

My father was a professor at the University of Toronto in the 1970s, so our family spent a few formative years north of the border. The city, even then, had a knack for quiet excellence. It wasn't showy. Things just worked. People valued calm competence over endless self-promotion. I didn't realize it as a kid, but that early exposure to Canadian steadiness now feels strangely relevant. More and more, I'm hearing about American professors packing up their offices and heading north.

Walk through the University of Toronto today and you'll notice familiar accents: New Yorkers, Californians, Bostonians, Texans. Some of the brightest names in U.S. academia are settling there, drawn by research freedom, less bureaucratic handling, and a campus atmosphere that still believes in open inquiry. The university has become a kind of quiet refuge for thinkers worn down by America's ideological battles.

This isn't a mass exodus—not yet. But the trickle says something important about the moral and cultural health of American higher education, and maybe the country as a whole.

#### **The shrinking space for intellectual freedom**

In recent years, universities in the U.S. have turned into miniature culture wars. Conservatives blast them as hotbeds of progressive ideology; progressives see them as bastions of outdated privilege. Administrators tiptoe around controversy like tightrope walkers, terrified of upsetting trustees or social media mobs. The result is a kind of polite silence—everyone performing civility while avoiding the topics that matter most. Curiosity has become a risk.

Professors who've made the jump north describe what sounds almost utopian by comparison: department meetings focused on research instead of factional politics, collegial debates that stay within the bounds of reason. The academic culture feels temperamentally gentler. Canada's funding structure softens the influence of donors and tuition pressures that distort so many American universities. And because the country never built its identity on revolutionary passion, every disagreement doesn't automatically feel existential.

Put simply, Canadians argue like grown-ups. Americans increasingly argue like partisans.

#### **A different kind of professional bargain**

For scholars who still see academia as a calling rather than a brand, the choice is stark. The U.S. university has become a prestige marketplace—a high-speed chase for grants, citations, and clicks. Fame and ideology dominate more than teaching or long-term intellectual work.

By contrast, the Canadian model—quieter, steadier, less performative—offers something close to sanity. Professors there spend more time on their field and less on their reputation. The competition is still real, but it's less corrosive. For thinkers who

want to escape the exhausting hustle of American academic life, that trade-off feels worthwhile.

A young political theorist told me recently that moving north “felt like stepping out of a hurricane.” In her words: “Every department meeting back home was a miniature Twitter war. Here, people just want to talk ideas.” She said it with both relief and a hint of sadness—relief to escape the noise, sadness because she still felt, deep down, like an American intellectual.

#### **A national mirror**

When a country’s best minds start looking elsewhere, it’s rarely about money. It’s usually about meaning. In the 20th century, America was the destination for intellectual refugees—the place where truth could breathe. If that magnetism fades, even a little, something bigger is shifting in our civic DNA. The flight of scholars to another country hints at a deeper uncertainty about whether our institutions can still protect honest inquiry.

We’ve spent decades teaching young Americans to brand themselves, to fight their corner, to curate their identities. What we’ve neglected to teach is how to serve institutions larger than oneself. Professors who once saw universities as communities of truth now see them as very stressful workplaces. The moral mission that once glued higher education together has frayed, replaced by the language of competition and survival.

#### **Homesick for sanity**

I doubt this trend will become a flood. But it’s a powerful symbol of America’s fatigue—the sense that all our spaces for mutual trust have turned into battlegrounds. When people start moving to countries with fewer culture wars just to regain the freedom to think, that’s not an academic story. It’s a national one.

I think of my father walking to his classroom on those frozen Toronto mornings, briefcase in hand, the air crackling but the mood intact. The campus wasn’t glamorous, but it worked. And maybe that’s the simplest lesson American academia needs to relearn—that sometimes, what matters most isn’t glory or ideology. It’s a place that quietly does its job: a community that still believes ideas are worth the trouble.