

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN CANADA: LESSONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM

Introduction

The community college system plays a distinct role in Canada's higher education sector. It was purposefully created as an instrument of public policy to provide education that directly responds to the social and economic development needs of Canadian communities. Given the uniquely decentralized nature of Canadian higher education policy, community colleges have historically been able to adapt their programming and evolve as the socio-economic needs within Canadian communities have changed. This evolution continues today as the impacts of globalization increasingly permeate Canadian communities and the higher education sector. This paper provides an analysis of Canada's decentralized college system and its effectiveness in promoting socio-economic development. It begins with a broad overview of the history of the Canadian community college system and defines its core characteristics. The contributions made by community colleges to socio-economic development in Canada are identified, as are the challenges that have arisen in an increasingly globalized higher education landscape. The paper concludes with some suggestions, based on the Canadian experience, for other national higher education systems undergoing or contemplating reform.

History of the Canadian Community College System

The community college system in Canada is relatively new, dating to its creation in the 1960s. Unlike the university system, it did not gradually emerge through an evolutionary or organic process. Rather, the college system was purposefully and explicitly created by government to promote social and economic development in response to the socio-economic needs of the 1960s (Gallagher & Dennison 1995; Quint-Rapoport 2006). Colleges were to act as instruments of public policy in contrast to the autonomy that Canadian universities hold (Dunlop

1998; Dennison & Levin 1988). This deliberate approach to the creation of the college system was driven by the convergence of three factors evident in the early 1960s (Gallagher & Dennison 1995):

- i) The influence of human capital theory. Governments were increasingly convinced that the key to economic growth was through investing in people.
- ii) Increased higher education demand. Social scientists predicted that a huge increase in demand for higher education was coming.
- iii) The link between economic development and technical skills. Popular belief in Canada increasingly linked prosperity to the technical skills of the workforce.

Driven by these converging factors, the Technical and Vocational Training Assistance Act (TVTA) was passed by the federal government in 1960. The TVTA provided significant funding for training that addressed the socio-economic development needs of Canadian communities. With the TVTA as the impetus, Canada's provincial governments created individual provincial community college systems through a cost-sharing formula with the federal government.

This combined role of the federal and provincial governments is key to understanding the nature of the community college system and the larger higher education sector in Canada. Education in Canada has been shaped by the constitutionally entrenched division of powers between the federal and provincial governments and how this division of powers influences their ongoing relationship. While the federal government has spending power over areas of national interest indirectly related to higher education, such as the national economy and human resource development, the 10 provincial governments have sole jurisdiction over education in their respective provinces. The federal government therefore is limited in its influence over the

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education sector, other than through how it provides funding (Fisher et al. 2005). Jones (2006: 628) has outlined the rather unique situation to which this has led: "Canada may be the only nation in the developed world that has never had a national university or higher education act, or even a [federal] government minister assigned responsibility for higher education."

Given the dominant role of provinces in higher education, the creation in the 1960s of separate provincial community college systems through the TVTA's infusion of federal money meant multiple college models emerged. Perhaps the defining characteristic of the college system in Canada is the lack of a single national model. Diversity and differentiation are key characteristics, with relatively few universally comparable features across provinces (Dennison 1995a). The various provincial models that arose were designed to operate in the context of the distinct social, economic, cultural and educational characteristics of each province (Dennison & Levin 1988: 60). Each model was therefore tied to the uniqueness of its respective province or region.

From 1965 – 1975, five different models emerged across Canada (Gallagher & Dennison 1995). In the provinces of Ontario, where universities are numerous and dispersed, and Prince Edward Island, where the sole university is accessible given the province's small size, colleges were created to provide a separate and distinct higher education option for young people not eligible for university admission. Colleges provided a range of employment-focused programs at the apprenticeship, certificate and diploma levels, completely segregated from university level education. These colleges also served as adult education centres for people in the workforce interested in retraining, as well as more general education centres for non-career focused community education that addressed social and citizenship needs.

A significantly different model emerged in western Canada. Unlike Ontario and Prince Edward Island, the dispersed populations of the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia had much less access to the few universities located in their large urban centres. Colleges were therefore developed to provide not only technical/vocational training, but university transfer programming as well. This provided greater access to university education through the college system, unlike the university and college systems in Ontario and Prince Edward Island that were purposefully kept distinct. Both Alberta and British Columbia also established specialized institutes of technology in addition to their community colleges.

In the provinces of Manitoba, New Brunswick and Newfoundland, as well as the territories of the Yukon and Northwest Territories, a third model arose that emphasized technical/vocational education with an emphasis on short term work-entry

programs. This reflected the need within these provinces to address high unemployment rates. Adult education programs also held a central place in these provincial systems. As these systems evolved, a greater variety of programming was gradually incorporated, including university transfer programs.

A unique fourth model emerged in the province of Saskatchewan. The distinct rural/urban complexion of the province – numerous, sparsely populated rural regions and a few growing urban centres – led to a two-pronged system. In urban centres requiring technical and industrial skills, technical institutes were created to provide vocational and technical education. In rural areas, a "community college without walls" was established, where colleges served as brokers of education programming instead of as providers. As such, rural colleges' primary role was to arrange for the delivery by other institutions or agencies of educational programs that responded to locally articulated education demands. As Saskatchewan's system evolved, this brokerage model became less pronounced as rural colleges increasingly began to provide programming in addition to brokering it.

The final model that developed between 1965 and 1975 was in Quebec. All students in Quebec who want to pursue higher education must attend a Quebec college, or CEGEP. There are two streams within the CEGEP model. The first stream provides two years of pre-university education for those students moving on to university study. The second stream provides three years of technical education for those wishing to enter the workforce immediately after college. Unlike other provinces in Canada, the Quebec college model did not involve the provision of vocational education, which was provided in secondary schools, nor did it require students to pay tuition. The Quebec model was also more centralized than other provincial models. In other provinces, local boards were given governance responsibilities over colleges. In Quebec, partially elected institutional boards play some role in governance, but the province maintains significant responsibility of the sector.

From the 1960s through the early 1980s, these diverse provincial models enjoyed an enormous amount of success as instruments of social and economic development (Gallagher and Day 2001: 652; Gallagher 1987). Their distinct provincial features allowed them to deliver education and training that was responsive to the unique social and economic needs in each province. New economic and fiscal conditions began to emerge, however, that impacted all of the provincial college systems. By 1977, the nature of college funding began to change. Funding the provincial college systems through a process of cost sharing between the federal and provincial governments, as set out in the TVTA, was ended. The federal government's new Established Programs Financing Act (EPF) provided a system of unconditional block money transfers by the federal

government to the provinces for higher education and health. Cost sharing with the provinces was abandoned. Thirty-two percent of EPF funding was meant to be spent on higher education and 68% on health, although provinces were not required to allocate the funds in those proportions. The federal government intended EPF funding to promote equal quality education throughout all the provinces while maintaining the provinces' jurisdiction over education.

Economic changes in Canada also began to emerge. These changes generated new and different community needs that required a response from the provincial college systems (Skolnik 2004). Canada experienced a long-term economic recession beginning in the 1980s. The recession created rising unemployment and economic stagnation within communities across the country. Faced with this shift in community needs, colleges adapted their programming priorities to place greater emphasis on addressing unemployment and economic growth needs, while education that addressed social and citizenship issues was given decreased emphasis (Dennison & Levin 1988: 51). This was the beginning of an evolution towards a greater economic development orientation among Canada's colleges. By the early 1990s, this was coupled with an increasingly perilous deficit and debt problem within the federal government and most provincial governments. Federal funding for the college sector through the EPF was replaced in 1996 by the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST). The CHST provided the provincial governments with an unconditional block grant from the federal government, similar to the EPF, but funds for higher education were reduced. Overall, the CHST was a policy initiative focused primarily on reducing federal costs, and not on improving higher education (Fisher et al. 2005: 48).

The recession and reduced federal funding meant that, while provinces still maintained jurisdiction over education, they now had less money to put into their respective college systems. Provincial governments began urging colleges to economize and to generate an increased proportion of their own revenues through entrepreneurial initiatives (Gallagher & Day 2001: 653). While fiscal restraint was promoted within all areas of government activity, community colleges were especially vulnerable given the control provincial governments have over the disbursement of college funding (Dennison 1995b). Moreover, the provincial governments had a history of adding federal transfer funds earmarked for education to general revenues to be used for other provincial priorities. (Fisher et al 2005: 42). Faced with this fiscal reality, Canadian colleges again adapted. An entrepreneurial spirit was embraced in order to fill the emerging funding gap and to continue providing appropriate education to communities that now faced higher unemployment and decreased economic productivity. Colleges

directed their entrepreneurial initiative towards developing partnerships with the business community in order to find new revenue sources and promote increased economic productivity (Gallagher & Day 2001: 655). A new emphasis on contract training emerged, including customized training delivered directly to businesses.

More recently, colleges' entrepreneurial spirit and ties to business have been further solidified by the demands of globalization and the knowledge economy. Economic development needs within Canadian communities have again changed based on the influence of economic globalization. The emergence of a highly competitive, global and knowledge-based economy has meant local communities must develop a better educated, highly skilled workforce that can compete on a global scale. This, in turn, has driven the emergence of an even stronger economic development and market-oriented outlook among Canadian community colleges (Kirby 2007; Levin 2001; Quint-Rapoport 2006). Colleges across Canada are increasingly focused on designing and delivering appropriate workforce development and high technology training that provides local economies with the human capital needed to respond to the demands of the global economy. This has had two implications. First, colleges have further expanded their ties to business and industry to ensure the development of curricula that is consistent with the skills required by businesses operating within a knowledge-based global context (Kirby 2007: 5). Second, colleges have had to respond to the need for an appropriate credential level in such a globally competitive knowledge economy. The response has taken several forms, including colleges beginning to offer degree level programs previously offered only by universities, and widening transfer relationships and other forms of cooperation with universities to provide expanded higher education pathways to college students (Quint-Rapoport 2006; Walker 2006). This has resulted in innovative programming. For example, Humber College and the University of Guelph recently partnered to form the University of Guelph-Humber to deliver programming that offers a combination of the university's focus on theory and the college's focus on practical skills. Graduates of the four year degree programs receive both a university degree and a college diploma, reflecting the combined theoretical/practical nature of their education. Such innovative programming has enabled the community college system in Canada to continue to evolve and produce graduates who have the skills needed to succeed in the global economy.

From its creation as a vehicle to address the socio-economic needs of the 1960s through to its evolution into a more entrepreneurial institution in response to recession, government deficits and the demands of globalization, the Canadian community college has demonstrated an ability to adapt as socio-economic and fiscal conditions change. It has done so within a decentralized higher education context

that promotes adaptability at the provincial and community levels. This approach has had considerable success, as the community college system has become the largest supplier of higher and adult education and training in Canada (ACCC 2002: 1).

Characteristics of the Canadian Community College System

Despite the significant provincial diversity of college systems and the evolution that has occurred in response to recession, fiscal constraints and globalization, there are a number of basic characteristics that are common to college models across the provinces. According to Skolnik (2004), the main characteristic of Canadian colleges is that they educate and train people for jobs in the “middle range” of the labour force, between unskilled occupations and the professions. Often referred to as para-professionals, these middle range occupations are the engine of socio-economic development. Within this focus, five core characteristics have been identified that characterize Canadian community colleges (ACCC 2002: 1; Dennison & Levin 1988; Skolnik 2002: 7-10).

Five Core Characteristics

i) Access – As a tool created by government to promote socio-economic development, a key feature of the community college system is to provide educational opportunities for those in society previously denied access through barriers related to academic achievement, socio-economic status, geographic location or culture. Providing open access to a college education gives historically marginalized populations the opportunity to build knowledge and skills that open up greater social and economic opportunities. Open access initially was intended to mean that anyone applying to a college would be accepted; however, decreasing public funds have made this difficult (Skolnik 2002: 8). As a result, colleges have used other means to promote access, including lower tuition fees than universities, community-based learning centres, expanded programming options that fit a broader range of educational needs, and academic credit for prior learning based on informal life experience. These open access policies have resulted in college participation rates experiencing much higher growth over the last decade when compared to other higher education institutions in Canada (Canadian Council on Learning 2006: 61).

ii) Community orientation – The role of community colleges in promoting socio-economic development is distinctly community-based in nature. While overall responsibility rests with provincial governments, these governments have created governance structures (which are described in greater detail below) that tie colleges to their communities. Colleges are, in practice, both “locally-based and provincially-shaped” institutions (Gallagher 1987: 11). The constitutional separation of powers in Canada has ensured that centralization

of higher education has not occurred at the federal level. This decentralized approach enables colleges to address education and training needs that are specific to their own communities.

iii) Learning orientation – colleges were designed to be student-centered through a focus on the teaching and learning experience. This is in contrast to the high priority given to research within universities. High quality student learning experiences are the key focus of community colleges.

iv) Comprehensiveness – a central component of Canadian community colleges is the provision of a comprehensive curricular model with a broad range of programming. For colleges throughout Canada, this has meant an emphasis on apprenticeships, certificates, diplomas and, increasingly, degrees.

v) Responsiveness – colleges were created to be nimble and flexible so they can respond to the changes in their external environment. As social and economic conditions change, colleges have the capacity to respond to new education and training needs as they emerge. Ultimately, the ability to be responsive to changing needs is likely the foundational characteristic of Canadian colleges (Skolnik 2002: 11).

Funding

Funding for Canadian community colleges primarily comes from provincial governments, supported by federal government block money transfers to the provinces. Currently, these federal transfers occur through the Canada Social Transfer (CST), which grew out of the previous Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) in 2004. Student tuition fees cover approximately 11% of total higher education costs (Canadian Broadcasting Cooperation 2006). As such, the Canadian college system is accurately described as a publically funded system. At the same time, the fiscal tightening of the 1980s and 90s and the accompanying imperative for colleges to generate an increased portion of their own revenues has resulted in a dramatic increase in private funds within the public system. Currently, 43% of higher education revenues in Canada come from private sources (Kirby 2007: 9).

The increase in private funding within the public college system should be distinguished from an actual private college system in Canada. Private colleges, usually called career colleges, provide for-profit training in specific career areas such as hairdressing, real estate training, computer skills and business. Private colleges receive no government money but are regulated by provincial governments. Overall, they play a fairly insignificant role in Canadian higher education. The number of Canadian graduates of private colleges has dropped by 50% over the last decade, representing only 3.7% of Canadians with some form of higher education (Li 2006).

Governance

Despite the diverse provincial models, governance of community colleges is quite similar

across Canada. Unlike Canadian universities, which maintain a level of autonomy largely unequalled in other parts of the world (Dennison 1995a: 124), provincial governments play a large role in the Canadian college sector. Provincial ministries responsible for higher education are active in developing overall policy directions for colleges, distributing funds allocated to colleges by provincial legislatures, providing financial assistance programs and, significantly, appointing members of college Boards of Governors.

Within the parameters set by provincial governments, individual colleges enjoy a fairly considerable degree of autonomy (Dunlop 1998). Boards of Governors are the key actors in college governance. Each college's board establishes the overall goals, objectives, strategic directions and general oversight of the college. This includes preparation and approval of the college's business plan, budget and annual report, as well as appointment of auditors and approval of auditors' reports. Board members are primarily appointed by the provincial government and represent the interests and expertise within the college's local community. In most colleges, a small number of board positions are reserved for representatives of the college's faculty, administration and student body. This composition of boards, combined with their central role in college governance, is a key factor in maintaining the community orientation of the college system which, in turn, promotes nimbleness and flexibility when addressing changing community education needs.

The primacy of the Board of Governors distinguishes college governance from the bicameral governance structure of Canadian universities. Decision-making within individual Canadian universities is shared between a board and a senate. The university senate incorporates faculty participation in governance through its responsibility for all academic matters. While no such bicameral structure formally exists within Canadian colleges, the expectation that faculty should have a substantive role in decisions around academic matters is pervasive (Owen 1995). Boards of Governors in Canadian colleges have therefore established Academic Councils, sometimes called Education Councils, which are responsible for managing the academic affairs of the college. Academic Councils are made up of college faculty, administrators and students. Academic Councils do not have autonomy in decision-making as do university senates, but make recommendations to the college board on such things as the establishment of programs, determination of curricula, matters related to exams and the determination of graduation qualifications. This approach helps ensure that decisions about curriculum and other academic matters remain decentralized.

Boards of Governors also have the authority to establish Program Advisory Committees (PAC). PACs are usually set up for each college program, or

group of similar programs, to provide on-going advice on curricula, workforce trends, internship opportunities, program policies and standards. Members are appointed by the college president and tend to be representatives of local employers, licensing bodies, unions, relevant professional associations, community leaders, current students and program graduates. Given their composition, PACs play a critical role in maintaining an ongoing connection between colleges and their communities and local businesses (Leppard 2004). They help ensure that education and training provided by colleges evolves based on changing community socio-economic needs and does so in a timely manner.

Contributions to Socio-Economic Development

Despite its relatively short existence, the Canadian community college system has achieved significant success. As the largest suppliers of higher and adult education in Canada, colleges currently enroll approximately 2.5 million full and part-time students that study at 175 public colleges with campuses or learning centres in over 900 communities (ACCC 2002: 1). The decentralized nature of the system, combining provincial government jurisdiction with local community input through college boards, academic councils and PACs, has enabled the college system to remain responsive and flexible to local social and economic development needs. As a whole, significant success has been achieved in several key areas: providing greater education opportunities for marginalized populations, expanding lifelong learning opportunities for adults in the workforce, increasing economic growth, and decreasing social problems while increasing social savings. Significantly, this has all been done in a manner that has provided a significant return on the Canadian taxpayers' investment in colleges.

Increased education opportunities for marginalized populations

Canadian colleges have been very successful in fulfilling their mandate of providing access to education for people who have historically not had such access. This is in stark contrast to the Canadian university sector. Young people from low income families, for example, are just as likely to attend college as young people from high income families; they are only half as likely to attend university as those from high income families (Canadian Council on Learning 2006: 74). Colleges have also been very successful in providing access to education for aboriginal people, who have faced a long history of economic and social marginalization in Canada. The gap between the proportion of aboriginal people who have college level education and that of the total population is only 8%, compared to 23% at the university level (Canadian Council on Learning 2006: 75). The distribution of many college campuses and learning centres in rural areas has also increased access to higher education for rural

Canadians. The rate of college participation is nearly identical between rural and urban youth (Canadian Council on Learning 2006: 76).

Expanded lifelong learning opportunities for adults

Community colleges and technical institutes play a disproportionately large role in providing adult education and training to Canadians, especially those already in the workforce requiring job-related training. Among adults 25 – 54 years old who participate in adult education at a higher education institution, approximately 67% attend a community or technical college that provides diploma, vocational or apprenticeship level training (Myers & de Broucker 2006: 34). Canada lags behind other OECD countries in adult education participation (Canadian Council on Learning 2006: 86), but Canadian colleges play the central role and will be key to its expansion, especially in the context of a global knowledge economy.

Contributions to economic growth

Canadian colleges have demonstrated that they act as engines for economic growth within local economies. Colleges have increased human capital by producing graduates that have the specific technical skills required by the local economy. These graduates increase the productivity of businesses, leading to greater economic output and community wealth. These graduates also receive higher wages as a result of their education, leading to greater consumer spending within the economy. This economic growth is further bolstered by the direct economic impact resulting from wages and salaries paid to college faculty and staff. Taken in total, these drivers of economic growth have contributed approximately 8% of Canada's gross domestic product or the equivalent of about 1.25 million jobs in Canadian communities (Robison & Christophersen 2006: 55).

Decreased social problems and increased social savings

While Canadian colleges have evolved into institutions with a primary focus on economic development, they have nonetheless had considerable social impacts as well. Higher levels of college education among community members result in positive behavioral changes that improve community social conditions. In particular, increased college education in Canada is correlated with fewer smokers and alcohol abusers, decreased crime, reduced numbers of welfare recipients, increased participation in civil society, increased voting and greater degrees of tolerance (Canadian Council on Learning 2006: 42-46; Robison & Christophersen 2006: 39). These improved social conditions decrease the need for government spending in such areas as crime prevention, healthcare, addictions treatment and poverty alleviation. The savings are considerable. One year of community college operations in Canada generates approximately \$344 million in public savings through avoided costs for addressing such social problems (Robison & Christophersen 2006: 39).

Significant return on taxpayers' investment

Government funding remains the largest single source of funding for colleges despite the increasing role of private funds. This is a considerable investment on the part of the Canadian taxpayer. Yet the Canadian college system represents an excellent investment for the taxpayer. Colleges increase provincial government revenues through the economic growth they generate and the social savings they provide. As a result, government investment in Canadian colleges yields a rate of return equal to 19%, enabling Canadian colleges to not only pay for themselves but generate a surplus that can be applied to other government programming (Robison & Christophersen 2006: 1).

Challenges Faced by the Canadian Community College System

The contribution of Canadian colleges to socio-economic development has been significant. Yet continued contribution faces several key challenges. These challenges reflect the pervasive impacts of globalization that are increasingly being felt within Canadian communities and higher education institutions. Challenges faced by the Canadian college system include the lack of a mechanism for national performance measurement, the possibility of academic drift and the necessity of reconciling community-based social development with economic globalization.

The lack of a mechanism for national performance measurement

Decentralization is one of the key features of the Canadian college system. Combining provincial jurisdiction over higher education policy with local governance through Boards, Academic Councils and PACs has shaped the system into one that remains responsive to local needs. However, this decentralization, while effective in responding to diverse local education needs, has hampered the ability to measure performance of the entire college system on a national scale. Despite some efforts at the provincial level to develop performance measurement, to date there has been no significant pan-Canadian effort. Performance measurement has remained fragmented across the provinces. The lack of national performance measurements puts Canada's college system at a disadvantage globally. There is a need to be able to measure how Canada as a whole compares to other countries in its higher education performance if Canada is to remain competitive with these countries within a global, knowledge-based economy (Canadian Council on Learning 2006). Without a national mechanism to measure effectiveness, Canada will be unable to compare its higher education sector with those of competing countries and make the necessary reforms such comparisons dictate.

Academic drift

Given the need for a globally competitive workforce with appropriate credentials to compete in a knowledge economy, community colleges are

increasingly involved in providing education at the Bachelor's degree level (Burke & Garmon 1995; Walker 2006). While this further broadens the comprehensive nature of college programming, it raises the question of whether colleges are drifting from their traditional areas of focus and becoming pseudo-universities (Dunlop 1998). This issue has, to some extent, been addressed by focusing on *applied* degrees. The applied degree is characterized by a practical, hands-on curriculum as opposed to the academic nature of a university degree. Yet, if there is to be such a distinction, it is a questionable practice to continue to refer to both credentials as degrees (Skolnik 1995). Critics of community college involvement in applied degree granting suggest that the defining characteristics of the community college – especially open access and community orientation – may be lost as colleges incorporate the greater student selectivity that is needed to offer degree level programs, including the recruitment of students from outside the province (Farnsworth 2006; Skolnik 1995; 2002). As a result, the potential for academic drift towards university-like programming may also end up being accompanied by a drift away from a community-oriented and decentralized focus. While there is considerable momentum in many provincial college systems for granting more degrees, it is an issue that requires on-going attention in its implementation to ensure academic drift does not occur in a manner that makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish community colleges from universities.

Reconciling community orientation with economic globalization

The gradual evolution of Canadian colleges towards a more market-based orientation has, especially in the context of globalization, shifted the emphasis away from programming that addresses the social, cultural and citizenship needs of communities (Kirby 2007; Levin 2001). According to Levin (2001), a “hyper-economic” preoccupation within colleges, driven by the demands of globalization, has made education a commodity where the traditional characteristics of community access and responsiveness have been refashioned into a means to promote global competitiveness of the local workforce. Serving the social development needs of local communities has become subservient to serving the economic demands of globalization as defined by business. This shift to a hyper-economic focus in higher education is controversial in Canada (Kirby 2007: 18). It is especially controversial given the potential for economic globalization to undermine equitable social development (Deacon 2000). Reconciling the college's past role in social development at the community level with its emerging preoccupation with economic globalization represents one of the most significant challenges the Canadian college system faces.

Conclusion: Lessons for Higher Education Reform

Canada's experience with its community college system provides a number of lessons for other national higher education systems that are contemplating or undergoing reform, especially at the college level. For national reform efforts that are interested in better linking higher education to socio-economic development, the following are brief suggestions based on the Canadian experience.

1. *Decentralized governance structures are key for promoting education and training that is timely and responsive to changes in community socio-economic conditions.* The Canadian community college model has developed governance structures that promote considerable community-based input into curriculum development, program planning, budgeting and program standards. This decentralized approach is especially important within countries, such as Canada, that have diverse regions and communities, often with very different histories, cultural makeup and socio-economic needs.

2. *A decentralized system should have formal connections to a national higher education strategy.* Canada's provincial patchwork of college systems is responsive to unique provincial and community needs, but it lacks a clear national strategy and performance framework. Incorporation of a national strategy linked to a decentralized system will provide a mechanism for national performance measurement as well as an ability for integrated planning that minimizes the potential for academic drift. This requires several linked, and potentially complex, bureaucratic layers – from the national through to the regional and local levels. But linking higher education from the local through to the national levels is necessary if a more seamless and meaningful connection is to be made between the evolving education needs of local communities and the demands of the global context within which they exist.

3. *Implementing explicit open access strategies is an important tool for providing increased educational opportunities to historically marginalized populations.* This, in turn, creates greater opportunities for economic success among those most often denied such success. In Canada, the use of lower tuition fees, learning centres located in small centres, increased programming options, and provision of academic credit for prior informal learning are important strategies enabling colleges to reach low income, aboriginal and rural students in much greater numbers than Canadian universities. There can be a considerable financial cost to the implementation open access strategies, but they are vital for promoting socio-economic development among those in greatest needs.

4. *Predictable and consistent public funding is critical to maintain the college system's ability to respond to social as well as economic development needs.* A number of the challenges faced by the Canadian college system throughout its history are rooted in the gradual decrease in public funding that

occurred throughout the 1980s and 90s. While a more entrepreneurial college system has been the result, it has also meant more emphasis is now placed on engaging business and industry. This in itself is not bad, but the decreased emphasis on education targeted at social, cultural and citizenship needs has diluted the broader impact Canadian colleges might have within their communities. This dilution will likely increase as the demands of economic globalization continue to dominate

Canadian college programming. The Canadian experience therefore suggests that higher education reform in other countries would be well served by putting in place predictable and consistent public funding. Public funds that are both predictable and consistent will help avoid an over-reliance on private funds from the business sector, thereby enabling colleges to provide education and training directed towards a more diversified set of stakeholders and social needs.

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