EXAMINING 50 YEARS OF RESEARCH ON ADMINISTRATION IN THE *CANADIAN JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION*

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Abstract

As the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* celebrates its fiftieth anniversary, this article takes the measure of the research published so far on higher education administration and reflects on future work. The study examined the 38 articles on higher education administration published by the *Journal* between 1971 and 2020 to characterize how administration has been investigated and theorized since the *Journal*'s inception. The article discusses the topics that have captured the attention of scholars and the frameworks and methods they selected for their investigations. Overall, the body of work published by the *Journal* in its first 50 years of existence paints a nuanced portrait of higher education administration where administrators appear simultaneously powerless and powerful. The article suggests promising areas of inquiry based on its findings and discusses implications for editors, reviewers, and authors.

Keywords: leadership, management, administration, review, higher education

Résumé

À l'occasion du 50e anniversaire de la *Revue canadienne d'enseignement supérieur*, cet article évalue la recherche qu'elle a publiée à ce jour sur l'administration de l'enseignement supérieur et propose des pistes à explorer pour les années à venir. Trente-huit articles sur l'administration de l'enseignement supérieur publiés par la *Revue* entre 1971 et 2020 ont été examinés pour caractériser la manière dont ce sujet a été étudié et théorisé durant cette période. Dans l'ensemble, le corpus de publications de la *Revue*, de sa naissance à aujourd'hui, dresse un portrait nuancé de l'administration de l'enseignement supérieur, les administratrices et administrateurs y apparaissant à la fois puissants et impuissants. L'article propose des pistes de réflexion et d'investigation, et présente les implications de ses résultats pour les éditeurs, éditrices, évaluateurs, évaluatrices, auteurs et auteures de la *Revue*.

Mots-clés : leadership, gestion, administration, revue, enseignement supérieur

Introduction

The *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary. During this period, the Canadian higher education system has experienced deep transformations. It has grown in size and complexity (Fisher et al., 2014), while provincial governments have reframed its purpose and adjusted their support accordingly (Jones et al., 2011). As a result, its funding has ebbed and flowed unpredictably (Fisher et al., 2014) and its regulatory framework has grown more rigid and complex (Axelrod et al., 2013). In line with these transformations, the practice of administration—here understood as the set of formal and informal activities, such as management and leadership, related to running an organization (Mintzberg, 2009), and the work of administrators, that is individuals granted positional power to perform these activities (Ouimet, 2008)—has also changed (Lavigne & Sá, 2021).

In today's higher education systems, administrators

are expected to exercise their authority and leadership to shape their institutions (Middlehurst, 1997), but to do so collegially (Bryman, 2007) and reluctantly (Lumby, 2019). They require a thorough understanding of their institutions' purpose (Gioia & Thomas, 1996) and processes (Bensimon, 1989; Bolman & Deal, 1991), and a broad set of problem-solving approaches (Bolman & Deal, 1991; Wepner et al., 2008). Administrators are also expected to interface with external stakeholders. They shape how their institutions are understood (Montez et al., 2002) and, in turn, shape how these expectations are interpreted, translated, and conciliated internally (Davis et al., 2016).

As such, higher education administration matters, at least sufficiently to warrant studying who these administrators are, what it is that they do, and to clarify to what extent and in what ways their work makes a difference. It also matters because administration participates in defining norms, processes, outputs, and outcomes, and, thus, in ensuring that higher education institutions serve their purpose. Further, the study of higher education administration matters because research informs how administrators are educated and trained. What scholars discover, their findings and their conceptualizations, shape the reflections of the next generations of administrators and their work. Finally, studying higher education administration matters because the complexity and challenges inherent to the practice of administration reflect the nature of higher education institutions. Through understanding their administration, we deepen our understanding of how higher education institutions work.

The *Journal*'s fiftieth anniversary serves as a timely if, admittedly, arbitrary reminder of the passing of time. It beckons us to pause and look back, to celebrate past achievements, to take stock of the work done, and to plan the work ahead. If research is akin to stepping up to and beyond the edge of the map to see what lies ahead, then this article is a short rest along the journey. The article examines the contributions that the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* has made to our understanding of Canadian higher education administration. Its purpose is to analyze and synthesize the work on higher education administration published by the *Journal* since its inception and provide the *Journal*'s editors, reviewers, and authors with suggestions on the handling of future publications. The article should also prove of interest to a broader readership interested in examining the role of

scientific journals in furthering the development of an emerging field of study.

Methods

The study examined the body of work on higher education administration published by the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* between 1971 and 2020. The body of work was put together in stages. In the first stage, we used the *Journal*'s search engine to query all articles that included the following keywords and their concatenated variants in their titles, abstracts, or other metadata: administration, management, leadership, supervision, strategy, president, provost, dean, director, head, and chair. A separate search was conducted with French translations of the same keywords. The keywords were put together based on typical roles and activities associated with administration. Each individual search produced between 50 and 300 articles, many of which appeared in several searches. In the second stage, we examined the titles and abstracts of all the articles produced by the queries to select only those who focused on either administration or administrators. This produced a set of 52 articles. These were then read to confirm whether their object of inquiry was administration or administrators, which brought down the number of articles to 38, of which three were in French. Taken together, the set of articles covers all five decades, with eight articles published in the 1970s, 12 in the 1980s, nine in the 1990s, two in the 2000s, and seven in the 2010s.

Each article was first read and analyzed to identify or deduce its general topic, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and research methods. We then examined whether each article discussed its study's limitations and whether it cited works from the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, from other Canadian, American, and international higher education journals, and from broader administration literature. Finally, we identified, for each article, its specific areas of inquiry, key findings, and framing of administration and administrators. This last stage involved more reflection to identify the overall message, or underlying theme, conveyed by each article. For example, some articles portrayed administration as a logical exercise, while others portrayed it as an uphill battle, and others still as a moral dilemma. In the final stage of the study, the findings were cross-compared to identify salient features regarding the body of work's ar-

eas of focus, preferred approaches to inquiry, emerging themes and findings, methodological points of concern, and connections to other bodies of knowledge.

Findings: Looking Back

The study sought to identify, analyze, and synthesize the body of literature on higher education administration published by the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* between 1971 and 2020. The 38 articles recovered from the *Journal*'s archive rely on both quantitative and qualitative approaches and cover a broad range of related topics. Taken together, they paint a perplexing, though hopeful, portrait. This section is divided in two. The first part focuses on preferred approaches to inquiry and the second part on areas of inquiry and emerging themes.

Preferred Approaches to Inquiry

Over the last 50 years, the collected studies employed on a broad range of approaches. With regards to conceptual underpinnings, the majority of articles identify their analytical frameworks. In instances where they do not, the frameworks were nonetheless easy to identify. The majority of studies either relied on rational perspectives, such as cybernetics (Birnbaum, 1989), or non-rational ones, such as organized anarchy (Cohen et al., 1972). A few studies drew from power and politics (e.g., Pfeffer & Salancik, 1974) and some from collegiality (e.g., Baldridge, 1971). Interestingly, managerialism (see Rourke & Brooks, 1964) was rarely used, yet often served as the backdrop for institutions' external constraints or as a potential solution to organizational issues. The same is true for heroic perspectives (e.g., Zaleznik, 1977), which were rarely mentioned, yet often implied.

Regarding theoretical or research frameworks, few articles clarified their ontological and epistemological assumptions (see Lincoln & Guba, 1994). Based on implicit assumptions, the analysis found that most studies were guided by post-positivist or realist (see Bunge, 1997) assumptions. Constructivist assumptions (see Berger & Luckmann, 1967) were rarely found or disclosed, one study drew from a feminist framework (see Sprague, 2005), and no study referred to a critical framework (see Alvesson & Willmott, 2012). The low proportion of research frameworks other than post-positivist or realist ones is in part explained by the fact that several of

these frameworks were not prevalent or were still emerging in the first half of our 50-year frame.

With regards to methods, early years saw a greater proportion of quantitative studies and rhetorical exercises, while qualitative studies became increasingly more prevalent in the last 25 years. Quantitative approaches primarily included survey-based studies. These studies explored career goals and developmental needs (Konrad et al., 1976; Konrad, 1980), perceptions and understanding of administrative roles (Konrad & McNeal, 1984; Mount & Belanger, 2001; Watson, 1979, 1986), processes (Carson et al., 1995; Schell & Tarnopolsky, 1990; Small, 1994), and effectiveness (Budros, 2002). Besides surveys, quantitative approaches also leveraged correlation measurements. These linked conflict resolution modes to effectiveness (Garnier, 1982) and individual characteristics to earnings (Mang, 2019). Difference tests were used with presidents' and government officials' perceptions (Barrington, 1982) and mathematical modelling with staffing decisions (Belanger, 1979) and budget approaches (Myers, 2019).

Qualitative approaches primarily included documentary analyses, interview-based studies, and case studies. Documentary analyses examined the coordination between college and university curricula (Fortin, 1975), the evolving role of university presidents (Bissell, 1978), the impact of research support policies (Ingalls, 1982), and cutback decisions (Hardy, 1984). Interview-based studies focused on experiences related to university cutbacks (Crespo et al., 1986), purpose and effectiveness (Levin, 1992; Levin et al., 2018), and role conflict (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017). As for case studies, these provided in-depth descriptions of retrenchment strategies (Hardy, 1987), adaptation strategies (Levin & Dennison, 1989), board-president relations (Levin, 1991), decision making values (Keast, 1996), administrators' sources of power (Rees, 1999), and curriculum reviews (Lock et al., 2018). Beyond these, one study used phenomenology to explore role conflict (Davison, 2012) and another employed grounded theory to theorize faculty–administrator dialogues (Muzzin, 2016). Finally, one study combined quantitative and qualitative approaches (Dowdeswell & Good, 1982). It used surveys and interviews to clarify the level of alignment between actors of different hierarchical levels.

The *Journal* also published articles that did not draw from empirical data but from rhetorical analyses. These

explore the rise of accountability in higher education (Sibley, 1972) and defend the value of institutional research (Sheehan, 1972), pedagogical support (Parent, 1979), strategic planning (Sibley, 1986), and faculty workload modulation (Desrosiers, 1991), and argue for a renewal in Canadian higher education (Riffel, 1994).

Of concern, very few articles explore or discuss their studies' limitations. Of the 38 articles analyzed, only two (Hardy, 1987; Mang, 2019) examine their methods and present a fair assessment of their studies' limitations. This situation is particularly problematic for articles based on rhetorical analyses (Desrosiers, 1991; Parent, 1979; Riffel, 1994; Sheehan, 1972; Sibley, 1972, 1986), for studies where researchers were also participants (Ingalls, 1982; Lock et al., 2018; Parent, 1979; Rees, 1999; Sheehan, 1972; Sibley, 1986), and for studies involving very small samples or a single case (Budros, 2002; Ingalls, 1982; Lock et al., 2018; Rees, 1999). Omitting to explore and discuss a study's limitations not only misrepresents the validity and reliability of its findings, but also constitutes a missed opportunity to provide a path forward for research (Brutus et al., 2013).

Also worth noting is that references and connections to other bodies of work were modest and limited. Only 13 of the 38 articles connect their work to other articles published in the *Journal*, though a fair number (29) refer to other Canadian publications. As for work published in other countries, most articles (35) refer to publications from the United States and, contrastingly, very few (7) refer to work published outside of Canada and the United States. Finally, we expected the body of work, given its focus on administration, to connect with the broader literature on administration, management, and leadership. Yet, only about half (20) of the articles reference such sources.

Areas of Inquiry and Emerging Themes

Taken broadly, the studies primarily examined administrators' roles, decision making, power, behaviour, and careers. These areas of inquiry are congruent with those described by Kezar et al. (2011) for American studies. Regarding roles, several articles look at presidents. Bissell (1978) clarifies how university presidents have gained prominence within their institutions and, as a result, with their provincial governments. The article highlights the political role presidents played in shaping how governments understood higher education institutions.

While Bissell (1978) also suggests that structural changes may imbue presidents with power, in particular with regards to their boards' chairpersons, Levin (1991), in examining community college presidents, finds instead that boards' expectations are what defines appropriate administration. For Levin, power is gained through meeting these expectations. Levin further shows how these expectations are generated by the institution's context, whereas, for Levin et al. (2018), this tension expresses itself instead through colleges reinventing themselves as universities.

This tension between presidents and boards and between presidents and government is echoed in other articles. Mount and Belanger (2001), examining entrepreneurial pressure on universities, frame their presidents as striving to define an appropriate organizational posture that balances economical relevance and academic freedom imperatives. Davison (2012) draws similar conclusions, highlighting experienced dissonance in administrators' efforts to protect learning spaces. As well, Levin and Dennison (1989) portray community college administrators' roles in a similar way, acting as conveyor belts for the external constraints applied on their institutions, their role limited to that of morale keepers in the face of financial duress.

This theme of powerlessness is also expressed in Sibley (1972) and Fortin (1975). These authors argue that university administrators do not have the formal authority that would normally come with the responsibilities bestowed upon them. This directly speaks to the tension between administration and faculty members, but also to the lack of influence university administrators have over governments' decisions on funding, articulation, and performance indicators.

Studies on administrators' roles have also examined faculty expectations. Watson (1979, 1986) found that most faculty members expected their department chairpersons to work through collegial processes, though important differences were observed between disciplines, some of them expecting their chairpersons to be assertive instead. Armstrong and Woloshyn (2017) describe a similar balancing act with the department chairpersons they interviewed.

These arguments find purchase in Konrad and McNeal's (1984) findings. Their study found that university presidents' priorities differed significantly from what they felt ought to be prioritized. Dowdeswell and Good (1982) provide a potential explanation for this gap between

what is being done and what ought to be done. Their study found that actors with different hierarchical status involved in teaching evaluations had different and misaligned goals, which in turn explained the inefficiencies the authors observed. This lack of alignment between actors is likely exacerbated by administrators' curtailed authority, as described by Parent (1979). Konrad and McNeal (1984) go further, portraying presidents as reactive and preoccupied with backlash reactions, be they from inside or outside their institutions. Small (1994) comes to a similar conclusion, with provosts and deans summarizing reform as more or less limited, ad hoc, and reactive efforts to respond to new funding constraints.

The articles described so far portray administrators as caught between irreconcilable tensions, having little agency, and being focused on preserving the status quo in the face of government-driven pressures. Related to these depictions, several articles describe administrative rational decision-making models. These articles argue for developing institutional research centres' capacity (Sheehan, 1972) or for using mathematical models to guide workload distributions (Desrosiers, 1991), staff cuts (Belanger, 1979), and budget distribution (Myers, 2019). Interestingly, these depictions shift administration away from administrators. They reduce administration to rational procedures that seemingly no longer involve judgement. However, it should be noted that formulas and mathematical models require criteria and thresholds, which require some kind of human judgement. As a result, human judgement remains, though it is now predetermined, embedded into formulas, and no longer within the scope of administrators' discretion.

Nonetheless, as the following articles demonstrate, administrators have retained and use a fair measure of discretion and agency in making decisions. Hardy (1984, 1987) examined how administrators devised and implemented retrenchment strategies in their universities. These articles show administrators combining rational, collegial, and political perspectives (Hardy, 1984) to inform their analyses of contents, contexts, and processes specific to their situations, as well as weighing the financial and political outcomes of potential solutions (Hardy, 1987). Crespo et al. (1986) describe similar findings. Their study found that administrators, when faced with severe cutbacks, drawing on their understanding of the purpose of their universities, as well as the specific realities, strengths, and weaknesses of their units, to de-

vise and implement solutions that were both innovative, politically sensitive, and protective of their most vulnerable student populations. In a similar way, Keast (1996) found that values, in particular fairness and collegiality, shaped administrators' decision making. Similar commitments were also found for administrators' budgeting decisions, which, as Schell and Tarnopolsky (1990) argue, constitute a tangible demonstration of value-based decisions. Related, Budros's (2002) study found that administrators' backgrounds and work experience were the primary factors explaining their choice of retrenchment strategies.

Taken together, this body of research on decision making highlights the role of agency in higher education administration and reframes the middle position administrators occupy as, yes complex and challenging, but also pivotal and imbued with its measure of power (Davis et al., 2016; Murray et al., 2000), and supported by rational tools. It nonetheless frames their decision making as a reactive process, which appears to be primarily driven by external constraints. On the other hand, given that the financial cutbacks provided ideal conditions for investigating administrators' decision making, the reactiveness found in the literature might be a by-product of the researchers' reactions to the cutbacks and a situated reflection of administrators' general posture towards planning.

The articles also discuss administrators' behaviour, and a few of them further explore their effectiveness. Ingalls (1982) describes his administrative behaviour and implemented processes and connects them to positive outcomes. Based on these results, the author argues for increasing research support in smaller universities as it increases their effectiveness. Lock et al. (2018), as well as Rees (1999), proceed in a similar fashion, examining their personal experience of one curriculum review process to draw lessons on behaviour and best practices (Lock et al., 2018), or of their personal leadership practices to understand their gendered perspective on power and the source of their administrative effectiveness (Rees, 1999).

While these findings remain strongly contextualized and limited to single cases and single perspectives, other studies have sought to use broader samples and combine several perspectives. Garnier (1982) used correlations between deans' preferred modes of conflict-solving and perceived effectiveness to identify approaches more

likely to be perceived as effective by faculty members. Interestingly, the type of conflict was not factored in, while dimensions such as time in office or faculty size were, implying that situated aspects were not theorized as having an impact on perceived effectiveness. Also of note, effectiveness was operationalized through faculty members' and chairpersons' standpoints. Muzzin (2016), on the other hand, while keeping a faculty-centric view of effectiveness, gives situational specifics a significant role in explaining how administrators relate to each other and share information, connecting Glaser and Strauss's (1965) four broad patterns of relation between doctors and patients to those of administrators and faculty members. Levin (1992) also examines effectiveness, but for college presidents and specifically from the standpoint of board members, situating effectiveness as an appropriate educating of external stakeholders.

Finally, a smaller, coherent set of three articles examine issues related specifically to administrators' individual characteristics, career decisions, and earnings. Konrad et al. (1976) surveyed college administrators about their professional development needs and found that these were primarily related to leadership, program development, and staff evaluations. Konrad (1980) conducted a similar—if broader in scope and areas of inquiry—survey, this time of university deans, reporting that most deans chose administration for the challenge, yet that a fair proportion also found the position overly challenging and that the majority of them planned on returning to the faculty after their first term in office. The surveyed deans identified organizing, budgeting, and political skills as areas to be prioritized for professional development. Finally, Mang (2019) analyzed senior university administrators' earnings, concluding that gender disparities remained low, once faculty types were taken into account. In fact, faculty type was the main source of earning disparities. Nonetheless, the study found that gender disparities remained problematic in the case of newly created positions.

Discussion and Conclusion: Looking Forward

The preceding section examined the 38 articles on higher education administration published by the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* between 1971 and 2020. Taken together, the articles paint a complex and nuanced portrait of higher education administration. In several ways, the articles convey a negative image of administration. In many articles, the practice of administration appears limited to the mitigating of external constraints' impact on institutions, while remaining devoid of the authority warranted for such tasks. These depictions stand in stark contrast with prescriptive and positive descriptions of administrators as institutional saviours (e.g., Julius et al., 1999; Kok & McDonald, 2017; Spendlove, 2007), and serve as reminders of the systemic challenges inherent to higher education administration (Murray et al., 2000).

On the other hand, studies also found administrators to retain a fair measure of agency and discretion. Canadian higher education administrators find ways to let their values guide them as they analyze their context and weigh their options before selecting a course of action, a behaviour also reported in other jurisdictions (Davis et al., 2016). Related, for some at least, challenge is the key reason leading them toward administration, a perspective also found by Floyd (2012).

As for roles and appropriate behaviour, the body of research shows a broad spectrum of possibilities, as in other studies on roles in Canadian (e.g., Boyko & Jones, 2010) and other higher education settings (e.g., Meek et al., 2010; Scott et al., 2008). It reminds us that context matters and that efforts to reduce higher education administration to a set of roles or to a specific approach are doomed to either state the obvious or remain inapplicable.

Based on this synthesis of the last 50 years, we identify several promising areas of inquiry. Foremost, the tensions inherent to higher education administration require further exploration. The practice of administration often comes down to some kind of balancing act. As such, understanding how dilemmas related to conflicting loyalties, career costs, performance criteria, conflicting needs of internal and external stakeholders, coexisting identities, misaligned managerial and collegial logics, and tensions between governance and operations shape administrators' decisions is likely to advance our understanding of higher education administration. Related, more work could be done to understand how administrators' values shape their decisions. As their work often involves making decisions that will impact one group or another, clarifying to what extent and in what way their values influence how they understand situations and how they make their decisions is also likely to significantly advance our knowledge.

As well, college administration requires more attention. Of the 38 articles published, only six turned their attention toward college realities. Comparative studies contrasting the realities of college and university administrators are a good place to start developing a more complete understanding of the entire realm of higher education administration. Similarly, presidents and deans tend to garner more attention, while other administrators—non-academic ones in particular—remain understudied. Accordingly, we suggest that further efforts be made toward understanding how these roles and individuals shape their organizations.

Finally, scholars would gain from further relying on frameworks related to gender, race, class, oppression, and performativity to inform their future musings. These frameworks promise to offer contrasting results and bring new questions to the fore. Scholars would also gain from further connecting to the growing body of work on higher education administration, Canadian or otherwise. As this article's findings suggest, our body of knowledge is growing but would benefit from having stronger interconnections and sustained conversations.

Regarding the *Journal*'s editorial posture, we wish, firstly, to reiterate the importance of requiring a discussion of studies' limitations and enjoin the Journal to raise its expectations. The findings suggest that there remains a fair amount of work to be done in that regard. Discussing limitations serves not only to improve the perceived validity and reliability of the work published, but to provide ideas for future research (Brutus et al., 2013). It also ensures that studies involving a single case or studies whose researchers are also participants appropriately frame their findings and refrain from misleading generalizations.

Related to this comment, we also wish to point out that most researchers studying higher education administration are either faculty members or administrators, as was the case for the great majority of the articles in this study. Given their professional experience, both groups are liable to biases. Accordingly, we expect higher education administration scholars to pay extra attention to threats to internal validity when designing their studies and reporting their findings. We enjoin editors, reviewers, and authors to remain vigilant as well as supportive in that regard, in order to build research capacity while raising the quality of our research.

Our last comment refers to the rational posture assumed in an important number of articles under study. Several of them promote or praise specific administrative services or processes, yet fail to also explore their potentially negative and unforeseen outcomes. Given that these articles were authored by individuals responsible for these activities, we ask that the *Journal* take a more assertive stance and provide guidance to the authors on seeking additional perspectives or on nuancing their interpretations, especially with regards to claimed effectiveness gains.

As for our study, our methods of data collection and analysis are not without limitations. Firstly, the creation of our sample relied on our definition of administration and administrators. In particular, the study defined administration in relation to management and leadership and in relation to specific administrative titles. Future work could explore alternative definitions to be used as starting points. Different conceptualizations may produce a different set of articles, which would complement our findings. As well, we decided to consider administration in relation to administrators. Groupings that would keep administration and administrators separate would allow researchers to explore each in more depth and provide additional insights.

To sum, the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, through its first 50-year journey, has made great strides toward furthering our understanding of higher education administration. It participated in the emergence of a diverse body of work highlighting the unique complexity and challenges of higher education administration and administrators as exhibiting agency within a web of seemingly unreconcilable tensions, both external and internal. Based on the work done, we see that the path forward requires us to delve deeper into this web of tensions, but also to acknowledge that our personal standpoints, as stakeholders of the system we strive to understand, shape our investigations.

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