

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JAMES E. CÔTÉ and ANTON L. ALLAHAR, *Ivory Tower Blues: A University System in Crisis*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007, x + 244 p., index.

Professors James Côté and Anton Allahar, two sociologists at the University of Western Ontario, have created a riveting and controversial book, long overdue, focusing on the topic of student disengagement and the implications of grade inflation for Canadian universities. *Ivory Tower Blues* is well-positioned to become a watershed in the literature on Canadian higher education. Written in the critical tradition of Pierre Berton's (1964) *The Comfortable Pew*, it has received much attention from CBC radio interviewers Michael Enright (*The Sunday Edition*) and Rex Murphy (*Cross Country Checkup*). It has begun to generate considerable debate, hailed by professors, and pooh-poohed by administrators like Heather Munroe-Blum of McGill University. The trouble is, the Anglican Church's Department of Religious Education invited Pierre Berton, as a renowned agnostic, to write a critique of the Church. Anton Allahar and James Côté are insiders to the Canadian university system, which has its advantages, but can also constrain what can be published, even with the safeguards of tenure and academic freedom. Although it is a strong beginning, this book leaves unarticulated much more that should be said.

*Ivory Tower Blues* is written for several audiences: Canadian professors, university students, their parents, and policy-makers. More and more, they argue, professors must adopt the role of gatekeepers, cooling out unqualified students, a task that was previously performed by high schools. Because universities operate on the corporate model, some students act like clients, demanding grades to which they are not entitled, simply because they have paid their tuition, and take revenge on professors who award low grades through teacher evaluations. Because many sessional, limited term and untenured professors are intimidated by student evaluations, which are used in hiring, promotion, and tenure, they award inflated grades that keep students "happy" playing the system. There are the parents who hover over their children in university, seeking to protect their investment, calling professors when their child receives a low mark. University administrators, many of whom have not been in the classroom for years, are blind to these realities, wrapped up in a marketing frenzy to see that student enrollments do not fall below a certain quota. Côté and Allahar have provided three mechanisms with which to fight the tide of what they term the encroaching "BA – lite": (1) a language to debate the crisis, (2) a solid body of evidence, and (3) suggestions for some solutions. One recommendation

that will be welcomed by some professors is their suggestion to discontinue the practice of answering student e-mail. They also propose that student evaluations of the professoriate, which presently contribute to grade inflation, must be reformed, so that “faculty assessment [is] more closely linked to student achievement” (166). What remains the true irony, is that the radicals of the 1970s successfully created the “student power” now being misused.

Anyone who has taught in the “front lines” of an introductory class of several hundred students in any discipline will be able to readily identify with the arguments in this book. Canadian universities are indeed in crisis, but more than that, pushing slightly further than the rational language that enabled Côté and Allahar to get their work published, the system has become fundamentally corrupt. One only needs to take note of how many unqualified foreign students are being admitted for their high tuition fees, the presence of widespread plagiarism requiring the hiring of Academic Integrity Officers, the need for Conflict Resolution Officers to handle the cases of threats and harassment of professors by students and their “helicopter parents,” not to mention the risk of getting shot and killed if one is in the wrong classroom at the wrong time. After all, if the system openly operates as edu-business and under a corporate model, why shouldn’t it be susceptible to the same corporate scandals as an Enron, a World Com, or a Conrad Black? More needs to be done; Ivory Tower Blues claims the need for debate, but it also represents a call to action. This systemic corruption should be resisted in the same way Canadian professors worked against the invasion of American scholars in the academic appointments of the 1970s. By all means, professors, students, parents, administrators and policy-analysts should read and discuss this book. One can only hope that it does more than lecture to the already converted.

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