

# Dollars and Sense

by Mathieu Powell

Camosun College is beset with crisis. There are difficult challenges in administration, discord between departments and debilitating financial hurdles to overcome.

The challenges in administration begin, as in most institutions, with the leadership.

All leaders have a unique style of management and, in that, they accept praise for decisions bearing fruit, as well as blame for projects gone awry.

At Camosun, the woman who has held the reins for the past seven years is President Dr. Liz Ashton. She came with an impressive list of leadership credentials including that of equestrian athlete, representing Canada at the Olympics for 17 years.

For the record, Ashton won a silver medal at the Pan American Games in 1975 and a gold medal at the World Equestrian Championships in 1978.

In 1994, she was hired by Camosun's Board of Governors (BoG) to assume the mantle of leadership with the political objective of raising the image of the college within the community — both as a corporate entity and as an educational institution.

Recently, both praise and offered in results obtained by a survey conducted by the Board in September.

Ashton was evaluated by three groups within the college. These groups — the management team, employee/student groups, and members of the Board — were asked in a survey to rate Ashton on 17 statements relating to her abilities as a president and a leader.

Those asked to respond to the survey, a total of 49 people, were presented with statements to which they could strongly agree, agree, remain neutral, disagree or have no opinion.

Thirty people responded to the survey: nine in management, eight in the employee/student group and 13 members of the Board. The survey results were compiled in a report which included comments from the three groups.

Within the survey, Ashton is highly noted for her decisiveness, for elevating the image of Camosun in the community and for providing realistic access to herself.

One hundred percent of the management team agreed on Ashton's decisiveness. The other groups weren't as positive, registering 63 percent among the employee/student group and 77 percent among the board members.

Identical scoring was achieved on the issue of whether the President has elevated the image of Camosun in the community.

On the issue of accessibility, management and employees/students scored Ashton the same, but the board moved the score up to 92 percent.

All the other statements received positive scoring, with the exception of one.

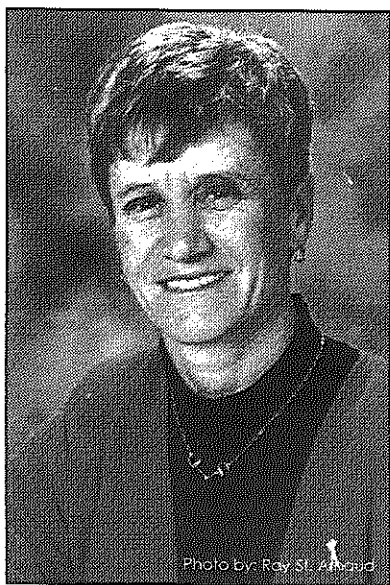
President Ashton received her lowest score in the area of consensus building.

In this area, her score dipped to 40 percent for the positive, and rose to 46 percent on the negative.

Management still gave her a positive 67 percent score, but the Board's score dropped to 39 percent, followed by an even lower score of 12 percent from the employees/students group.

The statement "I feel like part of a cohesive team" elicited no disagreement from the management team, but 62 percent of the employee/student groups disagreed and the Board had 46 percent disagreement.

Comments from each of the



President Liz Ashton

three groups provide insight into the percentages reached in the survey. (See Sidebar One)

Ashton would not comment on the report.

"I'm not going to talk about any assessment that was done in confidentiality," said Ashton. "Whatever the assessment was, good or bad, is between me and

the Board."

She did, however, defend herself against the evaluation by saying, "Part of the problem with the most recent one is it wasn't measured against any expectations. It was just a general 'how does the world feel about the President' kind of thing."

The Board establishes what their expectations are of the president, and it's against those expectations that the president should be evaluated, according to Ashton.

Assessment is more reflective of who's doing the assessing, according to Ashton. "What you may want from a President will be entirely different from what a faculty member or a seventeen-year-old would want from a President of a public institution."

Ashton does, however, appear to be taking steps towards addressing the need for communication between herself and members of the college community.

In an open document she presented to the Board in January, Ashton indicated she is setting time aside to do walkabouts at Lansdowne and Interurban campuses, arrange meetings between herself and stakeholder groups.

She will also be writing quarterly publications for distribution to the college community to convey her "values and hopes for the institution and the BC College system."

"I hope that the outcome will be increased visibility," says Ashton. "Many of those things I have done for many years, but it is a way of documenting what I do. Communication is two ways. If you want to communicate you need to take advantage of the opportunity and make it a two-way communication."

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As for the discord between departments at the college, expressions of dissent between management and faculty surfaced in the above-mentioned report.

In response to the statement "I work in a climate of trust and respect," the Employee/Student Group disagreed by 62 percent, the highest among the three surveyed groups.

In another document, "Contract Management Committee Report for the Board of Directors," the Camosun College Faculty Association Contract Management Committee

(CMC) detailed the frequency of questions or concerns brought to their attention between September 1 and December 22, 2000.

Several items brought forward related directly to problems between faculty and management.

One of the most frequently-asked concerns on a 16-item list related to what faculty perceived to be improper use of authority by deans or directors.

"This is the most difficult type of concern to describe without offending someone," says the report.

"Faculty members have complained that their dean or director uses his/her position of authority to impose a value system or to behave in a way faculty perceive as inappropriate (yelling, bullying, ridicule). These concerns often surface as the root of other contractual complaints."

The selection of departmental chairs also has raised some eyebrows among the faculty.

"Faculty have approached the CMC with concerns about the chair selection process (not transparent or inclusive), chair release time (insufficient) and the role of departmental chairs (supervisor or peer)," states the report.

The difficulties among personnel at Camosun was also referred to in a January Board Report which details a meeting on Jan. 5 between the College Management Team and the Camosun College Faculty Association.

The meeting focused primarily on a discussion on the "distinction between consultation and collaboration" and the "appropriate roles of labour and management in providing quality education."

The report reveals that the meeting allowed "some significant tensions to candidly emerge."

The meeting was summarized by a challenge for both parties - "Rather than wasting resources either unnecessarily fighting or trying to get around

each other, (the challenge) is to appreciate the value of each other and put more effort into a working partnership. The development of such a partnership is not optional: it is essential."

While it appears attempts are being made to bury the hatchet between the management and faculty, difficulties still remain, as evidenced by a recent conflict.

Last issue, Nexus published a

story on Vice President Bob Priebe's selection process for an advisory board in hiring a new Dean of Business.

Priebe did not go to the stakeholder groups within the college for their selected representatives. Rather, he has chosen to select those people whose

vice he personally finds most beneficial. This autocratic approach has some stakeholders upset, but Priebe defends his position.

"I'm not surprised when a union puts forward a view that 'we want our official representation and input in this process'," says Priebe, "but it's not something I'm used to doing when I go about the selection of another senior member."

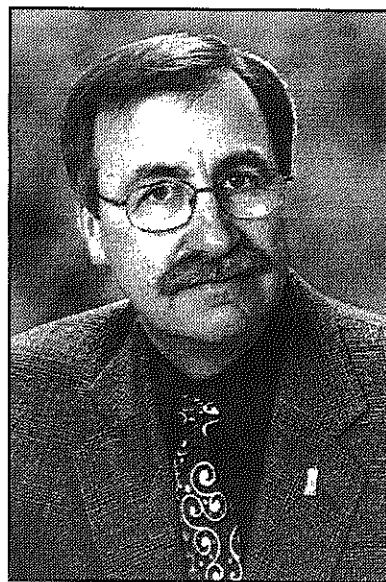
Some of the conflict may be in the dual role Camosun College plays as both a corporate entity and an educational institution. In other words, should it carry out its activities like a business, or like a bureaucracy?

In deciding whether to be autocratic or collaborative, perhaps Camosun's management style could be compared to an old proverb: If God designed a horse, then a committee designed the camel.

The horse is a beautiful creation full of balance and economy while a camel is ugly, foul-tempered and lumbers along in an ungainly fashion.

Before dismissing the camel, however, it's a good idea to know the kind of terrain through which you need to travel.

Will you be racing over the level ground of financial plenty while jumping hurdles with quick



Vice President Bob Priebe

# the future!



decision, or will you be slogging it out through the deserts of public scrutiny with little water to quench financial thirst?

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The third, and biggest, crisis looming in Camosun's future is the debilitating financial hurdles which it needs to overcome.

The financial situation has been grave enough to cause shakeups in Camosun's financial department.

As of Mar. 28, Karen Lorimer is no longer the Manager of Financial Operations. Her replacement will begin his appointment on Apr. 2.

In addition, an outside comptroller is being brought in to assess the crisis.

With several projects gone awry and insufficient funding, Camosun's financial picture is bleak. There isn't enough money to maintain the present infrastructure much less develop it.

One project gone awry was the Business Centre, located in downtown Victoria, designed to be an incubator for small businesses. The plug was pulled on this venture about a year ago after it was found to be a financial sinkhole. It resulted in a loss of over half a million dollars.

"We got caught by timing," says Ashton. "If we had been in there a year earlier, we would have gotten funding another institution received."

Ashton says the government made a decision to make such developments as the Business Centre a lower priority for funding, and Camosun College couldn't afford it.

"They decided to cut back, and we got caught in the swing of things," says Ashton.

In minutes from a February Board meeting, Kevin Carter, director of Technology and Learning Support, raised further financial concerns as he presented the current state of technology at Camosun College.

The minutes state: "He expressed grave concerns about our infrastructure and its capability to continue supporting both the complexity of our present usage and future growth needs of the College."

An overview of Camosun's financial requirements presented at the same Board meeting list the growing list of fiscal difficulties.

A \$300 million Technology Infrastructure and Equipment Endowment Fund is being

requested from the provincial government. Proceeds would be used to help defray technological costs and to lever matching funds from the federal government and the private sector.

The Young Building Restoration Campaign came up \$100,000 short of its campaign commitment. The college is asking the government to forgive this debt.

\$380,000 is required for "obligations incurred with Saanich Municipality in relation to the Technology Park." Based on an agreement signed years ago by the college, Camosun are liable for part of the improvement costs around the Interurban campus which result from the creation of the nearby technology center.

The Information Technology (IT) infrastructure will require \$1.2 million per year for the next five years — \$500,000 per year on infrastructure needs, \$700,000 per year to replace aging work stations and servers, and to buy new computers to address expanding use.

And to maintain the status quo and not reduce existing services or programs, a further on-going funding increase of about \$614,000 is needed in the IT area.

A sports education facility has been touted for a number of years as an important need. The project is estimated at \$7.4 million.

The financial shortfall list goes on, but these are some of the highlights.

The question many Camosun stakeholders are asking is, how did Camosun's financial situation get so bad?

Camosun's Board and President Ashton point to under-funding by the government as part of the problem.

"We have a fairly significant structural deficit, which means the costs of doing what we always have are exceeding the revenue that we get for operating," says Ashton. "It costs about \$102 million just to maintain our current standard of technology."

The College's pleas to the Ministry of Education have fallen on deaf ears.

According to the Board minutes of Feb. 8, referring to a request made to the Ministry for additional budgetary funding, "It was concluded that, from the Ministry point of view, our concerns have been addressed, and that no further correspondence

should be initiated."

Camosun's under-funding, relative to other institutions in the system, has had a serious cumulative effect on the college's ability to serve its stakeholders, states the Board report.

"The compound effect of being funded at less than system average is estimated to be at \$4.2 million over the past decade."

Some figures provided by Ashton help to explain the problem.

In 1991, Camosun received an average of \$7809 per FTE (Full Time Equivalent). [FTE is a measurement of the number of student seats the government will fund per institution.] In 2000, Camosun received \$7475 per FTE. Over that same ten-year period, from 1991 to 2000 the total change in CPI (a measure of cost of living increases) increased 22.4 percent.

"What we have in total funding per FTE to date, compared with ten years ago, is 8.1 percent," says Ashton. "At the same time, the growth in CPI or regular increases in costs year in and year out — the cost of things has gone up 22.4 percent. We've had to absorb, in effect, 31.5 percent."

On the other hand, though, Camosun has had a habit of allowing more students to

register than it has had allotted government funding for, and when you accept more students than you have money for, something has to give — like infrastructure funding.

President Ashton defended Camosun's access overspending by saying, "We have been access-driven for many years and Camosun has provided more seats than we've been funded for through what we, basically, call overproduction."

But does "access overproduction" make sense when the college is struggling to keep its head above financial waters?

Trying to accommodate more students than funded for is one element that has led Camosun to the current structural deficit, admits the President. For several years, Camosun took in just over nine percent more students than it received funding for.

"Last year, when we ended up getting into some financial challenges, we said we were going to go back to trying to maintain 100 percent, not over 100 percent utilization of available seats," admits Ashton.

Yet Ashton is still strong in her

commitment to access. Her main political objective is to increase the number of seats available to students as well as maintain quality of education.

"It upsets me a lot when we have large wait lists for portions of our programs," says Ashton. "We haven't been able to increase our capacity to the degree I'd like. Each year we get approximately 150 new seats but it's still not enough."

"We haven't been rewarded in the government allocation model for the fact that we've tried to accommodate more and more students over a period of time as we try to meet the demands of a waitlist," says Ashton.

Camosun faces difficult times ahead. If this is the path set before it, Camosun College's Board and President Liz Ashton will find themselves beset by serious challenges — not only to meet the college's financial requirements, but maintain its current quality of education.

With leadership, co-operation, hard work and, maybe, some good luck, Camosun may weather the storm and remain the quality institution of learning it is today. One will have to wait and see.

## Comments Provided in the September Survey Regarding President Liz Ashton.

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(The following statements represent the opinions expressed by some members of the stakeholder groups, and do not represent the opinion of the paper.)

#### The Management Team:

"I have a great respect for Liz. I believe she has done an excellent job at the college despite difficult circumstances, largely beyond her control. Keep up the good work."

"Liz is a good leader who has found it very frustrating dealing with the long-held view of the Camosun way. She has the support of her team and also needs the support of the Board in order to make and implement some hard decisions."

#### Employee/Student Groups:

"I believe Liz Ashton could have better served this com-

munity in the following ways: (1) more face-to-face interaction with this community; (2) more public involvement in decision-making; (3) better responsiveness with key college issues i.e., like planning ahead to assist in the communication needs of groups affected by her decisions; (4) recognize that decisions in this community are 'values-driven'. She stressed 'public' decision-making but failed to talk 'publicly' about personal issues like health and safety, pride in the community, absence of conflict...to name a few."

"As a faculty member I have always felt valued for my ideas and contributions at Camosun. The President has always directly supported my work with students."

#### Board of Governors:

"The style of communication and decision-making shown at times by the college President has been heavy-handed and patronizing. I do not believe this

helps good staff relations. As a Board member, I have on a few occasions felt 'talked down to' and/or lectured."

"As a governor of Camosun Board I have much confidence and faith in our president. However, I hear from a retired group of faculty and staff and current staff that they do not always feel "consulted." This, they tell me, leads to mistrust of "administration." I am disturbed by these comments as it forms a pattern that I believe needs further examination and review. At times at Board meetings Liz becomes frustrated and her posturing reflects her feelings which some read too negatively. Nevertheless, I wish Liz could keep some of her posturing more neutral. It's not becoming for Liz to wear her dissatisfaction so visibly. I think being a CEO is an exceedingly difficult job. I believe Liz is doing an excellent job."