

## Victoria's version of Harvard

Times Colonist

July 8, 2004

A group of investors wants to create a private university in Victoria. A request has been submitted to the province for a charter, and the group is in discussions with the Greater Victoria school board to acquire the vacant Blanshard elementary school.

Legislation to grant permits to private universities already exists in B.C. Therefore, while this particular proposal still has hoops to go through, it's feasible we might see a new post-secondary institution in Victoria.

B.C. has a sprinkling of private degree-granting facilities. There are one or two faith-based institutions, such as Trinity Western University in Langley, and a new secular facility, Sea-to-Sky University at Squamish, is planned.

The traditional concern with private universities is that pressure to make profits can hurt the quality of instruction. However, so long as the government maintains strong regulatory oversight, this is a manageable concern.

The larger question is the impact that private institutions might have on public facilities. In the U.S., many of the most prestigious universities, like Harvard or Yale, are privately owned and operated. It's likely the competitive pressure they exert that encourages public institutions to raise their sights.

The opportunity to mobilize private capital which might not be accessible to public facilities also brings new resources into play. While some administrators worry that accepting corporate research grants may compromise independence, the reality is that every public university in Canada aggressively chases funded research.

The only difference seems to be that private schools, with their wider contacts, are better at it.

If there is a concern, it may be that higher fees charged by private institutions could encourage public facilities to follow suit. We've already seen hikes in university and college fees over the past two years of between 70 and 100 per cent.

If the government moves forward, we need an assurance it understands the difference between public and private facilities. Specifically, we need to know that when the presidents of public universities start waving private fee schedules and demanding equality, the government will show them the door.

© Times Colonist (Victoria) 2004