The Struggle for Access and Equity in the University:
Lessons from the Transitional Year Programme
(2009)
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This essay is inspired by the current struggle of advocates of the Transitional Year Programme (TYP) against efforts to restructure and relocate the program by the university administration. TYP is a full-time access program at the University of Toronto (UofT) for adults who lack the formal qualifications for university admission. It encourages applications from "members of the Native Canadian, African-Canadian, and LGBTQ communities, as well as from sole-support parents, persons with disabilities, and students from working-class backgrounds of all ethnicities." [1]

In the midst of budget cuts, uncertainty around the replacement of retiring faculty and the lack of a process to appoint a new director for the program – all matters over which the university administration has control – TYP is being pushed by the administration to physically and administratively relocate under Woodsworth College in the Faculty of Arts and Science [2]. The rationale provided for this move is the formation of an umbrella "access suite" with Woodsworth's single course Academic Bridging Program [3]. In effect, this would end the current arrangement in which TYP exists as an independent academic unit with a direct reporting relationship to the Provost and its own distinct space at 49 St. George Street for its students, staff and faculty.

While the administration is seeking to avoid confrontation or the appearance of disagreement, their position and top-down approach is indicative of a belief in the supremacy of managerialism and neoliberal economic imperatives. This ideology clashes with the principles of TYP, a program committed to "making excellence accessible" by bringing issues of access and equity to the forefront. Embodying these principles, current and former students of TYP and their allies formed the TYP Preservation Alliance (TPA) to advocate that the current structure and space of TYP be preserved and, moreover, that access and equity in the university be expanded and strengthened. This essay examines the clash in logics between advocates for access and equity and university administrators. It begins with the historical context of struggle that TYP has come out of, then turns to the current situation of resisting a perceived attack on access and equity while simultaneously fighting to further its realization in the broader university.

I argue that TYP is much more than an access program to augment an elitist university. By "making space" [4] for marginalized students and centering education and supports based upon their needs, TYP represents a different way of doing university education, based upon a different vision of what the role of the university should be and whom it should be for. TYP's work with marginalized students highlights the existence and extent of systemic barriers within the university. In this way, TYP is both a program serving an immediate need – access to post-secondary education for non-traditional students – and a project with the long-term goal of seeing the university as a whole transformed to reflect principles of access and equity. This essay is indebted to the incredible ideas and work of the people involved with TYP over the past four decades, to

which I was first exposed by friends who are TYP alumni and now through my involvement as a peer tutor at TYP and supporter of the TPA.

Historical Context: Making Space for Access and Equity

To understand this current struggle, it is important to understand that TYP has always existed in a context of struggle. TYP was founded by members of the Black community in the summer of 1969, during the height of the civil rights movement, to address systemic discrimination faced by Blacks who were denied access to higher education due to streaming and high school incompletion rates [5]. The summer program, based out of the Home Service Association on Bathurst Street, prepared a small number of Black students to gain admittance to York University [6]. The second summer program in 1970 relocated to Innis College at UofT and expanded its focus to include Aboriginals, women and other groups who needed access [7]. With the support of professors at UofT, who were conscious of the links between social unrest in cities in the United States and similar conditions of social exclusion [8], TYP launched as a full-time university program in September of 1970 at Innis College.

Since fall 1970, the mandate of TYP has been to prepare approximately fifty students each year to pursue undergraduate degree studies, primarily in the humanities and social sciences, though in more recent years math and science-based components have been added [9]. In the words of Keren Brathwaite, TYP co-founder and faculty member from inception until her retirement in 2003, "Nearly all of the students were the first in their families to attend a university, had no alternative means of access, and were dependent on government financial assistance." [10] In its recruitment, admissions and outreach, TYP sought to take into consideration the barriers of social class, race, gender and other inequities [11]. Further, these considerations were integrated into the program itself, which provided students with a supportive environment that included faculty and curriculum that reflected students' own lived experiences. Critical pedagogy was seen as a necessary extension of access, a way to provide "a space in which students can use their experiences to critically engage in education." [12]

When it came to UofT, TYP's mandate of access and equity presented a challenge to the established order of the university. The vision of extending access was perceived as an "assault on standards and standing", a threat to the university's principal concern with the pursuit of "excellence" [13]. Scholarship on citizenship is useful for understanding these conflicting discourses. The university's notion of excellence, tied to upholding particular standards and standing, applies a model of unitary citizenship by enforcing a single standard on all potential students (as potential members of the "university community") regardless of their backgrounds [14].

TYP challenges the model of unitary citizenship by claiming a right to differential citizenship, standards that take into account different experiences. The standard of unitary citizenship is based upon the experiences of the original university student population: affluent white males. While women, First Nations people and people of colour are no longer banned from universities as they once were, the underlying structure of the

university is still based on the advantaged experiences of those who have traditionally had access to university and the social rights of citizenship in the wider society. For rich white males, streaming and high school incompletion are not issues, nor are financial barriers. Representation in curriculum, faculty or in administrative decision-making is not a problem. However, these are very real barriers faced by poor and marginalized students and to apply the same universal, supposedly neutral standards discriminates against them.

TYP's vision of access and equity puts forward a radically different notion of excellence. TYP calls into question the discriminatory assumptions that underpin the prevailing notion of excellence and proposes to advance excellence through processes of inclusion rather than exclusion. This approach destabilizes entrenched ideas of who a university student is and of the role of the university in society [15]. According to TYP co-founder Horace Campbell, "TYP was itself a call to change the priorities of the University of Toronto, and to extend its mandate to those who had been denied access due to the history of inequality in Canadian society." [16] Brathwaite concurs, stating "When we use access and equity in the contest of university education, we are in fact recognizing the role of the university in promoting equality in society." [17] TYP's very existence is a testament to the need for access and equity, and through the experience of TYP in the university one encounters "critical factors that limit access" and can "suggest strategies for expanding access within the university" [18]. TYP has implications for the university as a whole – it is part of a wider process of "making space" for socially excluded groups who weren't expected to be part of the university.

Due to the struggle involved in "making space" for access and equity in the university, both as an idea and as a reality for equity-seeking bodies, TYP faced a great deal of scrutiny in its tumultuous first decade at UofT. During this time, only two of the seven colleges at UofT would accept students who successfully completed the program, TYP was physically moved five times and was even shut down for a year from 1976-77 in the wake of the scathing 1976 Crowe Report [19]. An ensuing report released in 1977, the Kelly Report, was much more sympathetic to the goals of access and equity and made several important recommendations that put TYP in a position to thrive, including its establishment as an independent academic unit with more autonomy to serve its students, a direct reporting relationship to the Provost and its own space [20]. However, the element of direct community involvement in TYP through community membership on the Policy Committee was never restored [21].

By its third decade, TYP had become widely recognized as a highly successful program in "making excellence accessible", and was referred to by administrators as the "jewel in the crown" of the university [22]. A conference was organized to mark the 30th anniversary, and Brathwaite edited a book, *Access and Equity in the University*, based on the proceedings. Brathwaite credits TYP students with proving that access and equity in education works, and thus allowing the concept to gain legitimacy within the university, "TYP students have demonstrated by their performance that university education ought to be more open and accessible to all citizens in a democratic society." [23]

However, in their reflections published in *Access and Equity*, Brathwaite and Campbell both remarked that the social conditions that compelled them to start TYP were still present, if not more dire [24]. Despite the fact that the university had made its environment more accommodating to students – as in students who managed to make it to university – with initiatives like equity officers and accessibility services, much more work needed to be done. The critical insights of Frederick Ivor Case, a former Principal of New College, are important to keep in mind here:

> It is not necessarily a "good thing" to have access to an institution that has done very little over the past fifty years to reflect in its teaching faculty the ethnic composition of its students. It seems hardly worthwhile to actively recruit "disadvantaged" students into a system of things that will cause them grief, humiliation, alienation, and isolation from their community origins. [25]

Broader changes are not just desirable, they are necessary. Brathwaite believes that TYP should be part of a "generalized and comprehensive access and equity plan, with accompanying implementation measures" [26]. For access and equity to succeed, access and equity need to reside not only in TYP, but in all of the operations of the university.

Current Conflict: Defending and Expanding Space for Access and Equity

Now that the struggle around TYP's institutional status has reignited, it is important to try to understand the nature of this particular conflict. Specifically, what has changed since the celebratory tone of TYP's 30th anniversary? What has remained unchanged since the difficulties in the 1970s? One difference since 2000 is the turnover in the senior administration, most notably in the offices of Provost and President. The hallmark of this administration has been its blatant neoliberal agenda, such as the much reviled *Towards 2030* plan [27] that recommended tuition fee deregulation and further commercialization of research [28]. *Towards 2030* uses the language of excellence, but given the lack of any mention of access and equity, which notion of excellence is being evoked? While the neoliberal agendas of administrators is certainly a factor, as well as the wider climate of neoliberalism in which universities exist, also significant is the refusal of previous administrators to commit to adopting principles of access and equity university-wide. If the overriding logic of the university remains untouched, or is pushed further towards elitism while equity is co-opted as a sub-goal on the margins, TYP and the agenda of access and equity will always exist in a precarious position.

The university administration's public position has been that the proposal to move TYP under Woodsworth College with the Academic Bridging Program would bring "programming synergies", "optimize use of resources" and put TYP on stable financial footing (making sure to reference the "dire economic climate") [29]. The motives of the central university administration and its collaborators warrant further consideration. To bring TYP administratively under Woodsworth would be akin to an act of downloading. Such a move would restore a sense of order for the central administration by placing the

anomalous TYP, currently an independent academic unit with a direct reporting relationship to the Provost, under the responsibility of a college.

The Woodsworth College administration, who has so far been a willing accomplice, could integrate TYP within its branding strategy as a college for equity-seeking students. This brand has taken a huge hit since it transitioned from being a college for part-time students to admitting full-time students and becoming the home for the Rotman Commerce program, displacing the Association of Part-time Undergraduate Students (APUS) in the process [30]. Finally, nothing has been said about future plans for the site and adjacent parking lot that TYP currently occupies at 49 St. George Street, prime real estate on a downtown campus with so few undeveloped lots.

In response to rumours (and later confirmation) of the university administration's plans, TYP students and alumni formed the TPA and began organizing. While asserting opposition to the proposed restructuring and relocation, the TPA has also held the university administration accountable for related issues of cuts to the TYP operating budget, uncertainty about the replacement of retiring faculty and the lack of a process to appoint a new director. The TPA has taken the position that the challenges faced by the program are a result of a lack of commitment to access and equity by the university, not by an imminent need to restructure an already effective program.

The TPA's strategy so far has focused on building awareness and support on campus and in the broader communities that TYP serves. This has included sending mass messages to TYP students and alumni, circulating a letter of endorsement to campus and community contacts, creating an online petition, tabling in public spaces on campus and speaking at related campus events. The TPA also organized a town hall meeting on March 21, 2009, where TYP students, alumni, Keren Brathwaite and former Minister of Education Zanana Akande spoke, followed by an open discussion on ways to preserve the TYP and advance the agenda of access and equity in the university [31].

The town hall, which was attended by over 100 people, was very effective in conveying issues of concern, ideas for resisting the proposed changes and the need to expand the reach of access and equity across the university. The issues of concern raised by advocates of TYP were the lack of consultation, the risks to fundamental aspects of the program that would result from a loss of space and autonomy, and more immediate issues such as budget cuts, rehiring faculty and getting a new director. No consultation has taken place with students or community members, however days before the town hall it was announced that a meeting schedule would be made public in late March (it is now early April and this has not happened yet). Despite the lack of consultation, or a formal decision at a university body, the tone from the administration is that the move is going ahead and that the purpose of the meetings is only to ameliorate any issues.

The position of the TPA is that the fundamental aspects of the program would not be protected in such a move. There has been no guarantee of a comparable space at Woodsworth, rather it has been suggested that TYP students would share space and resources already dedicated to Woodsworth students. Moreover, advocates of TYP assert

that the current structure of TYP is no accident, it has been fought for over many years. TYP was established as an independent academic unit following the 1977 Kelly Report, and in the words of Brathwaite at the town hall, TYP "had to be rescued from a college" [32].

Through its relative autonomy, TYP has been well-positioned to defend itself, but has also existed as a space for innovation. TYP was able to use its position outside of the Faculty of Arts and Science to enroll marginalized high school students in university courses as part of the Steps to University program [33], to support initiatives such as writing labs (then derided) before they were common place [34], and to create innovative curriculum like science education informed by equity and social justice [35]. Moving to Woodsworth has been portrayed as a way to strengthen the program, while pressing issues have gone unresolved to create a climate of uncertainty about the future. Nevertheless, even the promise of a better future today does nothing to guarantee a better future tomorrow. By moving under Woodsworth, TYP would find itself under several new layers of bureaucracy with their own hierarchies, competing interests for limited resources, imperatives to maximize efficiency and leadership that is subject to change. As Zanana Akande asked at the town hall, "When we blend, who gets blended out?" [36]

Conclusion

The struggles of TYP, both past and present, are very much struggles over place. The struggle over place can be understood in terms of the current conflict over the right physical and administrative space for TYP, or previous struggles in which a hostile climate towards TYP's vision of access and equity saw the program moved five times in its first decade and closed for a period a year. This understanding can be taken further to recognize this struggle to "make space" for TYP, and now to preserve and expand space for TYP, as a larger struggle to make space for access and equity and for equity-seeking students in the university. The question of who has access to the university (and of their treatment within it) is intimately bound to the question of what the role of the university in society should be and TYP does much to contest the exclusive foundations that are traditionally relied upon to answer these questions.

The implications of the current conflict over detrimental changes to the program is that the conflict opens up a space for TYP students, alumni and supporters, including community members still socially disadvantaged and unable to gain access to the university, to name and seriously challenge the university's lack of commitment to access and equity. This space to challenge the university exists not only to defend the program, but also to focus attention on the direction of the institution as a whole and to call for a comprehensive university-wide access and equity strategy. As Horace Campbell wrote in *Access and Equity*, "Ultimately, the success of TYP should result in the removal of the need for TYP". [37]

Notes

[1] Transitional Year Programme, "Prospective Students", http://www.typ.utoronto.ca/index.php?option=com_content&task=category&sectionid=4&id=13&Itemid=30 (accessed March 31, 2009).

[2] Transitional Year Programme Preservation Alliance, "Letter of Support for the Transitional Year Programme" (unpublished, 2009).

[3] Cheryl Misak (UofT Provost), email communication to TPA (March 19, 2009).

[4] Engin Isin and Myer Siemiatycki, "Making Space for Mosques: Claiming Urban Citizenship" in Sherene Razack (ed.), *Race, Space and the Law: The Making of a White Settler Society* (2002).

[5] Horace Campbell, "Is It Possible to Have Access and Equity in University Education in the Twenty-First Century?" in Keren Brathwaite (ed.), *Access and Equity in the University: A Collection of Papers from the 30th Anniversary Conference of the Transitional Year Programme* (2003), p. 42.

[6] Keren Brathwaite, "Access and Equity in the University" in Keren Brathwaite (ed.), *Access and Equity in the University* (2003), p. 13.

[7] ibid.

[8] Kerner Commission, "Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders" (1966), http://www.eisenhowerfoundation.org/docs/kerner.pdf (accessed March 31, 2009).

[9] Keren Brathwaite, "Access and Equity in the University", p. 13.

[10] ibid.

[11] ibid., p. 11.

[12] ibid., p. 12.

[13] ibid.

[14] James Holston and Arjun Appadurai, "Cities and Citizenship" in James Holston (ed.), *Cities and Citizenship* (1999), p. 194.

[15] Engin Isin and Myer Siemiatycki, "Making Space for Mosques: Claiming Urban Citizenship", p. 193.

[16] Horace Campbell, "Is It Possible to Have Access and Equity in University Education in the Twenty-First Century?", p. 41.

[17] Keren Brathwaite, "Access and Equity in the University", p. 18.

[18] ibid., p. 11.

[19] Keren Brathwaite, "Reflections on My Years in TYP" in Keren Brathwaite (ed.), *Access and Equity in the University* (2003), p. 70.

[20] ibid., p. 68.

[21] ibid.

[22] ibid.

[23] Keren Brathwaite, "Access and Equity in the University", p. 12.

[24] ibid., p. 13; Horace Campbell, p. 36.

[25] Frederick Ivor Case, "Dimensions of Access to Transition" in Keren Brathwaite (ed.), *Access and Equity in the University* (2003), p. 108.

[26] Keren Brathwaite, "Reflections on My Years in TYP", p. 61.

[27] University of Toronto. "Towards 2030: Planning for a Third Century of Excellence at the University of Toronto" (2008), www.towards2030.utoronto.ca (accessed March 31, 2009).

[28] Hilary Barlow, "Towards 2030 breezes through", *The Varsity* (October 27, 2008), http://www.thevarsity.ca/article/5413-towards-2030-breezes-through (accessed March 31, 2009).

[29] Unknown Author. "Statement regarding the Transitional Year Programme and Woodsworth College" (2009); Cheryl Misak (UofT Provost), email communication to TPA (March 19, 2009)

[30] Association of Part-time Undergraduate Students, "APUS Space Campaign Continues", http://www.apus.utoronto.ca/ (accessed on March 31, 2009).

[31] Transitional Year Programme Preservation Alliance, "Access and Equity Under Attack at UofT" (town hall audio), http://utfreepress.org/2009/04/access-and-equity-under-attack/ (accessed on April 2, 2009).

[32] Transitional Year Programme Preservation Alliance, "Access and Equity Under Attack at UofT".

[33] Thomas Mathien, "Extending Access into the Secondary Schools" in Keren Brathwaite (ed.), *Access and Equity in the University* (2003), p. 313.

[34] Alexander Francis, "Reflections" in Keren Brathwaite (ed.), *Access and Equity in the University* (2003), p. 24.

[35] Wanja Gitari, "Science Literacy: Schooled Science in the Service of Equity and Social Justice" in Keren Brathwaite (ed.), *Access and Equity in the University* (2003), p. 349.

[36] Transitional Year Programme Preservation Alliance, "Access and Equity Under Attack at UofT"

[37] Horace Campbell, "Is It Possible to Have Access and Equity in University Education in the Twenty-First Century?", p. 54.

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