

**Three New Campuses for Ontario: A Symposium on Options, Challenges and Possibilities**

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***Transforming Selected Colleges into New Universities:  
A Cautionary Tale***

**Preamble**

History shows that systems of education evolve as the social, economic and political contexts in which they exist change over time and, indeed, Ontario colleges are in some ways dramatically different from the portrait painted by Minister Davis in the legislature on May, 21 1965. So, while I am not intrinsically opposed to the idea of selected colleges becoming universities, I believe we need to tread cautiously and consider the implications for all who will be affected; current and future students, faculty, staff and the local community. Most importantly, we must address the question of what will be gained and what might be lost? Only then can we decide whether transforming three GTA colleges into new universities is a wise solution to the problem at hand.

**The Ontario College Legacy**

Without taking too much time and focusing only on the period 2000-2010, what can we say about the impact of Ontario colleges on one core mandate, access to PSE?

1. Applications have risen from 160,000 to 198,000
2. Enrolment has increased from 145,000 to 205,000
3. Int'l student enrolment increased from 3,707 to 14,500
4. The Second Career program enrolled 40,000 out-of-work Ontarians since 2008
5. Graduates increased from 45,000 to 63,000 with grand total of over ½ million
6. Enrolled students are drawn equally from all income quartiles
7. One third come from small communities of less than 50,000
8. 9% self-declare as Aboriginal learners
9. Students with disabilities increased from 9.5% to 12.2%
10. 25-33%, depending on definition, are First Generation students

11. 8 to 9 in 10 grads are employed 6 mths after graduation and 80% are satisfied with their college education
12. 90% of employers are satisfied with their college educated employees
13. Almost 2 in three students who enroll graduate
14. Colleges represent a 12% return on investment for taxpayers and 9% for students

Clearly, Ontario colleges have done an outstanding job improving access to PSE and delivering quality education with a robust return on stakeholder investments. At this point I'm tempted to invoke that old maxim "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" But if change is to be contemplated, then strategies to retain and enhance the legacy outlined above must also be identified. I say this because enrollments at the three colleges often associated with a new polytechnic or university status represent over one quarter of total provincial enrollment and two-thirds of the enrollment in the five Metro Toronto institutions. What impact would such a college-to-university transformation have on college-level programming at the institutional, regional and provincial levels?

### **Lessons from Away**

So, should we decide to transform one or more colleges into universities, what can we learn from other jurisdictions where something similar has happened? At a minimum their experiences should help us anticipate potential issues and pressures and inform the policies, processes and organizational structures necessary to mitigate any negative consequences for individuals, the institutions and the system generally. Recognizing the short time I have available, I will briefly review some issues raised by similar postsecondary developments in Norway, Australia and Western Canada.

### **Norway – Resources for Research**

The transformation of state colleges in Norway during the mid-90s highlighted the organization and administration of research as a key issue (Kyvik, S. & Skodvin, 2003). Indeed, the 1998 OECD report *Redefining Tertiary Education* concluded that the policy intention to exclude research from designated non-research institutions seldom succeeds over time. The issue is the status of research in tertiary education and the value that staff place on this activity, whether in the traditional "pure" sense or as applied problem-

solving. The non-university sector in Norway comprises 26 state colleges providing mainly vocationally oriented education that offer 2–4 year teaching programs in professional and vocational fields, as well as 1–1.5 year university courses. The majority of the colleges also offer academic course programs for a higher academic degree, and a few colleges also offer doctoral training in specific subjects. In 1995, The Act on Universities and Colleges specifically charged that the state colleges should engage in research. The government, however, stated that this was an institutional responsibility rather than an individual duty or right, and that the colleges should carry out research preferably connected to practice within specific fields, or to problems particularly relevant to their regions. The increasing emphasis on research as an important faculty task, in addition to teaching, created tensions and dilemmas within the colleges. This is reminiscent of the Ontario college experience with applied degrees and research, a topic being explored by two of my graduate students. In Norway, a number of policy dilemmas emerged related to internal allocation of resources for research including:

- Competition in the allocation of resources for research versus teaching
- Research-based teaching versus dissemination of advanced knowledge
- Emphasis on research abilities vs professional experience in staff recruitment
- Vocational and regionally oriented research versus discipline oriented research
- Institutional control of research versus the staff's own preferences

It appears that some of these issues are already being experienced in Ontario colleges that have developed a significant number of degree program offerings and associated applied research.

### **Australia – Competing Identities & Status**

The sectoral divide between vocational education and training (VET) and higher education in Australia is blurring as a consequence of broader social and economic pressures for a more highly skilled population, but also as a consequence of government policies designed to develop tertiary education markets and to diversify institutional types. The mixed-sector institutions that are emerging are in addition to Australia's five dual-sector universities, with their large higher education and technical and further education

(TAFE) divisions. Mixed-sector institutions are institutions with most of their student enrolments in one sector, but which are increasingly offering programs from the 'other' sector. This scenario is likely to prevail for some time as the transformed colleges are gradually recognized as new universities.

Two publications from Australia's National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) have highlighted issues associated with how teachers and students create identities for themselves and their relative status in mixed-sector institutions. In general, many scholars emphasize how individual and group action of faculty can lead to academic drift at the institutional level (Jenniskens and Morpew 1999). Teachers in the NCVER studies argued that the differences between the sectors needed to be recognized if higher education was to be developed. Some thought that higher education and VET needed to be organizationally separate so that the administration of the programs was handled by those who understand the requirements, while keeping those teaching higher education and VET within the one department to ensure silos didn't develop. Some faculty didn't want to see higher education as an exclusive division, but that there needed to be a cultural recognition about the importance of "academic input". Others thought there needed to be structural separation to benefit students and suggested that higher education should be organizationally separate and that students should have their own facilities and study area 'so they can feel a little bit proud and a little bit special'. This was said to be important because:

It helps them to understand that studying higher education is different to studying TAFE. Some still have the TAFE mentality, and if they are mixing with TAFE students then they will continue to think that it is okay for assignments to be late and that things are a little bit easier.

The latter quote alludes to perceived differences between students enrolled in TAFE versus university programs and confirms student reports regarding their interaction with peers. When asked whether they mixed with students enrolled in other programs in TAFE, or whether they knew other TAFE students, overwhelmingly higher education students did not mix with other students. The findings of these studies are instructive as they point to the development of tensions related to identities, role definition and status in mixed-sector institutions.

The issue of the status in mixed-sector institutions was pervasive in the NCVET studies. It was identified as an important limitation for the development of higher education in TAFE by interviewees in offices of higher education, by senior managers at the dual-sector universities, by TAFE senior management in all TAFE institutes in the project, and by teachers and students. Many TAFE managers and teachers explained that the community still identified TAFE as associated only with the trades, and that they didn't understand the extent of the programs TAFE was currently offering. Some teachers argued that it would be better if their TAFE institute were called an institute of technology rather than an institute of TAFE to escape, as one teacher put it, the 'stigma associated with TAFE, and the difference between TAFE and universities'. This view was echoed by other senior managers as an important strategy to position the institution and its qualifications to help educate the community and the international market about the institution and its qualifications.

The Australian experience, therefore, implies the development of a perceived status hierarchy both within and outside the mixed-sector institutions. This is not entirely a foreign concept within the Ontario postsecondary system, once characterized by John Dennison as consisting of two solitudes.

### **Western Canada – Credential Recognition**

A number of authors have documented the expansion of degree and institutional types in western Canada (Dennison, 2006; Marshall, 2008). For example, some colleges in B.C have been transformed into university-colleges and, ultimately, universities. This expansion of degree types and degree-granting institutions, however, has been linked to some confusion, particularly among parents and students, about the meaning and value of new undergraduate degrees delivered by non-university institutions (Skolnik, 2006). As the graduates of these degrees enter the workforce and seek further credentials, confusion is arising regarding the preparation of these graduates for further study.

University-level degree credibility is essentially defined by membership in AUCC and membership primarily involves an assessment that examines institutions for the requirements necessary to deliver the degree outcomes expected of a bachelor's or higher degree. These requirements include, among others: the appropriate qualifications of

faculty, the support for scholarly work for faculty and students, and the appropriate educational facilities.

Marshall (2008) has argued that the heart of all the redesign proposals for the “baccalaureate” level institution is the relationship between scholarship and instruction at the undergraduate level. All provincial “system redesign” proposals, as is the case for the new universities in Ontario, refer in some fashion to a limit, in either scope or intensity, on the research role of the baccalaureate-focused institution. On the other side of the issue is the AUCC membership requirement that the institution:

has a proven record of scholarship, academic inquiry and research, expects its academic staff to be engaged in externally peer reviewed research and to publish in externally disseminated sources, and provides appropriate time and institutional support for them to do so. Indicators of this commitment will include policies and programs pertaining to the creation of knowledge, the development of curriculum and the execution of research projects. (AUCC, 2004)

There appears to be little published research documenting the impact of meeting AUCC requirements on the non-university academic programming in the former university-colleges of B.C. The one article I did locate, by Dr. Brian Carr of Kwantlen Polytechnic University, identified as an ongoing challenge related to their institutional transformation the fact that “the trades and vocational areas have complained that with the advent of degrees, their programs have been marginalized.” There are echoes here, it seems to me, of the Australian experience. The implication for Ontario colleges that are transformed into universities is that the pressures of meeting AUCC quality assurance criteria for credential recognition in the marketplace might have a negative impact on the core college programming and institutional culture.

## **Conclusion**

Using the experiences of other jurisdictions, I have attempted to highlight potential difficulties associated with transforming Ontario colleges into universities. The risk, it appears, is one of creating tension and confusion regarding the perceived role definition and status of the new universities being considered. Should we proceed, however, we must ensure the legacy of the Ontario college system in promoting access is

not compromised and that future Ontario college students continue to enjoy the positive postsecondary experience and personal success of those who have gone before them.

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