

**Inaugural Lecture**

**Professor Michael L. Skolnik**

**The William G. Davis Chair in  
Community College Leadership**

**"In Praise of Polarities in Postsecondary Education"**

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## **In Praise of Polarities in Postsecondary Education\***

Among the things which I have found most fascinating - and often frustrating too - in the study of postsecondary education are the frequent instances where major goals or functions seem to be, or are alleged to be, in conflict with one another.

An example is the purported conflict between teaching and research. The notion that these two functions of the university are inherently in conflict goes back at least a century and a half to John Henry Newman who argued that teaching and research require different temperaments and conditions and are best done in different settings. Newman's view has not prevailed, and in fact, a central tenet of the contemporary university is that teaching and research *are* complementary. Still, there are many who feel that there *is* a conflict, if only for scarce resources and attention. They suggest that the university sector could accommodate more students and do a better job of educating them if only some universities would cut back on research and become predominantly teaching institutions.

This example illustrates one of the problems in dealing with purported conflicts among goals or functions in postsecondary education. It is not easy to tell just how pervasive or fundamental the conflict really is, or whether it is largely concocted to serve the policy agenda of some interest group. A case in point is the alleged conflict between quality and accessibility. The idea that these goals are fundamentally in conflict rests upon a particular way of conceptualizing quality as a scarce commodity for which students compete. If instead, quality were defined in terms of the gain in learning by each student, then, rather than being in conflict, quality and accessibility would be independent of each other or complementary.

What I would like to do in this lecture is to discuss three cases of conflict between goals or functions in postsecondary education that I believe are particularly pertinent today. Rather than using the term conflict, I prefer, as a generic term to cover these cases, the word polarity. I will use the term polarity here in a qualitative way to indicate the presence of two opposite or contrasting principles or tendencies, not in a way that could actually lend itself to measurement, like hot and cold.

### **Polarity #1: Materialism - Humanism**

The first polarity that I would like to discuss could be labeled with a variety of terms. I think that materialism vs. humanism would best capture what I have in mind, though economic vs. non-economic might also work.

The purposes of postsecondary education range from among the most lofty and noble things to which humans can aspire to the more mundane and expedient. On the one hand we look to education to develop morality,

character, taste, and citizenship and to help individuals comprehend themselves in relation to the society and the cosmos which they inhabit; on the other hand, we want universities and colleges to train people for jobs and make local industry internationally competitive. Formal statements of institutional mission typically emphasize the loftier aims. For example, the York University Act states that the "objects and purposes" of the University include "the intellectual, spiritual, social, moral, and physical development of its members and the betterment of society".

There is no explicit mention of the more instrumental economic objectives of education in such a statement of objectives, but they can be assumed to be present just the same - as they always have been. As historian of higher education, Harold Perkin, noted, what stimulated the growth of the earliest universities was the increasing demand "for trained elites to serve the bureaucracies of church and state and the emerging professions of clergy, law, and medicine." The research function developed several centuries later and was strongly encouraged - in some cases forced upon universities - by governments eager to reap the economic benefits of it.

The great expansion of postsecondary education in North America in the 1960s was justified by a plethora of research studies that purported to demonstrate the extraordinary contribution to economic growth which investment in education would make. York University may have a quite lofty statement of objectives, but Del McCormack Smyth, an early Dean of Atkinson College at York University, reported that among those who were instrumental in the process that led to the establishment of that university was a group from the Canadian aircraft industry who wished to improve professional and technical capabilities for the aircraft industry in Canada. Indicative of the way that the two poles were brought together, however, is the fact that another of the groups most prominent in the founding of York University was from the North Toronto YMCA - which perhaps accounts for the language in the Act.

By the way, I have cited the York University Act here because it has the most detailed - and interesting - statement of objectives of any Ontario university, but the Acts of most Ontario universities are similar in tone to York's. Curiously, the most recent version of the University of Toronto Act does not contain a statement of objectives. Our university does have a wonderful statement of institutional purpose approved by the Governing Council in 1992 to which I will refer later.

A distinction which is associated with the polarity that I am discussing here - and which has been the object of some attention in Ontario recently - is that between the natural sciences on the one hand and the humanities and social sciences on the other. While there is validity to Sheldon Rothblatt's claim that there is no subject which cannot be taught illiberally, and no subject which cannot be taught liberally, the humanities help us to grapple with fundamental questions of meaning and purpose and values in a way

that for most people - Einstein being an exception - the natural sciences do not. Ideally, an educated person should acquire an understanding of both the natural sciences and the humanities and social sciences. This aim is not advanced by lavishing funds on the former while starving the latter.

In considering how postsecondary education navigates between developing people and developing workers, between advancing knowledge and advancing industry, it is important to remember that these challenges are not new. Throughout history, the pendulum of emphasis has swung back and forth between poles. Sometimes when the movement seemed to be too far in one direction, the pendulum was nudged back toward the other. When some university leaders in Canada proposed the suspension of teaching of liberal subjects during World War II, it was apparently the Government which said effectively, no thanks, we need to remember what we're fighting for. Today the fear is that some governments would be only too eager to get a similar proposal from the universities!

As the economic motives and orientation of postsecondary education are very strong and always have been, there is rarely a need for special measures to strengthen them. In a materialistic, acquisitive society like ours, most of us are conditioned from an early age to look upon postsecondary education primarily as a commodity for personal and societal wealth creation. So habituated are we to the economic goals of postsecondary education, that it is getting harder to even find the words to describe the non-economic goals of education. Phrases like the passage from the York University Act that I cited - or kindred phrases, like the search for truth - used to come tripping off the tongue of postsecondary educators. Now such language seems quaintly fitting for an earlier, less cynical, era, and even embarrassing.

I am reminded of the scene in George Orwell's novel, *Coming up for Air*, when the protagonist, a middle-aged insurance salesman, worn down by his financial problems and depressed about growing clouds of war in the late 1930s, is driving to Pudley to try to close a sale. It's the first day of Spring, and along the roadside he sees a spot that "was smothered in primroses". On instinct he stops, wades into the field, and picks a handful. Momentarily he is startled from his reverie by the sound of an approaching automobile. Just before the car gets in sight of him, he forms a picture of how he must look: "a fat man of forty-five, in a grey herring-bone suit a bit the worse for wear and a bowler hat", holding a bouquet of primroses. Instantly, he chuckles the primroses and pretends to be doing up the fly-buttons of his pants. *That, the passers-by will understand!*

The fact that as a society we are so much more comfortable with the economic aspects of postsecondary education than its other dimensions suggests to me that it's overkill to use funding incentives to provide even more support for this objective. So long as the primary motive of postsecondary students is to prepare for a career, and our increasingly market-driven, consumer oriented postsecondary institutions are out to

satisfy their customers, then funding universities on the basis of the employment rates of their graduates is tipping the balance between poles too far in the materialistic direction. Or how about at least countering this performance indicator with other indicators which reflect the university's performance in regard to social, moral, and spiritual development?

Mention of performance indicators is a convenient segue to the community college sector, in view of all the attention which the implementation of key performance indicators (KPIs) in the colleges has attracted. If the view held in some quarters that the colleges exist only to provide training for specific jobs were correct, then the materialism-humanism polarity would not be applicable to them.

However, there is some support in the Basic Documents for the CAATs for an additional perspective, that they were intended to be more than training factories, and in fact, they have played a significant personal, social, and cultural development role too.

The kind of passion for the colleges' mission which gripped faculty and administrators so strongly in the early years of the system, though perhaps less so today, generally does not occur unless people perceive that there is a strong idealistic element in an organization's mission and identify with that idealism. From the beginning, that idealism was associated with, among other things, providing opportunities for people who had been bypassed or ignored by other parts of the educational system to turn their lives around.

To be sure, the colleges play a vital role in preparing people for careers, and it is important to maintain a strong capability for continuing to do so. However, like universities, colleges can serve other goals while still helping to create the skilled and knowledgeable workforce that is needed by Ontario and Canadian industry. Colleges after all are not only developing workers, but also citizens, parents, neighbors, community volunteers, and so on. It is thus unfortunate that the recently developed performance indicators for the college system were so heavily weighted toward one end of the materialism-humanism continuum. For example, there does not appear to be an indicator which really reflects accessibility or equity .

In both postsecondary sectors the tension between the materialistic and humanistic poles is ever present and inevitable, in the same way that each of us must manage the analogous poles in our own lives all the time. Orwell's character in *Coming Up for Air* finally came to realize that his life was impoverished because he hadn't spent any time picking primroses. But at the same time, he observed that this didn't mean that he now felt that everyone should spend all their time picking primroses. Why, he wondered, do so many people think that things have to be one way or the other?

## Polarity #2: Service - Criticism

Whatever displeasure with the materialistic side of postsecondary education many people in an audience like this one likely feel, you have to say one thing for it. It certainly does a lot to put students in classrooms and bring money to the campus. And that creates a choice situation for us as educators. We can simply give students what they seem to want, which for many is skills and credentials; and give society what it seems to want, which often looks like more efficient ways of doing the same things. Alternatively, in both our teaching and our research, we can challenge conventional beliefs and practices and try to get our students to do so also. I would describe the first type of response, that of giving people what they want, as service; and the second, giving people "more" than they want, as criticism.

Although I have presented service and criticism as poles, there is often a blurring between these two conceptual categories. In 1970, colleagues John Holland, Saeed Quazi, and Farid Siddiqui, and I were asked by the Ontario Government to examine the possibility of basing decisions about enrolment levels in various university programs on forecasts of occupational requirements. In our study entitled, *Manpower Forecasting and Educational Policy*, we concluded that this was neither technically feasible nor socially desirable, and the Government accepted our advice. I consider that this study provided both service *and* criticism. I don't know if a comparable study preceded the recent decision to relate university funding to graduate employment rates.

Both the critical and service stances grow out of scholarly study, and both can in turn, provide experiences which contribute to the advancement of scholarship. Service or criticism which is not connected to scholarship is incidental to the university.

Both stances can be the source of benefit - and harm - to society. Universities have great resources for helping organizations in nearly every sector of society to improve upon what they are doing. However, if the university places these resources at the beck and call of an external agent without question, the result of that help might simply be to help that agent move more quickly and efficiently to The Big Mistake. That is what a teacher of mine called being precisely correct and generally wrong. If almost everybody thinks the same, there may be great value in getting an opinion from the minority who think differently. On the other hand, there is no guarantee that a critical perspective will be insightful, correct, or helpful.

There is an asymmetry in the rewards and incentives for these two poles. The extrinsic rewards for operating in a service mode can be considerable: generous research funding; access to research sites, sponsorship, subjects, and data; large consultation fees and - these days - stock options. Generally these perquisites are not so forthcoming to critics, though in most fields there is a niche with hefty book royalties and speaking fees for the few most eloquent and passionate critics in the field.

As to other motivators, most people probably find it more comfortable to be compliant than confrontational, and this helps to ensure that there is more service than criticism. Further, those who operate in a service mode are likely to experience the satisfaction of seeing the impact of their work, whereas an occupational hazard for the critic is that his or her critical work might, as Michael Walzer pointed out in a wonderful book about social criticism, be read only by other critics. This is especially likely if critics speak in a way that makes it impossible for those whom they want to influence to even hear their message. Historically, one of the biggest disincentives of all to criticism is that at various times and places critics have experienced insecurity of employment - or worse.

Because this critical function is deemed to be both important and vulnerable, the academic community has attempted to provide protection for it. One of the best statements of institutional commitment to this function is found in the University of Toronto Statement of Institutional Purpose which refers to "the right to raise deeply disturbing questions and provocative challenges to the cherished beliefs of society at large and of the university itself". I can tell you that those of us whose field of study is the university itself are comforted to see the last part of that passage.

As with the other polarities which I am addressing, each of the pair is vital. Much of the service work of the university contributes to the betterment of society, and as well, it makes society more tolerant of seeing some of its tax dollars used for critical study. In turn, the critical work can help to bring about valuable new ways of rethinking social and technological issues - and avoiding related disasters. Further, criticism is not restricted to research. In both universities and community colleges, critical analysis which helps students to question why things are as they are, and enables them to understand the power relations which they will encounter in their everyday lives, is an essential part of a liberal or general education and can have a liberating influence on them.

Pursuing either of these stances to the exclusion of the other is much easier than trying to do both of them. However, the challenge facing postsecondary institutions, especially professional schools like ours, is how to *combine* these apparently contradictory stances. That is not only the more socially responsible course, but it is the one which will have a more significant impact on the world of practice - and it makes life interesting!

I will turn now to a case where those who study community colleges have to grapple with the conflict between taking a service and a criticism stance in deciding how to relate to an emerging polarity, that between teaching and learning.

### **Polarity #3: Teaching - Learning**

To the person who is uninitiated into the recent dialogue about learning-centered education, the idea of juxtaposing teaching against learning will no doubt seem bizarre. Currently though, perhaps the most talked about change in community college practice is the transformation which many colleges in North America are attempting, to become learning colleges. Some advocates of this transformation describe it as replacing the teaching paradigm with the learning paradigm as the foundation of the community college. This transformation is also referred to as the learning revolution, and it is an issue for all of postsecondary education, though I will concentrate on the community college.

What is a learning college? In the words of Terry O'Banion, who is the leading scholar on the subject, "The learning college places learning first and provides educational experiences for learners anyway, anyplace, anytime". The learning college represents a major change in the way that colleges conduct their affairs in at least two important respects.

First, every single aspect of the college is looked at to ensure that it really does place learning first, anyway, anyplace, anytime. This includes the way the college is administered, the registrarial processes, the scheduling and location of courses, and the way that achievement is defined and evaluated. When we place the whole enchilada under such a microscope, we usually find that a great deal of the structure and practices of most colleges - and universities more so - are not designed in such a way as to enhance, let alone maximize, learning. They are in fact designed for the convenience of those who run them and work in them, or simply because that's the way that things have always been done. Look critically sometime at the practices in a postsecondary institution with which you are familiar and ask yourself if these practices suggest that the institution places learning first. You will probably find that there are other ways of doing many things that would contribute more to learning.

The second way in which the learning college constitutes a major challenge to conventional practice is with regard to the types of educational experiences that it provides. In most postsecondary institutions, the vast bulk of intentional educational experiences are lectures by a teacher to a defined group of students who meet at rigidly scheduled times, the so-called "sage on a stage" approach to learning. A central tenet of the learning college is that this particular activity, which is the image that the word, teaching, usually evokes in colleges and universities, is but one of many possible ways of arranging learning experiences, and it is not always, or perhaps even in the majority of situations, the most effective way of promoting learning. Other options include self directed learning, independent study under the guidance of a mentor, collaborative learning in a community of learners, peer coaching, technologically sophisticated interactive expert systems, computer based learning, and multi-media systems, to name just a few.

In the learning college, options are selected for particular situations on the basis of an understanding of which option would best engender learning for particular learners relative to particular learning goals. And the learners are regarded as full partners in the learning process and accordingly participate in the choice of options. Also, ideally there should be some theoretical justification for the approach taken. Most of the options that I just listed are more consistent with the constructivist learning theories which are so prominent in Education today than is the traditional teaching paradigm employed by colleges and universities - though, ironically, in my experience some of the strongest opponents of the learning revolution are also strong adherents of constructivism. Possibly the explanation for this paradox is that both constructivism and opposition to the learning revolution involve taking egocentric positions.

Proponents of the learning paradigm claim that it represents a fundamental rethinking of the purpose of the community college and the role of the postsecondary teacher. As such, in the context of the second polarity that I discussed, working on the learning revolution would be a major critical project. On the other hand, I have to report that, as with just about every purported change in postsecondary education in my lifetime, there are critics who say that there is nothing essentially new in this so-called revolution.

From my brief description of the learning college and how it juxtaposes teaching and learning, you might guess that the politics of transformation of postsecondary institutions into learning colleges would be interesting. It might be expected that many college teachers might not look favourably toward the change in their role which is inherent in this movement. In fact, in colleges which have attempted to initiate these changes there has been some opposition to them among faculty, but more often faculty have wanted to be part of the learning revolution because of the promise that it holds for their students.

The learning college concept has its roots in two quite different spheres, and reaction to it depends somewhat upon which of these spheres is emphasized in its presentation. Some advocates of the learning college present it as a way of responding to economic pressure by lowering costs through the introduction of information technology and shifting more of the responsibility for learning onto students themselves. Trying to elicit faculty support on this basis is not likely to be a very enjoyable experience for boards and administration.

The other roots - which I think is where the learning revolution is more soundly anchored both factually and conceptually - are in the Humanistic Education Movement of the 1960s which involved an attempt to treat each learner as a unique individual and help them to create learning experiences which would enable them to develop their human potential. The Humanistic Education Movement had difficulty taking root in institutional settings because the conditions that it requires are so alien to bureaucracy. The

Nontraditional Education Movement of the 1970s was an attempt to create new institutions which would be hospitable to a humanistic orientation, but as it was confined primarily to a smattering of new institutions this movement did not have a very broad impact. I see the learning college as a lineal descendent of humanistic and nontraditional education, and therefore I look upon it more favourably than those who see it in a bureaucratic efficiency paradigm.

As an example of this point, consider the following quotation from a team at Sinclair Community College in Ohio, one of the colleges which has made the strongest commitment to becoming a learning college: "Sinclair Community College will need to call on the creativity and ingenuity of its faculty to develop new learning formats for students that will remove barriers to access so that everyone will have the opportunity to discover the satisfaction and rewards of learning."

You may recognize the correspondence between the two spheres of roots of the learning college, bureaucratic efficiency and humanistic education, and the two poles in my first example: materialistic and humanistic orientations of postsecondary education. In the same way that the materialistic goals of postsecondary education provide the main stimulus for government and public financial support of universities and colleges, efficiency motives may help to attract necessary financial support for the learning revolution, without which the extensive changes necessary to transform colleges might not be possible.

Although universities and colleges in Canada serve materialistic goals of society, they have, at least until now, generally been able to do so in a way that allowed them also to pursue more humanistic goals too. In like manner, even if much of the financial support for the learning revolution is rooted in the desire for greater efficiency, colleges may have the discretion to implement these reforms in such a way as to finally realize the vision of Humanistic Education of the 1960s.

Of course this centuries old compromise between town and gown, which has been described as Faustian, could be upset if governments use their power to force universities and colleges to concentrate on the materialistic pole, or if institutions themselves allow the glitter of the potential return from commercially lucrative service activities to blind them to their important critical role. Failing these dreary possibilities, postsecondary education can continue the messy and imperfect business of trying to manage its polarities in such a way as to draw strength from the diversity of its goals. We need both the materialistic and humanistic goals; both the service and criticism functions; and both the teaching and learning orientations. And quite possibly, the difficult process of managing these opposites has a beneficial transformative effect on our institutions and on ourselves. It is for that reason that I conclude this reflection with some praise for polarities in postsecondary education!

### Endnote

\*In preparing this lecture, I benefited from comments on an earlier draft by Marsha Skolnik, Glen Jones, Renate Krakauer, and Richard Townsend, none of whom bear any responsibility for the final product. The remark by Harold Perkin is from his chapter on the History of Universities in Philip G. Altbach, (ed.), *International Higher Education: An Encyclopedia*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1991, Vol. 1, p. 171. The quotations from *Coming up for Air* are from the Secker & Warburg/Octopus edition of a collection of six Orwell novels, 1976, p. 526 and p. 529. The quotations pertaining to the learning college are from Terry O'Banion, *A Learning College for the 21st Century*. Phoenix: American Council on Education and The Oryx Press, 1997, p. 47; and from the chapter in that book by David H. Ponitz and others from Sinclair Community College, p. 126.

Michael Skolnik  
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