

Forum / Tribune

Reconceptualizing University Extension and Public Service: A Response to Lauzon

Wayne Lamble, *University of Alberta*

Gordon Thompson, *University of Saskatchewan*

ABSTRACT

Gordon Thompson and Wayne Lamble published an article in Vol. 26, No. 1 of this Journal titled *Reconceptualizing University Extension and Public Service*. That issue also contained an invited response from Allan Lauzon titled *University Extension and Public Service in the Age of Economic Globalization: A Response to Thompson and Lamble*. The present article is an invited rejoinder to the comments by Lauzon.

RÉSUMÉ

Gordon Thompson et Wayne Lamble ont publié un article, "Reconceptualizing University Extension and Public Service", dans le Vol.26, No.1 de cette Revue. Aussi, dans ce numéro-là, y avait-il une réponse, obtenue sur invitation, d'Allan Lauzon - "University Extension and Public Service in the Age of Economic Globalization: A Response to Thompson and Lamble". L'article actuel est une duplique, obtenue sur invitation, aux commentaires de Lauzon.

INTRODUCTION

We welcomed Lauzon's (2000) critical elaboration on the changing context of university extension and on the role of social, political, and economic forces—including a fundamental shift in dominant values—in shaping the university and university extension. Although he expressed disappointment about our article (Thompson & Lamble, 2000) and was critical of some parts of our analysis and conclusions, he seemed more concerned with what we did not address.

In our introduction to the article, we acknowledged that the specific form and purpose of the extension function has evolved under the influence of two primary forces: first, "the differing and changing social, economic, and political conditions in which universities operated"; second, "the varying visions of university leadership in response to those conditions" (p. 52). To the first force, we also added the emerging technologies in education, communication, and information.

Although we did acknowledge the importance of the first force, our article was intended to address only the second force. We left further discussion, including a critical analysis of the first force, for another time and for other articles. And, indeed, Lauzon has responded to the opportunity to expand on this topic.

HIGHLIGHTING THE NEED TO RECONCEPTUALIZE

Lauzon's detailed critique of the changing social, political, and economic context, and the impact of this on universities and university extension, highlights the importance of the need to deliberately and carefully reconceptualize and articulate university extension.

For example, his concern—perhaps somewhat overstated—that university extension has become "the handmaiden to those who benefit from economic globalization" (p. 80) illustrates just one of the risks of not having a well-conceived, well-grounded conceptualization and articulation of the function.

He goes on to suggest other ways in which the modern public university may be compromising its function and role in society. In our opinion, many of the conditions and concerns he cites arise because of, or are largely the result of, superficial, out-dated, or otherwise inadequate conceptualizations of university extension.

DISAGREEING ON ASSUMPTIONS

We do disagree, however, with Lauzon's apparent assumption that the definition, clarification, and conceptualization of university extension is predominantly determined by our understanding of the larger environment of the university and by the nature and extent of the forces this environment exerts on the university. We assume that, although the conceptualization—and operationalization—of university extension should be informed by these environmental forces, it should be more fundamentally determined and defined by our understanding of the basic academic functions of a public university and its service mission to its larger community.

Certainly, it is necessary to "understand the larger environment of the university, and how changes in it are impinging on university extension units, in terms of how the university is being influenced by the larger social, political, and economic environment" (Lauzon, p. 81). However, we believe that such understanding is crucial to the development of strategic priorities and approaches, as well as to the development of specific, relevant program initiatives.

In terms of clarifying and reconceptualizing the role of university extension, we argue it is more important—perhaps critically important—to have a fundamental understanding of how the university and university extension can, and should, constructively participate in and contribute to the development and shaping of the larger environment. Further, this understanding should be grounded in the fundamental service mission and scholarly functions of a public university. (This is, we feel, the essence of the reconceptualization that Lauzon apparently missed in our article.)

Without such grounding, the response of university extension to the contemporary environmental forces is more likely to be reactive, expedient, or even subservient to special interest groups. This is particularly likely if the extension unit has positioned itself to be primarily a provider of continuing education courses and programs for those individuals and firms who are able and willing to "pay their way." Certainly, in the absence of such a foundational model and guiding ideal, realization of the extension unit's potential to represent and serve both the university as a whole and the public needs of the larger community will be at risk.

Contemporary-needs and market-specific responses portray a particular interpretation and a very narrow aspect of university extension. And

because most people, including university administrators and faculty members, are usually only exposed to a selected range of extension activities, it is not surprising that most people have rather specific, narrow, and, therefore, somewhat superficial ideas about the nature of university extension.

Consequently, these inconsistencies, conflicts, and ambiguities about the nature and potential of extension can effectively reduce the operational definition of university extension to the lowest and simplest common denominator. That is, extension comes to be defined as an ancillary public service or public relations activity to which no, or very little, precious funding or resources can be justified. As Lauzon points out, there may even be a temptation to view extension as a business enterprise that can generate a surplus or profit to support other functions deemed more academic and central to the mission of the university.

In other words, we believe that our understanding and conceptualization of university extension should be driven by two equal forces: 1) our understanding and conceptualization of the fundamental and continuing role and contribution of the public university to the continuing development of society, and 2) the contemporary forces emanating from that society.

RECONCEPTUALIZATION IS UNDERWAY

Lauzon notes, and we agree, that the reconceptualization of university extension “is unfolding before our very eyes” (p. 90). We also agree that the predominant new conceptualization seems to have extension units acting as centres of entrepreneurial activity. Given the current political-economic climate, this model is a fairly obvious extension of the predominant continuing education model that has developed over recent decades. With a few exceptions, university extension units seem to have been preoccupied for some time with becoming centres of continuing education. This has involved becoming providers of non-degree courses and programs offered at special times and places, and in formats that meet the private desires and needs of individual learners and, occasionally, corporate organizations.

We believe this situation to be the result of an expedient “drift” at the confluence of several contemporary forces. Moreover, we believe this drift is occurring largely because of the absence of an impelling alternative vision of university extension. Therefore, we argue for a deliberate reconceptualization and reaffirmation of university extension that is central

and supportive of—not ancillary and incidental to—the fundamental purpose and functions of the public university.

ISSUE OF RELEVANCE

Lauzon questions the assertion that universities have tended to reject service as part of serious scholarship because it is conceived as being separate from serious intellectual work. He suggests that it is more “an issue of service activities being unable to generate sufficient revenue” (p. 90). Certainly, any university endeavour has to attract sufficient resources to justify and enable its occurrence, whether the resources come from base budget allocations, grants, contracts, or user fees.

More pertinent is why service activities are unable to attract or generate sufficient resources. We suggested it may be because what is offered in the name of service is too often narrowly defined as individual faculty volunteer efforts to provide assistance to specific-interest “good causes.” Consequently, the relevance of these efforts to complex community issues is likely to be less than that of more deliberate, comprehensive, longer-term, collaborative programmatic interventions. This, in turn, results in missed opportunities for creating substantive value to the larger community, whether measured in terms of direct revenue generation or otherwise.

PUBLIC SERVICE FAÇADE

Lauzon describes public service and grand mission statements about it as often being façades, which are trotted out from time to time for review. Of course, unless these declarations are supported by appropriate policies, strategic plans, structures, and so on, they remain somewhat shallow. What Lauzon fails to consider, however, is the challenge faced by university leaders to continually create and support effective mechanisms for operationalizing these declarations and for generating broad-based community support for their institutions. This is especially challenging given the increasing specialization of disciplinary scholarly work at universities at a time when community problems are becoming increasingly large and complex.

It is critical to the continuing development of our public universities that institutions be, and be seen as, relevant to the larger community. A well-conceived and articulated, academically integrated conceptualization of university extension could be invaluable to university leaders and administrators in this regard.

CHALLENGING A GENERAL THEME

Lauzon's extensive commentary on the larger, dominant value shifts in Canadian society—from a life code of value to a money code of value—and the undesirable implications for universities and university extension units seems to gravitate towards the polemic. The view that over the past decade or two university extension units (like their host institutions) have experienced significant decreases in budgetary support and have had to become more efficient and explore new revenue sources is not uncommon. Nonetheless, we regard his claims about a preoccupation with the "financial bottom line" as somewhat excessive. To illustrate, we highlight the following excerpts from Lauzon's response.

Lifelong learning is thus reduced, not to the development of the citizen or civil society, but to preparation for the workplace. In effect, lifelong learning is actually lifelong training, and education is a product for sale to consumers who have a need to buy (pp. 87-88).

What administrators see, however, and appreciate is the potential of university extension units. Not only can they operate on a cost-recovery basis, they can also serve as profit-making centres and institutional revenue generators, all firmly grounded in the values of the marketplace (p. 90).

Thus, university extension as community service simply will not be allowed to survive in the new entrepreneurial university if it refuses to or cannot deliver profits (p. 91).

During the 1990s, university extension was transformed: it is now a business first and foremost and subscribes to the money code of value. That, for me, is the bottom line (p. 92).

These few quotes are enough to demonstrate a consistent theme that needs to be challenged. What little research exists on this point does not support Lauzon's thesis that all university continuing education (UCE) units must be cost-recovery operations. For example, a 1996 CAUCE survey (Morris & Potter, 1996) reported that of the UCE units responding to the survey, only 44 percent were financially self-supporting in the credit area, and only 47 percent were financially self-supporting in the non-credit area.

A 1999 survey by the University Continuing Education Association (UCEA) (2000) reported similar results. In this survey, the results were separately reported according to the organizational structure of the UCE

unit. For example, most were either academically and administratively centralized, or academically decentralized and administratively centralized. As for credit programs, 56 percent of the academically / administratively centralized units and 46 percent of the academically decentralized / administratively centralized units were expected to be totally self-supporting. For non-credit programs, 62 percent of the academically / administratively centralized units and 57 percent of the academically decentralized / administratively centralized units were expected to be totally self-supporting.

These data confirmed that among universities in both the United States and Canada, there continued to be a significant level of budgetary subsidization for their UCE units.

UCE units are likely to continue to experience increasing pressure to reduce their dependence upon such budgetary subsidization. Further, some institutions are likely to be less willing than others to continue such support. In this regard, although we are in resigned agreement with Lauzon's analysis, this assessment makes all the more urgent a reconceptualization of the role and purpose of UCE units. Lauzon appears to concede that the battle is lost; we argue this is not the case so long as there remain thoughtful, articulate, and dedicated champions of the cause.

RECOGNIZING THE NEED TO RENEW UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

We are not alone in recognizing the need to reconceptualize university extension. This issue has been addressed recently by the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (Kellogg Commission, 1999a). This was a national commission, comprising about 25 university presidents, to rethink the role of public higher education in the United States. Over the past four years, this group has produced six reports on various aspects of renewal in public universities—from a review of the social, economic, technological, and geo-political forces reshaping the world to recommendations for renewing the covenant between universities and the public for learning, discovery, and engagement.

The Commission's third report, *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution* (Kellogg Commission, 1999b), addresses most directly the reconceptualization of university extension. The report states that one of the challenges faced by public universities is growing public frustration with what is seen to be institutional unresponsiveness. Underlying this criticism is a perception that, despite the resources and expertise available on their

campuses, these universities have failed to bring them to bear on local problems in a coherent way. Other issues identified as confronting these institutions included enrolment pressures, long-term financial constraints and demands for affordability and cost containment, growing emphasis on accountability and productivity, and urgent requests from policy-makers for solutions to national and international problems of many kinds.

Within this context, the Commission members concluded that it is time to go beyond outreach and service to what they call "engagement." Their reconceptualization calls for institutions to redesign "their teaching, research, and extension and service functions to become even more sympathetically and productively involved with their communities, however community may be defined" (1999b, p. 9).

Indeed, this suggests a more deliberate, comprehensive form of engagement with the community. To this Commission:

Engagement goes well beyond extension, conventional outreach, and even most conceptions of public service. Inherited concepts emphasize a one-way process in which the university transfers its expertise to key constituents. Embedded in the engagement ideal is a commitment to sharing and reciprocity. By engagement the Commission envisions partnerships, two-way streets defined by mutual respect among the partners for what each brings to the table. (1999b, p. 9)

Such partnerships are likely to be characterized by problems defined together, goals and agendas that are shared in common, definitions of success that are meaningful to both university and community and developed together, and some pooling or leveraging of university and public and private funds. The collaboration arising out of this process is likely to be mutually beneficial and to build the capacity and competence of all parties. (1999b, p. 27)

The commissioners believe that an engaged university can enrich the student experience and help change the campus culture. It can do so by enlarging opportunities for faculty and students to gain access to research and new knowledge and by broadening access to internships and various kinds of off-campus learning opportunities. Above all, this concept puts a priority on "putting knowledge to work" on public issues that really matter to the larger community.

Although this may not be the ultimate conceptualization of university extension, it does represent a major reconceptualization of the function.

This reconceptualization is both 1) grounded in the basic purpose and core values of the public university, and 2) responsive—and therefore likely to be more relevant—to the changing environment of these universities.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In summary, we do not “romanticize contemporary university extension” (Lauzon, p. 89) or historically inherited forms of it. These models have evolved and have been generally appropriate to the circumstances of their time and place. However, we believe they are inadequate for enabling extension to provide leadership for the enhanced engagement of public universities with their larger communities.

We present a case for a reconceptualized, more fundamentally grounded understanding of university extension as we move into the new millennium. It is based not just on contemporary environmental issues and trends, but rather primarily on extending, integrating, and applying the basic academic functions of a public university to enhanced service to its larger community. This conceptualization and associated models are defined more by these basic academic functions and intended public outcomes than by the types of activities, products, and services provided.

We believe that such a reconceptualization is required to stem, if not reverse, the drift of extension towards being ancillary, entrepreneurial, business enterprises. More important, we believe it will position those involved in, and responsible for, university extension to provide much needed leadership for enhancing the university’s engagement with its larger community.

We recognize that a new conceptualization of university extension will not in itself bring a transformation in the function. It is, however, a beginning and it can become the focal point for deliberately and systematically developing supporting policies, procedures, structures, expertise, understanding, commitment, and processes for transformation.

Finally, we encourage and welcome further discussion and debate on this issue.

REFERENCES

- Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities. (1999a). *Overview*. [On-line]. Available HTTP: <http://www.nasulgc.org/Kellogg/kellogg.htm/>.
- Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities. (1999b). *Returning to our roots: The engaged institution*. Washington, DC: National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, Office of Public Affairs. [On-line]. Available HTTP: <http://www.nasulgc.org/publications/Kellogg/engage.pdf/>.
- Lauzon, A. C. (2000). University extension and public service in the age of economic globalization: A response to Thompson and Lamble. *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education*. 26 (1), 79-95.
- Morris, J. F., & Potter, J. (1996). *Continuing education policies and practices in Canadian universities: An overview*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Association for University Continuing Education.
- Thompson, G., & Lamble, W. (2000). Reconceptualizing university extension and public service. *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education*. 26(1), 51-77.
- University Continuing Education Association. (2000). *Survey summary: Results from the 1999 UCEA management survey*. Washington, DC: Author.

BIOGRAPHIES

Gordon Thompson is Professor and Dean of Extension at the University of Saskatchewan. He completed his Ph.D. degree in Adult and Continuing Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and has maintained an active involvement in teaching and publishing in this field. His scholarly interests include the facilitation of learning for adults with particular reference to teaching and learning styles.

Gordon Thompson est professeur et Doyen de la Division de l'éducation permanente à The University of Saskatchewan. Il a complété son doctorat dans le domaine de la formation des adultes et de l'éducation permanente à The University of Wisconsin-Madison. Il maintient une participation active dans l'enseignement et la publication dans ce domaine. Ses intérêts d'érudition comprennent la facilitation d'apprentissage pour adultes en particulier par rapport aux styles d'enseignement et d'apprentissage.

Wayne Lamble is a Professor and Director of Program Development for the Institute for Professional Development (U of A-IPD) in the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta (<http://www.idp.ualberta.ca>). U of A-IPD promotes advanced study and innovative practice in continuing professional development. Wayne's areas of interest include program development and management; continuing professional development, learning, and education; and integration of communication, information, and learning technologies to enhance learning and knowledge management.

Wayne Lamble est professeur et directeur d'élaboration de programmes pour The Institute for Professional Development (U of A-IPD) dans la Faculté de l'éducation permanente à The University of Alberta (<http://www.idp.ualberta.ca>). U of A-IPD favorise les études poussées et la pratique innovatrice dans la formation professionnelle continue. Wayne s'intéresse à l'élaboration et à la gestion de programmes; à la formation professionnelle continue, à l'apprentissage et l'éducation; et à l'intégration de la communication, de l'information et des technologies d'apprentissage pour valoriser l'apprentissage et la connaissance en matière de gestion.

