



# Saskatchewan



# Notes

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## **The People's Free University: Counteracting the innovation agenda on campus and model for lifelong learning**

— by *Michael Collins*

With wind-chill, it was -41 on the night of the Open House and first graduation ceremonies for the People's Free University. Not a night to venture out for meetings. Yet the large basement meeting room of St. Thomas-Wesley Church on 20th Street West was packed with people from the community, including Saskatoon activists and a sprinkling of progressive academic types. They were present to celebrate the achievements of learners and volunteer teachers at PFU's recently completed first session and to launch the spring term courses, workshops, and public lectures. We were "Unearthing Seeds of Fire" (Adams & Horton, 1975), on the coldest Saskatchewan March evening in memory, to cultivate a new community-based educational initiative.

Education for PFU advocates is still very much a public good in contrast to calculating market-driven "knowledge economy" imperatives so completely embraced by our publicly funded university (MacKinnon, 2003).

### The Corporate Campus in Question

The People's Free University emerged from a series of "bag lunch" public meetings organized at the University of Saskatchewan (U. of S.) within the Educational Foundations department. The main topic was how the wholesale adoption of the federal government's current innovation policy agenda for universities shapes priority setting and planning for the reallocation of resources on campus. This agenda is advanced by an ideological discourse on "research intensiveness", "integrated planning", and the necessity for a cumbersome, top-down "systematic program review". Marketplace criteria for assessing the value of publicly funded university education are invoked to justify substantial increases in student fees.

In particular, the enthronement of the Canadian Light Source ("Synchrotron") project on campus gives rise to reasonable concern about what this massive commitment will draw from other parts of the university. So far, the "Synchrotron" has been overwhelmingly financed through the public purse, with no guarantees of continued adequate funding from that source, and negligible contributions from the corporate sector which will be a major, arguably *the* major, beneficiary. While news reports and editorials in *The Saskatoon Star Phoenix* have served, by and large, to reinforce the university's promotion of its corporate initiatives, a recent editorial now acknowledges that the innovation agenda involves "ongoing costs" for the university and community (SP Editorial, March 10, 2003).

The bag lunch public interest seminar series, beginning November 21, 2001, was entitled "U. of S. Ltd: W(h)ither the Corporate University?" Each forum of the series, focusing on particular aspects of the corporate agenda at the University of

Saskatchewan, was well attended and received local and national media attention. The faculty, undergraduate and graduate students, support staff, and community activists who attended represented applied sciences as well as arts and science. The Faculty Association, welcoming the emergence of an alternative to the one-sided management monologues on corporate style innovation, provided support for further sessions organized by "concerned faculty" to examine recent trends which exemplify the new corporate culture at the U. of S. and other Canadian universities. This counter-discourse from within the Faculty Association shows signs of gathering momentum (Findlay, 2003).

### Everyone Can Learn - Everyone Can Teach

"Whatever happened to the People's University?" This question referred to a founding statement made by the University of Saskatchewan's first President, Walter Murray, that "this is the university of the people, established by the people" (Hayden, 1984). It was posed early, and often, during the bag lunch sessions. The genesis of PFU emerged from a small but open meeting, immediately following an Educational Foundations Bag Lunch public seminar, of community activists, concerned faculty, and students who wanted to address this question in some practical way. Since significant discussion among those attending the public seminars had focused on the issue of tuition fee increases, the notion of offering free courses was raised at this initial PFU meeting. Subsequent PFU organizational meetings (open to the public) were held at off-campus locations, mainly on the west side of town – a mixed blue collar, aboriginal, and ethnic neighborhood.

No particular model was presented to influence the early organizational meetings of PFU. Rather, a curriculum development process and discussions on possible future directions were facilitated according to a grassroots approach (Welton, 1987) that is consistent with this province's historical legacy in community oriented adult education. At the same time, however, a

meaningful variation of the slogan "Anyone can teach - anyone can learn" was borrowed from The Free University: Model for Lifelong Learning (Draves, 1984) which confirmed that the aims and principles for adult learning being adopted by PFU make sense. As community adult education, PFU is very much about friends learning from friends (Collins, 1991/94).

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From the outset, there was no problem in finding enthusiastic volunteers who wanted to teach. Over 200 learners, ranging in age from 12 to 82 and varying in formal education background from Ph.D's to those who had given up on formal schooling, enrolled in the first PFU classes.

Students in "academically oriented" classes (the PFU program also includes public lectures and workshops) have the option of submitting work for detailed feedback and conventional grading. Otherwise, PFU certificates that can form part of a learner's portfolio on academic achievement are issued for all learning events. In this regard, PFU is anticipating the wider adoption in higher education, including the University of Saskatchewan, of a policy that allows credit for past experience through prior learning assessment (PLA).

### **The Innovation Agenda: Is There No Alternative?**

That modern universities are becoming "an annex of the corporate system" has been apparent since The Free Speech Movement in the 1960's

(Cohen & Zelnik, 2003), which coincided with the beginning of free university classes at Berkeley. Now there is widespread acceptance of an authoritative insistence that "there is no alternative" (TINA)

but acquiescence on-campus to global marketplace imperatives. Echoing this favorite catch-phrase of neo-conservative icon, Margaret Thatcher, U. of S. President (and President-Elect of the Association of

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Universities and Colleges of Canada) MacKinnon proclaims "there is no alternative" to a market-driven innovation agenda that positions students as consumer units and higher education as a private good for economic advancement. No doubt, university presidents face daunting challenges in sustaining the viability of publicly funded higher education. Yet it is far from evident that re-shaping campus priorities directly in line with Ottawa's current policy agenda on innovation is the most effective way to invest public funds for economic growth, let alone increase accessibility for young Canadians to our publicly funded universities. More likely, the "innovation, innovation, innovation" mantra accompanied by the ideology of TINA is taking our universities down "Corporate Road" towards privatized education (Polster, 2003). This is the same road taken by universities in the UK where faculty are increasingly demoralized (Smithers, 2003) and universities are already in crisis (Emery-Barker, 2003). Government policy on higher education, already rife with contradictions, now demands that universities make their business enterprise agenda much more accessible to undergraduates.

### **Lifelong Learning and Community Development**

It can still make sense to view university education as a public rather than private good. The prospect of free tuition raised by the PFU initiative is not necessarily out of the question. Contrary to policy initiatives elsewhere in the UK, the Welsh National Assembly insists that a policy of free tuition will

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continue in Wales that, in many relevant respects, is disadvantaged economically compared to the rest of the UK as Saskatchewan is to Canada. The PFU initiative looks to the original aims of lifelong learning – a concept that has been hijacked by educational bureaucrats and the pundits of management human resource development (HRD) – as a public good. It shares the UNESCO vision of lifelong learning (Faure, 1972), yet to be realized, that prefigures a radical restructuring of educational systems for ordinary men, women, and children rather than for serving corporate interests, the commodification of learning processes, and the emergence on a global scale of "coca-cola pedagogy".

Locally, the PFU model of community-based participatory approaches can be instructive even for Saskatchewan's distinctive "SchoolPlus" policy on community schools (Woodhouse, 2003) which, while reasonably viewed as progressive for these times, is steered by top-down bureaucratic implementation strategies. Likewise, there is legitimate concern that the allocation of public funds for community research and development initiatives is largely steered according to academic interests. In contrast, PFU poses vital questions about where scarce resources for community education are going and in whose interests. With regard to the publicly funded corporate university, the emergence of PFU confirms that public interests need to be more prominent in determining both on-campus priorities and the university's community-oriented obligations.

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*Michael Collins is Professor of Adult Education in the Department of Educational Foundations at the University of Saskatchewan, founding member of the People's Free University, and a Research Associate with the Saskatchewan Office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.*

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**Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – SK**

**2717 Wentz Ave., Saskatoon, SK S7K 4B6**

**Ph: 306-978-5308 — Fax: 306-922-9162**

**Email: [ccpasask@sasktel.net](mailto:ccpasask@sasktel.net) / Website: [www.policyalternatives.ca/sk](http://www.policyalternatives.ca/sk)**