énoncés du but. Gander questionne l'habileté des ces énoncés de bien représenter les visions de ces unités ainsi que l'efficacité des processus par lesquels de tels énoncés sont générés. En faisant ceci, l'auteur expose le besoin de cataloguer ce que font actuellement

a synthesis of the units' purpose statements, McLean takes UCE units full circle to the debate he set to the side: What should UCE units do?

les unités d'ÉPU, et de réfléchir sur les raisons pour lesquelles nous semblons avoirs besoin de dévaloriser quelques-unes de ces activités. Gander conclue avec la suggestion qu'en présentant une synthèse des énoncés du but de ces unités, McLean emmène ces unités directement au débat qu'il avait mis de côté : Que devraient faire les unités d'éducation permanente universitaire ?

## INTRODUCTION

I read with interest Scott McLean's (2007) article "About Us: Expressing the Purpose of University Continuing Education Units in Canada," in which he reviewed the claims that university continuing education (UCE) units make about themselves on their websites. I would like to respond to three of the questions he posed: Do those public claims accurately reflect the full range of purposes served by UCE units? Does our work have unintended consequences, particularly with respect to perpetuating social inequities? Do other priorities put at risk the expressed purposes of continuing education units? (pp. 78–79).

I will do that by looking at the following:

- The nature of purpose statements generally
- The nature of UCE purpose statements
- Is what you see what you get?
- Unintended consequences
- At what cost success?

## THE NATURE OF PURPOSE STATEMENTS GENERALLY

In the 35 or so years that I have been involved in UCE, I have participated in numerous exercises that have sought to articulate the role and mission of our faculty or some other organization. Those sessions have been led variously by professional facilitators, strategic planners, other outsiders, and insiders. All these efforts started with the best of intentions, with assurances that

whereas previous efforts may have failed, this time we would succeed, and with prophecies that we would be better for taking on the challenge. Since those experiences have consistently failed to meet expectations, I must conclude either that I am the consistent dysfunctional element in these exercises or that something is fundamentally wrong with the very idea of creating purpose statements.

I prefer to think the latter is the case and that the problem lies in the very nature of those vision statements—their level of abstraction, the expectation that a vision can be stated in very few words, that those words have the same meaning for all those involved in crafting the statement, let alone everyone who reads it, and so on. Difficulties with articulating purpose statements also arise in the processes used to do so. Whose vision statement is it meant to be? The Dean's? The academic faculty's? The whole faculty's? And whose is it really? How does the vision come into being? Does it reflect some individual or collective philosophical epiphany? Is it imposed from the top down? Created by some group of seven, whether representative of the faculty or not? Done through a consultative process? If so, who is consulted? Who decides when the statement is acceptable? The process is rarely unadulterated. What assumptions underlie it? What compromises get made along the way? Whichever process is used, purpose statements often must be produced within a fixed time frame, which is rarely long enough. And so, by the end of that time, the real test of the statement is not whether it does the unit justice but whether it is something we can live with. Is the purpose statement sufficiently abstract, vague, or ambiguous to capture whatever we might want it to mean somewhere down the line?

Jaded though I may be, mission or purpose statements must be looked at with some degree of skepticism. All they may really tell us is who or what is dominating or driving the process and how well the unit is doing in capturing the latest buzz words or fitting within the mission statement of some higher authority.

## THE NATURE OF UCE PURPOSE STATEMENTS

That said, and imperfect as purpose statements may be, it is well worth looking at what the current crop of statements tells us. Even if they don't fully reflect what we are doing and why, they do reveal something about the consensus that we have been able to reach under current conditions. The fact that McLean could synthesize them as easily as he did suggests considerable homogeneity among UCE units. However, our current purpose statements do reflect a rather bland state of being—we exist in a safe and conforming huddle in the bosom of our parent institutions. It is ironic that McLean's review appeared in an issue of *CJUCE* that included an article describing

adult education as a spiritual enterprise (Lauzon, 2007) and the review of a book calling for the teaching of defiance (Nesbit, 2007). Neither of those approaches to adult education fits well with our current branding; both challenge our complacency. By holding up a mirror to us, perhaps McLean has helped us see how far we, or at least our purpose statements, have deviated from what some authors take to be our social-justice heritage and continuing mandate.

## IS WHAT YOU SEE WHAT YOU GET?

If the process of developing purpose statements is at best flawed, how far off the mark are those statements? The real test would be to compare those statements with the actual activities of UCE units. That would tell us not only where we fall short of our espoused purposes but also where and how we might exceed or deviate from them. With that information in hand, we might then be able to infer other purposes. McLean's study doesn't go that far, however, and I do not have the resources to make that comparison. So instead, I will compare the activities of the Legal Studies Program of the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta (which I directed until March 2007) with the faculty's current mission statement.

The Legal Studies Program (LSP) was created in 1975 as the Legal Resource Centre (LRC). The program's underlying philosophy was that the legal system of a democratic society should reflect the wishes and needs of all members of that society. This was believed to more likely be effected if the public was actively involved in the evolution of the law and its administration. The long-term goal of the LRC was, therefore, to increase public concern for and involvement in the legal process. The general strategy adopted was to facilitate the establishment of a comprehensive network of legal informational and educational services. The LRC was to be part of that network, filling in gaps or supporting the work of others as appropriate. The intent was to help people recognize a direct and personal need to become involved in the legal system and, in doing so, develop a sense of responsibility for the system. The network of services would then provide access to the information and skills that were necessary to support meaningful public involvement.

Over the next several years, the LRC developed a variety of programs and services that undertook library, training, publishing, consulting, and networking activities that were directed toward the needs of three audiences: 1) teachers, librarians, community leaders, counsellors, paralegal workers, or other individuals with extensive contact with members of the public; 2) children; and 3) interest groups, community groups, and other formal or

informal groups of people with no other access to information about the law or legal process.

Those audiences were selected because they were in positions to pass on information to others, they had no other access to information or resources, they were already involved in law-related activities and needed support, or they possessed the potential for participation in law-related activities. The LRC helped them to gain more knowledge about the laws by which they were governed and stimulated the public, generally, to learn more about the legal system. The education of children about legal matters was seen as a long-term strategy for developing citizens who understood their responsibilities toward the legal system, accepted them, and engaged in shaping our legal future (Gander, 1980).

Over the years, the expression of that purpose changed to fit changes in the LSP environment, including within the Faculty of Extension and the University of Alberta. In 2006, the program's stated mission was restated: "to enhance the accessibility and quality of justice realized in Canada." The LSP purported to address its restated mission by creating learning opportunities and building learning communities that facilitated the creation, management, exchange, and integration of knowledge among people within the justice system and between them and the general public. Although its mission was more or less consistent with the faculty's current mission "to create opportunities for lifelong learning in response to the needs of individuals and society by engaging the university and communities in learning, discovery, and citizenship," it provided a more explicit and more spiritually infused sense of purpose.

The various LSP mission statements articulated over the years noted that the program carried out a range of activities, such as developing and delivering puppet shows for kids; radio and community television programs; teacher training; public library outreach services, which included helping libraries build and maintain their legal collections; websites to assist abused women deal with legal issues; a national Internet portal of law and justice resources; and various print resources, including workbooks to help not-for-profit organizations meet their legal obligations. Few of these activities took the form of traditional continuing education courses, and most were carried out in collaboration with and for the benefit of marginalized sectors of Canadian society.

Without drilling down into the Faculty of Extension's website, it would not be obvious that these sorts of activities were going on. Nor are they unique in addressing contemporary social issues. Members of the Extension faculty are currently involved in supporting urban-farming activities, improving conditions in seniors' housing, and helping institutions, com-

munities, and entire countries set up proper communications' protocols for dealing with crises.

So perhaps things are not as bland as purpose statements suggest. The question that lurks, though, is why UCE units feel the need to present such a safe face to the world. Part of the answer lies in McLean's observation that websites are usually designed by marketers for the purpose of reaching a particular audience, usually potential students who have access to Internet technology and the money to spend on course fees. Websites do not tend to give prominence to research, community-development activities, or informal learning activities and resources; those markets are quite different and need to be reached in other ways. UCE units also use their purpose statements and websites to meet their perceived need to be active members of their larger institution's "team"—to appear to be in the same game and meeting the same goals. The bottom line, after all, is survival and UCE units are vulnerable to a hostile administration and to financial exigencies. Certain types of activities may need to be carried out under the radar.

## UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

So, if the actual practices of UCE units are more interesting than their purpose statements might suggest, what of McLean's concern that, like our parent institutions, we are participating in the perpetuation of inequalities in society. If that means helping the privileged increase their privilege, we must plead guilty if we maintain any significant continuing professional education programs. Our faculty's medical acupuncture program, for instance, is limited to individuals already accredited by a medical profession; thus, by serving these learners, we are culpable of not just perpetuating but also enhancing their privilege. However, that is surely too simplistic an indictment, for the ultimate beneficiaries of this increased competency are the patients, a much broader group of people.

Indeed, as the experience of the LSP suggests, the indictment against the Faculty of Extension for perpetuating the status quo is not so easily made out. Two LSP activities that have contributed to achieving justice and citizen engagement—the training of Native court workers and lobbying restrictions on not-for-profit organizations—are briefly described next.

### *Training of Native Court Workers*

For about 10 years, the LSP provided the legal training needed by court workers employed by the Native Counselling Services of Alberta (NCSA). The NCSA maintains services that assist Native people accused of crimes or experiencing other legal difficulties, their families and communities, and the courts. Court workers also serve as role models for others in their

communities and often progress up the ranks of the organization or move on to positions elsewhere in the justice system. Both the founder of the NCSA, Chester Cunningham, and the current executive director, Allen Benson, have been recognized for their service to Aboriginal people through honorary doctorates bestowed by the University of Alberta. Neither those individuals nor many of the people employed by the NCSA can be counted among the privileged of society, at least at the time they join the organization. In providing the NCSA with training services, the LSP not only helped individual Aboriginal people increase their ability to participate more fully in society but also helped the organization achieve its mission to improve access to justice for Aboriginals. In their work, both the NCSA and the LSP pursued visions of democracy and social justice by engaging in the sort of spiritually inspired adult education of which Lauzon (2007) spoke.

### *Lobbying Restrictions on Not-for-Profit Organizations*

Recently, I was asked to carry out an assessment of the potential impact that proposed new legislation regulating lobbyists (Bill 1 *Lobbyists Act*) might have on not-for-profit organizations in Alberta. My research identified a number of issues for the voluntary sector that suggested the legislation would fundamentally impair the ability of Albertans to engage with their government and would further marginalize people whose voices most need to be heard (Gander, 2007). My research was subsequently used by not-for-profit organizations to ground their submissions to government and in support of a coordinated lobby by sector leaders for more realistic regulation of lobbying by not-for-profit organizations. The results of the lobby were almost more than the voluntary sector dared hope (*Lobbyists Act*).<sup>1</sup> The sector fought the government and the sector won. Although this example may not fully qualify as an act of defiance in the Newman (2006) sense, the sector did take control of the moment and, against seemingly impossible odds (the Bill was the new Premier's "flagship" legislation), blocked a fundamentally anti-democratic move by the government.

## AT WHAT COST SUCCESS?

Scott McLean suggested that UCE units may be compromised in achieving their purposes by allowing themselves to be valued in terms of public relations or the financial return realized on the University's investment in the unit. He asked whether units should have the ability to set fees in accordance with their mission of promoting widespread access to education, rather than in response to pressures to generate surpluses. Should they have to limit their activities to those that are cost recovery or better? Who gets left behind with these sorts of policies and practices? Who should pay for

programs of social change? Who defines social justice and sets programming priorities? These are sticky questions.

The experience of the LSP suggests that there is more than one way of generating the revenues necessary to pay for valuable programs; for instance, public and private foundations and government grants and contracts can support and sustain some of them. But what role should the parent university play? What about the faculty? How much internal cross-subsidization is fair? How should that money be generated? How should it be shared? The LSP experience also suggests that it is not easy to survive, let alone thrive, on the financial margins of a UCE unit. It is significant that the LSP no longer exists within the Faculty of Extension, its educational activities devolved to an independent entity. The lessons to be learned from the LSP example are many but must wait to be addressed in another article.

In giving us this representation of ourselves through our purpose statements, McLean raised a number of provocative questions. To answer them, though, we must go full circle and confront the normative question he chose not to address: What *ought* we to be doing in university continuing education?

## ENDNOTE

1. Certain types of not-for-profit organizations were exempted from the legislation entirely.

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## BIOGRAPHY

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