

Research Notes/Notes de Recherche

Student Administration and Administrative Careers 1921–59

Charles Levi

The Literary and Athletic Society of University College at the University of Toronto was founded in 1854 as the Literary and Scientific Society. It followed an established tradition in the British Isles and the United States whereby university students organized outside the curriculum to practice their oratorical powers through essays, readings, and debates. They thus allowed for the perfection of certain skills not enshrined in the Canadian curriculum, yet considered “ideal education for the men of letters.”¹

The Literary Society and its activities continued until after the end of the Great War, when the Society was reorganized. Students in the Society saw a connection between its activities and their likely future careers. Although persons entering University College before 1921 had diverse occupational and socio-economic origins, they left University College almost entirely as professionals, taking careers in the law, clergy, medicine, and academia. University graduates might have entered these professions in any case, but apologists for the Lit. nonetheless drew a direct link between participation in the Society and these career paths. As one former officer of the Society put it in 1895:

It will be well-nigh impossible for any [student] to escape from more or less public speaking after they have turned their backs on the scenes of their student days, and have entered upon their chosen calling in life, whether law, business, medicine, the ministry, teaching, or journalism be the ultimate choice. It is a very safe prediction that not a single student now attending this university will be able to run his allotted course in life without being called upon somewhere in his career to pause and speak to those crowding around him, who wish to know and to learn, who want his thought and opinions.²

¹James McLachlan, “The Choice of Hercules: American Student Societies in the Early 19th Century”, in Lawrence Stone, ed., *The University in Society*, Vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 488–9.

²*Varsity*, 13 November 1895.

Another commentator in 1900 noted that graduates who lacked this ability were "to some extent at least going to make a failure"³ in their future careers.

Before 1921, the Literary Society was as a means to meet students and spend time away from the drudgery of the classroom, but also a vital part of the career training of future graduates of University College.

Beginning in the fall of 1920, the organization of undergraduate activities at University College changed significantly as the result of discussions among the college student population. The Literary Society had been restarted after three years of dormancy, but was attracting few students to its meetings. The *Varsity* in March of 1920 described it as "struggling wearily along."⁴ Steps were taken in the next academic year to reform it. The impetus for reform is not known, but it appears the Literary Society had become a refuge for students in History and Political Economy, alienating the remainder of the College population. A new, less specialized, and more social organization was thought needful. And so, in February, 1921, the Literary and Scientific Society was no more, as the Literary and Athletic Society took its place.⁵

Change was slow, but a decade later the organization was fundamentally different. Debates among University College students had been reduced to one each year, and readings and essays completely eliminated. The number and scope of dances organized by the Society increased dramatically, and the University College Follies, an annual musical revue, became part of the Lit's offerings.

The "dance-crazy" students of the interwar years have been well documented by Paul Axelrod and Brian McKillop. Both point out that dancing was a way for students to express the independence of their generation, challenge earlier ideals, and meet members of the opposite sex in a controlled setting.⁶ University College was a non-denominational institution, and the generational rebellion involved in holding dances less pronounced than at other institutions. But at University College dances and the Follies were more than social events. They were tests of the administrative competence of the executive of the Literary and Athletic Society.

Two incidents exemplify the new emphasis on administration at the Society. In 1925, a formal debate on the amalgamation of the CNR and CPR

³*Varsity*, 21 February 1900.

⁴*Varsity*, 17 March 1920.

⁵See *Varsity*, 16, 18 February, 7, 9 March 1921.

⁶A.B. McKillop, *Matters of Mind: The University in Ontario 1791-1951*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1994, 413-4; Paul Axelrod, *Making a Middle Class: Student Life in English Canada during the Thirties*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990, 113-4.

was delayed by an extended discussion regarding the discovery of twenty-three forged tickets to the U.C. Follies. The debate was not allowed to proceed until the Lit. had hammered out a mechanism to prevent a recurrence.⁷ More significant was the 1938 crisis over money-handling during the Follies. The Society called in professional auditors, who discovered a discrepancy of \$89.00 in the Follies accounts. A long discussion of these matters ensued at a Society meeting, which tightened up procedures for the Follies. The Lit. at length allowed their invited guest speaker, The Honourable Leopold Macaulay, M.P.P, who represented the "literary" part of the program, to give his address.⁸ The priorities of the Society had certainly changed.

Dances could cause a similar fuss. In 1948, the Society held two meetings within a week on the question whether the annual Arts Ball should be formal or semi-formal.⁹ Again in 1949 and 1952, the question of holding the Ball, and how to organize it, pushed all other matters, especially literary ones, completely off the agenda.¹⁰

The Society was particularly seized by the matter of student space at the College. In 1924 the University College Council granted the Lit. a Junior Common Room or JCR, the first space which the Lit controlled completely. Administration of the JCR became a perennial problem. In 1930 the Lit. had to deal with the question of abuse of equipment in the room, warning that "drastic measures will be taken if any further destruction ensues."¹¹ In 1937, a professor reported the JCR to be a "pig pen," and throughout World War II the Society struggled to make the room more "livable." Three meetings in 1946 resulted from an executive decision to close the JCR because of excessive filth, and throughout the 1940s and 1950s the Society fought both the garbage situation in the room and the thorny problem of bridge players monopolizing tables during lunch hours, finally banning card playing in the room in 1957.¹²

Taken individually, any one of these incidents could easily be dismissed as just another undergraduate tempest in a tea pot, the sort that makes for happy alumni memories as chequebooks are brought out at annual reunions. The pattern of increasing administrative detail, coupled with less and less literary activity, remains. Even the creation of a University College Literary

⁷*Varsity*, 9 December 1925.

⁸Lit. Meeting Minutes, 2 February 1938, University of Toronto Archives (UTA)/University College/A69-0011; *Varsity*, 3 February 1938.

⁹*Varsity*, 12, 17 February, 148.

¹⁰Lit. Meeting minutes 2 November 1949, 2 December 1952.

¹¹Lit. Executive minutes, 2 December 1930, UTA/Literary and Athletic Society Executive Minutes/A75-0013.

¹²*Varsity*, 7, 14 February 1957.

magazine, the *Undergraduate*, was chiefly an administrative exercise for the Society's officers (as opposed to the students who actually wrote for it.)

The rhetoric used by both Lit. officers and those who spoke about the Society began to change. Commentators in the *Varsity* continued to fret about the "executive competence" of the students who ran for the organization.¹³ R.A. Bell, writing a history of the Society on its eightieth anniversary in 1934, stressed the countless outstanding men that the Lit. had trained for public service,¹⁴ and David Gauthier at the hundredth anniversary declared that the Lit. could point to the success of its officers in later life, thus "giving proof that tilting with windmills is good practice for more serious struggles." Oratorical skill was denigrated, as Gauthier noted: the Lit. "says much, though not always to great purpose."¹⁵ In its activities and in its public face to the University, the Literary Society had by now entirely eliminated its nineteenth century humanist roots to embrace an administrative ethic.

This pattern is all the more remarkable in the context of the future careers of the officers of the Society from 1921–1959. The number of officers becoming physicians, journalists, clergymen, and academics all dropped significantly, while the number who became accountants, consultants, insurance agents, managers, and white collar workers increased. Even the lawyers, who in percentage terms increased slightly in this period, seem to have been practising a different *type* of law, with several joining the civil service and a few engaging in significant business activity. Whereas 80 per cent of the officers of the Lit. prior to 1921 had gone into the traditional occupations, in the 1921 to 1959 period the figure drops to 55 per cent, and this figure is most likely high because the traditional occupations are easier to track than administrative careers which, for various reasons, leave less evidence.

The data collected on some 1,876 Lit. officers from 1854–1973 as compared to the activities of the Society thus points to a connection between administrative activities as a student and careers in administration. But further aspects of the data, and of Canadian society in the period, make this conclusion less definite.

For example, the officers of the Lit. during the period 1922–1959 contained a disproportionate number of students in the Commerce and Finance course at the University. The connection between the BComm degree and the ambitions of professional accountants has been outlined in Phillip

¹³See *Varsity*, 13 January 1934, 22, 26 February 1940, 6 March 1946.

¹⁴R.A. Bell, "The 'Lit' 1854–1934", *Undergraduate Magazine*, University College Literary and Athletic Society, 1934, 28–9.

¹⁵David Gauthier, "Student '54", in Claude Bissell, ed., *University College: A Portrait*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953, 7.

Creighton's history of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario,¹⁶ and certainly other rising professions saw the degree as a necessary prerequisite for success. The possibility exists, then, that these Commerce students would have ended up in their professions without the Literary Society.

But, then again, there is evidence that the Commerce course attracted a high percentage of the best students at University College. Maurice Hutton complained in the late 1920s that the Commerce and Finance course, along with economics, was engaging "the best brains of our students,"¹⁷ leaving few good students to enter his Classics course. If the better students are more prominent on campus and more respected among their peers, then this could explain the disproportionate number who ended up on the Lit. Did the Lit. attract Commerce students because it was an administrative organization, or was it *becoming* an administrative organization because Commerce students, along with Political Economy honours students, were being elected in large numbers? Or were both trends merely reactions to other pressures on the University?

One thing was not a factor, and that was outside interference from University administrators. There is no evidence the change in activities at the Lit. was mandated or shaped by the University College Council—in fact, almost precisely the opposite was true. A succession of University presidents and College principals spoke out against the perception that the University of Toronto, and University College, was a "trade school" devoted to the preparation of managers and accountants.

A notable example was the discussions between the Life Underwriters Association of Canada and the University in 1925. The Life Underwriters wished to see a University course in Insurance; instead, they were granted a series of extension lectures which concentrated on abstract mathematics rather than practical problems, and few students completed the course. Pressing for a more practical programme, the Underwriters were told the function of the university was to provide general education, and the only way to raise the standards of life underwriters was to recruit graduates from the universities and train them afterwards. The Underwriters contented themselves with the extension courses.¹⁸

¹⁶Phillip Creighton, *A Sum of Yesterdays: Being a History of the First One Hundred Years of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Ontario* (Toronto: The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario, 1984), 110, 154–8.

¹⁷Maurice Hutton, *The Sisters Jest and Earnest* (Toronto: Musson Book Company, [1930?]), 142.

¹⁸Leslie W. Dunstall, *The Story of the Life Underwriters Association of Canada 1906–1956*, (Toronto: Life Underwriters of Canada, 1956), 65–6, 70–1.

There was further opposition to vocational training in the professoriate. In 1945, C.A. Ashley of the Political Economy department informed Sidney Smith, then Principal of University College, that he had begun negotiations with certain business firms in order to convince them to accept graduates but believed this project should not be conducted by a department of the University.¹⁹ The purpose of Professors was to teach their subjects, not to worry about career opportunities for their students. Or, as Professor S.B. Stocking said of the Commerce Course in the *University of Toronto Monthly* of October, 1946:

The Department does not treat the curriculum as a professional one, although many of the subjects are obviously useful to students entering the business world. In fact, it is felt that a great deal of the strength of the undergraduate course lies in the maintenance of the Arts tradition and that professional education can be most effectively offered at the graduate level.²⁰

The University, then, was not consciously aiding and abetting administrative training within its walls. Yet students received a different message.

It is conceivable that parental influence may have shaped career decisions of students in the home long before they attended any classes or meetings of the Lit. Fifty to sixty per cent of the sons of businessmen and white-collar workers, at least as far as the Society's officers were concerned, concentrated in Commerce and General courses, compared to only thirty per cent of the sons of professionals. Sons of professionals clustered in the honours courses. Almost every member of the Lit. executive from 1921 to 1959 taking an honours course outside Political Economy was the son of a professional. If the institutions themselves were not supporting vocational training, the consumers of the product in society at large had different ideas and priorities.

Even so, the change in the activities of the Literary and Athletic Society and the way they match the pattern of career choices after graduation are striking. If the data do not make clear the necessary linkages, might it be that experience of administrative activities during student careers made students *better* administrators after graduation? Here the quantitative data have to yield to qualitative and anecdotal evidence. Certain former officers of the Lit. *did* become prominent in administrative activities in their later careers. Among lawyers, Beverley Matthews became one of the acknowledged masters of managing large law firms. In accountancy, four ex-officers ascended to vice-presidencies and presidencies of corporations, most prominently Earl Orser at

¹⁹C.A. Ashley to Sidney Smith, 28 March 1945, UTA/Office of the President (Smith)/A68-0006/63(01).

²⁰S.B. Stocking, "Education for Business Careers in the University of Toronto", *University of Toronto Monthly*, October, 1946, 6-7.

London Life. Four who went into Life Insurance became significant members of various professional associations, including the now forgotten Harrington Guy, president of the Canadian Life Insurance Officers Association and subject of several glowing obituaries in accounting journals in North America. Ian Montagnes moved from the Lit. into publishing, and John Lowden received a listing in the *Canadian Who's Who* as a management consultant.

Anecdotal evidence, to be sure, is often no evidence at all, but a large group of former Lit. officers ascended to high levels in their chosen professions. No decisive trend is present in the qualitative evidence, leaving the question of the connection between student administration and administrative careers still largely unanswered. But we can at least add it to our list of questions about the importance of the extracurriculum in the preparation of students for later life. Did the type of extracurricular activity pursued by students in Canadian universities have a marked impact on career decisions? Can changes in the shape of these activities be identified as conscious career moves by student populations? Most work done on student institutions has been dedicated to issues of cultural transfer and generational rebellion. The question of student activities as vocational training has not been as clearly studied, and it is in this direction that future research should proceed.