

# **The New University Cooperative: Reclaiming Higher Education: Prioritizing Social Justice and Ecological Sustainability**

**E. Wilma van der Veen<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

Recognizing the state of massive and concomitant crises facing humanity and the planet, from climate change to disparities of wealth to war, and that the current system of higher education contributes to the perpetuation of these crises, there is great impetus for a new approach to how we engage in higher education. From this basis, academics, students, activists, and community members from across the country met to create a New University in Canada, with a vision holistically founded on principles of ecological sustainability and social justice, inclusive and accessible to all. This article will provide a brief critique of higher education and its role in society arguing it does not provide the leadership and knowledge needed to meet these challenges and instead contributes to the perpetuation of these crises. The discussion will then articulate what a higher education institution profoundly grounded in ecology and social justice using a cooperative organizational structure would look like in practice.

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Student *"What do I have to learn this stuff? I just don't see how this is relevant to my life and the life I want to live. Why aren't we learning how to change the way things are in the world? Why am I always told by my professors that this is the way it is and there isn't much we can do about it?" "This is so boring. Why does he always just lecture in each class. I want to have some discussions." "Why are these classes so big? Why bother showing up to class when I am just a number." "University is just getting so expensive. I don't want to graduate with a massive debt."*

Professor *"I am sick and tired of just getting contract work. I never know if I am going to teach until days before the semester begins. I work so hard and I get lousy pay and no benefits." "Why do I have to teach such big classes?" "Why do I have to do research when my passion is teaching?" "I am so stressed out with this tenure application game I have to play." "I am just*

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*another worker with no real say in what happens here."*

Administration *"I am fed up with students being rude to me, and then there are the arrogant professors who think they know it all. Who do they think they are? Just because I don't have a PhD doesn't mean I am stupid." "I really wish I could take some courses as part of my job. I work at this university but I can't afford to take a course." "I really like my job as VP of this institution but why does every decision have to be based on money?" "The board is really conservative. I wish they would think outside of the box but then I have to be careful not to rock the boat."*

The above statements are just some of the common complaints you hear about the experiences of students, professors, administrators, and other support staff in today's colleges and universities across Canada and the US and other Western nations. Sound familiar? In the world of the corporate and elitist university should we be surprised?

Students are for the most part now considered customers (by themselves and by the institutions) where they pay for a service and expect to attain a skill so that they can gain well paying employment in a capitalist economy. All too often, universities and colleges have become job-training centers, where, in essence, they churn out cogs in the machine. For many students today, the cost of getting a higher education is making it out of reach for many, or students end up carrying a debt load that cripples them in carving out a place of their own. It is clear that gaining further education is essential to acquiring employment, however does this education provide them with the knowledge, understanding, and skills to address the problems our communities face so that progressive, ecologically sustainable, and socially just societies will be created?

In terms of professors, they too are cogs in the machine of the corporate university, both as a result of their own making but also constrained by factors outside of their control. Those who are fortunate enough to have a permanent position face the pressure to conduct research or publish (or perish!) in order to bring in funds to the institution, and the concomitant competition for limited research dollars. The empty rhetoric of academic excellence means nothing except in terms of capitalist interpretation--read profit. This limits the type of scholarly work academics will seek or engage in since their position will be dependent on the funds acquired and since the research must produce a marketable good. This latter point has seen much research and development costs (R&D) being absorbed by the public but the financial benefits are accrued by the corporation that uses the R&D to mass produce the good. And then there are those instructors who simply go from contract to contract

experiencing the type of working life very similar to any other exploited worker--lousy pay, no benefits, no job security.

In the corporate world of higher education, the style of management adopted is one of managerialism, where the bottom line is the determinant of success. University and college leadership is drawn from the corporate world instead of the academic world. In terms of the operations of post-secondary institutions, despite seeking input from students and employees, this is simply lip service where the real power resides at the top. Hierarchy reigns supreme and your survival depends on your knowing where you stand in the academic pecking order.

So what is one to do? Consider the following statements:

Student *"I feel I have a voice in how this university is run. I am a shareholder in my university. Here my opinion counts, there are regular meetings and forums in which I can share my opinion and it will be listened to." "It is so great to have small classes." "I feel like all my professors are mentors to me, and they really care what issues are important to me." "I'm glad that this school is really a green place, from the buildings we take our courses in, to the food we eat on campus, to the curricula in all my courses. Everything is a springboard for ecological sustainability." "I can afford to actually be a student here. I get to work on campus making this place an even better place."*

Professor *"I just love the students. They are so committed to changing the world. They enrich me just as much as I hope I enrich them." "I know I have a direct say in how this place is run and that my input is meaningful." "I am glad that I am free here to pursue what I want, either teaching or research, all the while being a student myself." "I am free to assess my students in ways that work for them and me." "It is so great to have small classes. I really have the opportunity to get to know my students." "I love being part of this local community. I feel so enriched knowing there is a deep connection between the local residents and us educators."*

Administration *"I love it here. I can be an employee and a student." "I get to work alongside students and professors, and I feel equal to them." "I am able to offer my skills to others at this campus. I didn't know that I could actually teach something to someone." "I feel I have a responsibility to contribute to the university in order to keep it running and I get much meaning*

*from this knowing that my voice is heard and has an impact."*

Imagine if these were what you heard regularly instead. Well, the [New University Cooperative](#) (NUC) is creating a progressive post-secondary educational experience where these statements would be common refrains.

Given the massive and concomitant ecological and social crises facing the planet and humanity today, from climate change to disparities of wealth to war, the current role and function of higher education in society requires significant realignment and revisioning. Out of a critique that higher education is indeed fuelling paradigms of unlimited economic growth, violence, anthropocentrism, and social injustice, there was impetus to develop a new approach to how we engage in higher education. The NUC arose out of a gathering of three-dozen people--academics, students, activists, and community members--who came from across Canada to meet outside of Montreal in the summer of 2005. This became the founding meeting for a grassroots initiative dedicated to the creation of a new innovative institution of higher education in Canada with a vision holistically founded on principles of ecological sustainability and social justice, inclusive and accessible to all, creating actively engaged citizens who are fully enabled and engaged to deal with the crises.

The NUC incorporated as a federal multi-stakeholder cooperative in the fall of 2007. This structure was chosen as it represents the most democratic form of organization enabling all shareholders to have a direct role in the development of the NUC, where the hierarchical relationships between students and faculty and administrators are minimized. Membership types include the typical categories of students, educators, administrators (the latter two being termed employees), individuals, and organizations. Each member has equal voting power. The decision-making process adopted is that of consensus. Despite the national designation of the NUC, with tele- and videoconferencing technologies available at no cost through shareware, meetings can be held to gather input and make decisions. The NUC envisions being a coordinating body where NUC campuses, permanent and temporary and virtual, would be managed locally and autonomously (abiding by NUC principles and themselves being cooperatives). Other educational organizations would affiliate with the federal organization to create a far-reaching network of progressive higher education programming.

Other principles of the NUC are that of lifelong and holistic learning and knowledge. It is imagined that all members are students and teachers throughout their work with the NUC regardless of their primary involvement in the organization. As well, the curricula will be made up of rigorous academic material from various subjects and from a multi- and inter-disciplinary focus,

drawing from schools of thought found throughout the world (not simply the West) and practical and applied material incorporating a range of life skills, such as learning to grow food, build structures, and make clothes. NUC will also create campuses where new structures will need to be built or existing ones modified. These activities, however, will in themselves be courses of the NUC, incorporating the latest green building designs and techniques.

Since its inception, the New University Cooperative has held several national meetings, organized lectures and presentations, coordinated weekly conference calls, and undertaken extensive electronic discussions, focusing on furthering the critique of higher education and expanding the cooperative. Most recently, in January of 2009 a three-day symposium was held entitled "Reclaiming Higher Education for All" in Nova Scotia, and in the summer of 2009 we organized the first Short Course Programme, a pilot project for our vision of a sustainable and holistic curriculum. As well, we held the second annual symposium in British Columbia in May 2010 entitled "Reclaiming Activism in Academia." If you would like NUC representatives to visit your community, then please visit the website [www.newuniversity.ca](http://www.newuniversity.ca). Our three and five year strategic plans call for the creation of a masters program and undergraduate courses and the establishment of a physical campus by 2013.

The New University Cooperative has drawn from past and current models of progressive higher education, but it is unique in its organizational structure. It is also revolutionary, as it aims to be truly accessible--that is affordable--by keeping tuition and other costs to a minimum, using a variety of means. One such means is to set up social enterprises. Examples of such endeavours might include organic farming on the grounds of the campus, renewable energy production and distribution, green building technologies, conflict mediation and meeting facilitation services, etc. Another means will be to have students work at the campus in exchange for tuition--for example, teaching or maintaining the buildings or working in one of the social enterprises. And yet another will be to create a visiting scholars program where educators on sabbatical can teach short-term courses at the NUC in exchange for room and board and the experience of being part of a truly innovative institution of higher learning. It is envisioned that each campus will be fully integrated into surrounding communities, working with members of these communities to offer programming, meeting local needs, and engaging in sustainable business practices where different forms of exchange (not just cash-based) will be undertaken, such as incorporating barter and LETS systems (Local Economic Trading Systems).

Join the New University Cooperative to create a university with an ethos based on ecological sustainability and social justice, inclusive and accessible for all. Visit [www.newuniversity.ca](http://www.newuniversity.ca) for more information.

**E. Wilma van der Veen**

**Endnote**

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<sup>1</sup> **Wilma van der Veen** is primarily an educator, including college professor of sociology and criminology, and trainer in non-violence, diversity, and environment. Her teaching draws upon a foundation of popular education and radical and transformative pedagogy. She is an activist academic using her position of privilege to assist community groups to seek social change in various areas of social justice, such as peace, environment and development, and to advocate on behalf of marginalized groups in society, including youth at risk, inmates, women, people who are poor, people with disabilities, and people of colour. Van der Veen is a writer and researcher on issues of power and social justice and has been an organizer, facilitator, coordinator, and spokesperson for various small and large non-profits and non-governmental organizations. She is also a traveler and networker.

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