

# Canadian Studies at a small, undergraduate, Atlantic university: Looking to the future

What are the prospects for undergraduate Canadian Studies (CS) programs? From my perspective the signals are mixed. Students and employers increasingly recognize the value of the skills and knowledge CS graduates possess. But universities, faced with mounting competition for students and resources, have been slow to recognize the benefits that students and employers have identified. As in so many areas of modern life, the most serious challenge is one of perception and packaging. CS needs an image make-over to bring home to university administrators and faculty the assets of a CS program.

## CANADIAN STUDIES AT MOUNT SAINT VINCENT UNIVERSITY

In considering the present state and future of Canadian Studies, I confess to two biases. First, I remain an unrepentant believer in the relevance and value of Canadian Studies programs, particularly at the undergraduate level. I have been connected to this field of academic enquiry for almost 40 years, having graduated in 1973 from the first formal undergraduate CS program in Canada, set up at Mount Allison University in 1969 by my father, George Stanley. Eventually, I became a professor of CS at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) where I am also the co-ordinator of the CS program. Second, MSVU is a small, primarily undergraduate university in Halifax. Therefore, my observations do not reflect experiences in larger university programs or graduate programs.

The MSVU program holds to its initial objectives: to examine Canada through a diversity of perspectives to gain understanding for and appreciation of her people, land, institutions, and cultures and to explore the place of Canada in the world by examining how Canadians see themselves and how others see them. In terms of structure, in addition to the three compulsory CS core courses

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taught from an interdisciplinary perspective, students can develop a multi-discipline body of Canadian content courses drawn from across various departments and programs. Although French is highly recommended, it has never been a compulsory requirement.

In 1988, the first full-time CS co-ordinator was hired to promote the program, recruit students, act as academic adviser to majors, and teach the three core courses. In many ways, the resulting continuity in the program made it more attractive to students than previously. Even after it became part of the Department of Political and Canadian Studies, the separate administration and budgeting of the CS program meant that other programs and departments did not feel their own budgets and faculty resources threatened in any way.

The program has grown and devel-

oped over its 30-year history. When I arrived in the mid-1980s, a good-sized graduating class was two to four majors and there were about 10 majors annually. This past May, 21 majors graduated, the largest class of CANA (Canadian Studies) majors since 1974. Today the number of majors remains fairly steady at 50 to 55. As well, all core courses (which are also open to non-majors under some conditions) reach capped enrolment numbers, and the demand for directed studies exceeds what the university allows. Enrolment success has made it possible, in the last two years, to increase the number of interdisciplinary CANA core course offerings and to hire interdisciplinary part-time faculty for topics like "The North in Film" and "Atlantic Folk Art."

There is more evidence of success: the vitality of the CS Student Society, the recent production of multi-page coloured brochures and a website, the creation of financial awards for CS majors such as the one established by Andrea and Charles Bronfman, and access to funding from organizations such as the Association for Canadian Studies (ACS), which assists students to attend national CS student conferences. The number of Canadian content courses offered by the traditional disciplines has increased significantly. The co-ordinator and the CS Society are noted on campus for their university and community involvement: working with international students, raising money for students in financial need, participating in the Scholars Forum, serving on numerous university committees, organizing campus events such as Flag Day celebrations, participating in university recruiting activities, conducting research projects for local museums, including Pier 21, organizing Canada Theme Day Camps, and participating in employment partnerships to help recent immigrants. CS certainly has a profile on

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campus. The program produces a multi-paged annual newsletter. Last year the co-ordinator assembled a directory that lists faculty with international research interests and publications and put together an information booklet for new international students. Some course connections with other departments have been developed, particularly with Education and History, and discussions are under way with Tourism to introduce new cross-listed courses.

## THE PROBLEM OF RESOURCES

Sadly, however, the MSVU program may well become a victim of its own success; not so much because traditional departments have introduced more Canadian content into their programs and hired more Canadianist faculty over the past 30 years, perhaps pre-empting the need for CS as it was identified by Thomas Symons in 1975; and not because more and more Canadianists, regardless of their discipline, are adopting some elements of interdisciplinarity in their research and analysis, thereby raising questions whether an interdisciplinary study of Canada needs to still be promoted under the umbrella of a CS program. There is some evidence of these developments at MSVU, but the more immediate threat is rooted in resourcing and university priorities. MSVU has very limited financial resources and does not foresee any significant increase in new full-time hiring for some time in spite of looming baby boomer retirements. The present demands of so many majors, minors, and students simply interested in CANA offerings cannot be met by one full-time faculty person in the position of program co-ordinator. Nor can they be met with an annual operating budget of \$500 and about a half day a week of secretarial time. The program has become too large for the limited human and financial resources it has been traditionally allotted and there does not appear to be the university will or colleague support to address that problem.

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Myka Burke's 2006 evaluation of CS programs noted that far too many were under-resourced, had limited university support, depended too much on the "volunteer" work of dedicated faculty, and continued to encounter problems over cross-listings and "teachable" designations. She could have been describing my program but, in fact, hers was a national report. If larger and better-resourced institutions still treat CS as peripheral, what hope is there for the small university programs that are marginalized by financial constraints and a lack of administration commitment? Enrolment predictions highlight the dilemma. If the number of Arts students continues to decline in Atlantic Canada, the competition among traditional disciplines to retain their student and faculty numbers will become more aggressive than in the past. Small programs, whether housed within traditional departments or standing alone, will not have sufficient resources or a strong enough voice to lobby for protection. Instead, they will increasingly be pressured to either disband or amalgamate with larger administrative units. As a result, CS will lose its identity, profile, and viability.

There are other challenges ahead at MSVU. The absence of an Honours program will continue to deter students planning to go on to graduate school. The large numbers of students taking Canadian Studies as a qualifying degree for entry into Bachelor of Education programs are dependent upon cross-listings and "cognate" course designations, which are always subject to possible

reversal. The present independent adjunct position of CS within the Department of Political and Canadian Studies is under review, as the university prefers fully integrated departments. Lastly, neighbouring Dalhousie University, convinced that Canadian Studies and Francophone Studies are enjoying a renaissance among students, is expanding its degree offerings in these areas. I doubt that there is room for two viable undergraduate Canadian Studies programs in such a small area.

## POTENTIAL FOR GROWTH

Not everything is gloomy. The dean recently recommended creating a second full-time CS position when finances allow. There is now a body of young, motivated CS academics who have graduated from CS graduate programs and who are primed to instill new life into the next generation of CS programs. Perhaps most important of all, the successful employment record of CS alumni at MSVU provides evidence of the relevance and value of Canadian Studies in areas such as law, journalism, education, social work, heritage-related work, and public/social policy.

It is this last fact that convinces me that CS, in general, remains a relevant and valuable area of academic endeavour. A structured interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary study of Canada not only gives graduates the anticipated oral, written, research, critical thinking, and analytical skills, but also teaches them to apply these skills to evaluating and synthesizing a variety of information

perspectives and formats. As John Wadland has said, CS “is the meeting ground for insights drawn from disciplines ... the points of intersection” that enable people to “understand, resolve and synthesize.” Canadian Studies teaches students to solve problems by examining the big picture, the relationships between the forces and ideas shaping the country in their regional, national, and international contexts. They learn to articulate Canada to Canadians and to the world using knowledge, skills, and multiple frameworks, which are so essential to diplomatic, business, foreign aid, constitutional, social and public policy decision-making. Sounds like an employer’s wish list to me.


### MARKETING CANADIAN STUDIES

The challenge is that CS needs a major

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PR overhaul. Graduates of Canadian Studies programs need to be encouraged to promote the program by showing their experiences. Employers need to hear more about CS and its graduates. This is not a new problem but it has never been addressed through a concerted, unified effort by those who administer CS programs or regard themselves as CS scholars. At the undergraduate level, CS offers

as much or more to the future leadership of Canada as a BA in English, History, Political Science, or any other traditional discipline. Crassly put, we have something valuable to sell. We need to figure out a way to package and market it better to our university administrators, academic colleagues, employers, and students. Otherwise, CS programs, like mine, will eventually become academic relics. 

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Glendon College, all of them learn French as a part of the program), a skill that I have since heard referred to by members of the federal public service as “essential if you want to advance in the federal government,” and otherwise certainly an important asset.

In terms of the job market, I do not think that there is one specific field that Canadian Studies students gravitate to more than another. Out of the five that I graduated with, our interests were vastly different and as a result so too have been our exploits in the past year—one having taken an internship in Parliament, one in teacher’s college, and one in a management position. It is such a versatile field of study that students are not really pointed in one direction over another; rather, many opportunities are available and encouraged. The multi-disciplinary skills that we are taught are applicable to many different types of employment.

While I myself am only now exploring whether or not this kind of background is useful in the great job hunt, I do believe it was a good one to have when it came to applying to various Master’s programs.

**The next question would usually be, “what are you going to do with that?”**

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It has also certainly been of help to me as I have worked toward completing my Master of Public Administration, and not surprisingly I am the only Canadian Studies student of the 50 MPA candidates in my class. The multi-disciplinary skills that I gained as an undergraduate student in Canadian Studies are undoubtedly both an important advantage and asset in this particular program that is itself multi-disciplinary.

My experience in Canadian Studies was incredibly positive; the program is very flexible and offers students the opportunity to focus on personal interests. There are so many natural complements to the field and so many choices of where to go afterward. As such, I found that Canadian Studies taught me valuable problem-solving skills that span many different disciplines, which is a distinct

advantage and necessity when it comes to solving today’s problems.

### NO LIMITS

My question about Canadian Studies is not a what or a why question, but rather a how question: if Canadian Studies was created to promote and encourage knowledge of our country, how can we (students past and present, universities and scholars, federal and provincial governments) garner more interest in the subject? Winston Churchill once said, “there are no limits to the majestic future which lies before the mighty expanse of Canada.” There is so much that many Canadians don’t know about this mighty expanse, and sparking interest is the key to instilling knowledge and understanding of our country and realizing the future that is laid out before us. 