

University Students' Perceptions on the Role of the University in 2009: An International Survey

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Abstract

What are the current perceptions of university students about the role of the university? To answer this question, a survey was conducted and results were collected from the University of Ottawa in Canada, Europe, and North America. Results indicated that students feel academically challenged and support the role of the university in promoting a society which respects human dignity and the free exchange of ideas. While over half of the students who participated in the study felt comfortable expressing their personal views, there is still a number of students who are uncomfortable. Overall, students felt the University meets their educational and future work needs. To encourage learning amongst all members, the university should support programs that encourage critical thinking, increase dialogue on contentious issues, and improve the exchange of ideas through Co-op and International Exchange Programs.

Introduction

What is the role of the university in a pluralistic society? According to historians, the earliest institution of higher learning is the University of Constantinople, established in 425 A.D. Officially, defining an academic institution as a university requires that it conforms to the codes of individual countries; however, at its heart, the university is a community of teachers and scholars, based on the Latin term for university, *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*. As an institution, the university has gradually evolved from this foundational notion of a common journey towards truth through discussion, such as that found in Plato's Academy, to official institutes of higher learning, promoting research, teaching, and academic independence. Just as external influences such as humanism, the Enlightenment, and the Reformation have affected the development of the university, the university continues to evolve. Marvin Bartell, in his study entitled, "Internationalization of Universities: A University culture-based framework", suggests that in the last two decades alone, "universities worldwide have come under increasing pressures to adapt to rapidly changing social, technological, economic and political forces" (43). More significantly, the "demands of global capitalism hinder the university's ability to fulfill its cultural mission," and that in the aftermath, universities are becoming more concerned with "... equip[ping] students with the necessary knowledge and skills in preparation for the job market" (Sportn 1999, p.70), which is increasingly global in character" (44).

The definition of the university as an institute of higher learning is evolving to such an extent that it is "revolutionary, rather than evolutionary" (Kerr 1987; cited in Bartell 44), as the demands of a globalized job market replace ideals of cultural formation and search for truth. The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions of university students on the role of the university in a pluralistic society. We expect that University students perceive that 1) the responsibility of the university is to inspire a thirst for knowledge, promote a society which respects human dignity and the free exchange of ideas, but since 2) they do not feel comfortable expressing their personal values, ideas, and opinions on campus and in the classroom, 3) the university is merely a place where their basic educational needs are met for their future employment.

Methodology

A survey was created to evaluate the role of the university. It includes six demographic-related questions, fourteen Likert scale questions regarding student perception and an open-ended comment section (See appendix A). The goal was to create a survey that takes five minutes or less to complete, and can be easily distributed and returned either in person, by mail, fax, or email. A pilot study was conducted among a small number of students in Ottawa, Canada to obtain preliminary feedback, from which the comments were used to evaluate and refine the survey. Through investigators affiliated with the study, students in Mexico, Rome, Spain, and Canada were contacted in order to obtain a global perspective for the subsequent analysis.

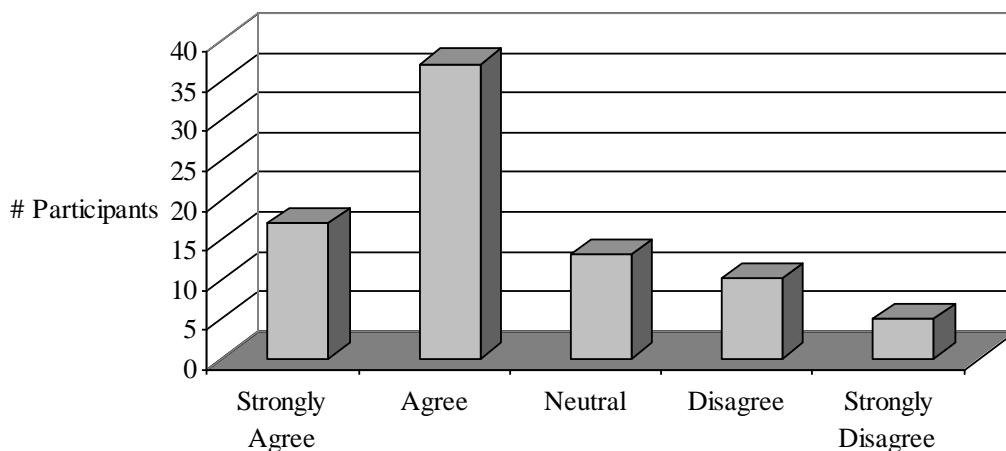
Results

We received paper surveys from the University of Ottawa (n=59) and electronic surveys from Europe (n=6) and North America (n=18). In total, 83 surveys were collected. The majority of students were between the ages of 19 and 20 (41%, n=33), female (63%, n=52), Roman Catholic (47%, n=39), studying Science (24%, n=20) or Social Science (23%, n=19), studying in North America (90%, n=74) and in 3rd year (30%, n=26). Analysis of the survey questions is grouped according to hypothesis statement. To facilitate analysis, agreement is defined as “strongly agree or agree” and disagreement is defined as “disagree and strongly disagree.”

1. *The responsibility of the university is to inspire a thirst for knowledge, promote a society which respects human dignity and the free exchange of ideas.*

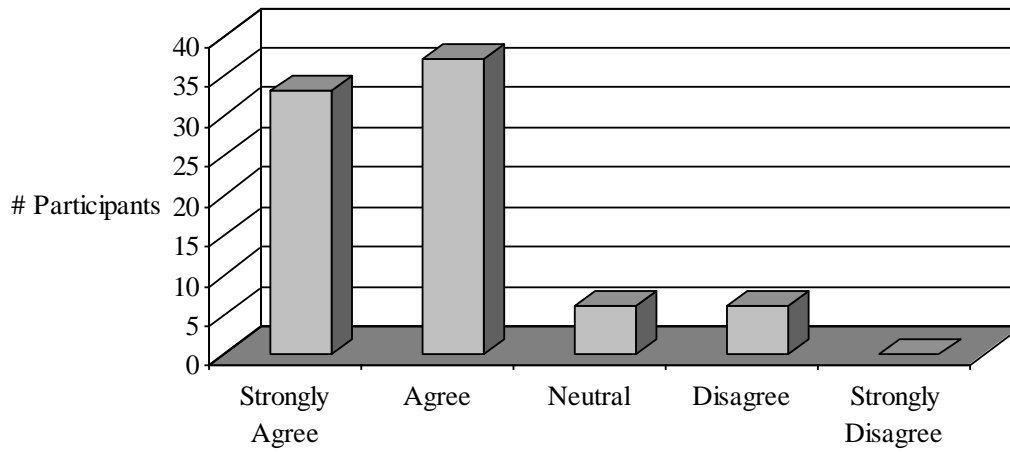
Most students agree (66%, n=54) that they are being challenged by the education they are receiving at university.

I feel academically challenged by my education at the university. (N=82)



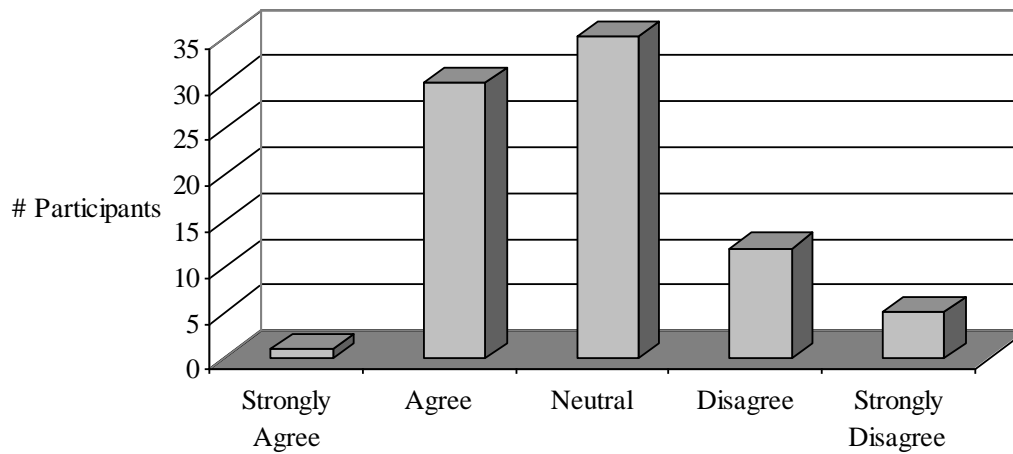
The majority of students agree (84%, n=70) that they are responsible for educating themselves at the university.

I believe I am responsible for educating myself at university. (N=83)



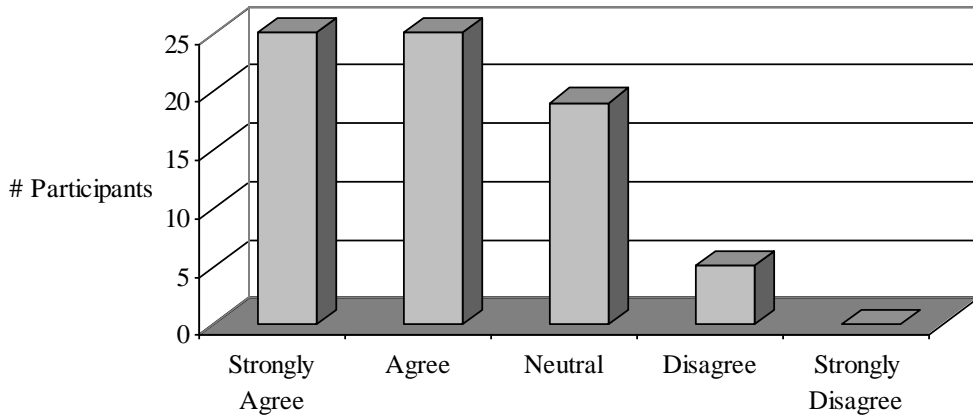
Students respond less strongly to whether the professors help them reach their potential as university students. Thirty-seven percent (37%, n=31) agree however the majority are undecided (42%, n=35).

I feel the professors help me to reach my potential as a student. (N=83)



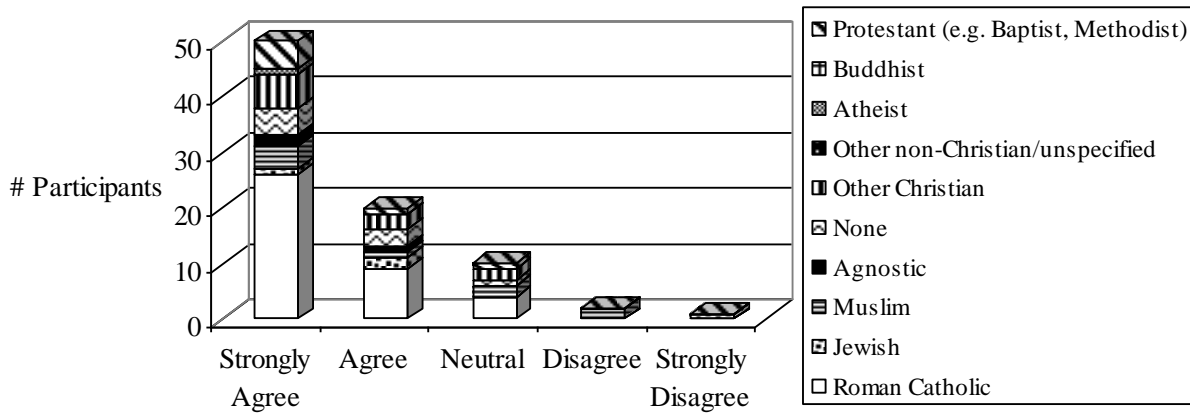
Most students agree (71%, n=59) that the university is a place to develop critical thinking skills.

I think university is a place to develop critical thinking skills. (N=81)



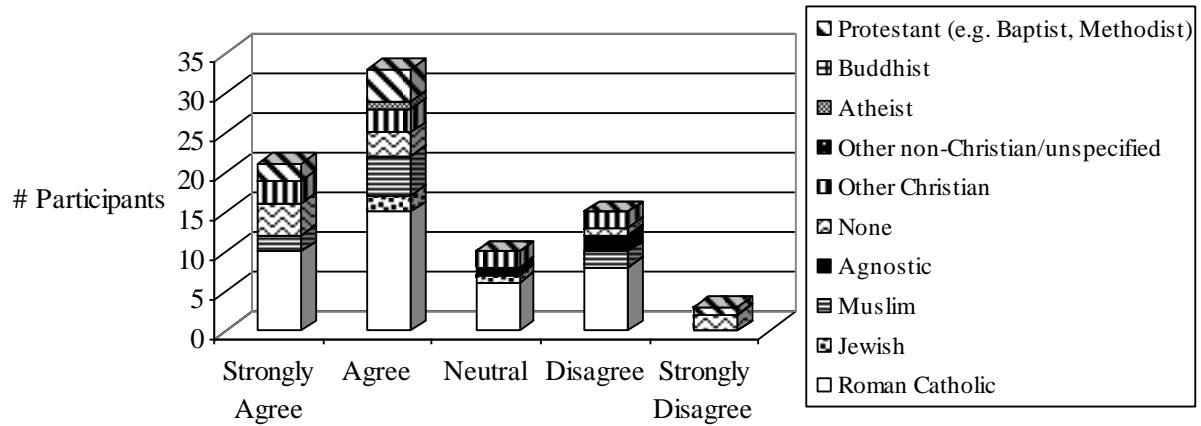
The majority (84%, n=70) of students strongly agree that the role of the university should be to promote a society which respects human dignity. Among the agreement responses there was an equal distribution of religious background.

Comparison of religious background and answer to "I think the university has a responsibility to promote a society which respects human dignity." (N=83)



Most students also agree (54%, n=45) that the university is a place for all students to express their ideas and opinions; however, there are a number of students who disagree (22%, n=18).

Comparison of religious background and answer to "I think the university is a place for all students to express their ideas and opinions". (N=82)



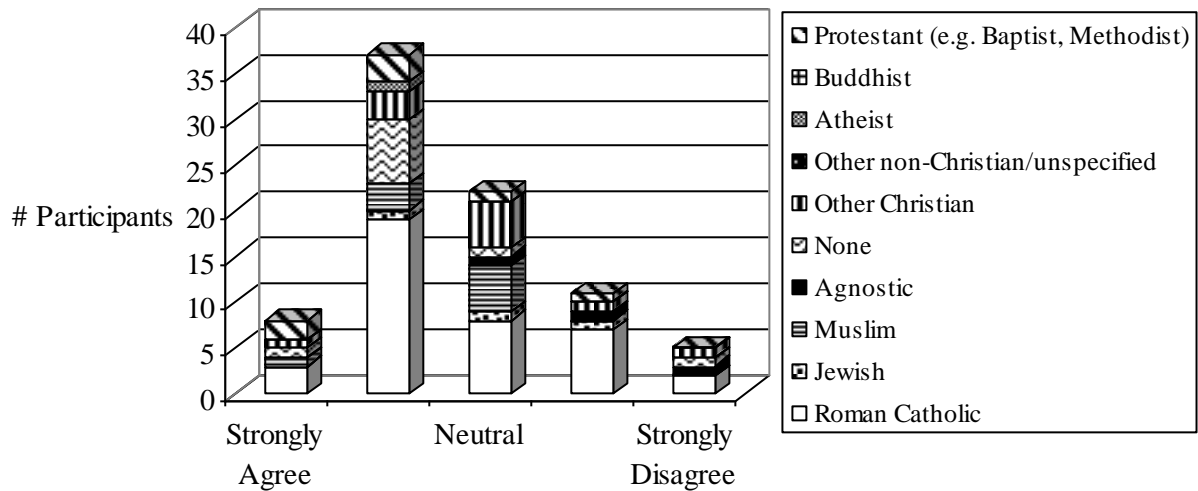
Students generally are neutral (40%, n=33) or agree (34%, n=28) as to whether it is important to be involved in campus life through various activities.

Overall, 71% of students agree that Co-op and International Exchange Programs play an important role in the life of the university.

2. *University students do not feel comfortable expressing their personal values, ideas, and opinions on campus and in the classroom.*

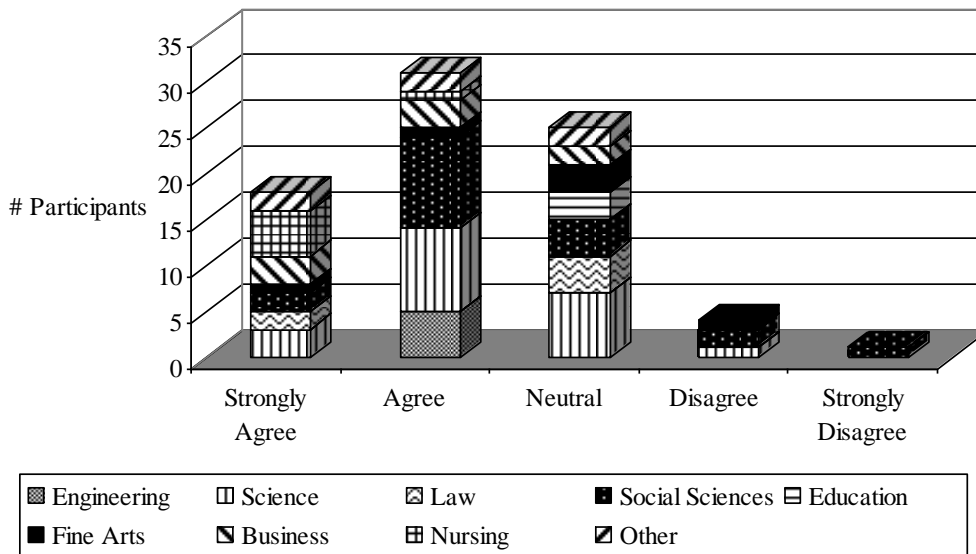
Most students (54 %, n=45) do feel comfortable expressing their ideas and opinions in the classroom and on campus. Fourteen (17%) students disagree with this statement including those from various religious backgrounds including atheism, agnosticism, no religious background, Judaism, and Catholicism.

Comparison of religious background and answer to "I am comfortable expressing my ideas and opinions in the classroom and on campus". (N=83)



A comparison by faculty of those who felt comfortable expressing their ideas and opinions on the campus revealed that there are no large disparities between faculty and ability to express oneself.

Comparison of faculty and answer to "I am comfortable expressing my ideas and opinions in the classroom and on campus." (N=83)

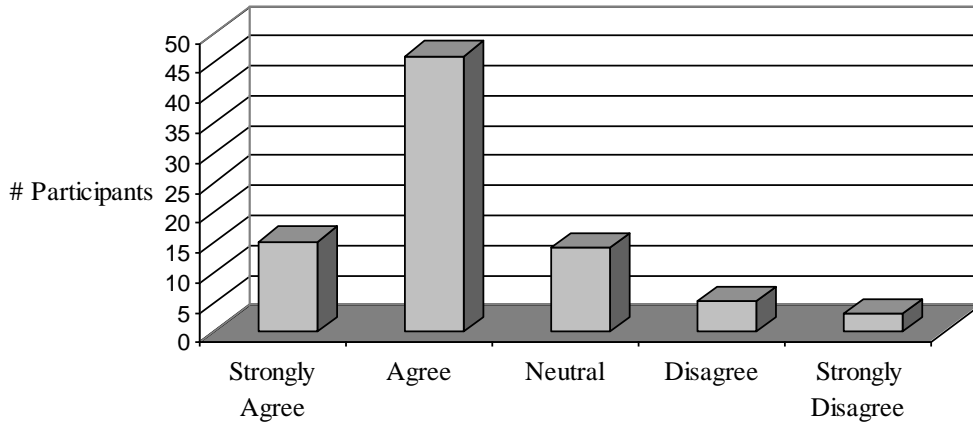


There was a broad spectrum of responses (agree=55%, n=46; neutral=18%, n=15, disagree=24%, n=22) as to whether religion, morality, philosophy and/or theology plays an important role personally in the university setting.

3. *The university is merely a place where student's basic educational needs are met for their future employment.*

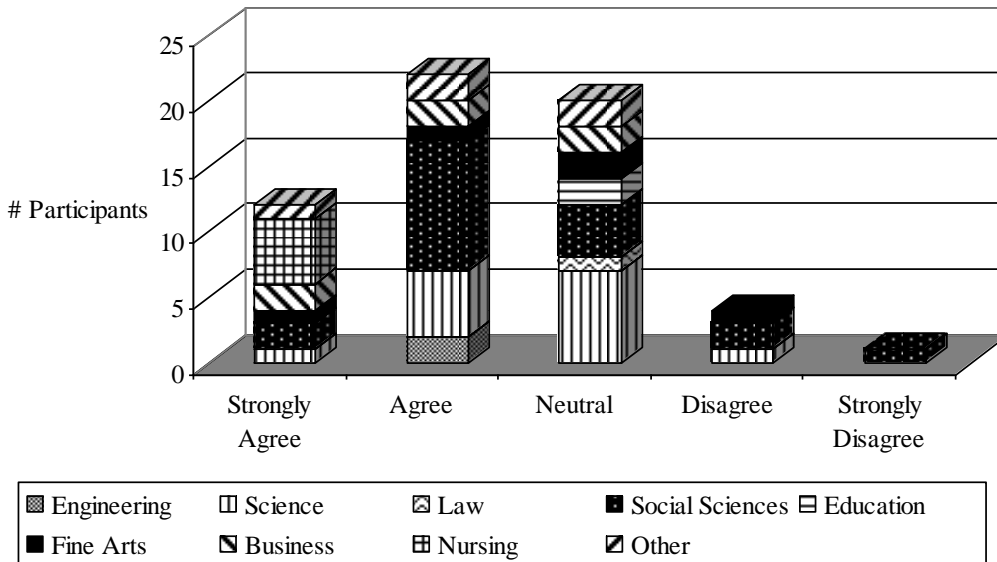
In response to the question "I feel the university meets my educational needs," the majority (73%, n=61) of participants agree that the university was meeting their educational needs.

I feel the university meets my educational needs. (N=83)



In addition, most participants either agree (61%, n=51) or are neutral (30%, n=25) as to whether they feel confident that they would be able to find a job after they completed their education.

Comparison of faculty and answer to "I am confident I will be able to find a job in my field after I complete my education."



Conclusion

Many students are academically challenged by their education at the university they attend. However, this study has found that they tend to believe that 1) they are responsible for educating themselves and 2) professors may or may not help them to reach their potential as a student. If

professors represent the heart of the university and a key role in transmitting knowledge, they should be helpful and inspire their students through their support and example. Moreover, students in university realize the importance of developing critical thinking skills in a complex environment.

Although a large percentage of students believe that the role of the university should be to promote a society which respects human dignity, incidences in the Canadian news tend to indicate otherwise. For example, at the University of Calgary campus in Alberta, students from the Campus Pro-Life Club were charged with trespassing for expressing their Pro-life views in the form of a graphic portrayal of the effects of abortion through the Genocide Awareness Project (Libin, 2009). Over half of university students felt comfortable expressing their ideas on campus; however, this still leaves a large number of students who are either neutral or not comfortable disclosing their opinion. One practicing female Catholic law student expressed herself this way:

“Going into law school, I thought I would be exposed to various different points of view on complex issues and that I would have a chance to be part of thought-provoking, constructive discussions. To my surprise, I have found the opposite: there is usually one mainstream view being expressed, namely, the secular anti-Christian ideas inspired by the feminist and homosexual movements. I feel uncomfortable talking about what I believe to be the truth in the university setting, since that may affect my friendships, grades, and reputation.”

Are these sentiments specific to a select few who have strong beliefs or is this a far reaching issue affecting many students across disciplines, religious backgrounds, and geographical places of study? In the comparison of religious background and the answer to whether they were comfortable expressing their ideas and opinions, there are no specific trends. In general, it is easier to follow the crowd than to express views that are not popular. Thus, it is difficult to engage in meaningful discussions about different points of view.

University students strongly see the benefit of Co-op and international exchanges which could improve the free exchange of knowledge and expose people to different cultures. Students are less enthusiastic about being involved in campus activities which could also be a means of improving dialogue between them.

In opposition to our original hypothesis and personal experiences, over half of students felt comfortable expressing their ideas and opinions in the classroom and on campus. We observed that there were no specific trends in terms of religious background or faculty in general, except for those who were agnostic. This is not consistent with the tolerant environment that is considered an ideal of the university as evidenced by the response of students who believed that universities should be a place for all students to express their ideas and opinions.

In most cases, students felt that the university was meeting their educational needs and that they will be able to find a job in their field when they complete their education. What we can ask ourselves is the following: is the current role of the university to meet the basic educational needs of the individual to find a job and for business to meet the demand for young talent or is it

a place for the formation of well rounded people who can then contribute to the formation of a better society?

Proposal

In light of our conclusions, we have developed some proposals to help students and the university to encourage learning amongst all members:

1) The promotion of programs for the development of critical thinking skills are important for students and in Canada, they are currently being offered by some universities (e.g. Carleton University in Ottawa and York University, Toronto). These programs can help students critically review the information transmitted to them and help them to express and preserve their values and ideas which can enrich the learning experience.

2) Universities could promote dialogue on contentious issues such as abortion and prevent such displays as the University of Calgary in which students were charged for wanting to have open dialogue and discussion. An example of a thought-provoking debate occurred at the University of Ottawa (February 27, 2009), where Stephanie Grey who represented the Pro-life view debated with a Bioethics professor who represented the Pro-choice view. A large number of students were present and were able to peacefully dialogue on the contentious issue of abortion. The freedom of expression was exercised in the true sense: both sides were respectfully heard and considered by the other. Thus, the debate helped to enhance understanding between groups and promoted the tolerance of other viewpoints.

3) The university can promote the free exchange of ideas by continuing to support Co-op and international students who bring new and fresh experiences to the educational environment on campus and in the classroom.

Bibliography

Bartell, Marvin. "Internationalization of Universities: A University Culture-Based Framework." *Higher Education* 45.1 (January 2003). 43-70.

Libin, Kevin. "University accused of denying rights." *National Post* (February 3, 2009). A6.

Appendix A. Survey

University Student Survey

COVER LETTER

University students in Ottawa, Ontario are interested in conducting a global survey to evaluate the role of the university. The information collected will be used to create an overall report on the role of the university in today's international society. *This survey is for current university students.*

Indicate your responses to the questions by checking the boxes on the survey either electronically or in pen. Additional comments may be written at the bottom of the survey.

The survey consists of three sections: Cover letter, Anonymous demographic information and Evaluation form.

Return your completed survey results either in person, by mail, email or fax to:
 UNIV c/o Valrideau Residence univ.valrideau@gmail.com (613) 789-8861
 453 Daly Avenue subject heading "UNIV" Attention: "UNIV"
 Ottawa, Ontario
 K1N 6H6
 Canada

Please send the survey results prior to January 15, 2009.

PART I: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

What level of education have you achieved at a University?
 1st year Undergraduate Degree Post-doctoral degree
 2nd year Master's Degree
 3rd year+ Doctoral Degree Other: _____

What area of the world are you attending university?
 Europe Asia Africa
 Africa Arab, Middle Eastern Australia
 North America South America New Zealand

What faculty are you attending?
 Engineering Social Sciences Interdisciplinary Programs
 Science Humanities Education
 Law Medicine Fine Arts Nursing
 Human and Social Development Business Other

What most closely describes your religious background?
 Protestant (e.g. Baptist, Methodist) None
 Roman Catholic Other Christian
 Jewish Other non-Christian/ unspecified
 Muslim Atheist
 Agnostic Buddhist

What gender are you?
 Male Female

What age group are you defined by?
 16-18 19-20 21-24 25-30 31-40 41-50 51+

PART II: EVALUATION

REVIEW GUIDELINES

Complete this peer review, using the following scale:

	1 = Strongly agree
	2 = Agree
	3 = Neutral
	4 = Disagree
	5 = Strongly Disagree

EVALUATION

	(1) = Strongly Agree	(2) = Agree	(3) = Neutral	(4) = Disagree	(5) = Strong Disagree
I feel the university meets my educational needs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am comfortable expressing my ideas and opinions in the classroom and on campus.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I believe I am responsible for educating myself at university.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am confident that I will be able to find a job in my field after I complete my education.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel the professors help me to reach my potential as a student.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think it is important to be involved in life on campus (i.e. clubs, intramurals, activities).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think religion, morality, philosophy and/or theology plays an important role in my life at the university.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel academically challenged by my education at the university.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think business plays an increasingly important role for the future of universities (i.e. corporate sponsorship).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the university is a place for all students to express their ideas and opinions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think attending university is a right for all.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think university is a place to develop critical thinking skills.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel programs such as Co-op and international exchanges are essential to a university education.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the university has a responsibility to promote a society which respects human dignity?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Additional Comments:					