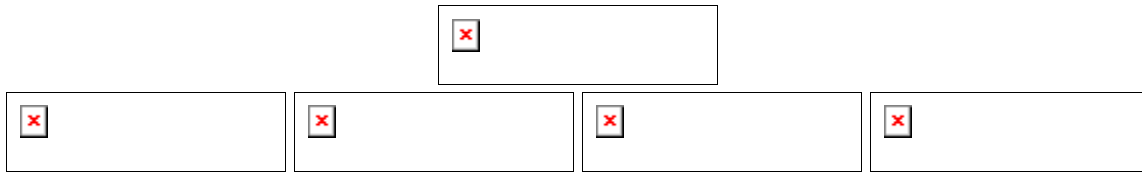


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Ontario Community Colleges and Change: Is there an essence that has remained constant? Does it matter?

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I wish to thank the Association of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology of Ontario, and particularly the organizers of this conference, for giving me the honour of delivering the Sisco Address. It is always a privilege to speak to members of the college community, and, owing to the great respect and admiration that I had for Mr. Sisco, it is a special privilege to be giving the address which bears his name.

The invitation did not carry with it a request that I speak on a particular theme or topic. This freedom can be both an opportunity and a problem. It is an opportunity to have a captive audience, for a while, at least - depending upon how easy it is to get to the exit doors - to hear me hold forth on something that I think is important. On the other hand, the whole domain of community colleges, past, present, and future, is a daunting universe from which to craft remarks for a late afternoon on a winter's day.

In what I hope will turn out to have been a sensible, if no doubt ambitious, choice, I decided to try to focus my remarks on one of those big themes that has long been of interest to me, that of the identity, or essence, of the Ontario colleges; and whether, and if so, how, it may have changed over time. I believe that these questions are of speculative, philosophical interest to people who care about the colleges, and that is sufficient justification for us to consider them in a forum like this. However, these questions also have important practical consequences. In dialogue about proposals for change in the colleges, what has often been deemed a vital question - even a deal breaker - is whether the proposed change is consistent with the essence of the colleges.

The problem of having to justify change in relation to how it fits with an institution's essence is not unique to community colleges. Indeed, it has been more of an issue for universities, where the

observation that "this is the way that we have always done it" has, over the years, been remarkably successful in resisting change. While members of the college community may admit to some ambiguity regarding the essence of their institution, their counterparts in the university sector claim to know with absolute certainty what is essential to theirs.

For example, when the Province of British Columbia proposed to establish a new, technical university, with a different type of governance arrangement than is typical of Canadian universities, the provincial and national faculty organizations let the Province know in no uncertain terms, that a university without an academic senate was a contradiction in terms. In Ontario, the academic community seems, by and large, to have taken the position that being a predominantly teaching institution, or providing all courses of instruction electronically, are inconsistent with the idea of a university. Of course, in the Mid-Nineteenth Century, a report at Yale University warned that Yale would cease to be a university if Greek and Latin were given a secondary place in the curriculum.

In comparison with their counterparts in the university, those in the community college who would like to make proposals for change meet the test of consistency with institutional essence face at least two distinct challenges. One is that being a relatively new institution, colleges do not yet have the weight of tradition with which to anchor assertions about their identity.

Clark Kerr once noted that about 85 institutions in the world which were established by the year 1520 still exist in recognizable form with unbroken histories. These include the Catholic Church, Parliaments of the Isle of Man, Iceland, and Great Britain, several Swiss cantons; and about 70 universities, most still in the same locations, with some of the same buildings; and with professors and students doing much the same thing that they did in 1520. Indeed, Larry Spence observed that while a physician from medieval times would run screaming from a modern operating room, a Fifteenth Century teacher from the University of Paris would feel right at home in a Berkeley classroom. Don't laugh, he'd probably feel at home in an Ontario college classroom too!

The fact that for most of its existence the community college has been prominent in just a few countries adds to the difficulty of establishing an identity. While the same model of the university has been replicated in much of the world, even in settings where its appropriateness is questionable, this has not been the case with the community college. All jurisdictions have some type of postsecondary education institution that is not a university, but these vary greatly.

In part, this variation among jurisdictions in the form of the community college is a manifestation of the second problem in formulating the identity of the community college. That is that the community college, as distinct from the junior college which preceded it in the United States, came upon the scene largely as a deliberate creation through public policy to address a plethora of society's economic, social, and cultural issues which, by their very nature, differ from place to place, and change over time.

This type of role leads to the following conundrum with respect to defining institutional identity: If the core identity of a community college is that it is a postsecondary educational institution which is dedicated to meeting changing societal needs, then it is difficult to fix any other elements of its identity, because those may need to change in order to enable the institution to most effectively meet new societal needs.

In other words, if the essence of the community college is change, then as the college changes, its essence is not changed, because in changing, it is only actualizing its essence! Right? I did say that in part, we would be engaging in speculative philosophy this afternoon. This way of disposing of the question that is stated in the title of my address is reminiscent of those paradoxes posed by Bertrand

Russell. Like, if every man who does not shave himself is shaved by the barber, who shaves the barber? Actually, Russell was one of those philosophers who dismissed the concept of essence as invalid. For him, the term, essence, was only a linguistic convenience. A word could have an essence, but a thing could not. Of course, by this point in my talk - and I still have a long ways to go - some of you may feel that the concept of essence is more of a linguistic inconvenience.

The Search for College Identity

Following Russell, we may say that the term, college of applied arts and technology, is a linguistic convenience used to refer to a postsecondary educational institution with certain characteristics. In attempting to determine what those defining characteristics are, at least three avenues could be pursued: we could look for official statements of the mandate of the colleges; we could look to see what people who work in the colleges believe its essence to be; and we could look to the literature on the definition of the wider class of institutions called community colleges, of which Ontario's Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs) may be considered members.

The first of these approaches could be followed very easily if there were an official statement somewhere entitled "Mandate of the colleges of applied arts and technology", which in a crisp paragraph or so stated explicitly the mandate of the colleges. If there is such a statement, I have not been able to find it. Many of you may remember the Vision 2000 Review of the Mandate of the Colleges just over a decade ago. The first recommendation in the Vision 2000 Report was an eight sentence statement of the mandate of the colleges which the Government was urged to adopt. However, my understanding is that this mandate statement was never adopted.

The document which most closely approximates a mandate is, of course, the Statement in the Legislature by the Minister of Education, Mr. Davis, on May 21, 1965, when the legislation to establish the colleges was introduced.

The Minister's Statement in the Legislature provided a wonderful description of the Government's rationale for the creation of the colleges, some of its thinking regarding the design of the system, and a detailed description of the functions and types of programs that were envisaged for the colleges. Considering that it was a twelve page statement produced more than two years before the first college opened, the statement was remarkably useful in guiding the development of the colleges.

However, like statements in other jurisdictions about new types of postsecondary institutions that were being created in that era, it was easier to say what the colleges were not than what they were going to be. The major responsibilities that were identified were the provision of "courses of types and levels beyond, or not suited to, the secondary school setting", and "to meet the needs of graduates from any secondary school program, apart from those wishing to attend university". It would be left to the colleges, once they were operational, to give meaning to this new area of educational activity that was not of the secondary school or of the university, and accordingly to establish their own identity.

In regard to originally defining the colleges in large part on the basis of what they would not do, the transfer function stands out. No other aspect of the design of the CAATs - and possibly no other decision about the shape of postsecondary education in Ontario in the Twentieth century - engendered so much debate and second guessing as the original decision that the functions of the CAATs would not include university transfer. There seemed a consensus throughout most of the history of the colleges - and for many people, the idea lives on - that part of the essence of the CAATs is that they do not have a university transfer function. However, it is possible to infer from the Minister's Statement that the original stance on transfer was merely a policy position at a point in time rather than a core characteristic

of the colleges. The sentence that says that transfer courses have not been included in the list of types of courses to be offered ends with the explanation, ". . . because there is no need for such courses in Ontario at the present time . . .". That paragraph ends by noting that the Department was studying the demands of the 1970s, and "If circumstances so require, we will naturally change or make adaptations to our present plans." However, after the 1960s, the Ontario Government (whatever the Party in power) lost the will to consciously shape its publicly funded postsecondary education system - but that's another story.

What I find salient about the quotations that I have just cited is that they reinforce the idea of the colleges as a governmental response to societal needs with the implication that being able to change as those needs change is more central to their identity than any particular form that they may adopt in response to societal needs at one particular point in time.

The second possible way of getting insight into the identity of the colleges, studying what people in the system think and say about it, has not been pursued much. The closest example of a published study of this type was the one that John Dennison and John Levin did in 1987 in which they asked college CEOs and Ministry officials across Canada to rate different statements of college objectives. In the Ontario responses, as distinct from those of other provinces, only statements pertaining to training for employment were rated in the highest category. This is consistent with the often heard view that the CAATs are primarily employment training institutions. It is a view which also is consistent with the Key Performance Indicators that are used to assess the colleges. However, it is a narrower view of the identity of the colleges than I have encountered over the years in visiting colleges and talking with college administrators and faculty. As I wrote in a study of the evolution of relations between management and faculty in the colleges in 1987, it is hard to imagine that the passion that staff of the colleges brought to their jobs in the 1970s could have been due solely to a belief that they were training people for employment. In addition to that, there was a strong feeling that the colleges were there to provide opportunity to change their lives for a lot of people who didn't have much in the way of other opportunities.

The third approach to considering the identity of the CAATs is to tap into the North American literature on the community college, and see what it says about community college identity. A possible deficiency of this approach is that the Ontario CAATs may differ significantly from the typical community college. The fact that they were not formally called community colleges has sometimes been taken to indicate that they were not intended to be community colleges. However, at the time of the debates about the nature and name of the colleges - the early to mid Sixties - the term, community college, was just coming into widespread usage.

When you read the documents that were part of the deliberations about what kind of colleges the Province should establish, especially those produced by the Committee of Presidents of the Universities, what stands out is the poor understanding of the concept of a community college that most participants in the Sixties Debate in Ontario had. The American model that was rejected in these documents was not that of the community colleges that were just emerging, but that of the junior college which was something quite different, and was, at the time, being phased out in the United States. I believe that this confusion of the American community college with the junior college had a lot to do with the original design of the CAATs. It led people here to view transfer and occupational education as mutually exclusive, when in fact, in American community colleges, the largest growth in transfer has occurred in occupational programs. But because this was not understood in Ontario, we are largely dependent upon out-of-province universities to address this large and growing need!

Colleges do not exist in a vacuum. They belong to various national and continental networks, and their staff interact regularly with peers in colleges in other provinces and the United States. Ideas are

exchanged about administrative practices, curriculum, teaching, student policies, and other aspects of college life. Ontario CAATs have been both contributors to and consumers of the vast body of professional knowledge that has developed in North America regarding community colleges. It would be surprising - and a lot of money would have been wasted - if this exposure to the general culture and wisdom of the community college community had not affected the CAATs, and in the process, their sense of identity. That being the case, it seems reasonable to look, at least briefly, at the more general literature pertaining to community college identity.

Characteristics of the Community College

According to my colleague, John Dennison, there are five characteristics which are connoted by the term, community college. These are: open door access; community orientation; emphasis on teaching; comprehensiveness; and responsiveness to societal needs. Let's consider briefly how Dennison's concept of a community college matched, and matches, the Ontario CAATs.

The term, open door access has had two principal connotations. One is that everyone who applies will be admitted. I believe that originally, most community college systems aspired to this meaning of open door access, but financial constraints have made this increasingly difficult. The other connotation of open door access places it at the opposite end of a continuum from selective admissions. In particular, it means that one applicant will not be chosen over another on the basis of superior prior academic achievement. From early on, the CAATs wrestled mightily with this aspect of open door access. For example, when it was suggested that applicants to the CAATs who had done Grade 13 might be better qualified for some programs than those from Grade 12, an appeal to the colleges' identity as open door institutions was used to resist such ranking of applicants. But faced with funding constraints, excess demand for places, and increased accountability for how graduates performed in the workplace, selectivity gradually became more widespread and pervasive. How much selectivity in admissions can there be before a college is no longer deemed to be an open door access institution, and for that reason no longer deemed to fit the definition of a community college? Or should the definition of a community college change to reflect its changed circumstances?

Community Orientation. Ontario CAATs have always had substantial interaction with their surrounding communities and regions. But then, so too do almost all public institutions, i.e. hospitals, schools, and libraries. Unlike community colleges in the United States, the CAATs never received local funding or had board members chosen by the community. If you read the Act that authorizes the Minister to "establish, name, maintain, conduct and govern" the colleges, you get the strong impression that these are provincial colleges placed in various communities. Program advisory committees have more of an industry than community focus. Colleges have been prohibited from giving a preference in admissions to residents of their community, and indeed, I understand that in the new Charter for the colleges, the concept of local catchment areas - which no longer means much anyway - will disappear. Further, in contrast to the situation in the United States, I do not get a sense that the idea of community orientation has inhibited the substantial move that many CAATs have made into international activity. In summary, I would have to question whether community orientation is an intimate aspect of the identity of the CAATs.

Emphasis on teaching has, I think, two particular connotations. One is that faculty work consists primarily of teaching as opposed to research. This has certainly been the case in the CAATs, even more so than in other North American jurisdictions where there is more integration between community colleges and universities, and consequently the professional values and norms of the university spill over into the community college. The other connotation of emphasis on teaching is that a high priority would be placed upon ensuring high quality in teaching through such means as training, professional

development, evaluation and quality assurance. Going back as far as the Basic Documents for the colleges, the intention to promote high quality teaching has always been there, and over the years there have been numerous initiatives at both the college and provincial level to improve teaching quality, even if, as in other educational sectors, the attainment of this goal has usually been rather problematic.

The phrase, emphasis on teaching, as a defining characteristic of the community college, seems dated now. Since the mid 1990s, one of the major themes in the organizational and professional literature pertaining to community colleges is that these institutions need to become learning colleges rather than teaching colleges. The idea of the learning college is that the institution's overarching mission is to maximize the learning that actually occurs, and that those activities traditionally connoted by the term, teaching, should be just one tool in the college's repertoire of activities that facilitate learning. Other dimensions of the learning college include creating structures that enhance opportunities for students to learn on their own and from and with their peers. The same Larry Spence whom I cited earlier says, "We won't meet the needs for more and better higher education until professors become designers of learning experiences and not teachers". However, our attachment to emphasis on teaching as a defining characteristic of the community college has served as an impediment to colleges redefining themselves as learning colleges. Insofar as this has occurred, it is another example of the way that a particular idea of the essence of what a community college is can be an inhibitor of change.

Comprehensiveness is most often taken to mean that a college incorporates a number of different functions, though the term can also be used to refer to offering a range of different fields of study. In this context, the opposite of comprehensive is specialized. Examples of specialized postsecondary institutions would be a college of art or of music, an institution which concentrates on serving persons with hearing impairment, or an institution which offers only remedial education. In some respects, Ontario CAATs are the most comprehensive colleges in North America. When the CAATs were created, there was an attempt to consolidate almost all publicly funded non-degree adult education into them. In regard to subject matter, the only exception was agricultural technology. Whereas elsewhere in North America, separate institutions were maintained or established for trades training, and others for remedial education, in Ontario virtually everything was thrust upon the CAATs.

It is sometimes said that the six major functions of the community college are occupational education; transfer education; general education; remedial education; student development; and community education & service. The CAATs have been particularly strong in occupational education and in community education. College efforts in remedial education have been valiant but hampered by restrictive provincial government funding policies. The function from which the CAATs have been excluded by design, but increasingly driven to by necessity, is of course, transfer education, a subject about which I will have a lot more to say shortly. And because of its intimate connection with transfer education, general, or liberal, education, while normally present in some measure, has been less than robust in many colleges.

Overall, as I have said, I think that the CAATs score quite high on the dimension of comprehensiveness. The idea of the CAATs as essentially comprehensive institutions has been used to reject proposals to streamline their operations by giving up such functions as remedial education or vocational retraining. On the other hand, the idea of comprehensiveness has not been used as a rationale for adding transfer education. Indeed, transfer was rejected on the grounds that it would create too wide a span of functions, an odd position to take given the drive to make the colleges comprehensive!

The remaining item on Professor Dennison's list of defining characteristics of the community college is responsiveness to societal needs. As I indicated earlier, this may be the most basic of all defining characteristics of a community college. The extent and form of the others might vary, largely in response to differences in societal needs, but it is doubtful that an institution which does not place a high priority

on meeting societal needs merits being called a community college. Of course, adherence to this expectation gives rise to many questions: how are societal needs identified? who decides? how are priorities established among different needs that could be met?

Type and Level of Programs

Professor Dennison's list, like those of others who have suggested similar lists, omits a few things that many people would regard as defining characteristics of the community college. One is subjects or fields of study that are typically offered. Another is some way of suggesting the level of the courses provided. The biggest part of what a community college does has been preparing people for jobs in the mid range of the occupational structure without which the modern economy would grind to a halt. There is not a perfect generic name for this category of jobs. Para-professional was once used to describe it. W. Norton Grubb's excellent book on this realm of education is titled simply, *Working in the Middle*. If the colleges are tied to this sector of the labour force, then it would follow that as the educational needs for those occupations change, college programs would have to change accordingly.

The concept of level of education is a particularly difficult one to address. The junior college, from which community college in the United States evolved, was understood to provide instruction at a level that was intermediate between the secondary school and the upper division of the university. Such a hierarchical relationship was fairly easy to identify because so many of the same subjects were offered in all three institutions.

Insofar as the community college might have incorporated a junior college function, a similar characterization of levels of study would fit. However in its occupationally oriented education, a community college offers many programs which don't map to corresponding programs in the university. In these occupational programs, what the college offers may represent the highest level of directly relevant education that there is. If directly related programs are not offered by other educational sectors, then it is not possible to determine the level of those programs within an educational hierarchy that does not exist.

The existence of such programs which are at the highest level of their own, but not of some larger, hierarchy has several implications. I wish to comment on four such implications. One is that it will likely be difficult for graduates of these programs to "transfer" to a university, because universities tend to operate on the notion of a hierarchy of learning, and they won't be able to determine where these college programs fit within that hierarchy. Of course it is in the nature of the university world that some universities will take greater pains than others to figure out how the level of learning represented by graduation from a college occupational program relates to the expectations for progression within their own institution. Typically, universities which have a strong occupational orientation in their own programs, and hence will be familiar with assessing levels of advancement within occupationally oriented education, will grant more credit to the student who comes from a college program than their peer institutions who have no such measuring rods. This tendency will penalize community college students in Ontario, because Ontario has few if any occupationally oriented universities, of which there are so many in other countries.

A second implication is that community college programs which offer study at the highest level for occupations for which universities generally do not provide programs are likely to be attractive to many university graduates who are looking for more job relevant education. The term commonly used to describe the phenomenon of university graduates enrolling in regular diploma and certificate programs in community colleges, or in post-diploma programs specially designed for university graduates, is reverse transfer. This term reflects a hierarchical view of levels of education between the community

college and the university. I suggest that this is an inappropriate way to describe movement from a university to a program in a community college that has no counterpart in the university. It is also curious to hear the term, reverse transfer, used in a province that has not officially accepted the idea of transfer!

In noting a third implication of the existence in the community college of high level occupational education programs in areas where there is not a corresponding program in the university, I must state a disclaimer. Although I am a member of Ontario's Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board, my comments about applied baccalaureate degrees and related matters are not intended to represent the views or policies of the Board. Having said that, I can say that it seems appropriate to me that study at a high level within a particular field should be recognized by the awarding of a baccalaureate degree. Naturally, many questions arise in implementing this viewpoint: such as, how is this field defined; what constitutes high level study in that field; what program characteristics and resources are necessary to ensure that quality study at this high level actually takes place?

As many of you probably know, the Government of Ontario has recently accepted - on a pilot basis - the idea of a CAAT being allowed to offer an applied baccalaureate degree. This idea is not unique to Ontario. Alberta adopted something similar in 1995, and a handful of American states have also done so. In studying these developments, one thing that I find interesting is that I have heard absolutely no objection from anyone to the idea of an applied baccalaureate degree. In fact, universities have for a long time offered some programs that are in reality, if not in name, applied degrees. But not in fields in which community colleges are beginning to offer them. What is controversial is whether a community college should be able to offer an applied baccalaureate degree. As you might expect, much of the opposition to this idea comes from universities. Depending upon how you view the universities, you may see their opposition as a monopolist defending its monopoly, or alternatively, as a disinterested expression of concern for the integrity of degrees and the vulnerability of those individuals who invest their time and money in obtaining one of these applied degrees.

The most passionate controversy about colleges getting into applied baccalaureate degrees is occurring right within the college community. In the United States, where the issue is not just applied degrees for colleges but more general baccalaureate granting as well, especially by colleges that are located in regions not served by a university - if that is imaginable in the United States - the American Association of Community Colleges has been torn by this issue. Opponents regard the offering of a baccalaureate degree as inconsistent with the essence of a community college and have used that argument to oppose it. They view colleges that adopt the baccalaureate as leaving the proverbial fold, and threatening the viability of the whole community college movement. In the language of the title of my address, for critics of what may be an incipient trend toward baccalaureate granting, part of the essence of the community college is that it does not grant a baccalaureate degree; and to do so would matter a lot, as it might greatly alter the identity of the institution. It may be hyperbole to equate the baccalaureate degree with the apple in the Garden of Eden, but there appears to be a fear among many community college educators in the United States that biting into that apple will mean being transformed into something other than a community college, with the loss of innocence that goes with that transformation.

Offering applied baccalaureate programs is only one of many ways that the colleges have, in recent years, attempted to make it possible for their students to continue their education further than was provided for in the original plan for the CAATs. Block transfer, articulation, collaborative programs, and degree completion agreements with universities are some of the other means being used. All these initiatives stand in contrast to what was once regarded as an essential quality of the colleges, that they provided only terminal education. As I recall, the Minister's Statement in the Legislature did not use that term, but it was prominent in the public debate that preceded the establishment of the colleges. It was

exactly the role for the colleges that was urged by the Committee of Presidents of the Universities.

I have always thought that terminal was an unfortunate adjective to place in front of the word education, not just because of the association created by its frequent use as a modifier of the word illness. A career in practicing and studying education has led me to the view that the phrase, terminal education, is an oxymoron. Any program of study which arouses students' curiosity, engages them in reflection, provides them an experience of the joy of learning, and gives them even a hint of the vast stores of knowledge which might be relevant to their lives and of which they are presently ignorant, is likely to foster some desire for further learning. It would have to be a pretty dull and deadening program of study which did not do any of these things. I don't think such a program of study would justify being called Education.

Conclusion

It's time to try to draw a few conclusions about the colleges, change, and essence. In terms of the traditional defining characteristics of the community colleges, the results are mixed. I have suggested that I don't think that community orientation was ever part of the CAAT identity in the way it was for American colleges. Emphasis on teaching was a core element of the CAAT identity, and has persisted through the years. As I noted, emphasis on teaching has several connotations, and in one regard the persistence of this characteristic has been at least as much a liability as an asset. The CAATs were established as comprehensive institutions, but it was a peculiar form of comprehensiveness, including a lot of basic level and specialized activities that in other jurisdictions are performed by different agencies, while excluding what is in most North American community colleges one of their two major functions. Because this form of comprehensiveness was so unique to Ontario, it was certainly part of the essence of the CAATs, and it has continued.

Of the traditional defining characteristics, the only one where I think there has been a major change is with respect to open door access. In the sense that a place can be found somewhere in the system for most people who want to attend a CAAT, open door access could be said to have persisted. However, the increase in selectivity for many programs, and colleges, and the widening gap between people's first choices and what the system can offer them, reflect a quite different situation than originally envisaged. Most of us probably agree that this change in access is not a good thing. But opinions may differ with regard to how central more liberal access was to the identity of the CAATs.

In my view what is probably most central to the essence of the CAATs is not these four traditional characteristics, but that the colleges prepare people for work in the middle segment of the occupational structure. This still seems to be the major focus of the colleges. Of course what it means to prepare people for the middle segment of the occupational structure has changed a good deal. Many of those jobs now require more education, or more complex and sophisticated types of education than before. In many cases, graduates of CAAT programs in traditional occupational areas will require a baccalaureate or subsequent university education to be licensed or to have optimal skills and credentials for their careers. Their careers are also increasingly likely to take them beyond the boundaries of Ontario. If the CAATs are to effectively address the needs of people who are going to be working in the middle, they have to change commensurate with the way that the educational needs of that population are changing. In so doing they are both changing and remaining the same.

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