

A Proposal Regarding the State of Higher Education in British Columbia

A Submission from John D. Dennison, PhD to
CUFA BC's 20 Questions for 2020 Project

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Note: This document is a personal commentary on higher education in British Columbia. It is not intended to be a conventional research paper. Unless referenced, opinions expressed are entirely those of the author.

"Differentiation of function so that each of the three systems would strive for excellence in different areas so as not to waste public resources on duplicate efforts" (California Master Plan, 1960).

By any measure, growth, diversity or complexity, public higher education in British Columbia is an impressive enterprise. It is instructive to recall that in 1960 there was one public degree granting institution in the province. By 2008 there are more than twenty universities and colleges offering a variety of degrees, diplomas and certificates. Equally impressive is the diversity of missions and goals reflected in the range of programs which are offered.

Notwithstanding the growth of institutions, there remains an element of uncertainty particularly with respect to the clarity of mandate in one segment of the system i.e. the "new" universities. Beginning in the 1980's there has been a steady evolution of the roles and functions of a selected segment of the former community college component of the system. After the initial decision to award degree granting authority to five colleges, various factors, political and otherwise, colluded to allow for a steady evolution of mission, culminating in the renaming of four of the former colleges as universities. This decision in 2008 was supplemented by the addition of one community college and one specialized institute to the approved designation as universities **(NOTE 1)**

Given that the new title was the result of lengthy lobbying within the political arena by both the institutions and supportive community groups, the decision was well received. A less enthusiastic response was, not surprisingly, expressed by the older, established universities. Paradoxically, the effort to maintain exclusiveness by the latter had been duplicated some years earlier when the newly created "university colleges" sought to seek independence from the remaining non-degree granting community colleges.

Given their designation as new universities there was a perception by some faculty and administrations that certain positive changes would follow. It was hoped that these changes would bring the institutions into line with the values, policies and practices which prevailed in conventional Canadian universities.

At this point it is instructive to review the scene in "mainstream" universities in this country. Within this category there is both considerable diversity and numerous common features. Partly as a result of their historic roots, Canadian universities are both large and small based upon enrollment and, with limited exceptions, are public (although most institutions in central and eastern Canada were originally denominational). Several are major centres of research, graduate and professional programs. Others are focused primarily on teaching and undergraduate studies, while another group is a combination of both descriptions. **(NOTE 2)**

Notwithstanding the foregoing, they share many common practices. All expect faculty to engage in research, pursue funding from federal granting agencies, and reinforce their status by becoming members of prestigious national organizations. All offer almost exclusively general baccalaureate, professional and advanced graduate degrees.

It is important to acknowledge that most of the "new" universities have, from their time as university colleges, sought and succeeded in their bids to become members of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC). While this accomplishment has given them a quasi accredited designation, many of the old established universities have been reluctant to welcome the "new" universities as 'members of the establishment'.

However, more important than the above, is the vision which the new universities hold of themselves. It comes as no surprise that having been awarded the new designation many faculty members and administrators, particularly in the academic area, look forward to more opportunities to conduct research, to an improvement in support services, libraries and computers, and eventually funding for graduate students to assist in research and teaching. It must be acknowledged that even before becoming universities, many faculty in these institutions, despite limited funding and other support services, have produced creditable records of research and publication while maintaining challenging teaching loads and other duties.

There is little dispute that a good measure of the established universities to expect (even demand) research activity from their faculty, in addition to teaching, is rooted in how they are funded. The funding formulae provide for a limitation upon teaching loads, support expanded library, laboratory and computer facilities, and provide for graduate students in numerous roles. By some accounts the "new" universities are not accorded sufficient funding support to fully duplicate this pattern of activity.

In an effort to draw a distinction between the "old" and the "new" universities, references have been made to the latter as "regional", "teaching", "new paradigm" or "primarily undergraduate" universities. Such titles, however, tend to add to, rather than retract from, a clearer understating of what distinctive role, if any, these institutions will assume. Until there is clarity of mandate and function there will be confusion, frustration and disappointment, particularly among faculty (and to a lesser extent, the wider community) as to how much fiscal and technical support from government they may anticipate in their effort to fulfill a mission which is as yet unclear.

How then might this dilemma be resolved? In the opinion of this observer there are two worthwhile clues from the past which deserve to be revisited. One model was introduced in British Columbia, the second was formulated at approximately the same time in the state of California. **(NOTE 3)**

In 1963, John Macdonald published his report on "Higher Education in British Columbia and a Plan for the Future". Not only was the report enthusiastically received by the academic and wider community (perhaps less so by government) it proved to be one of the most influential studies in the history of BC education. Moreover, much of Macdonald's advice translated into action. By doing so the entire spectrum of higher education in the province changed from then on.

However, there was one aspect of the plan which received limited attention at the time and has since been largely forgotten. In a province with a population of 3 million, Macdonald foresaw the need to maintain only one "research university", supplemented by two (later three) four-year colleges and a galaxy of community colleges in significant population centres of the province. Within this "system" students would be able to continue their studies by earning credits at the colleges which would supplement their degrees on transfer to either the university or the four-year colleges. The role and function of each component of the system would be defined. For example, the four-year colleges would offer a galaxy of undergraduate degrees and limited masters degrees. The colleges would offer two year programs, largely in Arts and Sciences, in addition to preparation for a limited number of professional programs.

Clearly, Macdonald's vision of a structured system was never brought to fruition. The proposed four-year colleges would accept nothing less than full research university status. Although the community college model prevailed for several years, an inevitable demand for more degree accessible programs culminated in "university-college" designation for some institutions and eventually "university" status as described earlier in this paper.

The California approach, however, proved to be more resilient. The Master Plan for Higher Education, approved in 1960, was based upon an important principle which stated that ... **Differentiation of function so that each of these systems would strive for excellence in different areas so as to not waste public resources on duplicate efforts.** The primary author of the Plan, Clark Kerr, stated that his goal was "to balance the competing demands of fostering excellence and guaranteeing educational access for all".

Stated briefly, the Plan involved three coordinated public systems. The single public multi campus University of California which would have sole authority to offer doctoral and most professional degrees and be charged with responsibility for research (**NOTE 4**). The second component was the state college (later university) system, now involving 23 institutions, with authority to offer numerous baccalaureate and limited graduate degrees but no expectations for research. Finally, the community colleges, which now numbered 110, would maintain two year programs in academic and applied areas with transfer opportunities for students where appropriate.

As part of the Plan a complicated student admission policy was approved. On a state-wide basis using high school grades and standardized testing the top 12 ½% of students would be eligible for admission to the university. The top one third would qualify for the state colleges, and all would be able to enter the community colleges. Although there have been minor amendments to the Plan over the past fifty years, the general principles have been maintained. There remains a clear, state-wide acceptance of the role and mission of each component of the system. It is also interesting to note that none of the four-year 'universities' have been granted research university status (**NOTE 5**) nor have any of the community colleges been granted departure from their original mission (**NOTE 6**).

In the light of this discussion the question which remains is how much, if any, of the above has any relevance to British Columbia's higher education system in 2009? Does a need exist to revisit the missions of each of the current institutions with the intention of removing any ambiguity by providing a clear and precise definition of each role, purpose and function within the system? Could such an initiative reduce confusion and modify the expectations of faculty, administrators and the wider community as to precisely which activity will be expected and funded accordingly?

One fact is not arguable. British Columbia contains four autonomous comprehensive universities, each with a mandate to place a high priority on research, graduate and professional studies. This distinction should be restated and reinforced. It is the second component of the system which is more complicated. While one group (Thompson Rivers, Fraser Valley, Vancouver Island, Kwantlen and perhaps Capilano) might be called regional or undergraduate universities, it is vital that their mandates be made clear. For example, research activity, while neither required nor funded, should not be discouraged. Expectations regarding the growth of graduate and professional degrees need to be made explicit. Other institutions within this category e.g. Royal Roads, Emily Carr, BC Institute of Technology, play specific and individual roles in the system which also require clarification. Their distinctiveness should be reinforced.

The community colleges have, from their inception, played an important role in their service to those seeking academic upgrading, English language training, and entry into job preparation. Incrementally, the colleges have gained degree granting authority in selected areas. Not all observers have applauded this development (see Campus 2020). It is critical that the community colleges maintain their comprehensive curricula and do not drift too far from their original mission. Again a clear statement of mandate would be welcomed. As the primary source of funding, it is the ultimate responsibility of government to exercise leadership if a formal description of the specific mandate of each of the components of the tripartite system of higher education is to be defined. In the absence of clarity there will

be uncertainty and 'doubt' leading to academic drift which will eventually produce homogeneity in the system.

Having made the case for reform of the system in British Columbia two important questions remain (a) Have historical realities made any real intervention or refinement of the roles of the three components of the system unworkable? and (b) what is to be gained by the attempt?

With regard to (a) with the exception of the research intensive universities which have developed in ways consistent with the role and function, the "new" universities and the community colleges have been consistently in a state of flux. Under a mandate not clearly defined the institutions have developed programs in many areas which, depending on one's point of reference, are not all consistent with their mandate. Nevertheless, it could be argued that it is both impossible and impractical to attempt to reverse the process (again, see Campus 2020).

However it is the response to question (b) which is more important. Governments in British Columbia have long been committed to meeting the educational needs of the widely diverse population by building an equally diverse galaxy of institutions with a wide range of programs. Without some constraint diversity is difficult to maintain, particularly when university colleges seek to become universities and community colleges strive to emulate university colleges. Status-seeking among institutions is an understandable goal but it is usually the least advantaged among the student community which receives the least attention. We live in a credential driven society but as a cynical comment once made by the late Paul Gallagher, "perhaps all people should be given a degree at birth and then get on with their education".

A second consideration is more pragmatic. In a fiscal climate where resources are limited, duplication is at best undesirable. The principle stated earlier which underscored the California Master Plan is critical if the BC system is to be managed efficiently and effectively. It is to be expected that in the research universities costs per student will exceed those of the "new" universities which, in turn, will require more funding per student than that of the community colleges. But the comparison will endure only if the distinctive roles and functions of the institutions prevail.

From a theoretical perspective a three dimensional model for maintenance of the system is instructive. These factors are **access, quality and funding**. A delicate balance among these three must be preserved to ensure stability. Uncontrolled access will put pressure upon both maintenance of quality and level of funding. High quality is difficult to maintain without appropriate funding. The California Master Plan is designed to ensure academic

excellence and control access to each component of the system while ensuring careful control over public resources.

Interesting as they may be, any analogies drawn from either the Macdonald Report or the California Master Plan have limited relevance to the province. Given the current population of BC, the Macdonald model would have required major adaptation. The University of British Columbia, for example, would have expanded to at least five campuses (including Okanagan). This discussion should not be distracted by the size and complexity of the system. It is the general organizational model proposed by Macdonald which is important. A major variation with the California Master Plan in the curricular structure of the second component. British Columbia's "new" universities, with the exception of Emily Carr, offer a wide range of programs from adult basic education to limited Masters Degrees. California's state universities confine their curriculum to general academic degrees. It would be difficult to draw a distinctive line of demarcation between BC's community colleges and the "new" universities.

In spite of these acknowledged differences, it is the general organizational principle which should not be lost. This principle is best expressed in a recent statement on the California Master Plan...

"The Master Plan transformed a collection of uncoordinated and competing colleges and universities into a coherent system. It achieved this by assigning each public segment ... the University of California, the California State University and the community colleges ... its own distinctive mission and pool of students. The genius of the Master plan was that it established a broad framework for higher education that encourages each of the three independent segments to concentrate on creating its own distinctive brand of excellence within its own particular set of responsibilities" (Educational Relations Department, U.C. Office of the President, January 2007).

A review of public higher education in British Columbia might begin with that statement in mind.

Notes

1. Kwantlen, Malaspina and Fraser Valley university colleges. Okanagan had become an affiliate of the University of British Columbia. Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design and Capilano College were also named universities. University College of the Cariboo had assumed responsibility for the Open Learning Institute and granted university status.
2. This classification is used Macleans magazine in its report on Canadian universities.
3. While I cannot confirm this comment. I believe that Macdonald's views were influenced by the California Plan.
4. As of 2009 the University of California contains ten separate campuses.
5. Some Ph.D. degrees are now offered jointly with the university.
6. Although much of the student population has moved from university transfer to adult upgrading and language training.

References

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Bio

John D. Dennison is Emeritus Professor of Higher Education at the University of British Columbia. He holds a doctorate from Washington State University and for thirty years served in the Department of Higher Education at UBC as a teacher and researcher in his discipline. He is the author or co-author of four books and has published over 100 articles in professional journals dealing with the history, development and management of post-secondary education with a particular emphasis upon the community college.

In 2000, Dr. Dennison was named Millennium Professor of Higher Education by the American Association of Professors of Community College Education. Other awards include the UBC President's Award for Excellence, OISE's Distinguished Educator Award, and the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education's Distinguished Member. In 2002, he received an Honorary Doctor of Laws from Thompson Rivers University, an Honorary Doctor of letters from Kwantlen University College and a Doctorate in Sacred Letters from St. Mark's College.

Dr. Dennison has extensive experience as a consultant on issues relating to post-secondary education in Australia, England, and most provinces of Canada. He has been actively involved in the development of the higher education system in British Columbia from the early 1960's to the present day.