CORE

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*This issue highlights the work of the York Assessment Forum. Prepared by the project teams, each report sets out the agenda for the assessment project and describes some of the interesting and informative results that have been generated thus far. Complementing these reports is an article by the Vice-President (Enrolment and Student Services) delineating the demographic characteristics of York's undergraduates. Included also are some ideas for engaging in research on student learning within the classroom. Taken together, we hope the articles in this issue will stimulate further discussion and analysis of York's unique teaching and learning conte*xt.

Assessment - York's Way

In the next decade, one thing we can be absolutely certain about is that there will be increased pressures on university programmes. The pressures we are already experiencing with larger class sizes will become even more acute when the anticipated 'double-cohort' arrives at our doors. And this can only worsen with the subsequent demographic growth of the university age population. Another pressure we may count on, particularly in this province, is the constant need to balance programming priorities with targeted funding opportunities.

As we struggle to adapt to this new climate, it will be important not to lose sight of our commitment to finding more effective and inclusive ways of responding to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Some key priorities will be:

- finding ways to improve student learning by engaging students outside as well as inside the classroom;
- facilitating students' transferable skills while preserving the academic integrity of our programmes;
- ensuring greater access to education and involvement in the educational process by members of traditionally excluded groups;
- developing approaches for incorporating instructional technology in our teaching that ensure not only quality of access to learning but also quality of the learning experience itself. (1)

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YORK ASSESSMENT FORUM

- **What can we do to improve teaching, learning and student life at York?**
- **To what extent are students being engaged outside of the classroom?**
- **How can we create an intellectual commmunity for our students?**
- **What makes a good first year programme, and what makes a good first-year course?**
- **What barriers do students from certain minority groups confront in going to graduate school?**

These questions and others like them engaged a group of faculty staff and students in discussions about teaching, learning and student life at York University in January 1999 – the first meeting of the re-instituted York Assessment Forum. These questions led to the establishment of three assessment projects that are examining a range of issues relating to first year transition, students' engagement at the university, and student diversity.

If you find one of these projects interesting, or have another project you would like to explore, please contact us at cst@yorku.ca.

COURSE DESIGN INSTITUTE: RE-THINKING YOUR COURSE
May 1 – 4, 2000
A four-day event designed to assist individuals and course teams in re-thinking their courses and offering practical sessions on specific aspects of course design and approaches to teaching and learning. (See last page.)

In this issue

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How effective we will be in achieving these goals will depend largely on how well we are able to understand students' needs and develop appropriate strategies for meeting them. One way to do this is through careful, systematic assessment.

In this context, assessment can provide a mechanism that allows the institutional "us" to begin to consider the University's contribution to the learning experience of students. It focuses attention on student learning and encourages collective responsibility for its development beyond individual courses taught by individual instructors.

> Assessment is the process of defining, selecting, designing, collecting, analysing, interpreting and using information to increase students' learning and development. Assessment is seen as a process that includes discussions about what should be assessed and how information will be used, not just the hands-on testing of students. Assessment can produce information for communication and decision-making: for students to decide how to improve their learning, for faculty to decide how to plan more effective instruction, for academic leaders to decide how to construct more effective programs(2).

What is new about assessment as defined by the York Assessment Forum is its aim to explore, interpret and expand our understanding and observations about York's learning environment...

Assessing teaching and student learning is not new to York – it is an ongoing activity that assumes a variety of forms across the University. Faculty and TAs routinely apply classroom assessment strategies to gauge how well their students are learning what they are being taught (see article on Classroom Research, page 10). As well, all of our academic programmes – undergraduate, graduate, and professional – undergo regular review. What is new about assessment as defined by the York Assessment Forum is its aim to explore, interpret and expand our understanding and observations about York's learning environment, and to develop and evaluate measures to enhance teaching, learning and student life both inside and outside of the classroom. By its very design, the York Assessment Forum provides a means for the University, its faculty, students, staff and administrators, to build on existing "best practice" in a way that acknowledges the complexity of our culture and takes into account the needs and particular constraints of our unique context.

First instituted in 1993 and modeled on the Harvard Assessment Seminars, the York Assessment Forum is motivated by the need for a more systematic review and assessment of teaching, learning and student life at York University. Six different projects were undertaken in its early years on issues important to curriculum development and classroom climate at York. Revived in January 1999, the Forum brings together faculty, students, staff, and administrators to engage in collegial discussion and systematic exploration aimed at investigating and making explicit the unarticulated assumptions that influence teaching and learning.

Projects undertaken by the York Assessment Forum are defined and shaped by Forum members to address concerns and generate data that are unique to York's teaching and learning context. The results of the projects will be published each year and will ultimately prompt and inform positive changes to improve York's services, programmes and student learning.

The Forum has identified three specific areas for investigation:

1) the assumptions that faculty make about the lives of undergraduate students, and the influence these may have on the way students are taught; and

2) the transition and diversity of the graduate student body, and the factors of the undergraduate experience that serve to encourage (or discourage) students to continue on to graduate school;

3) the factors that facilitate students' academic success during their first year at York, and conversely, the factors that might cause students not to return to University for their second year.

Each of these areas is currently being explored by a working group of the York Assessment Forum and, as you will see from their reports contained in this issue, all are well advanced in their work and are generating exciting results. Indeed, some of the results have already prompted specific changes in administrative policies and processes. And further, one group is generating results that appear to be unique to the York context, as they were not found in the literature search that informed the design of the research. The reports are complemented by an analysis of the demographic characteristics of the York's undergraduates prepared by Deborah Hobson, Vice-President (Enrollment and Student Services). As well, we have included a sampling of instruments that might be used by individual instructors to gauge the effect their teaching is having on student learning. Altogether, we hope that the articles will shed new light on our collective understanding, and contribute to the further improvement, of teaching, learning and student life at York University.

The York Assessment Forum (YAF) is a project of the Centre for the Support of Teaching in collaboration with the Centre for Human Rights and Equity, the Centre for Feminist Research, the Office of the Advisor on the Status of Women, and the Institute for Social Research.

Tentanda Via!

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(1) See APPC's proposed revisions to the Strategic Priorities section of the UAP (Pedagogy), December 1999.

(2) Ratcliff, J. L. "The Rudder and the Sail: Assessment for Staff, Program and Organizational Development." *Journal of Staff, Program and Organizational Development* Vol. 16, No. 4, Spring 1999.

Assessment Project on Student Lives

Martin Muldoon **(Mathematics and Statistics/Arts), and** ***Didi Khayatt*** **(Education and Centre for Feminist Research)**

It's a familiar refrain: the students are ill-prepared, uncommitted; they will not read, cannot write; they used to be better; they only want the piece of paper; they work too much outside. These are not new observations. But they seem to be exacerbated at York, a commuter school populated by students many of whose families have had no previous experience with university, by a period when York's forte, the liberal arts, is under unprecedented attack by the provincial government.

These observations resurfaced at a session of the York Assessment Forum (YAF) in early 1999 and led to the formation of a subgroup and an Assessment Project on Student Lives which has been active since last spring. Early on, the project group members addressed the question of the validity of these perceptions, or unarticulated assumptions, as we tended to call them. Some of the questions were:

- What are the perceptions faculty members have of student lives?
- Do faculty members think that student life has changed over the past ten years?
- If so, in what way is it different now from when they started teaching?
- Do these perceptions affect the expectations that faculty members have for the learning that takes place in their classes?
- In what way has their teaching changed in response to these perceptions? Are the responses appropriate?
- How might the structure of classes more effectively accommodate the diversity of student life?
- How do the perceptions of faculty members compare with students' own descriptions of their lives?
- Have students and faculty both changed in comparable ways (for example in time spent on campus, in participation in university-wide events, etc.)?

To investigate some of these questions we decided to interview a cross-section of faculty members mainly in Arts, Education and Science. Alexandra Emberley, graduate programme in Education, was hired to conduct the interviews during the summer and fall of 1999. The project group met at least monthly during this period and reported verbally to meetings of the YAF on several occasions. On March 1, 2000 we had a lively dinner meeting, chaired by Didi Khayatt and attended by many of those interviewed, to compare notes and decide on further actions.

The interview results (reported anonymously to the project group) and the March 1 discussion revealed major areas of concern but a lack of unanimity on what can or should be done about them. It will be important to get information also from students in order to round out the picture. The information available from ISR surveys is useful but not of a sufficiently detailed nature to throw light on the extent of the problems identified in the faculty interviews.

Respondents frequently refer to students' preoccupation with simply getting a qualification, external pressures from employment and family responsibilities, York's location ***("****faculty prefer to work at home so the student finds a hallway of closed doors and the frustration of no one there ...*") and the lack of community ("*a commuter school which has failed to re-invent itself*") as serious problems.

Some faculty members are very pessimistic in their view of today's students. They find that the students simply do not enjoy or want to read as much as they did in past years. Others are dismayed that students simply do not want to study:

"I gave them a problem I solved in class for the exam. I gave them the answer and they still did not answer it. They simply do not do the work. It was very depressing."

> "There is a demand to do less and students want information given to them — they want the answers ... they should go to a community college. They want study sheets ... Students are not interested in an intrinsic experience of learning."

Many respondents recognize that some of the resistance to studying can be attributed to students' need to seek paid employment. However, they also wish that students would opt for lower course loads:

> "If you're going to be a student you should be a good student. Take fewer courses, I don't think the degree should be compromised - the degree should continue to mean what it meant to past generations".

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(The Assessment Project on Student Lives from page 3)

Other faculty take a realistic attitude:

"We should teach the students we have rather than those we wish we had."

"I'm explaining things in the text that once I didn't have to."

"I have cut down the reading list by a fair amount and shortened the length of papers. They can't write long papers."

"I give a third as much reading ...as in the seventies,"

"I still think it's part of my job to get students to do a little bit more than they want to do."

"My assumption is that with the advent of electronic communication, we are working with a less literate and less interested student population ..."

But not all despair. Several faculty members are excited by York's students:

"I find students to be enthusiastic, exuberant, keen and curious and I quite enjoy working with them. I like the age of the students at the Keele campus — they're so eager and open to ideas and how to think about them."

"There is ...a strong ethnic, gender and queer multiplicity at York which is great for courses."

Others have striven hard to adapt to the changed situation:

"There is a pressure to make it enticing—to use videos and resource people."

"Only time students [are] involved in high engagement is when they are discussing…"

"Make their own questions part of the course".

The Assessment Project on Student Lives aims to deepen awareness and understanding about the lives of students and how that knowledge impacts on teaching and learning at York. We hope that the results will inform future planning considerations by individual course directors, curriculum and program development committees and policy-makers about academic standards and expectations for students at all levels.

Project members include Gottfried Paasche, Didi Khayatt, Martin Muldoon, Jana Vizmuller-Zocco, Georges Monette, Joanne Magee, Alexandra Emberley and Ellen Hoffmann.

DESIRES AND INTENTIONS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

A typical challenge in university teaching, especially with first and second year students, is to find ways to respond to the tension between the teacher's desire for students to "get learning" and the student's intention to "get the grades." (1) Many of the comments cited in the preceding article are illustrative of this tension.

As teachers, we know that it is sometimes difficult to resist pressures from students to help them get a qualification as easily as possible. We know that such a *surface* approach to learning is unlikely to lead to long-term success. What we try to promote instead is a *deep* learning (2), whereby students approach their studies with the intention of understanding rather than memorizing the material. For deep learners, the learning task involves making sense of what is to be learned, thinking, looking for connections, and trying to make meaning by playing with ideas and concepts. Surface learning tends to be experienced as an uphill struggle, characterized by feelings of frustration and depression; deep learning is experienced as exciting and a gratifying challenge (3).

Course characteristics that are likely to foster a surface approach to learning have been identified through several different studies involving thousands of students across a wide range of disciplines. These include: a heavy workload; an excessive amount of course material; a lack of opportunity to study course material in depth; a lack of choice over topics; a lack of choice over methods of study; an anxiety provoking assessment system; and assessment methods which tolerate regurgitation. Knowing this is helpful to teachers who want to make changes in their course design in order to move students towards deeper conceptions of learning.

Course characteristics that promote deep learning

Motivational context:
Deep learning is more likely to occur when students' motivation is intrinsic and they experience a need to know. Courses designed to provide students with choice in what they study, and clearly stated learning objectives and assessment standards help promote a deeper approach to learning (4). One way to achieve this is through problem-based learning, where students are presented with problems or issues to resolve, and provided with resources and support for self-directed learning. Providing a positive, supportive climate for learning is key to establishing the motivational context for fostering a deeper approach to learning.

Learner activity:
Students need to be active rather than passive participants in the learning process if deep learning is to occur. Deep learning is associated with doing, but doing is not enough by itself – activities must be planned, reflected upon, processed and related to abstract conceptions. Teaching methods that allow time for information gathering and reflection, and link course material to students' lives and aspirations can encourage deeper learning.

Interaction with others:
It is easier to negotiate meaning and manipulate ideas when working with others than when alone. Teaching methods that make use of active and interactive strategies and encourage collaborative projects and small group work in class and outside of class are important ways to engage students with each other and with the teacher.

A well-structured knowledge base:
New knowledge must be built on existing concepts and experience and taught in integrated wholes rather than bits and pieces. Teaching methods that make connections with what students already know, and use tasks that require students to integrate information from a variety of sources can help promote a deeper approach to learning.

(1) Weimer, Maryellen. "Teaching Tensions: Confronting Opposing Forces in Today's Classrooms." *AAHE Bulletin,* May 1990 (9-13).

(2) Gibbs, Graham. *Improving the Quality of Student Learning*. Bristol: Technical and Education Services Ltd, 1992.

(3) Atherton, James. *Approaches to Study: "Deep" and "Surface."* http://websites.ntl.com/~james.atherton/learning, 1999.

(3) Campbell, Elizabeth. "Teaching Strategies to Foster "Deep" Versus Surface" Learning. *Teaching Options*. Centre for University Teaching, University of Ottawa: November 1998.

Who are York's Undergraduates?

***Deborah Hobson,* Vice-President (Enrolment and Student Services)**

Last year my office undertook a survey of how York undergraduates finance their university education. This survey was conducted by the Institute for Social Research and was also administered at four other Ontario universities (Queen's, Ryerson, Toronto and Western). The survey instrument included a number of questions about the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The information provided gives us a good idea of who our undergraduates are, and allows us to compare their demographic characteristics with those of the other universities in the survey.

1. Birthplace:

A large proportion of respondents were not born in Canada (38% for York and 30% for the average of the five universities) and the range between the highest and the lowest universities was considerable (42% versus 16%). Generally the demographic characteristics are similar to those of the other two urban universities in the survey (Ryerson, UofT) and different from the non-urban universities (Queen's, Western). The proportion of York students born outside of Canada was considerably higher in this 1998 survey than in two surveys conducted earlier in the decade, both of which put the figure at 27%. York has had a large increase in the number of new Canadians over the past decade.

2. Language spoken:

Over a third (36%) of the York respondents grew up in a home where English was not the language spoken.

3. Ethno-racial origin:

York has a higher proportion of students of non-European origin than the five-university average (41% compared to 37%). York also has a higher percentage of African Origin/ Black students than the average. Table 1 provides a distribution of respondents by major ethno-racial origin.

Table 1: Ethno-Racial Origin

	York	Five-University Average
European	58.7%	62.6%
Chinese	14.7	14.9
South Asian	7.3	6.9
African Origin/Black	9.3	5.6
Other Non-European	10.0	10.0

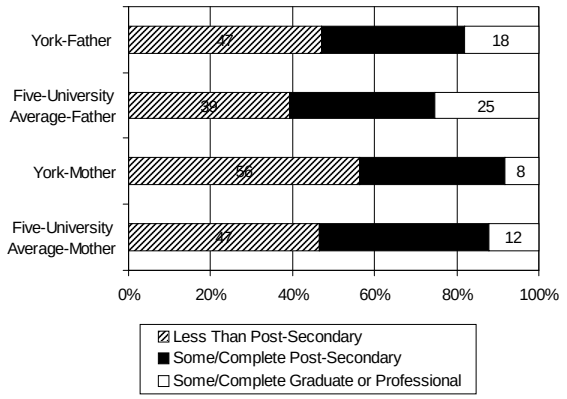
Viewed from the perspective of what language and ethnicity data reflect about cultural backgrounds, the vast majority of York students come from different backgrounds than their teachers, a fact which may well lead to certain communication gaps and create challenging teaching conditions.

4. Parental education:

York students generally come from somewhat less well-educated families than the other universities in the survey. For York respondents, virtually half of the parents had completed less than postsecondary education (47% of fathers, 56% of mothers), as compared with 39% and 47%, respectively, for the five-university average (see Figure 1). At the other end of the educational spectrum, only 18% of York fathers and 8% of mothers had completed some graduate or professional training, as compared with 25% and 12% for the five-university average. Taken together, 30% of York students came from families where neither parent went beyond high school, and only 6% came from families where both parents had had at least some graduate or professional education.

Over half of York students are having an experience which was denied to their parents, namely the opportunity to pursue a university degree. Students who are the first in their family to enrol in university often have particular challenges to meet their academic and financial obligations while also responding to the domestic expectations of their parents. They may also be pressured to pursue programmes of study which their parents believe will have a practical value for employment, rather than seeing a university education as an intellectually broadening experience which will enrich their future life in less tangible ways.

Figure 1: Parental Education



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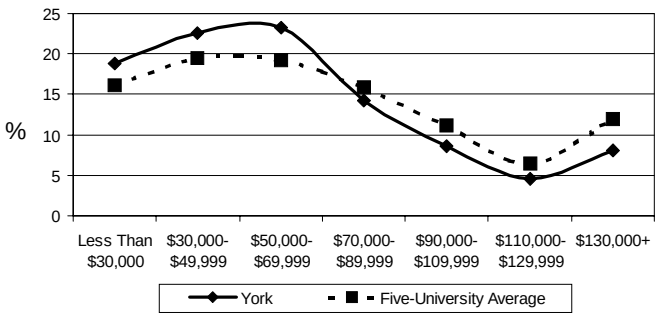
5. Parental income:

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of parental incomes for York respondents and for the average of the five universities. On average, York respondents came from families with lower parental incomes than the five university average. This finding is consistent with the lower level of parental education and the higher degree of ethnic diversity noted above. A substantial proportion of York undergraduates come from families that are new to Canada and face significant economic challenges in funding a university education. Nevertheless, fully 28% of the survey respondents reported that their parents were paying the full cost of their university education.

Figure 2: Parental Income



6. Living arrangements:

Two-thirds of York survey respondents lived at home with their parents, much higher than the five-university average (44%) and at the extreme end of the range (from 7% to 66%). Many of these students believed that they could not afford to go away to university. However, one of the most interesting findings of the survey was that the average total cost of university was not significantly different between commuter and residence students (about $13,000 for the period September to April, including tuition and all living expenses). Commuter students have significant transportation and living costs which are comparable in amount to the room and board costs in residence.

7. Employment:

A majority of York students work during the academic year. 62% of respondents reported that they were working an average of 17 hours, up from 55% of respondents and 14 hours a week in a 1990/1 survey, and higher than the five-university average of 48% working an average of 15 hours a week.

York students worked longer hours than students at other institutions and their weekly earnings were higher ($163 compared to $137 for the five-university average). School year earnings were a more important source of funds than summer jobs. Students holding jobs during the academic year earned an average of $2,950 from this source, as compared with $2,260 from summer earnings.

Conclusions

The demographic characteristics of York undergraduates present special challenges for their teachers. Many students grew up in homes where English was not the language spoken, many have immigrated to Canada in recent years, and many come from homes where no one else has had access to a university education. They may have family expectations which are in conflict with the academic demands placed upon them, and they are probably struggling to piece together the finances for their university education by some combination of loans, employment, scholarships and bursaries. Members of the university community should be aware of and sensitive to particular struggles of our students to obtain their degrees.

3M TEACHING FELLOWSHIPS 2000

Call for Nominations

Each year, 3M Canada and the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, Canada's association for improving teaching and learning in higher education, awards up to ten 3M Teaching Fellowships to individuals who have made exceptional contributions to teaching and learning at Canadian universities. The criteria for this award are two-fold: 1) excellence in teaching over a number of years, principally, but not exclusively, at the undergraduate level; and 2) exemplary educational leadership towards the improvement of university teaching within the candidate's own institution and perhaps beyond.

Nominations for this prestigious award must be routed through the Academic Vice-President's office, which has set an internal deadline of Monday, April 24, 2000 for receipt of nominations at S939 Ross Building. Further information and successful files from previous competitions are available at the Centre for the Support of Teaching (111 Central Square, 736-5754). As well, CST staff are available to review the process, criteria and submission requirements for this award as well as to discuss the elements that contribute to a successful nomination.

Assessment Project on Transition and Diversity

Cheryle Tai **(Graduate Programme in Education), and** ***Celia Haig-Brown*** **(Faculty of Education)**

The Assessment Project on Graduate Students: Transition and Diversity is researching the factors that contribute to the decrease in student diversity from the undergraduate to the graduate levels at York University. Through qualitative research, our project aims to identify the barriers that have historically confronted students from various underrepresented groups in going to graduate school, and to explore ways to address these factors at York. We are focusing on the following groups:

1. Visible minority students
2. First Nations/Aboriginal students
3. Students with disabilities
4. Gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered/ queer students
5. Women
   - Women in non-traditional fields
   - Re-entry women
   - Married women
6. Returning and part-time students
7. International students

Over the summer months, we undertook a literature review and, from various studies in higher education, developed comprehensive lists of the barriers faced by each underrepresented group. We also developed a second list of policy and programme recommendations that have been proposed to address these barriers. The next stage of the project has been to conduct a series of focus groups with students from the various underrepresented groups using questions formulated from the literature review.

We have already completed focus group interviews with First Nations/Aboriginal students, East-Asian women students, and students with disabilities. We intend to do additional focus groups with students of African descent as well as re-visiting some of the earlier groups. We are also anticipating the use of individual interviews with some students. We see these groups as the starting point for our work and intend to conduct research with members of other groups mentioned above as our project progresses.

From the initial analysis of the focus group discussions, we have identified a number of themes that had an important impact on the persistence and success of these students at the graduate level. A few examples of the themes that were generated out of the focus group research are discussed below.

Meeting Application Requirements

Some minority students have had difficulty meeting graduate school application requirements, especially the need to obtain letters of reference from professors in their undergraduate programmes. Part of this difficulty can be attributed to the lack of familiarity that larger class sizes create between students and professors. Some feel this is compounded by a system that favours white males speaking up and therefore being remembered by professors.

> I went to UBC and most of my classes had two or three-hundred students in them and other classes I had which were smaller, maybe 20-30, but it was mostly men who spoke and men who took up air-time; mostly white people who feel more enfranchised to speak over students of colour and then who is the professor going to remember? You don't get that buddy relationship which you feel you need in order to approach someone for a reference letter so it is definitely a barrier.

Adapting to Expectations

Students of various cultural backgrounds may experience difficulty in adapting to the expectations of Canadian graduate schools, especially if these conflict with the educational system and values in their native country.

> As an East-Asian talking in public, I mean we are not really familiar with that kind of communication in Korea, so I haven't had any chance to present in public in Korea in my undergraduate programme. It was so embarrassing at first: I was so

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nervous and my voice was shaking, it embarrassed me again so it was like a vicious circle. I don't like presentations so far and most of the graduate seminars are composed of presentations and it doesn't matter if it is big or small, I have to talk in public. I'm pressured because there are participation points so I feel I have to talk and I don't really like to stand out. For me, it is physical appearance too. I'm small and I'm short and it works negatively, so when I meet my classmates who are white and tall, I feel it's negative for me.

Being Excluded

For some students, language can be a barrier to becoming academically and/or professionally socialized once enrolled in the graduate programme, resulting in social and academic isolation. This sense of isolation may be compounded by the insensitive attitudes of some faculty and classmates who do not make an effort or attempt at inclusion.

I remember an experience in class where the professor started a very funny story and it stemmed from a funny word. The East-Asian group didn't know it and the majority students, they just laughed but East-Asian students just stayed calm. It was very awkward. We didn't understand so we couldn't laugh or get together with other people and I think that the professor and other students should have explained what it is but they didn't. It was really really awkward and I felt really bad...I think it is unethical to explain what the joke means because everyone has to share the same story. This continued for a long time. They were really enjoying themselves but don't really care about minority students.

Being Unrepresented

Many students have also raised concerns over the general lack of representation in curricular resources.

I think in terms of the percentage of minority students in our class, the one or two articles included in the course isn't sufficient to represent the specific issues relevant for them, the racism, the feminism or whatever.

This sense of isolation may be compounded by the insensitive attitudes of some faculty and classmates who do not make an effort or attempt at inclusion.

Other activities the group has been pursuing include working with administrative offices on campus to determine the kinds of institutional data that might be made available to us. We are hoping to identify the kinds of policies and programmes that are currently in place to motivate minority students to continue their education at the graduate level. The group has found that the information that is currently gathered on students, particularly those who leave the university, does not identify minority representation. This gap is being redressed and future exit surveys will include a section where respondents can self-identify as a member of a minority group. We offered input into the current search for a Dean in the Faculty of Graduate Studies urging that one of the criteria in the search include a commitment to issues of diversity at the graduate level and have received a positive response. The group will continue to work with administrative offices to address other such gaps at the policy and programme level to encourage greater numbers of minority students to pursue graduate studies.

The members of the sub-committee include Celia Haig-Brown, Heather Dryden, Denise Hammond, Anna Hoefnagels, Nimki Lavell, Gill Teiman, Cheryle Tai, Walter Whiteley and Marilyn Zivian.

2000

Come celebrate the 20th anniversary of STLHE!

June 14-17, 2000

Brock University

St. Catherines, Ontario

Further information and registration information is available at the CST or www.brocku.ca/stlhe2000.

"Into the Millennium: The Changing Faces of Teaching and Learning"

The Society for Learning and Higher Education (STLHE) has an excellent reputation for providing a quality, interactive teaching related programme in way that is quite different than any other conference – it's informal, practical, lively, scholarly and involves a wide cross-section of colleagues from every discipline. This conference will be of interest to:

- University and college teachers
- Faculty and TA developers
- Instructional development officers
- Teaching assistants and graduate students
- Student affairs professionals
- Anyone interested in exploring issues related to teaching and learning in higher education.

STLHE 2000 will be rich in ideas for developing and invigorating teaching and learning in higher education. Participants will be involved in problem-solving sessions, discussion groups, demonstrations, workshops, and other participative sessions that show rather than tell how the aspects of teaching and learning are

Assessment Project on The First Year Experience

Barry Miller **(Languages, Literature and Linguistics/Arts, and Arts Dean's Office)**

The Assessment Group on the First Year at York is currently focussing on the issue of student retention. For its project over the 1999/2000 academic year, the group developed a survey to be administered to students who have not returned in the 1999/2000 session after their first year of study in 1998/1999. Following the approach of a 1985 survey of non-returning students undertaken by the Institute for Social Research (ISR)(1), the group has also been developing a companion survey aimed at students who have returned for their second year of study in the 1999/2000 session. The idea is to use the comparative data from the two surveys to try to identify distinguishing characteristics of students who choose not to return to York.

An overarching objective of the surveys is to get a picture of who the non-returning students are, with a view to determining the extent to which attrition among students between first and second year is attributable to factors which the University can and might wish to address. There are various reasons why students might not continue with their studies over which the University has little or no control. Such reasons could involve a personal crisis or medical condition, financial difficulties or an attractive job opportunity. Students might also make a positive decision to leave York to pursue a college diploma program or some applied program outside the university system which they feel is better suited to their interests and needs than university-level study. (1) It is necessary, then, to circumscribe the dimensions of attrition arising from factors that York can potentially influence in order to gauge the extent to which the retention figures represent a challenge that should be addressed.

The surveys are organized around three main questions. Two questions are common to both surveys; one asks students about their reasons for deciding to attend York, and the other asks students about their level of satisfaction with items relating to teaching and the classroom experience, student support services and University facilities. In the survey intended for non-returning students, a third question asks students to identify from a list the reasons why they have decided not to return to York. The survey for returning students presents a similar list but asks students to assess the items on the list as factors influencing their level of satisfaction with their experience at York. An important strength of the survey design is that results of the surveys should provide not only valuable insight on why students do not continue on to their second year, but also valuable information on students' level of satisfaction in key areas of their experience at York.

[The survey] results...should provide not only valuable insight on why students do not continue on to their second year, but valuable information on students' level of satisfaction in key areas of their experience at York.

The survey results will also have the benefit of comparison with the results of the 1985 ISR survey, which, to our knowledge, is the only previous comprehensive cross-Faculty survey of non-returning students. The basic themes of the 1985 survey instruments are covered by the present instruments. There are two areas of comparison that are of particular interest at the outset: the significance of financial considerations and academic advising as factors for deciding not to return to York. The significance of financial considerations in the decision not to return is given special attention because of the sharp increase in the cost of university education over the past decade. We will look to see whether financial considerations emerge as a more significant factor in the decision not to return in the results of our survey than they did in the results of the 1985 survey.

Dissatisfaction with academic advising bears special attention as a possible factor for students withdrawing from York because of concerns raised in the published report on the 1985 ISR survey. (1) The results of our survey should provide valuable feedback on how well current practices around academic advising are working and whether we should consider exploring new practices.

At present, the group is putting finishing touches on the survey instruments based on feedback it has received from participants at a recent YAF meeting. The survey intends to target students in the Faculties of Arts, Environmental Studies, Fine Arts, Glendon and Pure and Applied Science. The group plans to follow up the survey with student focus groups.

Project members currently include Barry Miller, Diane Beelen-Woody, Marla Chodak, Barbara Dodge, Pam Edgecombe, Beverly Giblon, Judy Libman and Ron Mitchell.

(1) Darroch, Gordon, David Northrup and Mirka Ondrack. Student Withdrawals at York University: First and Second Year Students, 1984-85. Institute for Social Research, 1989.

Classroom Research
Transforming Teaching and Learning

Classroom research is a process of collecting information from students to learn more about how they learn, and how they are responding to particular approaches to teaching. It involves the formulation of goals and systematic collection of feedback from students by individual instructors to address particular issues that have arisen in their teaching. It requires an expert knowledge of the discipline, an understanding of students' characteristics and needs, good analytic and problem-solving skills, and a lasting commitment to improving student learning – thus all faculty have the potential to use classroom research to improve student learning in their classes. The results can provide both faculty and students with information and insights that lead to improvements teaching effectiveness and learning quality.(1)

Within the broader framework of classroom research, classroom assessment is one approach for studying the effects of teaching on learning. It involves the use of instruments and techniques designed to inform instructors about the effect their teaching is having on the level and quality of student learning, which then informs their instructional decisions. Unlike tests and quizzes, classroom assessment can be used to help instructors identify gaps between what they teach and what students learn early enough in the course for them to be able to adjust their teaching. The information should always be shared with students to help them improve their learning strategies and study habits in order to become more successful, self-directed learners.

On the next page we have outlined several simple classroom assessment strategies that can be adapted and used to answer particular questions you might have about your students' learning. We hope that, in addition to providing useful feedback on student learning, their use will prompt discussion among colleagues about their effectiveness, and lead to new and better techniques for eliciting constructive feedback on teaching. Further information on these and other classroom assessment strategies is available at the CST Resource Centre.

(continued on page 11)

UNIVERSITY-WIDE
TEACHING AWARD WINNERS

Gottfried Paasche **(Sociology/Arts and Chair of the Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning)**

The Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning is pleased to announce the recipients of this year's University-Wide Teaching Award for teaching excellence. These awards honour those who have significantly enhanced learning at York.

The Committee received 15 strong files representing teachers across the campus who have clearly made an impact on their students and colleagues. The high quality of the nominations made the Committee's task very difficult. The Committee recognizes the work involved in putting the nomination files together, and thanks the students, faculty, and staff who took the time to put forward the nominees.

This year's winners are:

Harvey Mandel, *Psychology/Arts - full-time senior faculty (more than ten years).*

David Jopling, *Philosophy/Arts - full-time faculty (less than ten years).*

Radha Persaud, *Political Science/Arts, Atkinson and Glendon - part-time/contract/adjunct faculty.*

Alwin Cunje, *Graduate Programme in Chemistry - teaching assistant.*

Recipients receive a $3,000 honorarium sponsored by the York Parents' Association, have their names engraved on the University-Wide Teaching Award plaques in Vari Hall, and are presented with a citation at Convocation.

Watch for the call for next year's award competition to be circulated in the fall. The criteria and guidelines for this and other awards for teaching excellence are posted at http://www.yorku.ca/admin/cst/res/awards.htm.

(*Classroom Research continued from page 10)*

CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES

The One Minute Paper

The One-Minute Paper (1) is a technique that is used to provide instructors with feedback on what students are learning in a particular class. It may be introduced in small seminars or in large lectures, in first year courses and upper year courses.

The One-Minute Paper asks students to respond anonymously to the following questions:

The One Minute Paper

1. *What is the most important thing you learned in class today?*

2. *What question remains uppermost in your mind?*

Depending upon the structure and format of the class, the One-Minute Paper may be used in a variety of ways:

- During the lecture, to break up the period into smaller segments enabling students to reflect on the material just covered.
- At the end of the lecture, to inform your planning for the next class.
- In a course comprising lectures and tutorials, the information gleaned can be passed along to tutorial leaders giving them advance warning of issues that may be explored in the tutorial.

The Muddiest Point

An adaptation of the One-Minute Paper, the Muddiest Point is particularly useful in gauging how well students understand the lecture material. The Muddiest Point asks students:

What was the 'muddiest point' in my lecture today?

Like the One-Minute Paper, use of the Muddiest Point can helpfully inform your planning for the next class, and provide advance warning of issues that may be explored in the tutorial.

Caveat: Just as with course evaluations, the act of soliciting frank, in-the-moment feedback may elicit critical comments on what you are doing. It is difficult not to take these comments personally, and perhaps be discouraged by any suggestion that your intentions are anything but good. However, it is important to balance the positive commentary against the negative ones and not let them assume any greater weight. New users of this technique might find it helpful to discuss the critical comments with a disinterested colleague.

Critical Incident Questionnaires

The Critical Incident Questionnaire (3) is a simple classroom assessment tool that can be used to find out what and how students are learning, and identify areas where minor adjustments are necessary (e.g., the pace of the class, confusion respecting assignments or expectations). They also help illuminate power dynamics in the classroom that may not be obvious to the instructor.

On a single sheet of paper (with an attached carbon), students are asked five questions which focus on critical moments or actions in a programme or class. The questionnaire is handed out about ten minutes before the last class of the week.

Critical Incident Questionnaire

1. *At what moment in class were you most engaged as a learner?*
2. *At what moment in class this week were you most distanced as a learner?*
3. *What action that anyone in the room took this week did you find most affirming or helpful?*
4. *What action that anyone in the room took this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?*
5. *What surprised you most about the class this week?*

As students write their responses to these questions, the carbon provides a copy that they can keep for themselves. This allows them to review their responses over the length of the course and to notice common preferences, dispositions, and points of avoidance in their learning. The top copies (unsigned) are returned to the instructor. The anonymity of the feedback is considered crucial in order to receive honest accurate commentary on the class.

One Sentence Summaries

One Sentence Summaries (2) can be used to find out how concisely, completely and creatively students can summarize a given topic within the grammatical constraints of a single sentence. It is also effective for helping students break down material into smaller units that are more easily recalled. This strategy is most effective for any material that can be represented in declarative form – historical events, story lines, chemical reactions and mechanical processes.

The One Sentence Summary strategy involves asking students to consider the topic you are discussing in terms of *Who Does/Did What to Whom, How, When, Where and Why*, and then to synthesize those answers into a single informative, grammatical sentence. These sentences can then be analyzed to determine strengths and weaknesses in the students' understanding of the topic, or specific elements of the topic that require further elaboration. Before using this strategy it is important to make sure the topic *can* be summarized coherently – try doing it yourself first, you may not find it appropriate or feasible for certain material.

(references on page 12)

TA DAY 2000

18th Annual TA Day Conference

A one-day conference of professional development for Teaching Assistants at York University

Thursday, September 7, 2000

for more information see our website at www.yorku.ca/admin/cst/res/taday.htm

(Classroom Research from page 11)

(1) Angelo, T.A. (ed.) Cla*ssroom Research: Early Lessons from Success*. New Directions in Teaching and Learning (# 46), San Francisco, California: Jossey Bass, 1991.

(2) Cross, K. P. and Angelo, T. A. *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for Faculty*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning, 1988.

(3) Brookfield, Stephen J. and Preskill, S. *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for a Democratic Classroom*. San Francisco, California: Jossey Bass, 1999.

COURSE DESIGN INSTITUTE

RE-THINKING YOUR COURSE

The Centre for the Support of Teaching will be offering a series of sessions on May 1 – 4, 2000 for York instructors wishing to:

- Revamp a course or design a new one
- Rethink course objectives, teaching strategies, or assignments
- Explore in depth specific teaching and learning strategies and evaluation practices
- Reflect on teaching and learning issues with colleagues across and within disciplines
- Promote greater involvement of students in active learning.

The Institute aims to provide individuals and course teams with the opportunity, over a four day period (May 1 – 4, 2000), to re-think their courses or develop new ones. The programme will be structured to enable participants to learn about and explore a range of course design issues and active learning strategies. Intensive, hands-on sessions on particular aspects of course design will be offered in combination with time for substantive work on your own course and/or discussion with colleagues about particular approaches to teaching. Issues to be addressed in the sessions may include, for example, teaching large classes, handling discussion, collaborative learning, assessing student learning, incorporating appropriate technologies in teaching, preventing plagiarism, teaching critical skills.

To register for this event, please contact the Centre for the Support of Teaching
111 Central Square
(416) 736-5754
cst@yorku.ca

UNIVERSITÉ YORK UNIVERSITY

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