

GIVING STUDENTS A THIRD OPTION: A MODEST PROPOSAL FOR ONTARIO'S POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION SYSTEM

Ontario's education system is in serious trouble. The causes lie deeper than taxpayer resistance to public spending, a fashionable reaction against equality or even a declining birthrate. The Ontario education problem is also the result of a weakening regional economy that can no longer afford old dreams.

At the same time, Ontario may be short-changing itself in the kind of education that any future prosperity demands. Built into the province's post-secondary system is a questionable assumption that learning and training must be separate options. The practical consequence is a sharp separation of universities and community colleges that frustrates some real educational needs. The traditional university role has been emphasized by James Ham, the new president of the University of Toronto: "The university is not about vocation", he explained to reporters soon after his selection, "The major function of the university is to develop critical capacity in students."

In present circumstances, Dr. Ham may be literally correct. Students who count on a secure middle-class job as a reward for their university diploma may be at least temporarily disappointed. Public and private employers no longer reward university graduates with a desk and a secretary. Professional faculties in Ontario are over-crowded and so are many professions. Students are coming to university with fewer illusions about the buying power of a degree. Fewer illusions, in turn, mean fewer students. Years before a falling birthrate would have emptied university classrooms, declining enrolments have sent some institutions into a wild recruiting scramble. The losers in the race for warm bodies face faculty lay-offs and possible shutdown.

The post-secondary education sector intended for pure and simple vocational training includes Ontario's twenty-two community colleges. Their mandate requires them to admit any four-year graduate of an Ontario high school regardless of further qualifications. The colleges prepare their students for careers through two- and sometimes three-year programmes. Of course, universities have also served vocational goals through their faculties of medicine, law, pharmacy, dentistry, business administration, agriculture and much more. Even in faculties of arts and science, many programmes are consciously or covertly designed to serve the career goals of their students.

Caught between two vocational alternatives, more and more university-qualified students have chosen community college as a shorter, cheaper route to the goal of a marketable skill. Many students qualified for the higher graduation diploma have deliberately ended their studies at Level 4 because they see no early return on a higher qualification. After years of accepting the least qualified high school graduates and doing their best for them, the community colleges now find themselves at least temporarily the choice of some of our ablest students.

This may make short-term sense, but it promises long-run frustration. Bright, talented young people will be frustrated by the absence of opportunities in the quasi-middle class careers they often hope to enter after community college. There are hardly more jobs for community college-trained library technicians, journalists and social work assistants than there are for the professionals. Jobs which do exist are all too often ill-paid and dead-end.

Politicians, editors and other civic moralists may say that it serves them right but Ontario is not so rich in talent that it can waste it in frustration.

A Third Option

The two options offered by Ontario post-secondary education – university or community college – may still satisfy a majority of students. For a growing number it represents an unsatisfying dilemma. They do not see the alleged division between skill training and a critical education except as a vestige of snobbishness. Many excellent students want a mixture of practical and theoretical preparation and they have the ability and, in a growing number of cases, the job experience to profit from the combination.

There is also growing evidence that the Ontario economy also needs this kind of educated, practical person to supply the link between the theoretically-oriented engineer or scientist and the lightly trained worker. Every sector of the Ontario economy, from the machine tool industry to the hospitality trade cries out for people whose preparation combines practical training, experience and the kind of critical outlook that spurs innovation and creativity. People with these qualifications, have provided a major share of our successful entrepreneurs.

If Ontario post-secondary education is to respond to this need, it must develop a third option which combines academic and vocational preparation with work experience. We need a career preparation at a level more demanding than their mandate makes possible for the community colleges. We need institutions in Ontario which demonstrate that practical knowledge, critical capacity and research at the frontiers of understanding are inseparable in vocational training as they are in the traditional academic professions. We need as much quality in the education of our skilled people as we would demand for doctors, lawyers or professors of Greek.

In Ryerson Polytechnical Institute and in the Royal Military College at Kingston, Ontario already has two excellent post-secondary institutions which refute all the traditional claims that career training and academic quality cannot be combined. Unfortunately, in a two-option system, Ontario is forcing Ryerson into a quasi-university role without acknowledging the vital and autonomous role that the “third option” approach permits.

At a time when hundreds of thousands of unemployed Ontarians are waiting desperately for an economic revival, the province’s economy finds itself crippled for the lack of a relatively small number of highly skilled crafts people. Such “mismatches” can be blamed on many causes including the absence to date of effective mechanisms for manpower forecasting and of a broader provincial industrial strategy. However, the key factor is the absence of educational options between the first-job training of community colleges and the academic and professional preparation of the universities.

Practical Examples

Some who have recognized the problem have argued for the creation of as many as three new polytechnical institutes like Ryerson. Such an approach would be costly, inflexible and almost certain to fall victim to political and regional log-rolling. Instead, at a time when surplus resources, first in the university and then in the college sector, are becoming apparent, it is possible to build on the strength and resources of existing institutions, allowing each to contribute what it does best to an educational pattern that includes both learning and training.

For the past five years, the University of Toronto's Erindale College has participated with Sheridan College of Applied Arts and Technology in a highly successful co-operative programme in art education. Conceived as a common sense economy – to save the university from building its own studios – the programme has developed its own character, breaking out of the traditional fine art model. University students earn up to five credits through the joint Erindale-Sheridan programme.

This kind of programme is a model for how a “third option” approach to career preparation can develop from shared strengths. What is needed now from the universities is a recognition that courses and programmes without equivalents in a traditional arts and science programme may be a valid as well as a popular part of a modern education. The colleges, perhaps better attuned to both student and market needs, have been willing to recognize the need for more thorough and intellectually challenging programmes for some of their students.

At a time of scarce resources the answer is not, however, to “promote” some colleges or “demote” some universities to serve the “third option” function of training Ontario's badly-needed technologists, and highly skilled crafts people. The way is to break down some of the barriers between the universities and the colleges and to encourage them to combine existing strengths. Universities and colleges could co-operate, for example, in bringing a humanistic and scientific dimension to practical training in design. They could give a more comprehensive scientific understanding to a student in computer technology.

Practical Opposition

Traditional universities may well greet any such proposition with scorn. They will take comfort from the advice of William Newnham, the respected president of Seneca College, to stick to what they do best. Newnham and other community college spokesmen also have their own institutions to protect. At a time when university enrolments are shrinking and the colleges must turn away thousands, it is easy to dismiss the university overtures as a form of student poaching.

The problem for both kinds of institution and for the province's economy is too serious to be hidden by a short-lived imbalance in enrolments or by artificial jealousies. By the early 1980's, both colleges and universities will have spare capacity and Ontario will have serious unmet training and educational needs.

Not all the co-operation needs to be between universities and the community colleges. Erindale College's programme in survey science, also unique in Ontario, was developed in close co-operation with the Association of Ontario Land Surveyors. Other professional associations with their own training programmes can be encouraged to associate their work with appropriate post-secondary institutions. Programmes in urban planning, environmental assessment, design management, language interpretation and an array limited only by the practical needs of the Ontario economy can be developed from existing shared resources.

No such development will take place without a clear recognition by Ontario through its government that the needs of its economy can be met by a third option. During the 1960's the *Globe and Mail* pleaded in vain against the government's insistence on separating the college and university sectors. The *Globe* was right. The third option in post-secondary education is one approach to remedying the mistake.

Ontarians used to be encouraged to sneer at Quebec's traditional education system. French Canada produced, so it was claimed, an array of community college graduates unfitted for the tough, practical demands of business and industry. The balance of the population was fit only to become cheap labour for foreign-owned firms. In the 1960's Quebec changed. It is time for Ontario to wonder whether some of the same criticisms do not apply here. If so, something like the "Third Option" could be a sensible, practical way out.

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