

[▲ Home](#)[◀ Contents](#)**Research and the Polytechnic***by Glen A. Jones and Bryan Gopaul*

In 1994, the Government of Norway initiated a major restructuring of the non-university sector. Almost one hundred vocationally-oriented institutions were amalgamated to create twenty-six comprehensive, autonomous colleges. Nursing education was completely reorganized. Once offered in specialized schools closely linked to hospitals, nursing became a professional program within the new degree-granting colleges. Nurse educators found themselves in a new institutional environment that valued teaching and research. A few years later a team of scholars from the University of Oslo conducted a study of these and other changes in nursing education (Karseth, 2002). Interviews with nursing instructors revealed some important changes in faculty work. Given the new emphasis on research within institutional reward structures, faculty were devoting more time to research and less time to teaching. Average teaching loads decreased. There were increasing expectations that faculty would hold research-based graduate degrees. In a general sense, faculty reported a shift from what had been collaborative working teams towards a more individualistic, academic working milieu.

The Norwegian case illustrates two key points that I believe are extremely important in any discussion of introducing a research function to institutions that had previously focused only on teaching. The first, and perhaps the most obvious, point is that in the absence of institutional policies that steer research in alternative directions, there is a natural tendency for faculty to follow the traditional patterns of scholarly activity associated with the research university. For most of the twentieth century, the dominant force in defining and determining the quality of research has been the academic disciplines. Historians pursue their research using historical methodologies. They submit their work to academic journals that specialize in history, are edited by historians, and where decisions on publication are largely based on the advice of referees who are historians working in the same field. In the case of nurse educators in Norway, they were participating in an emerging academic discipline that had been defined as nursing science. The second point is that research has implications for resources, especially faculty time, a point we will return to later.

In the case of Canada's colleges and technical institutes, the question is not whether research should or should not take place. Despite the fact that Ontario's CAATs have a mission that focuses on teaching, many college faculty have been engaged in research and scholarly activities. College faculty write books, publish research articles, text books, and book reviews, and engage in consulting activities (see Bell, 1992; Bell and Jones, 1992). We suspect the same is true in other colleges and institutes in other provinces. For the most part, these activities take place outside of prescribed teaching

loads and reward structures. They do it because they find it rewarding on a personal, intellectual, or experiential level. The question, then, is whether research and scholarship should become part of the institutional mission, and if the answer is yes, how this research and scholarship might be defined. We believe that certain types of applied research related to practice are a quite natural extension of the role of colleges. The challenge is to create the conditions for strengthening the relationships between the college and the broader communities that they serve, and to find ways of engaging faculty in opportunities that will strengthen their work in the classroom and further their professional development.

Our sense is that traditional definitions of academic research rooted in the structures and boundaries of the disciplines is not a good match for the objectives of the colleges. This traditional view of research, sometimes described as mode 1 research (Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, and Trow, 1994) is currently being challenged by research activities that tend to be problem-based, interdisciplinary, and rooted in questions of application and discovery that do not fit neatly within the boundaries of the traditional disciplines. Mode 2 research isn't simply an alternative to mode 1, it challenges traditional mechanisms for organizing, defining, and evaluating research activity.

This leaves us with two key questions: 1) How to organize this new research function and address it in the context of faculty work and reward structures; and 2) How to assess this research activity? In the case of the Norwegian colleges, all faculty were expected to engage in research and workloads were adjusted accordingly. Individual faculty made individual decisions on how to fulfill this responsibility, and success became a requirement under promotion and reward structures.

This is not the only way to organize research. A second approach is more collectivist in orientation. The responsibility for this research function might be assigned to teams, interdisciplinary networks, or clusters. The level of individual activity might vary substantively depending on interest, expertise, and the degree to which the activity matches the professional development needs of possible participants. Decisions about workload would emerge in response to the practical realities, and funding limitations, of each project. A third approach might be to assign responsibility of the research function to an entrepreneurial unit that, guided by the institutional mission, seeks out research opportunities and essentially subcontracts participation based on institutional objectives.

Regardless of the approach, it is important to remember that research involves resources. In the Norwegian case, the research mission of the new colleges led to a reduction in teaching loads. While there may be circumstances where the costs of research (including institutional overhead) are supported by an external sponsor, the research function is almost always subsidized.

The second question concerns assessment. If polytechnics have a research function that is somehow distinct from the traditional

definitions of the discipline, then the answer cannot be to leave assessment in the hands of peer-review journals, academic publishers, and expert referees. In the quest for legitimacy, there are very strong pressures to retain traditional definitions of research. An alternative answer is to link assessment back to the rationale for pursuing research in the first place. If the objective is to strengthen the relationships between the classroom and the workplace, then we need to collect evidence on how research has strengthened this relationship. If the objective is the continuing professional development of our faculty, we need to find ways of assessing this development. Scholarship, however defined, must be assessed in terms of what we are trying to accomplish. In the Norwegian case, a conscious choice was made to link their research mission with the broader research structures of the traditional disciplines. We have tried to argue that there are other alternative decisions, but in the absence of carefully defined objectives and explicit discussions of assessment, there will be a quite natural pull towards what many perceive to be the norm.

There are many reasons for polytechnics to define a research mission that is directly related to their distinctive objectives and structures. Perhaps the most basic is that many of the institutions that would have been regarded as polytechnics a few decades ago no longer exist as distinct institutional forms. The college of applied education in Australia, the polytechnics of the United Kingdom, and even our own local Ryerson Polytechnic have been merged or transformed into components of the university sector. Over time, these institutions simply became less distinctive, a phenomenon that is frequently described as academic drift. If polytechnics are to remain distinctive institutions, they should pursue a research function that reflects their distinctive mission, and that means defining, organizing, and assessing research in ways that reflect this mission.

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