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The Challenge of Finding Faculty Time for Applied Research Activities in Ontario Colleges.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how the role of Ontario college faculty has evolved since the advent of the Post-Secondary Education Choice and Excellence Act of 2000 and the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act of 2002 in terms of whether or not the decision to create a research culture at the colleges included making time available to the professoriate to engage in applied research activities.

Introduction

The role of Ontario college faculty has evolved considerably since the turn of the century, especially in the area of research activities.While college professors used to be hired for their content expertise, and solely to teach students, they are now often hired as much for their advanced academic degrees, and their ability to conduct what is usually referred to as applied research. From the establishment of the Ontario college system in the mid-1960s until the turn of the century, however, research as a separate and distinct activity was not part of a professor's duties, and time for research activities was neither needed nor acknowledged.

In order to gain an understanding of how evolving expectations in terms of academic standing and research abilities are affecting Ontario's college professoriate,and whether or not time for research is now being accommodated, a study of four Ontario colleges at various stages of applied research evolution explored the degree to which the institutions, since the advent of the Post-secondary Education Choice and Excellence Act (Government of Ontario, 2000) and the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act of 2002 (Government of Ontario, 2002), [The Acts], the college mandate has included making time available to the professoriate to engage in applied research activities.

Because release time for research activity is not currently addressed in the Standard Workload Formula (SWF) as governed by the Faculty Collective Agreement that applies to all 24 Ontario colleges (Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology, 2009), professors who want to engage in their own applied research activities tend do so for the most part on their own time – after work, on weekends or during sabbaticals (Catalfamo, 2010). In order to find time for applied research activities in the SWF it is possible for professors to have some course reduction – usually one or two courses in a semester, and/or a temporary reduction in other responsibilities - but these practices are largely contingent on the professors' working relationship with their departmental managers. The

practices in terms of finding the necessary time for applied research activities are by no means consistent within a single institution, much less across the group of Ontario colleges, with the result that the time for research activities appears to be applied on a somewhat haphazard basis.

Review of the Literature

The traditional function of Canadian colleges as non-degree granting institutions that provide vocational, adult, and related education in support of workforce and regional economic development (Dennison & Gallagher, 1986), has undergone a significant change since the beginning of the 21st-century.Unable to offer degrees or transfer agreements with other institutions, colleges in Ontario were, by design and intent, originally limited to being vocationally specific post-secondary institutions, separate and unique from the province's universities (Ontario Department of Education, 1967, p. 10). This would all change with the rapid growth in the provincial economy, the population, and the increase in manufacturing and the use of technology through the quarter century following the establishment of the Ontario college system (Dennison & Gallagher, 1986).As Glen Jones (2004) has pointed out, in light of the fact that one of the defining differences between universities and colleges in Ontario was the monopoly assigned to universities over degree-granting, "…the emergence of applied degree programmes [in colleges] signals an important blurring of the boundaries between the two sectors" (p. 47). This blurring extended to the nature of the research being undertaken by colleges following the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act of 2002 (Government of Ontario, 2002) that followed on the heels of the Post-secondary Education Choice and Excellence Act of 2000 (Government of Ontario, 2000), which gave the colleges the ability to grant undergraduate, vocationally focused, degrees required by the Post-secondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB) (PEQAB 2010) to include applied research (p. 11; 4.1; p. 15).

Ontario's colleges have to deal with different challenges than universities when it comes to identifying and accommodating research activities engaged in by faculty because there is no expectation or accommodation of research functions on the part of faculty in the provincially negotiated collective agreement. This means, in particular, that there is no time allocated for research built into the SWF (Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology, 2009). This lack of faculty release time presents what has been identified as perhaps the single, greatest barrier to building a research culture at Ontario's colleges (Catalfamo, 2010; Corkery, 2006; Fisher, 2009; Jurmain & Madder, 2011; Laden, 2005; Madder, 2005; Munro & Haimowitz, 2010; NSERC, 2007; Skolnik, 2002; Vaughan, 1988).

Research Design and Methodology

The study compared four Ontario colleges that have achieved a level of research capacity from novice through to a fully integrated research culture as determined by Jim Madder in 2005 (Madder, 2005).

Structured interview questions that allowed for semi-structured follow-up questions were used in order to collect information from each of 11respondents. The qualitative data were collected in two phases. Phase 1 consisted of an analysis of documents publicly available on the colleges' web sites. The analysis helped to determine where on the continuum of the Madder (2005) typology the selected colleges would fall. Phase 2 of the study consisted of interviews with 11 senior leaders who were closely connected with the planning phases leading up to The Acts. These interviews were followed by interviews with five senior leaders who were present in the college system when The Acts were introduced. Lastly, interviews were conducted with four senior leaders, one from each of the four case study colleges, who could speak to current conditions regarding time for faculty research at their institutions.

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, the term "applied research" wasused as an omnibus term embracing in the broadest sense the range of research activities engaged in by Ontario colleges. In his 2008 report *Faculty Participation in Research at Canadian Colleges: A National Survey*, Fisher (2008) quotes a number of scholars on the issue of the use of the term "applied research," saying that "applied research" is "…an umbrella term referring to a variety of research activities related to the application of knowledge, and is often associated with terms like innovation, research and development, commercialization, and technology transfer" (p. 6). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) define applied research as "[an] original investigation undertaken in order toacquire new knowledge. It is, however, directed primarily towards a specific practical aim or objective" (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. 2002, p. 30).

Findings

Finding 1: The effects of a real or perceived lack of planning by college and government leaders for the introduction of applied degrees and applied research into the province's colleges resulted in an inconsistent approach to allocating time to college faculty for applied research activities.

Finding 2: Some or all of the applied research activity conducted in Ontario colleges should be a standard component of curriculum so that faculty applied research activities include and benefit students.

Discussion

No matter where a college falls on the Madder (2005) typology, from the "novice" category to the "fully integrated," the colleges in this study are all faced with the same difficulties in terms of how to allocate release time to faculty for applied research projects. Regardless of the presence – or lack thereof - and state of development of research related policies, well-resourced research offices, and community researcher partnerships and so

on, time allocation for faculty engagement in applied research is still primarily assigned on an as-needed basis through case-by-case negotiations between the interested faculty and management.

The complicating factor in how time and money are allocated for various faculty activities can be traced in large part to the imposition of a comprehensive SWF to set faculty hours in all their responsibilities, a formula that remains essentially the same almost 28 years after its creation (Clark, Moran, Skolnik, & Trick, 2009). This formula does not include time for faculty to conduct applied research, which is still not recognized as a responsibility for college faculty in Ontario.

As colleges evolve their institutional research cultures, finding ways to pay for the release time needed by a faculty member to engage in applied research projects is an on-going struggle. These institutions usually have to try to free up financial resources through small government grants, such as the NSERC (2011) College and Community Innovation program that will pay "about $7,000 per course load reduction" (Eligible Expenses), or through funding that comes from industry and community partners who may benefit from the innovation and research projects conducted by colleges, but these funds tend to be small and do not generally offset the cost incurred by the colleges conducting the applied research. As Jurmain and Madder (2011) have pointed out, "Colleges do not receive operating grant monies to permit faculty, who teach up to 18 hours per week, to have reduced teaching loads in order to conduct research. External resources must be found for release time" (p. 20). As one interview respondent noted, with funding models for colleges built on the presumptions of university funding models as opposed to the college models, engaging in applied research endeavours with communitypartners may mean a significant and likely unrecoverable investment in the project by the institution. "Every time we get a grant… it is in fact costing us money because of the in-kind contributions that are required… so we have to make decisions organizationally [about] whether or not we can support [research activity]" (SL10).

The reality for the colleges and the college managers, however, is that while a faculty member may be provided time to conduct research by being off-loaded a course or two, time allocated for research activities is often just for a semester, when, in fact, the research process and project may take much longer. The pattern since the CAAT Act of 2002 has been that a person engaged in applied research, however it manifested itself, had a different teaching load than one who wasn't. "The short answer to how we were going to accommodate time for research was through work load release in terms of teaching hours" (SL7), an answer that may not sit well with faculty because of the lack of clarity about how the research culture was going to be introduced, and how it was going to be decided who, in any given college, was going to be allowed off-loaded time to conduct applied research.

This idea that permission to conduct research, and the time needed to conduct this research, would have to be handled on an individual basis was a common theme in the interview responses for this study. Some thought

was given to allowing faculty time to conduct applied research when the colleges were given the go-ahead to offer applied degrees and to do applied research, “but no kind of formula [was provided].… My understanding is that it's all case-by-case” (SL2).

The fact that colleges in Ontario are funded as teaching institutions, and the difficulties that creates in terms of releasing professors to do research, was identified by several respondentsas a major problem when it came to releasing faculty to take on research projects outside the classroom.

The challenges arise when teaching responsibilities run up against the growing emphasis and expectation by college leadership that applied research be done either as part of a program, or as an individual teacher activity. Yet the hands-on and applied nature of the learning experience in colleges means that the time required for faculty to be present in the classroom cannot be compromised (ACCC 2011 Feb., p. 20).

The notion that the method that has evolved is one that requires permission to conduct applied research, with time negotiated on an individual basis, is a common theme in the interview responses, as is the observation that a college that has to approach research in this fashion doesn’t have a true research culture, or the capability to take on larger, potentially more lucrative, longitudinal applied research projects. In other words, an institution that has not resolved the issue of how to allocate time for applied research in a systematic, comprehensive manner may have considerable trouble becoming a fully integrated research institution.

Generally speaking, the province-wide Collective Agreement limits college full-time faculty to 44 hours of work per week (Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology, p. 9), including a maximum of 18 hours of instruction per week for a 36 week academic year. It is, however, difficult for a college to assign a full 18 hours to any faculty member because the SWF requires time to be set aside for class preparation, grading assignments, attending meetings, and other assigned activities, plus a minimum of six hours per week for out-of-class assistance to individual students and for other administrative tasks. These other duties as assigned hours are what managers will often target as possible – and already paid for – applied research time for professors.

Because the Collective Agreement does not occur at the institutional level, but on a provincial one, a novice research and innovation college as defined by Madder (2005) is bound by the same SWF restrictions as a fully integrated research and innovation college. Although study respondents noted that in early discussions about what the required research elements of the applied degrees in Ontario colleges might be, there was thought of assigning time to research and teaching in the baccalaureate programs in terms of how that time could be recognized through the SWF, but “To my knowledge there is no standardization of that; it occurred at a college by college [which resulted in] a lot of negotiation with faculty members” (SL7).

Research in Curriculum

One study respondent suggested that if faculty want to pursue individual,curiosity-driven, research, they can do it as part of their graduate studies, or on their own time, “but we as an institution are not funded [for research projects], and we have been very clear that any of our research initiatives that we undertake must be directly related to curriculum, and must engage, at some level, students in the research endeavour” (SL9). This sentiment that applied research projects belonged in curriculum was a common one in the interviewee responses, the essence of the responses being that regardless of whether or not time and funding could be made available for faculty to engage in their own applied research projects, the whole point of having applied research projects in the college was to enhance the students’ learning experience and prepare them for the working world with an up-to-date skill set.

From the point of view of a college teacher engaged in a variety of independent research projects, the benefits of having applied research embedded in curriculum are manifold. Curriculum-based research could engage both the students and the faculty in the process, and enhance the student learning experience in both the degree and diploma programs. In addition, by engaging the students and the research topic, faculty will be encouraged to stay current in their field, which, although this will not necessarily make them better teachers (Tierney, 1988), will help them have current knowledge in their applied fields of expertise where knowledge is likely advancing at a fairly rapid pace.

There was little enthusiasm among current senior leaders in the four colleges selected for this study to have faculty engage in their own applied research endeavours unless it was on their own time or as part of professional development experiences such as earning advanced degrees or professional certification. Ultimately, most of the respondents indicated that although the constraints of the SWF is primarily what determines how faculty is given time for research, the focus of faculty work continues to be, and will continue to be, teaching and learning. If research is part of the teaching and learning experience, then it is part of the professor’s job. “That is why we have [applied research] built into the curriculum… We are not funding individual faculty research projects just because they are interested in doing that - that is not our college mandate” (SL9).

As Fisher (2009) has noted, a central purpose of having research-based projects in curriculum is to develop the kind of highly skilled people who have the necessary qualifications to contribute to the economy, but applied research without instruction in how to do applied research will not be of much use to the students in the long run, and as one respondent in this study pointed out, what a college might consider applied research might not be what an employer considers applied research: “I think you are sending the students a bad message [if] you’re telling them that something is research that is not research – how will they know it when they see it?” (SL6).

Conclusions

Until a rationale can be found for having college faculty conduct applied research projects that take them away from their teaching responsibilities for extended periods of time, and the SWF – and associated funding – is correspondingly altered to accommodate these changes, applied research activities are best accommodated in the curriculum where it will also best serve the students. If applied research activities are embedded in the curriculum, SWF time can be allocated to support those activities.

The development of a more robust, fully integrated applied research culture in the colleges will require more careful and comprehensive planning by the colleges, either by themselves or in concert with agencies of the provincial government, than has been experienced to date. Making the change from being strictly vocational institutions of higher education to more academic, applied research oriented, and in some cases degree-granting, institutions, is one that is changing the nature and purpose of the colleges, causing them to move away from their original vocational education mandate to one that is as yet not clearly defined nor entirely understood.

This “academic drift” (Jones, McCarney, & Skolnik, 2005; Neave, 1979) could be described as a force that is shifting some Ontario colleges away from the culture adherent to vocational institutions to an institutional cultural area that falls somewhere between exclusively vocationally focused institutions and the historically well-established research cultures of universities.

The corporate management structure, and the drift toward a greater emphasis on more academic course content, taught by professors with more advanced degrees than specific vocational experience, will not come without challenges. What seems more likely is that Ontario colleges will continue to evolve as academic institutions with a vocational focus to the point where, as in jurisdictions such as Norway, Ontario colleges will, in the form of university colleges, eventually offer master's and doctorates in applied fields of study – perhaps in concert with some of the smaller universities - and will conduct large-scale, regional, national and international applied research projects, while the so-called Ivy League universities will continue to concentrate on more traditional, basic research, perhaps handing off entirely the delivery of undergraduate degrees to the university colleges. It is quite possible that Ontario colleges, which are now in an important period of transition, will, in the not too distant future, become new and differentiated institutions quite similar to those in Norway with significant consequences for the broader, post-secondary education landscape of Ontario, and the provincial private sector labour markets.

What has evolved – more by accident than design - over the 13 years of the Ontario colleges' applied degree offerings, and the 11 years of the formal approval of applied research activities, is a model of research where research activities have, in a sense, been forced into curriculum to the benefit of the students. No matter where on the Madder (2005) typology a college falls – in other words, no matter how advanced a college's research

culture may be – there is still no consistent, overall policy framework in place for making time available to faculty to engage in their own individual research activities. Whether or not this will ultimately prove to be an appropriate model for sustaining applied research activities in the Ontario colleges is as yet unclear, but the model does fall within the historical mandate of the colleges in that it thoroughly involves the students in the applied research learning experience.

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