

Activist Academe, Then and Now

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FOUNDED IN 1957, ACUTE/ACCUTE MAY NOT BE AS OLD or as large an organization as the MLA (founded in 1883), but its history is now a long and especially significant one for Canadians: not only does this institution articulate and embody the principles and goals of our profession but it has also become its public voice in the larger world. While some Canadian academics have always been members of the MLA, it was ACUTE that first gave us our sense of ourselves as professing English specifically in Canada. In 1982, Marjorie Garson made us a gift of an astutely analytic as well as informative account of ACUTE's somewhat difficult coming into being, of our developing sense of our specialized academic identity (something we take for granted today), and of the expansion of our association's focus from its initial concern for scholarship to include pedagogy and broader professional and practical issues (including departmental governance, professionalization of graduate students, the ethics of publishing, and so on). Providing a forum for our discussions—our sometimes acerbic disputes as much as our shared concerns—ACUTE/ACCUTE has given us the institutional space to think *together* and in this way to become a lively democratic community, eschewing the self-perpetuating elites that plague some professional organizations. *We are ACCUTE.*

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After its founding, ACUTE's concerns rapidly moved beyond the ever-important annual conference to the publishing of our own journal, *English Studies in Canada* (to counter the American flood), and from there to take an even more public role and represent the interests and concerns of our profession (and of the humanities in general) to the university, to the government, to funding agencies, and to the media. In so doing, it has helped others understand what it is that teachers of English teach, what it is that researchers in English research—and, even more importantly, *why* we do so. In defining and defending the literary arts and their study, ACUTE/ACCUTE's endeavours on our collective behalf have also worked to fight those feelings of beleaguered secondariness that literature scholars and teachers have sometimes been made to experience.

Neither ACUTE nor ACCUTE has ever shied away from taking an activist political role and, even more impressively, doing so as soon as a problem was identified. In the face of plummeting job possibilities for recent PHDs, as early as 1978 it established the Committee on Unemployment and Underemployment. The subsequent recommendations of the Rudrum Report (1979) are sobering to read today, however. One of its suggestions was that vigorous action be taken to combat the then-current debilitating job situation by improving the conditions of limited-term appointments, while at the same time working to phase them out in favour of tenure-track appointments. It argued the need for greater openness and honesty on the part of graduate programs in explaining to prospective entrants the actual employment situation. It also outlined the benefits of a more creative and inclusive approach to alternative kinds of employment. While it is likely safe to say that today's graduate students are more than aware of the academic job situation they face, I am not convinced that we have really ever initiated any kind of action, vigorous or otherwise, to combat the other problems. It is never too late, however. I realize that ACCUTE cannot fight this kind of larger institutional battle alone, of course, but I do hope it will continue to work to increase awareness of the continuing situation's collateral as well as actual damage—for universities, departments, faculty, students, and society at large.

This constant erosion, over the last thirty years, of tenure-track positions and this continuing casualization of the labour force have had many effects, not least among them the increased demand for “research productivity” at every level (from the first job to tenure and promotion), even as what is institutionally valued as acceptable “research” has narrowed. ACUTE's controversial 1976 Priestley Report had deplored early on the “publish or perish” mentality of English departments in Canada, something

that the much more recent report of the MLA's Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion (2006) has echoed and expanded. Sadly, little has changed in three decades. Given its activist history and its constant dedication to equity and fairness, ACCUTE could take the lead in provoking a debate, both in Canada and more widely, on exactly what it is that counts for tenure and promotion. There is an urgent need to redefine the criteria in the face of the very real pressures provoked by drastic reductions in humanities lists by academic publishers, increasingly limited library budgets, manifest threats to the economic viability of university presses, and, much more positively, the new possibilities afforded by new technologies. Given the difficulty (especially for a beginning scholar) of publishing a traditional (print) scholarly monograph, how can we continue to demand that marker as the chief currency of our academic reward system? And while new electronic media do indeed offer us new possibilities (for publishing, but also in pedagogy), our institutions admit that they lack the proper assessment tools to do justice to those who deploy them. There is room for ACCUTE to intervene and lead the way once again. As its history shows, it has always been, if not prescient, at the very least foresightful. And for this we are all grateful.

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