

The colleges of British Columbia: some basic issues

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The opening of the first two-year community college in British Columbia, in September 1965, introduced an entirely new dimension of higher education into the educational scene of the province. However, it is probably fair to say that the college "idea" had by no means enjoyed unanimous approval from either the education profession or the public at large. Many critics suggested that an educational institution of this type could not hope to offer the quality of tertiary education to which society in British Columbia had become accustomed. Others believed that, inevitably, community colleges would become havens for second class students whose academic records were insufficient to earn them admission into the universities.

It may also be said that the concept of the "comprehensive" college was little understood, despite the strenuous efforts of those who promoted it. Both prospective students and their parents looked to the college as an alternative route to the university with few, if any, other functions.

The Macdonald Report of 1961¹ had granted academic respectability to the idea that quality and excellence were possible in various kinds of educational institutions even when such institutions sought different goals. After the Report had been studied, certain decisions were made at the governmental level which determined the kind of college which was to be developed in British Columbia.² They were to be "community" colleges in the broad sense of the term and the community was to bear a share of the costs through local taxation. Furthermore, the colleges would offer, not only university parallel courses, but various technical and vocational "career" programs leading to immediate employment. Placing these factors in relation, it became essential that the "community college concept" be interpreted clearly and convincingly to the taxpayer, as the future of the college depended upon the passing of referenda and plebiscites. In this respect, the colleges in British Columbia were to be unique in Canada.

It might be noted, in this context, that each province in Canada has developed colleges which are "unique" in one or more respects. Certainly, the colleges of Ontario,

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The Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATS), are different in their almost complete development of "non-academic-transfer" programs. By the same token, the C.E.G.E.P.s of Quebec have introduced a new concept in that attendance is mandatory for high school graduates eventually seeking a university degree. The community colleges of Alberta are closest to the British Columbia model with the obvious and important difference in Alberta's total provincial financing formula. Furthermore, it seems inevitable that the new Community Colleges in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and the Maritimes will develop modes of administration, structure and financing which best meet the particular needs of those provinces and, quite probably, will not duplicate any of the provincial college systems which presently exist. This diversity, in response to local needs, is one of the major features of the two-year college idea.

From the moment the college idea was conceived in British Columbia, certain assumptions were put forward which appeared to seek justification for the establishment of these new institutions. Most of the claims stemmed from the role of colleges in other places, predominantly the United States. Apparently it was presumed that colleges in this province would meet similar goals.

What were these assumptions? Essentially the B.C. colleges would democratize higher education, offering educational opportunity to a much broader spectrum of high school graduates. Adults would return to formal education and capitalize upon the opportunity by successful achievement. The lower costs of college education, and the opportunity to take part-time employment while living at home, would attract a different socio-economic class of students than those attending the traditional universities. Colleges would offer excellent instruction by attracting good teachers and maintaining close student-teacher relations. Such institutions would ensure that students do not suffer academically after transferring to university. The technical programs would prepare students for immediate employment by developing much needed vocational skills. College programs, unencumbered by ivory tower traditionalism, would be flexible and innovative. Student personnel departments, staffed by competent faculty, would be features of the new colleges. These, and many other virtues of the two-year colleges, were believed certain to eventuate.

The last five years have been, as far as the B.C. colleges are concerned, extremely productive and generally successful. By September 1970, eight colleges³ were in operation with enrollments ranging from 450 to 4,400. The college idea had been understood and reasonably well accepted by the universities, the students and society in general.

Notwithstanding the encouraging growth of the colleges, many issues have arisen which seriously hamper their future development and hence have become sources of continuing concern. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to the exploration of five of these issues in the hope that the new perspectives may help lead to logical solutions.

1. *The Preservation of the Comprehensive Curriculum*

Beginning with the opening of the first college and continuing to this date, the "comprehensive" concept, as applied to the colleges, has fought strenuously for

survival. The primary goal of a university degree has been sold and resold to society through a multitude of agencies.

This phenomenon is no more apparent than in the new two-year colleges, where by far the largest percentage of the students seek programs designed to qualify them for transfer to universities.

Enrollment figures as of September, 1970, vividly illustrate this point. Of a total enrollment of 11,072 full and part-time college students, 8,220 or 74 percent were undertaking university transfer programs whereas only 2,852 were registered as "career" or "technology" students. The "non transfer" programs suffer on at least three counts: the low demand for them; their cost, which far exceeds the transfer programs on a per capita basis; and their lack of "status appeal", which unquestionably exists. These views prevail despite growing evidence that employment opportunities continue to expand in many of the technologies and have decreased to some extent for those who are university educated. Despite the temptation the perennial thesis of non-accord between society's needs and society's demands, college counsellors have tried to influence prospective students on a pragmatic level — with limited success. It seems clear that each college is facing this dilemma and no immediate solution appears in sight.

Does a solution exist? The answer is probably "yes"; provided certain kinds of action are undertaken without delay. An intensive campaign is needed, beginning in the secondary schools and extending through every facet of the media, which will interpret clearly and as accurately as possible the employment needs of tomorrow's complex society. Efforts must be made to define areas of need and probable earning power of jobs within these areas. The resources of the Economic Council of Canada, the Federal and Provincial Departments of Manpower and the business community must be mobilized to identify the future employment needs of society. Students entering the colleges must be made aware of this information and advised and encouraged to make their decisions in light of such knowledge.

In regard to the foregoing, the federal Department of Manpower and Immigration has been responsible for the publication of one major document which has apparently not received the attention which it deserves.⁴ In 1967, the "Canadian Careers Directory" attempted to meet a similar need.⁵ Such efforts indicate that the task of monitoring employment needs, although extremely difficult, is far from impossible.

Further, it is incumbent upon the colleges to make even greater efforts to explore the resources of their own "community" with a view to determining accurately the employment needs of the immediate future. Advisory committees must be selected with greater care so that the information and advice which they give to the colleges is more accurate than sometimes has been the case.

2. *The College Faculty*

One of the most important concerns of college administrators has been to meet the widely publicized objectives of the new colleges. Important among these objectives

has been the commitment of the colleges to demand good teaching as a first requirement of their faculty. To a large extent this commitment has been met. However, the task of finding such teachers has not always been easy and one major difficulty is becoming more apparent. If transfer to the universities with full credit for college courses is to be maintained, the colleges will have to continue to satisfy the universities as to the competence of their teachers. Competence, to the university, is very much associated with the quality and level of the college teachers' degrees and the institution from which they were earned.

It is quite true that an increasing number of highly qualified personnel is becoming available — qualified with respect to the graduate degrees which they hold. However, quite often these people regard college teaching as a somewhat low priority, but unfortunately the only position currently available. Furthermore, if these faculty are to eventually find the university post to which many aspire, a certain contribution in terms of writing and research is mandatory. This requirement must be met over and above the college teaching responsibility.

Hence, the dilemma facing the college administrator is clear. Both the teaching competence and the requisite graduate degree must be found in the same individual. In addition, some commitment to the college "idea" is almost mandatory from the faculty member. Such people are hard to locate but in the best interests of the colleges, they must be identified.

3. Faculty — Council Relations

The history of college development in North America has been very much flavored with the colleges' perennial "search for identity". This phenomenon is no less true in British Columbia. Legislatively, the colleges are very much a part of the public school system. College Councils are composed largely of trustees from co-operating school districts. Local taxation for public school purposes include a percentage contribution towards the operation of the colleges. Borrowing for college capital expenditure must initiate in a co-operating school board. Consequently, college trustees look at colleges as very much a local responsibility.

With respect to relations with college faculty, this situation has led to considerable difficulties. Members of college faculty are being recruited from a number of sources, the most popular being the faculties and graduate schools of the universities. Consequently, these teachers perceive colleges as post-secondary institutions where the academic "traditions" of the universities would tend to be perpetuated. Important among such "traditions" are the structure of institutional government, the roles and responsibilities of department chairmen, deans and faculty committees, and the powers and duties of faculty councils. The B.C. Universities Act is clearly addressed to these questions and makes adequate reference to the role of the President, the Board of Governors and the Academic Senate. The existence of any analogous Act with respect to such questions in the colleges is clearly lacking.

In consequence, college principals, whose responsibility for the college operation is defined under the Public Schools Act, have involved faculty in college decision making in a variety of ways which tend to vary among the colleges. College faculty, anxious for greater responsibility in deciding academic and administrative affairs, have tended to compare and contrast their own situation with those of other colleges. The inevitable problems inherent in such a practice need little elaboration.

The lack of any guidelines as might be incorporated in a College Act, coupled with the lack of understanding and, in some cases, suspicion with which Council members view the "new academics" have created some problems in Faculty-Council relations which could easily escalate into major confrontations. The role of the principals in mediating Faculty-Council debate is not an enviable one.

In the near future it seems imperative that such crucial sources of concern as tenure, academic freedom and salary policy be discussed openly and honestly by faculty associations and college councils, and mutually acceptable solutions be found.

In this context it may be valuable to examine the ways in which these issues are handled in the provinces of Alberta, Ontario and Quebec. Alberta has had the advantage of a College Act since 1969. The extent to which the Act has met its objectives merits close examination.

4. The Multi-Campus College?

The population of British Columbia is, with some notable exceptions, well distributed throughout a large geographic area. The size of the regions serviced by the "interior" colleges attest to this phenomenon. The collaboration between five or six school districts in the formation of a college district has invariably created one major problem — the location of the college.

There are a number of forces impinging upon the problem of site selection. The first of these may be classified as political. It stems from long standing competition between towns and districts for industrial and commercial developments, hospitals and schools. In some areas the desire to have the college is but one further source of dispute between local governments. The second difficulty is financial. The college financing formula in B.C. requires 40 percent local contribution for capital development and taxpayers have generally refused approval for this. Hence colleges have tended to commence operation in local high schools or similar buildings which may be leased.

Faced with the dilemma between providing the best possible educational services to the community and at the same time gaining maximum value for the dollars available, College Councils have had to make a number of important decisions. Should the college operate in one major site where the maximum number of programs, courses and library facilities can be provided, or should they establish a number of campuses throughout the district and thus make educational opportunity more accessible? A convincing argument can be made for both points of view and yet each has a number of serious

disadvantages. In British Columbia, it appears that each college is reacting to the problem in somewhat different manner. Some colleges have elected to have one major site and encourage students to commute. Others have extended college facilities wherever the numbers justify the establishment of a "branch". For the "academic" or "university-parallel" courses, the latter step presents little difficulty, with the exception of some laboratory facilities. With the vocational technical programs, however, duplication of equipment is extremely expensive. Further, one central library seems desirable if a complete and comprehensive service is to be maintained.

Notwithstanding the present situation, however, serious study of this problem is indicated. Factors such as costs, attendance figures, population centres, geographic distances, political consequences and traditional parochial rivalry all need to be considered together before taking any irrevocable course of action in this aspect of future college planning.

5. *The Unanswered Questions*

It seems appropriate to conclude this paper with what might be considered as the "ultimate" issue facing the colleges. In what ways and to what extent are these institutions prepared to explore the assumptions upon which they operate? In one way this question could be considered as one of self-evaluation. It has often been said that the important questions are never investigated. Must this also be true of the colleges?

To develop this issue it is necessary to refer to the assumptions outlined earlier in the paper when the establishment of the colleges was described. In every sense these "purposes" were commitments which were made to society by those who promoted the "college concept". It is now incumbent upon the colleges that they objectively examine the extent to which these commitments have been realized.

Are the colleges really broadening the base of higher education by attracting students who would otherwise not have continued their education beyond high school? How well are the transfer students performing at the universities? Are the college programs really meeting the needs of a broad cross-section of society? Are the technical-vocational programs leading to employment for their graduates? Are the colleges offering high quality instruction in their classrooms and laboratories? These are but a few of the important questions which seek answers.

If the colleges are to accept the challenges of their existence they must also accept responsibility for their own evaluation. This requires a commitment of time, resources and personnel to the task of constant examination of the entire college operation. As each college seeks to develop its own identity each must test its own claims to uniqueness and be prepared to modify or redirect its energies in new directions. The community of colleges of British Columbia are young and vital institutions but the preservation of that vitality is dependent upon their willingness to the guardians of their own destiny.

Notes

1. Macdonald, John B. *Higher Education in British Columbia and a Plan for the Future*, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, 1962.
Macdonald made reference to
 - (a) *purposes of the colleges*, p. 50
"A two-year college, therefore, might be designed for those students who plan to continue their education at a degree-granting institution: those who wish to take only one or two years of higher education — technical, academic, or a combination of both; those who are undecided about their educational future."
 - (b) *financing of the colleges*, p. 99
"Operating: about 25 percent should come from student fees, at least 25 percent from the community or region, and not more than 50 percent from government grants."
 - (c) *governance of the colleges*, p. 87
"In my opinion, they (Boards of School Trustees) are well suited to appraise the educational needs and goals of areas within the Province, and for that reason they should have a large measure of responsibility for higher education in two-year regional colleges."
2. Province of British Columbia, *Public Schools Act*, Government Printer B.C., 1963. Colleges were defined in the Act in Section 163.
3. Vancouver City College, (Vancouver, established 1965, enrollment 4,400). Selkirk College (Castlegar, 1966, 850), Capilano College (West Vancouver, 1968, 1,250), Malaspina College (Nanaimo, 1969, 1,100), New Caledonia (Prince George, 1969, 450), Okanagan College (Kelowna, 1969, 850), Cariboo College (Kamloops, 1970, 550), Camosan College (Victoria, to open September, 1971).
4. Program Development Service, "*Career Outlook — Community College Graduates 1968-1969*," Department of Manpower and Immigration, Ottawa, 1968.
5. Canada Careers Directory, Cornmarket Press (Canada) Ltd., Montreal, 1967.