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SPECIAL EDITION

the Educator

For Fanshawe College Professors, Librarians and Counsellors

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THE COLLEGES IN CRISIS: GETTING THE STORY STRAIGHT

Many people in our college community have already read Kevin McKay's **Report on Education in Ontario Colleges** (2014). The full document is now posted province-wide at the OPSEU website: http://www.opseu.org/caat/caat_ac/report-on-education-2014.htm. This **Special Edition** is devoted to a review of major issues in McKay's Report, together with analysis and discussion of specific applications to Fanshawe College and Southwestern Ontario.

Education or Marketing? From Regional Service to Global Competition

To understand our current situation, we need to know something about the history of the college system. McKay identifies the 1990s as a period of transformation that began our dangerous drift away from ideals of public service to increasingly narrow focus on commercial measures of profit-and-loss. How many faculty members know that the colleges in those years abandoned their founding commitment to regional service areas and opened themselves instead to competitive recruitment of students across the province in a de-regulated 'educational marketplace'? This radical change was driven by a specific political agenda: a belief that market principles should govern every aspect of our social life.

McKay does not explore the consequences of this transformation in detail, but his identification of the change explains much of what we have seen at our own college: increasing expenditure on branding,

presentation, and public relations, and a disproportionate commitment of resources to manage and maintain it.

At Fanshawe, instead of serving, first and foremost, students in our immediate region hard hit by unemployment and employment-sector changes, we now increasingly market ourselves outside our region in a competitive scramble with other Ontario colleges for students from throughout the province and the world. This mutually-antagonistic market-share competition is expensive and requires costly staff and resources. Since the government funds colleges based on enrollment, everything must be done to maintain (and if possible) increase enrollment to maintain government funding, which is currently the lowest per student in Canada.

What a vicious cycle! We must spend ever more of our resources attempting to generate enrollments through marketing to secure inadequate funding that we increasingly use to support marketing which absorbs ever more of the funding. This snake-eating-its-tail model generates logos

and ad-copy, but its usefulness for quality education and service to regional students is indirect at best, and at worst, a contradiction of the colleges' mandate to serve and support local regions.

This shift to commercialization blurred the distinction between public and private colleges and promoted a management culture detached from ideals of public service. Means react on ends, and a constant pursuit of funding using marketing models alters the mission and identity of colleges.

We are undergoing an aggressive process of privatization which corrodes our original mandate and reduces the idea of the common good to a contest of slogans for a shrinking share of students targeted as consumers. In this process, students' relationship to their education, and our relationship to them, is altered and diminished. The element of dedicated service in teaching and counseling is displaced by a search for efficiencies designed to cut delivery costs.

This process is ultimately self-defeating because education – especially cultural education necessary to democracies – *has* costs, unavoidable costs, and this is precisely why it is subsidized by government: to ensure it remains affordable and available for ordinary citizens. If we continue to promote commercialization of our public colleges, the social commitment necessary to sustain public education will be undermined.

This is happening. McKay's Report confirms that the costs of education have steadily increased for ordinary students, and we all know that the colleges are involved in an ongoing violation of Article 2 of the Collective Agreement, which requires them to hire full-time instead of part-time.

The ideal of public education is in jeopardy, and this is as much a moral crisis as an economic one. The two are related more than we commonly admit, and chronic underfunding of colleges is symptomatic of a general social failure.

We must all work within constraints, but we must not further erosion of the public sector by promoting mercenary privatization schemes that abolish the distinction between colleges devoted to public service and corporations driven by private profit.

The Funding Crisis: A Kink in the Hose

The underlying cause of this self-defeating Darwinism in the college system can be traced to a long-term trend of decreased government funding. The college system operates in an environment of perpetual scarcity, and colleges serving students

in regions outside major metropolitan centers are increasingly pushed to the wall.

The bleed of resources to Toronto and the GTA, which is an ongoing provincial problem, is exacerbated by holding regional colleges to a funding structure based on concentrated population growth. Ontarians living in thinly-populated rural regions of the province will see the lion's share of their tax dollars sent to Toronto while regional resources, such as their colleges, starve for funding or disappear.

Yes, to be sure, money is tight, but some of this tightening is artificial, like a kinked garden hose. Dwindling funding for the colleges charts closely a decades-long trend of reduced taxation at upper income levels. This worldwide phenomenon is familiar to anyone who reads or watches the daily news, and McKay provides a brief summary immediately pertinent to Canada and Ontario.

Costs in the college system have increased while funding has decreased; some of the strain on current funding results from rising operating costs, but much of it derives from reduced government revenues caused by aggressively constrained taxation -- the kink in the hose.

Resource depletion in the colleges is not the unavoidable outcome of impersonal economic forces; it is the accumulated effect of specific political decisions. We got here because the interests of some individuals did not extend to maintaining a robust public sector for accessible education. Recognizing this political foundation of the crisis is our first step to reform.

Machines or People: The Online Agenda

McKay also examines the impact of new technologies in teaching. He recognizes, as we all do, that technology enhances teaching. However, he sees clearly the motive driving its unrestrained application in the colleges: a concerted effort to replace people with machines.

This process has been going on for centuries in our culture but has recently accelerated. The effect of *technological unemployment*, first named and identified by Maynard Keynes, is evident everywhere. Soon, no one will need to talk to a mail carrier, or a cashier, or a ticket taker ever again. They are being eliminated.

The same is now contemplated for teachers. If they cannot yet be eliminated, their numbers can be greatly reduced by substituting courses-in-a-box, disseminated online, designed by 'content experts', and graded by technicians if not by machines.

The dynamic and challenging experience of spontaneous face-to-face exchange in an unmediated classroom environment will be reserved for the rich. Ordinary citizens will receive training from a glowing screen in the isolation of their homes or in their workplace cubicles. Public space yields to cyberspace.

Those who prefer robust democracy and the traditions of teaching may be reluctant to celebrate this brave new world unreservedly. If online delivery remains an adjunct to teaching rather than its master, much can be gained, but if it hastens the literal

dehumanization of teaching, we will all be losers.

The unmediated human voice in free exchange, unhampered by elaborate machine procedures, is an enduring value of education. We can confirm this from Socrates to TED talks. We need to ensure that even ordinary citizens have this experience. One is not a Luddite to express concern about our headlong rush to expand technology in teaching.

The choice is not between technophobia and technophilia. The proper choice is judicious use, which means due regard for appropriate limits and protections. Let's have more technology, but not at the cost of full-time hires, and never at the cost of lay-offs.

Centralized online delivery controlled exclusively by government bureaucrats and administrators like Ontario Online is the single greatest threat to job security.

Managers and Underfunding: Rowing the Same Lifeboat

Another important take-away from McKay's report is a recognition that our academic managers and senior administration are caught in the same funding bind. Many of them would prefer to see the colleges adequately funded but are not as free as

unionized faculty members to critically examine and expose forces creating this situation.

A recent announcement by college management here at Fanshawe declared that a proposal to partner with a private college to deliver a public college credential was motivated by a need to 'increase revenue'. No one can deny the very real pressure to increase revenue created by an underfunded system.

Our college leadership elected to reject this temptation to shore up funding at the expense of our commitment to public education. We commend our management for its resolution on this issue.

Other colleges have not been as scrupulous and have compromised the meaning and purpose of public education by embarking on privatization schemes. The fiscal pressures on academic managers are real, and it behooves faculty to recognize and acknowledge this, but there are lines no manager can cross without violating the mission of public colleges, and privatization partnerships is one.

McKay has much to say about privatization, and everyone can benefit from his analysis of this dangerous trend. Any move in this direction must be, and will be, actively resisted.

What Can Be Done?

McKay concludes his report with a number of recommendations to government. Some may consider his proposals utopian. It is common now to dismiss appeals to public spirit as naïve, but such reflexive cynicism should be resisted. A great deal is at stake in the college system.

Our progressive withdrawal from public service bespeaks a pervasive crisis of which we are one small part. If we want better opportunities for our students, perhaps for our own children, we need to be custodians of the ideal of public service, of devotion to quality education that cannot be commoditized, packaged or sold as consumer goods detached from the men and women who embody these qualities and who demonstrate them as teachers, librarians and counselors.

Currently, the most effective means for individual faculty members to defend quality education is to support their union bargaining team, which has identified these issues and expressed them as demands for negotiation.

Things You Can Do

There are some concrete actions you can take in the months ahead; small actions, to be sure, but symbolically important. See below.

May 13 – Town Hall Meeting – London Hilton Hotel (See Back Page)

May 22 – Wear Blue Day – wear something blue to work to show solidarity with your union

June 2 – Support Bargaining Sunshades – put sunshades provided by Local 110 on your car dashboard

Are you concerned about:

- student debt and the rising cost of tuition
- online course delivery
- academic freedom
- the increase in part-time work
- government underfunding
- privatization

Please join us for a town hall on the future of education at Ontario's public colleges and universities.



**Tuesday
May 13, 2014**

Grand Ballroom East
London Hilton
300 King St.

6 pm to 7 pm
reception - light supper will be served

7 pm to 8:30 pm
panel presentations and moderated discussion

Speakers:

Kevin MacKay, Professor, Mohawk College
Darryl Bedford, Professor, President of Fanshawe College faculty union, OPSEU 110
Alastair Woods, Chair, Canadian Federation of Students – Ontario
Alison Hearn, President, University of Western Ontario Faculty Association

*Together, we can
make a difference.*

Join the conversation – expertsineducation.org



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