

## Book Review / Compte rendu

**Flemming, Kevin J. (2015). *Maintaining Strategic Relevance: Career and Technical Education Program Discontinuance in Community and Technical Colleges*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America. Pages: 108. Price: \$26.99 USD (paper or ebook)**

Reviewed by Anne C. Charles, Ph.D., Professor, School of Liberal Studies, Conestoga College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning.

The State of California, USA has one of the largest community college systems in the world and educates over 1.5 million people annually (Flemming, 2015, p. v.). In this concise insight, Kevin J. Flemming posits that colleges thrive on program accretion, but are resistant to program discontinuance (PD). He draws our attention to PD and Career and Technical Education (CTE). Claiming that PD is antagonistic to postsecondary culture, Flemming investigates the conditions for discontinuance, and the role of policy. He offers recommendations for best practices.

Flemming uses a theoretical framework from Birnbaum's bureaucratic system, and Bolman and Deal's four frames to analyze PD in the context of organizational change. His research was conducted in 2012-2013, and asked the question: "Under what conditions does CTE program discontinuance occur?" (p.77). Using a case study approach, the research catalogues and analyses district policies, shares data from interviews, and describes the impact of PD on people and institutional culture. Flemming argues that PD is more likely to occur when certain conditions arise: budget reductions; administrative triggers; the absence of full-time faculty within programs; or, when colleges have a comprehensive annual program review cycle in place. He asserts that good communication and clarity of roles are essential during the PD process.

The book, which is rather dry, is essentially a Ph.D. thesis turned into a higher education/ organizational behaviour reference resource. It opens by providing some historical mapping for the reader with respect to the establishment of the California Community College system (community colleges, technical colleges, technical institutes and 2-year vocational colleges) within the Master Plan for Higher Education in California 1960-1975. The mission of the colleges as set out in the California Education Code (CEC) 66010.4(a) (1) includes transfer preparation and CTE. The CEC requires CTE programs to be effective and relevant to regional economies, have regular reviews to ensure that the curriculum is up to date, have modes of delivery that meet industry requirements, and incorporate technological advances. CTE program offerings have higher delivery variables due to instructional equipment costs, regional labour markets, and federal workforce policy and legislation; these are described in chapter 2. From an outsider's perspective the extent of regulation could be described as a red tape nightmare – a myriad of state policies and regulations. “It is well documented that the California Community Colleges are the most heavily regulated entity in the world” (p. 16).

Program accretion and PD are discussed in chapter 3. Flemming draws the reader's attention to the fact that gaining approval for a new CTE program is a lengthy process (documented in a 249 page handbook, *Program Course and Approval Handbook*, supplemented by complex approval processes at the local/district levels) which “takes 2 months at best” (p. 20). He maintains that less is known about program vitality and discontinuance policies because while four sections of the CEC provide guidance for PD, only 60 out of 72 community college districts have approved PD policies, and at the time of the study, some of them were outdated or not fully implemented.

In chapter 4, findings from the field are shared. Flemming's population is comprised of three colleges, selected on the basis that each has undertaken PD reviews in recent years. His data collection methods include documentary analysis and interviews. All three colleges have student populations in the low five figures. Aligning with Bolman and Deal's (2008) organizational frames, in chapter five Flemming describes the overarching themes which emerged from the interview data. He compares the patterns in the findings under four headings expressed as questions: How did the process occur? How did people feel about the process? Are the actual programs offered aligned with those published? What is the role of policy in program discontinuance? Convergent patterns within the themes are reviewed and discussed in chapter 6 and organized along the lines of Bolman and Deal's (2008) organizational frames: structural, human resources, political and symbolic. In this chapter the author shares some interesting quotations from the interview data. Findings from the policy analysis of documents are in chapter 7, and the main research question is answered in chapter 8, where he also refers to Hefferlin's theory of academic reform which posits that reform of academic curriculum “often occurs during times of instability and vulnerability” (p. 77). Flemming contends that his findings support Hefferlin's theory, and further remarks that “the process and implementation of program discontinuance is ultimately one type of organizational change [...]” (p. 79).

While the former chapters are reflective of the nature of the project as a Ph.D. thesis, readers will appreciate the contributions to praxis which are offered in the eleven steps of PD recommended in chapter 9, which I have briefly summarised below.

**Flemming (2015):  
Eleven Steps for Community College Program Discontinuance**

1. Limit the process to a maximum of 12 months;
2. Implement strategies for transparency and document dialogue;
3. Communicate the process steps;
4. Provide reviewers with several possible outcomes, and include them in the PD policy documentation (discontinue, continue, revitalize, modify, reduce, consolidate etc.);
5. Establish and follow a process flow;
6. Include PD metrics in Annual Program Reviews;
7. Involve faculty and administration in the development of reporting templates and metrics
8. Create organizational charts which clearly communicate and delineate lines of authority and the span of control;
9. Clearly define “program” in all PD policies;
10. Establish a process to revisit specific analytical metrics in PD policies;
11. Include a “teach out” plan (p. 86) to enable students to complete their program of study.

In the context of Canada, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario’s (HEQCO) recent publication entitled *College Sustainability: Signal Data* (April 18, 2017), forecasts that “demographic shifts will pose enrollment challenges for [the] Ontario college sector” in the very near future. As the authors of the HEQCO report (Weingarten, Kaufman, Jonker & Hicks) point out, enrollment is linked to revenue; hence declining enrolment will likely create additional financial stresses and vulnerability for the colleges. The Ontario college system is Canada’s largest (24 colleges), and like their Californian counterparts they are often very creative in attracting students. Their links and responsiveness to the labour market are one of their distinguishing features. Their mandate requires them to respond to industry demands and labour market opportunities and provide appropriate skills based training. Interestingly, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) recently carried an article showcasing a newly created program about how to run a food truck offered at one community college in southern Ontario (Yawar, 2016). Canada’s colleges are market driven institutions. They are entrepreneurial. They reflect supply side and demand side economic principles and are geared to growth. Like their Californian counterparts they also have bureaucratic structures with strong inertia; hence, there may be some reluctance to pull back when market signs indicate contraction. Flemming’s eleven recommended steps for PD should therefore be kept under advisement.✱

### References

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