

Cutting classes

McGill project would make lectures obsolete

BY KRISTIN ANDREWS (CUP)

LECTURES MAY SOON BE A THING OF the past, if a McGill University professor's experiment catches on.

Proponents of the Atlantis Project want Canada's universities to replace lecture-hall courses with small tutorials.

"We've got to cease the over-teaching that goes on at university," said Paul Piehler, who aims to have a pilot version of Atlantis in place by next fall.

Piehler has been working toward alternatives to what he called the "obsolete" classroom lecture systems since he took a break from teaching medieval literature at McGill two years ago.

His vision is to replace all lecture classes with seminars of four students and one tutor.

While most McGill students take five courses at a time, the Atlantis Project would limit students' course loads to one or two tutorials per term. "I'm talking about ruthlessly cutting down on the quantity of student

work, giving increased possibility for the raising of quality," Piehler said.

Students would do all the reading for the course before the tutorial started, so that work in the seminar could focus on writing and editing of final papers. Students would be evaluated with verbal feedback in place of letter grades.

Atlantis is different from a lecture system because "students are encouraged to define their own problems and seek the solutions themselves," said Warwick Armstrong, a professor of geography at McGill and a supporter of the project.

The Atlantis Project is similar to the system which has been used at Cambridge and Oxford Universities since the 15th century, but this system is expensive, and some people think that increasing student contact with faculty would mean spending more money which Canadian universities don't have.

The McGill administration has approved only \$12,000 as seed money for the project, after which Atlantis will have to find its own funding.

At Dawson College in Montreal, a special Liberal Arts program attempts to accomplish some of the goals of the Atlantis Project. Classes are small (about forty people) and

students are encouraged to work closely together to learn from each other. "It is a little bit more expensive," said David Mulhall, a history teacher at Dawson who administers the Liberal Arts program. "But in the end, the students have a much more integrated education. They're much readier for university."

Some Atlantis supporters argue that the project is worth the extra money and that it might even be cheaper to run than the current system.

No new faculty would have to be hired, Piehler said. The time saved from lecture preparation and marking would provide more time for consulting students and for their own work.

Because the study would be more intense, degrees would take a year less to complete, Piehler said. Such a time savings could save universities money.

Piehler said he sees huge potential savings by cutting back on university administration in coordination with the tutorial system. "In the long run, the need for

administration enormously diminishes, because the relationship is all between the tutor and the students."

Students could probably operate much of the university administration themselves, Piehler added.

Piehler's cost-cutting claims have caused some ears to perk up in Ottawa. Stuart Smith, chair of the Royal Commission on Post-Secondary Education, has begun to look closely at the proposal.

"The Atlantis people are asking some important questions," said Smith. "Can the Oxford model be done in a way that saves money as opposed to costing more money? Can self-directed learning actually be cheaper than the form of mass education we're used to?"

While Smith is willing to look at the possibility that tutorials could save money in the humanities faculties, he, like others, is doubtful the system could be applied to teaching in the sciences without extra cost.

If the Atlantis Project flies, it will be unique in Canada. Brown University in Rhode Island implemented a similar program last fall. The Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado has used a tutorial system for many years.

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Opting out of CFS

Council planning alternative to CFS

BY G. BRUCE ROLSTON (CUP)

A GROUP OF CANADIAN UNIVERSITY student councils has formed a new business alliance that they say will unite the Canadian student market.

The Canadian Campus Business Consortium may also be the first step towards a new national student organization.

Involved are the student unions of Western, Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier, Queen's, UBC, Toronto, Dalhousie, and the University of Alberta.

The cross-Canada group is for business purposes only, stressed Dalhousie student council president Jefferson Rappell.

"This is totally a business initiative. The initiative isn't political," he said.

But University of Toronto student councillor Merry-LN Unan said the Consortium's founding conference, which she attended last week, also discussed forming a parallel political organization, to rival the existing Canadian Federation of Students.

"There are schools that were not happy with CFS. We were looking at the idea of what the perfect national organization would be."

None of the student unions involved, with the exception of Dalhousie, are members of CFS.

"They are looking for something to fill that void in their schools," said Rappell.

Unan said the rival political organization would have views similar to those of the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

(OUSA), which is a more conservative alternative to the Ontario branch of the Canadian Federation of Students. The OUSA agenda includes support for a user-pay tuition system backed with income-contingent loans.

All the schools in OUSA are involved in the new national business corporation. Western, Waterloo, Laurier and Queen's are founding members; Brock and Toronto are considering membership.

"The policies discussed were OUSA policies," said Unan.

Carl Gillis, chair of the Canadian Federation of Students, said he had not heard of the Canadian Campus Business Consortium or its possible political offshoot. He said he was not sure whether such a group would pose a threat to CFS, either in the business or political fields.

"To be honest, I haven't heard too much about it," he said. "I'd have to see exactly what they want to do."

Belonging to the Canadian Campus Business Consortium will cost councils approximately \$5,000 for the first year. Projects the CCBC might undertake include bulk paper-buying for all student councils across the country, or producing an advertising rate card for all student handbooks across the country to allow advertisers to sell nationally.

"We're just talking about adding everything together that students do. You can do it a lot cheaper," said Rappell.



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