

INTRODUCTION

In the last ten years public discussion and controversy have been growing around the question of quality of education in Ontario. The controversy has intensified as primary, secondary and post-secondary teachers' organizations have entered into a debate with policy makers over the direction of education. Canadians in general, and Ontarians in particular, have expressed great concern about education, focusing principally on the training and education of the Canadian workforce. This interest has been crystallized by the increasingly accepted idea that with globalization and increased competition "a nation's economic performance is increasingly determined by the quality of its human resources." (Riddle 1994:125)

Hundreds of thousands of young Ontarians are involved in training and advanced education each year. The quality of that experience impacts on the economy and prosperity of society as a whole. The recessions and turbulence of the 1980s and early 1990s, which have spawned tenacious unemployment even in times of economic recovery, have made entry into - and adaptation to - the labour market a primary concern for many Canadians. This concern has translated into political interest, and public policy has become increasingly focused on education and training. The public dialogue is far from over, and will ultimately help shape policy in many jurisdictions.

During the past 15 years there have been two major studies of the College system in Ontario, both ordered by Conservative Governments. Both the 1985 and 1996 studies pointed in similar directions, predicting the growth in demand for college training and warning that "without significant change in the way the [post secondary] sector was evolving and the way it is resourced, its quality and accessibility will be undermined" (Ministry of Education and Training 1996:2). Both reports called on academics and other researchers to continue to evaluate the system and contribute to public understanding of - and, hopefully, solutions to - the problems.

This study is a contribution to that understanding, using very similar methodologies and information as the previous studies, including documentary data from the relevant government departments, annual reports from the 25 colleges investigated and interviews. However, this study goes further than previous studies (which relied on a few interviews with people working in the classroom and administration), as the current inquiry includes an in-depth stratified random sample interview survey with 517 college professors. This report is, in part, their perceptions of the effects of the changes that have occurred over the last 5 years. This is not an anecdotal study; the stratified random sample was scientifically selected and only those responses that pass the rigors of statistical significance tests are reported in this study.

A major strength of this report is derived from survey interviewing college faculty because the people within the system are in the best position to describe what is happening in the colleges today. They have a particular understanding as participants who must cope with the evolving situation and who are able to compare, in practical terms, the old system with the new. We did not pursue student opinions because, while it is important, student experience is limited to a shorter time frame, thus providing little basis for comparison.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of this research is two-fold:

- 1) To discover the background structure and forces at work in shaping the changes in the colleges in the last 5-10 years.
- 2) To discover the consequences of these changes in terms of quality of education.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FINDINGS

The College System: Origins, Philosophy, Finances and Utilization.

Ontario has a system of 25 Colleges throughout the province with a combined full and part-time enrolment of over 200,000 students and operating costs of more than \$345 million. The Colleges employ more than 20,000 Ontarians

The system was established 1965 to accomplish two goals:

- 1) to build an educated workforce that would allow the province to diversify its economy.
- 2) to provide an education for those students whose talents, abilities or interests lay outside university programs

Since their inception, there have been competing visions of the function of the Colleges: Are they to provide employers with specifically trained workers? Are they to provide a more general educational training to students? Or can they combine both functions?

College Resources

❖ **Summary: trends in revenue**

Provincial Funding:

- 1987-1993: operating budgets increased
- 1993-1998: yearly decline in funding
- **1992-1998: operating grants decreased by over 20.9%**
- 1999: grants at levels similar to late 1980s

Despite an increase in both the proportion of funds generated from tuition – 13.7% of all revenue in 1993 to 20.7% in 1997 – as well as the actual amount of tuition-generated revenue - \$231 million in 1993 to \$309 million in 1997 – there has been an actual overall decline in revenue during the same period. The principle reason for this is the concurrent decline in transfers from the province for operating funds.

The decrease in funds, by itself, tells us only one part of a story. It is necessary to look further at the pressures on the Colleges in the form of expenditures, other revenues and enrolment.

❖ **Summary: trends in expenditure**

Colleges reduced their expenditures to stay within the shrinking envelope of funding. Operating costs declined from \$378.4 million in 1994-95 to \$342.1 million in 1996-97. **This decline in expenditures was achieved through savings in the compensation (wages and salaries) paid to academic and support staff.** Compensation packages in a unionized environment can decrease through layoffs/non-replacement of retirees or through concessions. In the case of the colleges it was **reductions in the numbers of teachers and support staff.**

The faculty and support resources, essential to program delivery, were declining. The effect of this decline on the quality of education is linked to the demand for these resources, which can be measured by a review of enrolment figures.

❖ **Summary: trends in enrolment**

Excluding 1994-95, **college enrolment has increased each year** over the 5 years studied. Full-time enrolment is up in all years including 1994-95. **Between 1991-92 and 1995-96 enrolment increased by over 9% or more than 18,000 full and part-time students.** There was some difficulty gathering the actual numbers of students for the 1996-1998 period but the Ministry indicates that upward trends continued.

We conclude that there has been an increase in pressure on the colleges in the form of increasing numbers of students and decreasing resources particularly in the form of operating funds from the province.

THE STUDY

Funding the Study

The Centre for Research on Work and Society (CRWS), York University, carried out the study under the direction of Dr. Jerry White (Department of Sociology, University of Western Ontario), a member of the CRWS Governing Council. It was funded through an innovative granting scheme.

Resources in kind and support funding allocated by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada were awarded by CRWS. An arms-length research grant was awarded by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU). The University of Western Ontario provided administrative support and resources in kind. The contents of this report, the interpretation and presentation are the sole responsibility of its principal author.

Methodology

A complete listing of professors, counsellors and librarians in all the colleges was stratified by college. From this complete list a random sample of 700 potential interviewees was selected by the researcher. The response rate was 86% and 517 full interviews were completed. Two cases were removed because the interviewee had worked for less than five years in the college system. All analysis is based on the 515 valid cases kept in the data set.

The interviews were conducted by telephone between March 3rd and April 24th 1999. Interviews were conducted in either French or English, as requested by each respondent. All methodological information is in the full report.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SURVEY

Class Size

Most faculty reported larger class sizes.

- 78% of respondents reported an **increase in class size over the past five years**
- 17% reported no change
- 3% reported a decrease
- Of those who reported an increase, nearly half stated that class size had increased by over 20%.

This was paralleled by an increase in the total numbers of students being taught by professors and, consequently, classrooms which are too crowded.

- More than **2/3 of the faculty said they had more students to teach**
- 90% of these reported an increase of more than 10%
- **46% saw increases over 20% in their student load**
- 60% of faculty report that there are sometimes too few chairs for students
- 11% often experience overcrowding in the classroom with too few spaces for students

Respondents were asked if changes in class size over the past five years has affected the quality of education.

- Almost **86% of those surveyed responded that the changes in class size have negatively affected the quality of education.**

Contact Time Between Professors and Students

An important part of a college professor's job involves contact with students outside the classroom, whether giving academic or career advice or tutoring. Respondents were asked whether they had experienced any changes in the opportunity for and amount of contact they had with students outside the classroom.

- **56.5% of the faculty reported a decrease in contact time with students outside the classroom**
- 34% saw little change
- 9% saw improvement.

Changes in the Programs and Changes in How They are Taught

A review of the literature on college courses and curricula indicated that colleges had been taking steps toward reducing the number of weeks allotted to teaching many courses. This study confirmed the findings, in that 75% of professors responded that this was their experience. Of those who experienced a decline in the number of weeks per course:

- **71% reported a decline in quality of the curriculum covered due to the reduced number of weeks per course**
- 26 % reported no effect on the quality
- 3% felt it had improved.

Self-taught Classes and Learning

College teachers reported a shift in emphasis toward “self learning” or what is referred to as self-taught classes, where students work independently. Educators were asked about the effect of this shift on the quality of their particular program.

- 89% of professors reported that their programs were affected by the introduction of self-taught classes

Of those whose programs were affected:

- **61.6% stated that the move toward self-directed learning has hurt the quality of their programs.**

Availability of Audio-visual Aids

- **53.3% of respondents reported difficulty getting audio-visual equipment some or all the time**
- 42 % find audio-visual resources available when needed.

Exams and Evaluations

The study examined whether larger classes and increased student loads caused faculty to change their methods of evaluations. **Nearly half of the faculty said they use fewer essays and assignments because there is simply no time to grade the work.**

Of those who said they have not changed their approach to exams and evaluations, many were in disciplines (e.g. technology, media arts) that have traditionally evaluated without essays.

Quality of Student Work

Professors were asked about the quality of student work. Nearly 65% of college teachers have seen a serious decline in the quality of academic work produced by college students.

THE COLLEGE AS A WORKPLACE FOR TEACHERS

Workload

Noting that an average work week might include preparation time, student evaluation, teaching, administrative duties and professional development, respondents were asked if their workload for an average work week had changed over the past five years. **Eighty-eight percent of respondents – across all disciplines - reported an increase in the workload of an average work week.**

Faculty Level of Stress

The study examined whether the changes in the colleges during the past five years had affected faculty stress levels.

- **more than 78% of faculty noted that their level of stress had increased**
- 2.5% responded that their level of stress had decreased
- almost 19% reported no change.

This increase in stress levels was uniform across each area of the colleges.

Faculty Job Satisfaction

Almost 64% of faculty surveyed reported a decrease in job satisfaction. Some disciplines (i.e. Health Sciences and Social Sciences/Humanities) reported a greater decrease in job satisfaction than others (i.e. Media Arts).

Morale at College

Respondents were asked about the effect of the recent changes on morale. **More than 86% of faculty reported a decline in the morale at their college.** When reviewed separately, each area or teaching discipline reported an overall decline in morale.

Fewer Full-time Faculty

The study noted a practice of employing fewer full-time contractually protected professors and more substitutes, i.e. instructors or technicians. **Almost 81% of those surveyed reported that this practice had negatively affected the quality of education offered at their college.** This trend was also uniform across all teaching disciplines.

CONCLUSIONS ON QUALITY

The measurement of quality in education is a complex issue. It is easier to spot trends and directions than to assign a precise “grade” to the quality of any program. However, there are some tools available for undertaking this assessment: we can gather and analyse the observations of those who deliver the programs; and we can examine previous evaluations of the system and apply them to assist us with our current view.

The College study of 1985, commissioned by Premier William Davis, conducted interviews with faculty and staff and concluded that quality could be assessed by looking at the following benchmarks:

- enrolment and resources as they impacted on classroom size and crowding;
- media and extra resources available to classrooms ;
- the potential for dialogue and interaction between teacher and student in class and during office consultation;
- the types of assignments and examinations used to evaluate students (including whether faculty were pressured to use multiple choice rather than essay tests).

The 1996 study, undertaken by Premier Mike Harris’s government, relied more on public and private interviews with stakeholders and public submissions than on the experiences of those who work in the classroom. The task force on college education concluded that the trajectory of development and the subsequent issues of access and quality would depend on how resources are allocated to the sector.

The current study used a hybrid approach examining the trends in enrolment, expenditures and revenue and conducting a survey with a reliable representative sample of those delivering the education. **We have concluded that quality has been declining in the 1990’s and will continue to do so unless the sector is refinanced.**

The study observed that the province has reduced transfers to colleges at the same time that enrolment has increased, forcing the system to teach more students with less money. To this end, the data indicate that there are fewer college employees – including teachers - receiving a lower gross compensation package. This trend has translated into larger class size and fewer services available to students, although students are not seeing any concomitant reductions in fees. In fact, students are paying more for their education, as is demonstrated by the increasing proportion of operating funds covered by tuition fees, as well as an increased proportion derived from ancillary fees. This is reflected in a consistently high number of students receiving assistance (OSAP).

Quality of Education from the Perspective of the Faculty

Respondents were asked to make an evaluation of the overall quality of education in the colleges.

- ❖ **68.4% of those surveyed responded that the overall quality of education has declined in the colleges in the last five years.**

CONCLUSIONS

The data from both documentary and interview-survey evidence reveals that there has been a **decline in the quality of education** over the past 5-10 years in the colleges of Ontario. This has also resulted in a **deterioration of morale** among the faculty and a deterioration of the Colleges as a workplace for teachers. **Stress levels are increasing** for those working in the Colleges. Improvement will require an investment in operating funds that facilitates retaining more professors and related faculty in library and counseling services. All indications are that support staff have also suffered reductions in numbers and morale increased stress levels.