

**Why Ontario universities should welcome the academic
enhancement of the colleges of applied arts and technology**

by

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One of the important questions to consider in a review of policy for postsecondary education is what kind of system do we need. To provide a reasonably complete answer to that question would require addressing many different dimensions of postsecondary education including structures, processes, and relationships. In this paper, I will concentrate on two important and closely related subsidiary questions within the broader question of what kind of system we need. Those subsidiary questions are what is the most appropriate mix of different types of postsecondary institutions, and what should be their relationships with one another?¹ As those are pretty large questions, within them my principal focus will be even narrower, on the balance and relationship between universities and community colleges.

Seeking the best mix of different types of institutions

A good place to start when asking what is the appropriate mix of different types of postsecondary institutions is to consider the range of possibilities. If we look at the way that degree level postsecondary education is organized into institutional units around the world, we can identify the following types of institutions:

¹ I have attempted to place these questions within a broad policy framework in M. L. Skolnik, "The Case for Giving Greater Attention to Structure in Higher Education Policy-making," in C. Beach, R. Broadway, and M. McInnis (eds.), *Higher Education in Canada*. (Kingston: John Deutsch Institute, Queen's University, 2005, forthcoming).

- research universities, which I take to mean institutions that offer programs in a wide range of fields and disciplines at the undergraduate and graduate level, and in which faculty are expected to spend about the same amount of their time in research as in teaching²;

- special mission universities, a category that includes institutions that concentrate on particular fields of study such as applied sciences and technology; or focus on serving particular clientele such as those defined by religion, gender, ethnicity, language, or circumstance; or concentrate on particular functions such as institutions whose mission is primarily teaching;

- distance, open, and virtual universities, of which one of the leading ones in the world is in Canada - Athabasca University;

- community colleges and institutes of technology whose mandate includes offering degree level courses for transfer credit at universities as well as full baccalaureate programs in selected areas;

These four categories of postsecondary institutions could exist in either public or private versions, generating eight cells in the map of possible institutional types.³

In regard to the provision of degree level postsecondary education, Ontario has, until quite recently, relied almost exclusively upon a single one of those eight institutional types, the public research university.⁴ The research university is a wonderful

² The term, research university, is widely used but often defined in different ways, or not defined at all. I think that the expectation regarding the proportion of their time that faculty are expected to spend in research is the most useful way to define a research university. Usually these expectations are codified in institutional or state policies or collective agreements.

³ More than eight cells if different types of special mission institutions are considered as distinct categories.

⁴ The *Postsecondary Education Choice and Excellence Act, 2000* made it possible for the first time in Ontario for secular private postsecondary institutions to obtain the authority to grant degrees. Thus far, under that Act, only one such institution has obtained that authority, involving two very small programs in

creation, and quite likely many within the Ontario university community would regard it as the best type of postsecondary education institution ever devised. However, even its enthusiasts might concede that no single institutional type is likely to be the best way to meet all postsecondary needs, in all places, at all times. Also, within a realistic policy perspective it is necessary to consider, along with its many virtues, the fact that the research university is likely the most expensive of all postsecondary institutional types.

Ontario stands in contrast to most, if not all, jurisdictions of comparable size and economic and educational development in its nearly exclusive reliance on the public research university model for providing degree level education. Even though we may feel that our university system has been inadequately funded for the past two or three decades, it is a noteworthy accomplishment that relying exclusively on the most expensive model for providing degree level postsecondary education, Ontario has been able to achieve both a participation rate that ranks quite high by international standards, and a quality of education and research that probably is among the best in the world.

The scholarly literature on institutional differentiation in postsecondary education suggests that there are considerable benefits from having a diverse mix of different institutional types.⁵ Insofar as that conclusion is valid, it would imply that fostering some movement toward institutional diversification in the provision of degree level education in Ontario would be a sensible thing to do, although that leaves important questions about

technology. The University of Ontario Institute of Technology could possibly be considered a special mission institution, though it also seems to be developing in the direction of a research university.

⁵ R. Birnbaum, *Maintaining Diversity in Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1983); J. Huisman, "Differentiation and Diversity in Higher Education Systems," in J. C. Smart (ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, Vol. XIII (New York: Agathon Press, 1998), pp. 75-109; V.L. Meek, L. Goedegebuure, O. Kivinen, and R. Rinne (eds.), *The Mockers and the Mocked: Comparative Perspectives on Differentiation, Convergence, and Diversity in Higher Education* (Oxford: Pergamon/IAU Press, 1996).

what particular moves to make, who should make that determination, and how the moves should be made.

The latter two questions are the stuff of system level governance. That is a topic that falls outside the scope of this paper, but I would like to make two observations about it.⁶ The first is that, again unlike most other jurisdictions of its size and level of economic development, and in spite of the considerable amount of public money that is allocated to postsecondary education, Ontario has *never* had a plan for the development of its postsecondary education, or an agency whose responsibility it is to produce a plan - not even in the 1960s and early 70s when there were some noteworthy instances of postsecondary system planning in other provinces, such as the Parent Commission in Quebec and the Deutsch Commission in New Brunswick.⁷ That is to say, we have never as a province attempted to answer the question of what kind of postsecondary education system do we need. My second point about governance is that there is no necessary conflict between system level planning and academic freedom for faculty, as the experience of many jurisdictions that have both system level plans for their postsecondary education systems and academic freedom demonstrates.

The role and mission of the colleges of applied arts and technology

⁶ I have elaborated on both structural and governance aspects of achieving a more differentiated system of postsecondary education in Ontario in a background paper that I did for the Rae Commission, M. L. Skolnik, *A Discussion of Some Issues Pertaining to the Structure of Postsecondary Education in Ontario and Some Suggestions for Addressing Them*. A paper commissioned by the Postsecondary Education Commission, Toronto, September, 2004.

⁷ *The Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Quebec (Parent Commission)* (Quebec: Queen's Printer, 1963); *Royal Commission on Higher Education in New Brunswick (J. Deutsch, Chair)* (Frederick, NB: Government of New Brunswick, 1962). There was considerable planning associated with the establishment of the colleges of applied arts and technology in Ontario in the mid-Sixties, but not much

One aspect of the broad question about the most appropriate mix of and relationship between different types of institutions that has been the subject of considerable interest in Ontario in recent years is that of the role of the colleges in regard to degree credit activity.⁸

When the CAATs were established in the 1960s, they were designed to be completely separate from the universities, and by and large that separation continued into the 1990s. Complete separation meant that, unlike the United States and some other Canadian provinces, there was no systemic provision for the colleges to offer courses for which the universities would give credit, though such was possible on a limited, and generally meager and inconsistent, case by case basis. That this was the way that the Ontario universities, or at least the most influential leaders of the Ontario universities, wanted it, was curious, because elsewhere it was the universities that were the leading advocate of a transfer function for the community colleges. In British Columbia, it was the President of the University of British Columbia, John B. Macdonald, who was the principal architect of the community college transfer system. In the United States, several prominent university presidents, such as Robert Hutchins at University of Chicago, were the leading advocates of an expanded transfer role for the community colleges.⁹ These university leaders were not entirely altruistic; they saw considerable benefit for their institutions if community colleges relieved them of some of the pressure to serve the

in the way of related planning for the whole postsecondary education sector, and certainly not much since those days.

⁸ Examples of this interest include several government appointed commissions and task forces (for example those headed by Pitman in 1993, Smith in 1996, and Rae in 2004) that have been asked to consider this issue, as well as the creation of the College-University Consortium Council in 1996.

⁹ J.B. Macdonald, *Higher education in British Columbia and a plan for the future* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1962). A good statement of Hutchins's views about the role of the community college can be found in R.M. Hutchins, "Hard Times and the Higher Learning", *Yale Review*, vol. 22 (1933), pp. 714-730.

large and growing numbers of first and second year students, enabling them to concentrate more on upper division and graduate courses and on research. Ontario university leaders have never seen the colleges as institutions that could be of benefit to them, and in recent years have viewed the colleges primarily as unwanted, and rather vexatious, competitors.

The Ontario colleges of applied arts and technology were designed to perform a predominantly economic role. Their main job – originally, and to this day – has been to prepare workers for the provincial economy, particularly workers in the middle of the occupational hierarchy. To support their occupational education function, the colleges developed capabilities in general education and developmental education. As the middle level occupations for which the colleges were intended to provide entry level education have evolved, college curricula, programs and resources for educating practitioners in these fields have evolved correspondingly. In order to be able to provide state-of-the-art programs of career education in the wide range of fields where they have been called upon to offer such programs, the colleges have, over the years, advanced considerably as postsecondary educational institutions. For example, it is now common for many colleges to require a Ph.D. for new hires in fields where the Ph.D. is the normal terminal academic credential. In some fields a natural consequence of the expertise of college faculty has been college involvement in applied research. As of November, 2004, thirty-three community colleges across Canada, including some in Ontario, had received project funding from the Canada Foundation for Innovation, a dozen of them more than a million dollars.¹⁰ This is a small amount compared to what many universities have received, but

¹⁰ This information was obtained from the CFI web site on December 31, 2004.
<<http://www.innovation.ca/projects/index>>

it indicates recognition of the contributions that the colleges can make in selected areas of applied research.

In many of the occupational fields for which the colleges have been providing career education, the baccalaureate has become a required or an important credential for entry or advancement. In tandem with this escalation in requirements, colleges and occupational groups in certain fields have made plausible arguments that a baccalaureate is an appropriate designation for completion of a demanding career education program that represents the highest level of education for entry to practice in a particular field. The idea of an applied baccalaureate is hardly novel or radical. In many European countries, the applied baccalaureate provided by a polytechnic institution has existed in parallel with the more traditional, or academic, baccalaureate provided by a university for quite a long time.

Colleges in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario are now empowered to award baccalaureate degrees, and the majority of colleges in Alberta and Ontario are offering baccalaureate programs of an applied nature.¹¹ In order to offer an applied baccalaureate program in Ontario, a college must submit a quite detailed proposal to the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities, who refers all such proposals to the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board. Following a process that is similar to that of the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies, the PEQAB has an on-site review done by a panel of experts which normally consists entirely or mostly of professors from universities in

¹¹ For an examination of developments and issues pertaining to the community college baccalaureate, see D.L. Floyd., M.L. Skolnik, and K.P. Walker (eds.), *The Community College Baccalaureate: Emerging Trends and Policy Issues* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing LLC, 2005). Colleges in Alberta were first given the authority to grant applied baccalaureate degrees in 1995. In 2004, it became possible for colleges in that province to obtain authority to grant conventional (academic) baccalaureate degrees, and the first such proposals are now being considered by the Campus Alberta Quality Council.

Ontario and elsewhere. As of December 1, 2004, the Minister had approved 44 applied baccalaureate program applications in 19 colleges. As a member of the PEQAB, I read all the expert panel reports on these applications, and I have observed that in the vast majority of cases the appraisals have been quite positive, especially on whether the proposed programs are worthy of a baccalaureate degree.¹²

Towards a healthy relationship between colleges and universities

In contrast to the predominantly economic mission of the colleges, universities in Ontario, like most universities elsewhere, have striven to balance their economic role with their broader intellectual, cultural, and civic functions. Over the long history of the university, the relative emphasis given to its economic and non-economic functions has shifted frequently from time to time and varied from place to place. Frequently there have been some commentators who decried the dominance of the economic goals of the university even when few of their peers shared that view. For example, more than twenty years ago, Axelrod concluded that by the 1970s higher education in Canada already "was a simple (if inefficient) economic and technocratic commodity in the service of business and government"¹³

If this view was not widely shared at the time, Axelrod was at least prescient. By the late 1990s, there was an outpouring of expressions of concern about the preoccupation of universities in Canada (and in many other jurisdictions) with their role as instruments of service to the economy. To take one such example, James Downey,

¹² Proposals for applied baccalaureate programs and information on approvals of proposals is available on the PEQAB web site. <<http://www.peqab.edu.gov.on.ca>>

¹³ P. Axelrod, *Scholars and Dollars: Politics, Economics, and the Universities of Ontario, 1945-1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), p. 219.

former President of Waterloo University, suggested that universities have become "... too economy-centric in our focus, at the expense of some other values and considerations that go to the heart of our enterprise, notably the qualitative aspects of undergraduate education and the role of universities in a civil society, as distinct from in a knowledge economy".¹⁴

I believe that the strength and pervasiveness of the present preoccupation of the university with its contribution to economic life relative to its other contributions is unprecedented historically, and that this is the most serious problem in the academy, as well as being a serious problem for society. This problem may be even more worrisome for Ontario than many other jurisdictions, because in the absence of universities whose special mission is to provide service to the economy, the pressure to function as instruments of economic growth has fallen broadly upon all the provincial universities.

In this context it is important to remind ourselves that there is a whole cadre of postsecondary institutions in Ontario that has the historic mission of and the capability for responding rapidly to the market driven needs of industry. These, of course, are the colleges of applied arts and technology. However, rather than viewing the colleges as peer postsecondary institutions that can relieve the universities of some of the pressure to provide immediate instrumental service to the economy, Ontario's university leaders have tried to thwart the academic enhancement of the colleges. The universities have regarded the offering of applied baccalaureate programs by the colleges as an encroachment into what should be the exclusive territory of the universities, and some university leaders have complained that uppity colleges (i.e. those that don't know or

¹⁴ J. Downey, The Heart of Our Enterprise, *University Affairs* (December, 2003), 27-30.

aren't willing to stay in their place) are causing a blurring of the traditional boundary between the sectors. Apparently, these university leaders do not appreciate that by operating as if their main purpose is to be instruments of economic growth – the mission that has long been that of the colleges – the universities themselves have a major responsibility for such blurring of the boundary as has occurred in recent years.

If Ontario universities are serious about avoiding role convergence with the colleges, they might consider first what they can do in their own domain before lobbying the government to restrain the colleges. A completely different attitude about the ambiguous territory between sectors that has resulted from globalization and advances in technology was illustrated recently by a university in Florida. Florida Gulf Coast University decided to transfer two of its baccalaureate programs to the local community college, Edison College. The University felt that the heavy emphasis on workforce skills in its bachelor of applied science in computer technology and its bachelor of public services management made these programs more suitable for the community college to offer. In return, Edison College agreed to increase the space on some of its campuses that it provides for FGCU to offer programs there.¹⁵ I will leave it to readers to speculate on the likelihood of a similar occurrence in Ontario.

A university sector that was concerned about maintaining a healthy balance between serving its economic and non-economic objectives would not only welcome, but encourage and support the movement of community colleges into sophisticated areas of applied knowledge that respond to the needs of industry. It would recognize that even

¹⁵ J. B. Reed, "Edison applies to transfer programs from FGCU," *The News-Press* (Southwestern Florida), (July 20, 2004). This agreement between the institutions will require state approval. <www.news-press.com>

though it has an important role to play with respect to the commercialization of knowledge, it alone of all societal institutions has other vital roles too in relation to the advancement and conservation of knowledge, roles that can be jeopardized by excessive preoccupation with responding to immediate instrumental needs of industry. Such a university sector would look upon the colleges as allies in addressing societal needs and welcome, rather than seek to thwart, the academic enhancement of the colleges.