



[../index.html](#)

[▲ Home](#)

[../index.html](#) ◀

**Contents**

[\(index.html\)](#)

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### **An Historical Perspective on the Idea of Institutional Diversity and Differentiation in Ontario Higher Education <sup>1</sup>**

By Michael L. Skolnik

Institutional differentiation has frequently been an object of interest in higher education policymaking in Ontario. Occasionally this interest has motivated policy actions intended to increase differentiation, but more often government policy has aimed at limiting institutional differentiation – or it has had that effect by default. Although I will refer to a few instances of government policy actions that were explicitly intended to influence institutional differentiation, my focus today will be more on the *idea* of differentiation as revealed, or suggested, in the policy discourse on higher education.

In looking at discussions of higher education policy in Ontario over a long period of time, I am struck by two general features of those discussions. The first general feature pertains to the particular dimensions of differentiation that are the focus of interest.

#### **Dimensions of Institutional Differentiation of Interest**

The terms “institutional diversity” and “differentiation” refer to differences between or among postsecondary institutions *with respect to specific institutional characteristics*. Since those who have written about this subject have catalogued *dozens* of possible dimensions of diversity, the importance of the phrase, “with respect to specific characteristics” cannot be overemphasized. Two institutions can be very different with respect to some characteristics, but quite alike with respect to others. Thus, failure to define differentiation in specific terms can easily lead to disagreement about the extent and consequences of differentiation (Birnbaum, 1983).

While the employment of formal theories and concepts of institutional differentiation in the discussion of differences between institutions is relatively recent – largely beginning in the 1970s – perceptions of and discussion about how postsecondary institutions do and should differ are as old as postsecondary education itself. What have varied a lot over time are the specific institutional characteristics that are noted - or assumed - in discussions about institutional differences.

For example, institutional diversity in postsecondary education was not just an education issue, but a major *political* issue in Upper Canada in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. However, except in one respect, that debate about diversity doesn't have great resemblance to the current debate about diversity, because the characteristic of an institution which was of greatest interest in that period was its religious affiliation.

Subsequent to the religion-focused debate of the nineteenth century, the dimensions of differentiation that have been the focus of greatest attention have been: academic standards, mix of programs offered,

credentials awarded, and, the characteristic of greatest interest currently, the balance between teaching and research in an institution.

These institutional characteristics are important in their own right, but also for another reason: they may exert a significant influence over an institution's finances. Finance is in fact the dimension that connects the debate about religious diversity in postsecondary education in the mid-nineteenth century with debates about programmatic and functional diversity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Central to the nineteenth-century debate was concern about preferential financial treatment of one denomination's postsecondary institution. Similarly, a major concern about some proposals for differentiation in recent years is their likely impact on the distribution of government funds for postsecondary education among institutions.

### **The Tension between Differentiation and Geographic Accessibility**

The second feature of the idea of institutional differentiation to which I would like to call attention is the geographic dimension in the tension between the alleged benefits and the perceived downsides of institutional differentiation. The principal benefit of greater institutional differentiation is that, it is widely thought, an institution that concentrates on particular activities, fields, and functions, can do these things more efficiently than an institution that tries to do everything. If all postsecondary institutions were in a single location, the arguments against having greater differentiation would be much weaker.

But postsecondary institutions are not all in the same location. They are widely dispersed over the large geographic area that is Ontario. The greater the differentiation among postsecondary institutions across this large province, the harder it would be for students to find the particular field of study or type of educational experience that they seek in their own community or region. Moreover, postsecondary institutions serve not just students, but communities, in which they may be an important economic, social, cultural, and recreational resource. Greater differentiation may foster efficiency and productivity, but it may also impede geographic accessibility for students and limit the other benefits of having a university or college for some communities.

In general, the more densely populated a jurisdiction, the more it is able to reap the benefits of institutional differentiation while minimizing the adverse consequences for geographic accessibility. From earliest times, Ontario has had to deal with wide dispersal of population over an enormous area. For much of the history of postsecondary education in Ontario, the imperative of providing geographic accessibility across the province was deemed more urgent than seeking the potential efficiency and productivity benefits of greater institutional differentiation. Thus, the notion that universities in different communities should provide roughly comparable opportunities for students has long been one of the guiding principles undergirding policy for postsecondary education. This principle is associated with the idea that institutional differentiation by mission, function, standards and major program areas should be quite limited. The notion that differentiation should be limited for the sake of geographic

accessibility has been reinforced by the value placed on equality in most aspects of public policy in Ontario, and by self-serving behaviour of local politicians.

An informative case study of the tension between geographic equality and institutional differentiation is the 1985 article by Weller and Rosehart comparing the experience of northern universities in Ontario and Sweden (Weller & Rosehart, 1985). The authors described two possible models for northern universities: that of specialized professional institutions that are designed to address the regional problems of development and disparity, the educational planning for which is integrated with regional development planning, as apparently has been the model of choice in Northern Sweden; and the Ontario model of institutions that are regional access points to a common university experience. Weller and Rosehart conclude that even if the differentiated model would have produced greater benefits for the region, it didn't have a chance of being implemented: the pressures on the northern universities to be largely reflections of southern institutions were just too strong.

In spite of the privileged status of the idea of a homogeneous university system, however, from the late 1970s onward, a number of developments have stimulated challenges to that idea. Chief among these developments has been chronic shortfalls in revenue for postsecondary education, and the associated concern about the financial sustainability of the university system as it is presently configured. At the same time, there is some recognition that as a result of continued population growth, population density in much of the province is now sufficient to support greater institutional differentiation.

Before describing how these developments have been reflected in the discourse on differentiation in the university sector, I'd like to comment on what I think is a noteworthy difference between the two major sectors of postsecondary education in regard to differentiation.

### **College and University Sectors**

Without doubt, the policy intervention that did the most to increase institutional differentiation in postsecondary education in Ontario was the establishment of a system of colleges of applied arts and technology in 1965.

The establishment of the colleges brought to the fore new dimensions of differentiation between postsecondary institutions that had not previously been major focuses of differentiation in postsecondary education. These included: the qualifications for admission to a postsecondary institution; the spectrum of occupations for which the institutions provided preparation; the balance and relationship between the applied and the theoretical in the educational process; the balance between teaching and research; and the type of academic credential (i.e., degree versus diploma or certificate) awarded.

Judgments about the extent to which the *original* boundaries between the sectors have become blurred in recent years depend upon which particular dimensions of differentiation one has in mind. Whereas some

observers have reacted to the entry of colleges into baccalaureate granting as if the type of academic credential awarded were the *sole* dimension that differentiated colleges from universities, I have argued elsewhere that the other dimensions were much more fundamental and that offering baccalaureate programs is consistent with the original role of the colleges (Skolnik, 2011; 2012).

Because the community college was viewed as a *local* institution whose mission was to bring equivalent opportunities to the different communities and regions of the province, the question of balancing the benefits of institutional differentiation among colleges with the benefits of geographic accessibility was not at issue: as primarily local institutions, colleges were intended to be alike in regard to mission, functions, and opportunities provided, though some differentiation in programming was anticipated due to differences among the local economies that they served.

Consequently, colleges have figured into the idea of institutional differentiation in postsecondary education only *collectively*, as a *set* of institutions that are highly differentiated from the *other* major set of postsecondary institutions, the universities. In contrast to the university sector, where since about 1979 there has been discussion of, and the production of numerous documents pertaining to, intra-sector differentiation, relatively little attention has been given to institutional differentiation within the college sector. In fact, just about the only attempt to introduce institutional differentiation into the organization of the college sector was the designation of some colleges as Institutes of Technology and Advanced Learning (ITALs). However, this is a very limited form of institutional differentiation, as it pertains only to the limit on the number of baccalaureate programs that an institution may offer. The extent to which institutional differentiation has actually occurred in the college sector as a result of colleges individually responding to market forces exceeds the extent of mandated differentiation.

One could easily imagine how the government's approach to institutional differentiation in the college sector might have been, or might be, different. For example, in some metropolitan areas in other jurisdictions – Edmonton and Calgary come to mind – college sector institutions were designed to be highly differentiated from one another. And as colleges in Ontario continue to evolve in different directions in regard to baccalaureate programming, the government may see a need for more formal differentiation within the sector, for example pertaining to research.<sup>2</sup>

One final point about differentiation between sectors: although the college sector was established prior to the onset of serious concern about the provincial revenue that was available for postsecondary education, using institutional differentiation to make the postsecondary system more efficient was a large part of the rationale for creating colleges. While the growth in the youth population could have been accommodated simply by expanding the universities, this option was rejected because, as Fleming noted, "It was[also] clear that the province could bankrupt itself in a vain attempt to provide the most expensive of post-secondary facilities to all

comers” (Fleming, 1971, p. 492). With the establishment of the colleges, a portion of postsecondary education would be provided in what was expected to be a less expensive type of institution than a university. However, that still left open the question of whether the province could afford to provide all baccalaureate education through the most expensive type of postsecondary institution, the research university.

### **A Lightning Quick History of the Policy Discourse about Differentiation in Ontario's University Sector**

I would like now to provide a lightning quick history of the policy discourse on differentiation in Ontario's university sector. A good candidate for the starting point for this discourse is the September 1979 White Paper put out by the now defunct Ontario Council on University Affairs entitled *System on the Brink* (OCUA, 1979). In that paper, OCUA declared that, owing to shortfalls in revenue, the Ontario university system stood at the “brink of serious trouble” and faced a future of “precipitous decline and turbulence”. The following year, OCUA issued another document entitled *System Rationalization*, in which it urged the need for greater differentiation among universities particularly in regard to mix of programs offered, and the elimination of “undesirable duplication” of programs.

A year later a committee that consisted of representatives of the institutions, OCUA and the government recommended that either the government provide the substantially higher level of funding that was deemed necessary for adequate maintenance of the current structure of the university system; or that the system be restructured in such a way as to make it less costly (Committee on the Future Role, 1981). The Committee suggested that such restructuring would involve changing the mission, character, and range of activities of some of the universities. That the government opted for the second of the two alternatives offered by the Committee is indicated by the terms of reference of the commission that it subsequently appointed in January 1984. This commission was instructed to “develop an operational plan which . . . . provides for more clearly defined, different and distinctive roles for [each of] the universities” (Commission on the Future Development, 1984). In its final report, however, the Commission largely ignored its terms of reference, and in fact devoted less than two pages of its report to the subject of institutional differentiation.

Some attempts were made in the 1990s to get formally constituted bodies to produce specific plans for achieving greater institutional differentiation, but little materialized from these requests. I think that the last time a government formally requested recommendations for system restructuring was in 2004 when former Premier Bob Rae was appointed as an adviser to the Premier and Minister. The terms of reference of the Rae Review contained an explicit request for recommendations on *two* things: the design of the system and funding models (Rae, 2005). While doing a thorough job on the second of the assigned tasks, the Rae Report is one more public document that failed to deliver recommendations on system design even though it was asked to do so.

The repeated attempts by governments to get someone to produce recommendations for greater institutional differentiation within the university sector is indicative of (a) the perception that the sector as it is presently configured is financially unsustainable; and (b) the belief that there are alternative models of university system design that would be more efficient and affordable. The fact that none of the agents that have been asked to produce such a plan have actually done so may indicate (c) the difficulty of developing such recommendations and the opposition to greater differentiation. Still, some observers have recently argued that not only could some alternative models make the university system more *efficient*, but they could also make it more *effective* in both teaching and research. I am thinking here of the book *Academic Reform*, by Clark, Trick and Van Loon<sup>3</sup> (Clark, Trick & Van Loon, 2011) and subsequent work by Clark that involves comparison between the Ontario and California systems (Clark, 2012/2013). The analyses offered in the works just cited have been challenged by some opponents of greater institutional differentiation, but given the province's worsening financial situation, the debate over differentiation is unlikely to go away.

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> This is the text of a presentation that was given at the “Key Issues in Ontario Higher Education Policy Research Symposium”, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, May 16, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Earlier I addressed the notion that the awarding of baccalaureate degrees by colleges has resulted in a substantial blurring of the lines between colleges and universities. It has been suggested also that the performance of research by colleges, which apparently all colleges now do to some extent, is another example of significant blurring of the boundaries between sectors. However, there are still some important distinctions between research in the two sectors. One is the concentration of colleges on applied research. Another is that research is not a normally expected part of a college faculty member's job; whereas all university faculty are expected to divide their time approximately equally between teaching and research.

<sup>3</sup>In addition to greater inter-institutional differentiation in regard to the balance between teaching and research, these authors also advocate greater intra-institutional differentiation, i.e., that some professors be allowed to concentrate mainly on teaching and others mainly on research. They argue that such role differentiation could increase efficiency and make both teaching and research more effective.

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◀ **Contents** (index.html)

