

College Quarterly - Articles - College-University Transfer Programs in Ontario: A History and a Case Study

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College-University Transfer Programs in Ontario: A History and a Case Study

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Introduction

In Ontario, the topic of increasing transferability between colleges and universities has recently attracted the attention of numerous individuals in the fields of higher education, politics and the local media – many of whom have suggested that increasing the availability of college to university transfer programs, also known as articulation agreements, would facilitate pathways to higher education for a greater number of students from diverse backgrounds. However, there are many issues surrounding the transfer of students from colleges to universities in Ontario, most of which are connected to the historical structure of the system of postsecondary education in the province. Any progress towards a system of greater transferability between community Ontario and universities would require a careful analysis of the success of existing college to university transfer programs as well as a radical reconsideration of the provincial system of postsecondary education as a whole.

In this paper, I argue that facilitating pathways between colleges and universities in Ontario will create a more socially equitable system of postsecondary education in our province for students who, for various reasons, do not have direct access to undergraduate university admission following high school. Such pathways will also facilitate student mobility between college and university programs for students who wish to gain a more diverse postsecondary education which will meet their specific career goals and interests. I will frame my argument by examining the historical background of the structure of the Ontario postsecondary system, as well as reviewing the existing literature and research. I will also provide a case-study of the recently created transfer agreement between Seneca College and Woodsworth College at the University of Toronto, Faculty of Arts and Science, which has experienced much success. I believe that identifying the aspects of the Seneca-Woodsworth transfer program which have led to its success will strengthen the argument in favour of greater transferability between colleges and universities in this province, as well as provide guidelines for the creation of such programs in other postsecondary institutions.

Historical Background

When the Ontario college system was originally established during the 1960s, a system emerged that was quite unlike the system of community colleges in the US or other Canadian provinces. As Michael Skolnik explains:

When provincial systems of community colleges were being established in Canada in the 1960s, the single overriding issue in their design was whether to combine technical and general education in the same institution or to establish colleges that concentrated on technical education (Campbell, 1971). As with most American states, British Columbia, Alberta, and Quebec opted for the combined model, while Ontario and a small number of states chose the technical-education model. Ontario developed the largest system of technical colleges in North America that did not have any linkage with the university sector. (Skolnik, 2010, p. 2)

To clarify, the American model which Ontario rejected was that of the “junior college”. The American concept of the “junior college”, as it was understood during the 1960s, is defined by Skolnik as follows:

The junior college that first appeared in the United States in the early 20th century began as an institution whose function was to provide the first two years of university arts and sciences courses for students who were expected to subsequently transfer to a university to complete a bachelor’s degree. After World War II, these two-

year institutions increasingly took on additional functions, particularly vocational education that was intended to prepare students for entry into the workforce rather than further post-secondary education. As these institutions took on additional functions, it became more common in the United States to refer to them as community colleges rather than junior colleges. (Skolnik, 2010, p. 4)

It is important to note that, during the 1960s, grade 13 (later known as the Ontario Academic Credit or OAC) was still part of the high school curriculum in Ontario. This fifth year of high school was taken by Ontario students wishing to pursue university studies. Grade 13 was regarded by the Ontario government of the 1960s as performing a function similar to that of the junior college in the States; therefore, it was not deemed necessary to grant the newly created technical colleges in Ontario the authority to provide baccalaureate education.

Since the elimination of the OAC from the high school curriculum in 2003, this argument no longer seems valid. In fact, the elimination of grade 13 provides all the more reason to allow colleges to teach sub-baccalaureate degree courses which could be transferred to a baccalaureate degree. To clarify, “*Sub-baccalaureates* are students taking for-credit courses and are either in a two-year or less institution or are pursuing an associate degree, certificate, or no degree”; “*Baccalaureate students* are those taking for-credit courses toward a bachelor’s degree at a four-year institution”(Bailey, 2003, p. viii). Giving Ontario colleges the ability to offer transferable sub-baccalaureate courses would facilitate the transfer between colleges and universities by creating greater equivalence between courses taught at these two types of postsecondary institutions. For a number of reasons, one of which being the inability to pay high university tuition fees, not all Ontarians have an equal opportunity to enter university directly from high school, so many opt for college enrollment; however, during the course of their college studies, such individuals may keep university enrolment in mind as a possible option for the future. Unfortunately, the postsecondary system of colleges and universities which was established during the 1960s does not make transfer between the two systems easy; therefore, with the elimination of the OAC, it now makes more sense than ever before to provide alternative pathways to higher education.

Ontario’s choice to separate the colleges from the university sector was a decision which was vigorously discussed during the establishment of this system of postsecondary education. During the 1960s, the proponents of separating the system of colleges from the universities argued that “Ontario industry needed workers with different skills than those produced by a university education” (Skolnik, 2010, pp. 3-4). The other arguments identified by Skolnik are less palatable when viewed from the perspective of many modern educational theorists and advocates of social equity:

The second argument against using the universities to meet the bulk of what was perceived to be a growing need for post-secondary education was rooted in the belief that many individuals did not possess the capacity for a university education and were more suited for some form of technical or applied education. When combined with the third argument – that expanding the university sector was becoming increasingly costly – the belief that a university education was suitable for only a limited portion of the population provided a powerful rationale for developing an alternative form of post-secondary education in Ontario. (Skolnik, 2010, p. 4)

The 1960s argument which suggested that the population could be separated into two groups of people with distinct abilities and needs is clearly in conflict with the desire and need for greater transferability of educational skills which exists in society today. At this point it is important to clarify that, throughout the discussions about college-university transferability which are taking place in our modern world, no one is denying the value of vocational education and apprenticeships – these are important streams which should continue to be offered by the colleges; however, what *is* being argued is that there should be more options available to college students. Not all individuals who attend college wish to pursue a vocational stream; therefore, such students should have access to baccalaureate courses that would enable them to keep their options open.

It is interesting to note that, during the period of educational expansion which was taking place during the 1960s, the governments of British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec chose quite a different path in the creation of their college systems. Rather than create a division between the college and university sectors, these provinces were more influenced by the American model. As Stanyon points out:

From the very beginning, college-university relations in British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec were significantly

impacted by government legislation that ensured these two postsecondary sectors would have to work together. Dating back to their establishment in the 1960's, each of these college systems has had university transfer as part of their mandate. (Stanyon, 2003, Introduction)

To this day, the populations of these provinces enjoy a system of greater access and mobility. Unfortunately, the system of postsecondary education which was established in Ontario during the 1960s has remained largely unchanged, despite the many social changes which have occurred in the province, the country and the world. Fortunately, unlike the 1960s, our current educational climate is more intent on promoting accessibility and student mobility; however, any efforts in these areas are often hampered by the structure of the postsecondary system which is in place. It is unreasonable that the system of postsecondary education which was conceived in the mindset of the 1960s still functions in Ontario today. As concluded by Skolnik: "the original decision about transfer has had adverse consequences for student mobility and personal development, social equity, and the efficiency of the post-secondary education system" (Skolnik, 2010, p. 2). Indeed, it is high time for a change in this province.

Over the years, the need for change has been discussed on several occasions. In 1972, Douglas Wright, the Chair of the Committee on University Affairs, was asked to lead a commission to investigate the postsecondary system in Ontario and to make recommendations for future development. The Wright Commission, among many other suggestions, "recommended degree-granting status for the colleges" (Dennison & Gallagher, 1986, p. 32); however, "The commission's recommendations were generally seen as too radical and few were accepted" (Smith, 1996, Search for New Directions Section). In the years following the Wright Commission, little progress was made in the investigation of college-university relations. It was not until the 1990s that the Ontario government began a serious re-examination of the issue. During the early 1990s, the Minister of Colleges and Universities initiated an ambitious review of Ontario's colleges with an emphasis on developing a vision of the college system in the new millennium. This review was appropriately called "Vision 2000" and what arose from the study was a shocking list of challenges facing the colleges including "the lack of system-wide standards and planning, insufficient attention to general education and generic skills, limitations on access, inattention to adult part-time learners and inadequate mechanisms for recognition of prior learning, lack of flexibility with respect to changing employer needs, attrition" and, most importantly for this discussion, "inadequate linkages with secondary schools and universities" (Smith, 1996, Rethinking the Colleges Section). Judging by these findings, it would have been impossible for a college-university transfer system to be created at the time when data for the Vision 2000 review were compiled without the implementation of widespread changes to the college system. The report "advocated greater college-university program articulation" and a "recommendation to expand and improve opportunities for students to move between the college and university sectors, while maintaining the distinctiveness of each" (Smith, 1996, Rethinking the Colleges Section). Recommendation 25 from the Summary section of the Vision 2000 report states the following:

The government should establish a provincial institute "without walls" for advanced training to:

- Facilitate the development and co-ordination of arrangements between colleges and universities for combined college-university studies;
- Offer combined college-university degree programs, with instruction based at and provided by colleges and universities;
- Recommend, where appropriate, to the College Standards and Accreditation Council the development of college-based programs of advanced training with a unique credential at the post-diploma level. (Vision 2000, 1990, p. 5)

These are sound recommendations; however, the implementation of such changes in a system where colleges and universities rarely worked together would be a difficult endeavour which would take a great deal of time, effort and funds to accomplish. Would the Ontario government be willing to invest in such a plan?

At this point, it seems that the Ontario government was finally taking the first steps on a long journey of discussions leading to changes to the province's postsecondary system. In response to the recommendations of the Vision 2000 report, the Ontario government took on three initiatives:

- a College Standards and Accreditation Council (CSAC) was established to oversee the development of system-wide college program standards, and processes for review and accreditation;
- a Prior Learning Assessment Advisory and Coordinating Group was established for a three year period to guide implementation of a system of prior learning assessment in the colleges, after which time each college would assume full responsibility for offering prior learning assessment services; and

- the government established a task force¹ to examine how best the province could meet its advanced training needs. (Smith, 1996, Rethinking the Colleges Section)

The Task Force on Advanced Training “recommended that barriers to inter-sectoral transfer of credits in postsecondary education be eliminated and that an agency or council be established to provide leadership in the development of credit transfer policies and practices” and recognized “a need for new policies with respect to college and university funding mechanisms that would support and encourage inter-sectoral credit transfer arrangements and joint advanced training programs” (Smith, 1996, Rethinking the Colleges Section). In response to the recommendations of the task force:

In 1994, the Ministry announced its support of a voluntary consortium representing colleges and universities intended to promote college-university cooperation which became known as the College-University Consortium Council (CUCC). The Ministry also financed the development and distribution of a college-university credit transfer guide. (Smith, 1996, Rethinking the Colleges Section)

In 1996, a report written by the Advisory Panel on Future Directions for Postsecondary Education for the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities highlighted the need to “promote and support co-operation between colleges and universities” (Smith, 1996, Summary and Recommendations Section). After consulting with representatives from both colleges and universities, the panel arrived at several interesting conclusions. Although they believed in the soundness of “the basic structure of Ontario’s postsecondary sector”, they found that “without significant change in the way the sector is evolving and the way it is resourced, its quality and accessibility will be undermined, along with institutional capability to deliver the broad range of programs and the high calibre of research that will be needed in future” (Smith, 1996, Summary and Recommendations Section). The panel also emphasized the need “to remove unnecessary barriers to students wishing to transfer among them and also to the sharing of services and facilities”, was “encouraged by the degree of activity in recent years in developing linkages among the institutions” and endorsed “the aims of the recently established consortium² to further such linkages” (Smith, 1996, Recommendations Section).

The establishment of the CUCC marked a breakthrough in the Ontario government’s recognition of what Dennison refers to as “a deficiency in the organization of higher education” in the province (Dennison, 1995, p. 123). According to Stanyon:

The College University Consortium Council (CUCC), comprised of three university representatives, three college representatives and the Assistant Deputy Minister of Education and Training for the Postsecondary Division, was established to facilitate, promote and co-ordinate joint education and training ventures. It was the government’s intention that the CUCC would: aid the transfer of students from sector to sector, facilitate the creation of joint programs between colleges and universities and further the development of a more seamless continuum of postsecondary education in Ontario. The CUCC has also been charged with the responsibility for annually updating the OCUTG³ and expanding its development beyond that of a simple catalogue of collaborative programs to include exemplars of policies and procedures, all in an effort to promote province-wide transfer of credit between colleges and universities. (Stanyon, 2003, Ontario Context)

In 1996, the CUCC developed the “Ontario College University Degree-Completion Accord, or the Port Hope Accord as it has come to be known”, which was “officially signed in May of 1999” (Stanyon, 2003, Ontario Context). As Stanyon explains:

The Accord outlines a series of principles, and provides a matrix for developing new degree programs and degree-completion arrangements between colleges and universities. The intent was that colleges and universities would voluntarily work together within the framework of the Accord and it was expected to be particularly helpful in those program areas where there is a similar academic focus. (Stanyon, 2003, Ontario Context)

Indeed, in comparison to the decades of stagnation following the 1960s, the 1990s was a time of considerable action in terms of

government involvement in the process of forming official ties between the college and university sectors in Ontario. In the years following the establishment of the CUCC, many positive advances towards achieving a system of greater transferability have been realized. The CUCC existed until 2011 when, following two years of intensive deliberations among representatives of the Ministry, Colleges Ontario, the Council of Ontario Universities and student advocacy organizations, the Minister of Training Colleges and Universities announced a new provincial transfer framework and the establishment of a new coordinating body to replace the CUCC. This new body, ONCAT, was given an enhanced leadership, research and communications mandate, including the responsibility to develop and maintain a new transfer portal and a more robust online transfer guide. (ONCAT, 2012, History of the Organization).

Review of Literature and Research

In the previous section, I presented the historical events which led to the establishment of the system of postsecondary education which exists in the province of Ontario today. Being aware of the historical background provides a better understanding of the many issues which have arisen in regards to the lack of coordination between Ontario colleges and universities, as well as the criticisms of the system which have emerged. Indeed, many of the criticisms which we hear today already existed at the time of the creation of the college system during the 1960s – for example, Murray Ross, the President of York University during the 1960s, “strongly supported the view that there should be transfer opportunity for college graduates as a matter of provincial policy, not merely at the discretion of the universities in individual cases”, moreover, “Ross feared that, without such a policy, the colleges could become ‘a dead end’” (Dennison & Gallagher, 1986, p.34). Nevertheless, the decision to create two separate college and university systems prevailed. The 1990s may be looked upon as somewhat revolutionary time in that the issues of student mobility across the two systems and access to higher education were finally recognized by the Ontario government as a problem that needed to be resolved as the province approached the new millennium; however, as Michael Skolnik notes, any progress that has been made has been “patchwork” at best:

The original decision about the design of Ontario’s college system drew criticism from the outset, but that model remains largely intact today. Although many colleges have negotiated agreements with provincial universities that provide some university credit for courses taken in the college, these agreements constitute an uneven patchwork, and little progress has been made toward systemic change in the role of the colleges in relation to the universities. (Skolnik, 2010, p. 2)

If the 1990s may be viewed as a time of some progress in terms of the official recognition of the problem, the period between 2000 and 2010 may be viewed as a time of further debate and some action, albeit “patchwork”. The most influential document regarding the issue which emerged during over the past twelve years is the Rae Report.

In 2005, the Honourable Bob Rae in his then role as Advisor to the Premier and Minister of Training, College and Universities, presented a report entitled *Ontario – A Leader in Learning* to the McGuinty government. The report, now commonly referred to as the “Rae Report”, is frequently cited in literature, discussion papers and studies about college-university transfer agreements. The report was compiled after a review of “past studies and reports on higher education, research into best practices in Ontario, Canada and key jurisdictions” and “briefings on current projects, data and planned initiatives from various ministries”, as well as “extensive consultations across the province and meetings with students, educators, business leaders, the public and a wide range of experts”, “formal submissions from associations, institutions and individuals” and “ongoing research and analysis by the Secretariat” (Rae, 2005, p. 108). In the report, Rae acknowledges that “much has evolved since the ‘60s” and that the two systems of colleges and universities “have been irrevocably altered by students’ expectations and experience” (Rae, 2005, p. 14). Rae identifies “two key issues here: the first is how we serve students who want to move between institutions; the second is how to ensure that both colleges and universities are meeting labour market needs, accomplishing research and developing excellence” (Rae, 2005, p. 14). He then goes on to state: “While many people I met from colleges and universities were genuinely excited about institutional collaboration and the importance of clear pathways for students, some institutions have not considered creatively the areas of potential partnership. Opportunities are being missed” (Rae, 2005, p. 14). Rae offers several clear methods by which these “missed opportunities” may be rectified or avoided, including the “formal recognition” of institutional differentiation by the government which allow for “better pathways between institutions based on objective, justifiable and transparent criteria” (Rae, 2005, p. 41).

Many scholars in the field of higher education view differentiation as a positive attribute of a postsecondary system. The benefits of a highly differentiated postsecondary system are identified by Weingarten and Deller as follows:

Differentiation drives quality and student choice. If the aspirations of the student change during their studies or lifetime, a differentiated system offers the opportunity to switch to another postsecondary institution more aligned with their amended intentions and circumstances. The opportunity for students to move among postsecondary institutions is why an efficient and robust credit transfer system is more necessary in a differentiated system. (Weingarten & Deller, 2010, pp. 10-11)

Ironically, the decision made during the 1960s to create a college system separate from that of the university system actually resulted in a somewhat differentiated postsecondary system in Ontario; however, the barriers that were created between the college and university sectors is now a major obstacle to student mobility. The trick to making a differentiated system work is to allow for mobility between differentiated institutions. As Weingarten and Deller note in the above quote, greater mobility can be achieved through better systems of transfer credit. In his report, Rae acknowledges that “some progress has been made” in this regard, “primarily on an institution-to-institution and program-to-program basis”; however, he urges the government to “move the yardsticks much further” (Rae, 2005, p. 41).

Rae points out that some successful college-university transfer programs are already in place in Ontario:

There are some successful collaborative arrangements in place today, most notably programs where students pursue both diploma and degree credentials simultaneously from a college and a university, such as those provided by the joint programming of the University of Guelph-Humber and the University of Toronto Scarborough with Centennial College. (Rae, 2005, p. 43)

The existence of such collaborative arrangements is a positive sign. Such programs, when they are successful, may be used as models for the creation of similar arrangements between other institutions, which would encourage further development in this area. Rae also argues that the “government should mediate a comprehensive solution to current limitations on degree completion and credit transfer collaboration” (Rae, 2005, p. 41). In order to achieve this goal, Rae recommends that the government should consider “piloting” several approaches to arrive at a differentiated system with greater transferability⁴:

- Regional/Program Collaboration – assist a select number of universities representative of different regions of the province in setting up degree-completion programs that are specifically designed for college graduates.
- Focus on High-Demand Programs – identify a limited number of program areas in which college students most need a degree completion option, and the university program to which the program should be connected. Multilateral agreements would then be developed to facilitate credit recognition and supports to students.
- Focus on “Generic Courses” – encourage colleges and universities to come together as a group to identify a basic core set of introductory courses that are comparable in terms of learning outcomes, outline (and make available publicly) expected learning outcomes, and make any necessary changes to help ensure an alignment which would facilitate a rational basis for credit transfer in these core courses across the province. (Rae, 2005, p. 42)

Rae’s recommended approach is realistic and practical because it expands upon the institutional differentiation which already exists in the province’s postsecondary system. At the same time, Rae is careful not to propose any interference with the “institutional autonomy” and “different core mandates of Ontario’s colleges and universities”; however, Rae also stresses that “it is the very tolerance and pursuit of autonomy, differentiation and separate college and university mandates that makes transferability so critically important” (Rae, 2005, p. 42).

Collaborative programs and articulation agreements between colleges and universities and the perceived benefits of a more differentiated system with fewer barriers are currently popular topics in both the public and academic domains of the province. Discussion of the topic in the public domain is most evident in a special series on education entitled “Our Time to Lead” which was published in the Toronto *Globe and Mail* in the fall of 2012. An article by Erin Anderssen published in the *Globe and Mail* in October 2012 takes a pessimistic stance on the notion that postsecondary institutions would be willing to embrace a more flexible system of differentiation: “The flexibility to move between disciplines, schools or between colleges and universities is limited – the institutions, after all, want their students to stay put” (Anderssen, 2012, October 5, p. 5). In another *Globe and Mail* article published in October 2012, Anderssen writes about a student who is enrolled in a combined program between Ottawa’s Algonquin College and Carleton University. When he graduates, the student will earn “a university degree in IT, and an advanced-technology college diploma in interactive media” (Anderssen, 2012, October 19). According to Anderssen, the student

is thoroughly enjoying his program and is looking forward to landing “a dream job designing digital special effects” (Anderssen, 2012, October 19). According to the student, the program has the “best-of-both-worlds” of a college and university education in that he is learning the “practical application” while building a “theoretical understanding” of the field (Anderssen, 2012, October 19).

Anderssen uses the example of this student to emphasize the need for a system of greater collaboration between Canada’s colleges and universities:

Among developed countries, Canada is unique in its failure to develop a national approach to universities and colleges. But such a strategy, advocates say, would help solve many of the most serious criticisms levelled at universities. These include that they aren’t transparent about their results, flexible to labour-market demands, or innovative enough with credit-transfer agreements and partnerships between universities, and with colleges, which are now usually negotiated one by one. (Anderssen, 2012, October 19)

Anderssen also points out that the slow progression towards a system of greater transferability between colleges and universities is influenced by a lingering cultural prejudice about the social status of these two types of postsecondary institutions: “While combined programs are expanding, universities are still seen as the place where the smart kids go to get a well-rounded education, even if practical training at colleges is more likely to land them a good job” (Anderssen, 2012, October 19). I agree that this cultural stereotyping of college and university students is a problem in our society and may be one of the reasons behind the slow progress made towards a system of greater transferability. Unfortunately, this problem is rarely discussed during the debates about this topic even though it appears to be one of the underlying reasons behind the resistance to collaboration between colleges and universities.

Another article which appeared in the fall 2012 series on education in *Globe and Mail* openly condemns the lack of collaboration between colleges and universities in Canada while offering an innovative solution. In the *Globe and Mail*, Robert Luke opens his article with the following dire message:

Canadian postsecondary education has its solitudes: universities, polytechnics, colleges; provincial jurisdictions; the industry-academic divide. Canada may lead the world in the attainment of higher education, but we often neglect to recognize that this considers all types of education combined. Our failure to knit these systems together, and to link education and research to social and economic outcomes, will affect our long-term prosperity and capacity to innovate. (Luke, 2012, October 11)

What Luke proposes in the rest of his article is quite an original idea which I have not read in other literature on this topic. He likens the barriers between institutions to “guarded borders” and he proposes the idea of a “passport” which would allow students to easily move “across educational jurisdictions” – students could “go from a college to a university, followed by a stint at a polytechnic, while acquiring passport stamps that show credits earned in school and experiences gained through work” (Luke, 2012, October 11). According to Luke:

This approach involves challenges: system adaptability and differentiation; credit transfer and credentialing between institutions; alumni relations for fundraising. However, the potential benefits are great. Canada can collaborate to compete as a nation on the world stage, providing lifelong education to its citizens in response to social and economic drivers. (Luke, 2012, October 11)

The idea of a postsecondary system which facilitates “lifelong education” and educational mobility without boundaries was not considered during the 1960s; however, it is certainly becoming a necessity in our modern knowledge-based society. The articles in the *Globe and Mail* are effective to the extent they expose the issue of institutional transferability to a larger public audience; however, the problem with popular media is that claims are often made in a sensational and provocative manner without sufficient reflection upon how or if proposed changes may be implemented. Nevertheless, such articles have value in that they get people thinking and talking about relevant social issues like education. I will now turn my attention to a discussion paper and

a report which focus on how articulation agreements should be designed and implemented in order to achieve the best possible outcomes.

In 2008, the Colleges Ontario and Council of Ontario Universities (CO-COU) Joint Task Force on Student Mobility and Pathways prepared a discussion paper outlining a proposal to develop a “Student Mobility and Regularized Transfer System (SMARTS)⁵” which would:

- Provide student-focused options and solutions to expand educational pathways for students to facilitate (a) transfer of students among education institutions, and (b) transfer of credits for students wishing to sample different educational experiences in other institutions, particularly those outside Ontario.
- Provide explicit and transparent information for students about transfer and mobility agreements for Ontario colleges and universities.
- Provide mechanisms for tracking and analysing performance of students who avail themselves of the transfer and mobility system to provide feedback on areas for improvement to the transfer and mobility issues for the institutions in the province.
- Provide an approach to include colleges and universities in SMARTS through incentive schemes that recognize both college and university participation in a transfer process
- Provide an approach that will not impinge on the autonomy of institutions to make decisions about participation and admission standards and prerequisites.(Colleges Ontario and Council of Ontario Universities [CO-COU], 2008, p. 4)

The Joint Task Force recognizes that there are already a number of functioning articulation agreements in place in Ontario; however, through the development of SMARTS, they hope to “establish a wider set of agreements that could be used to facilitate transfer among a number of institutions” (CO-COU, 2008, p. 6).

Although many of the recommendations which appear in the discussion paper are proposals for a province-wide transfer system, the paper also contains a section which lists the best practices which have been identified in successful articulation agreements between specific institutions – particularly in collaborative programs “offered jointly by a college and a university” which enable students to “earn a college diploma and then attend the designated university partner to obtain their degree” (CO-COU, 2008, p. 11). Without naming the institutions from which they derived their information, the Joint Task Force provides the following list of best practices for the management of successful college-university collaborative programs⁶:

- Program design – Requires the early and effective collaboration of a team of academic and administrative representatives from the participating institutions. Additional time and expense is involved, as team members need to meet to identify opportunities for, and best approaches to, combining their respective strengths.
- Program development – Having designed the program, further discussions are required to determine the optimum division of responsibilities, followed by curriculum development. As with all new programs, course outlines must be prepared.
- Program approval – Programs must be approved by the appropriate governing bodies of all participating institutions.
- Facilities and equipment – Every new program generates a need for classroom, study and office space. As well, because many programs at both colleges and universities depend upon specialized facilities such as labs and shops, these facilities must also be provided.
- Start-up – In addition to the above, start-up costs include: hiring of faculty and other staff as appropriate; developing marketing campaigns; and designing promotional material.
- Registration and enrolment reporting – Experience in Ontario has shown that it is preferable to have one institution be the “reporting” institution for ministry-funding purposes, with a revenue-sharing arrangement established. Accordingly, the student registers at that institution but attends classes at both
- Dual privileges – In collaborative programs, students rely on support services, such as library, health and counseling, and recreation, at both institutions. Arrangements must be made and administered with respect to each service.
- Program review – As part of the quality-control processes at each institution, the programs are subject to periodic review. As a consequence of a program’s hybrid nature, the reviews are more complex to conduct and must be allocated appropriate resources.
- Capital – Like any program, a joint program requires initial capital funding. Decisions must be made regarding the

contributions of each participating institution.(Colleges Ontario and Council of Ontario Universities [CO-COU], 2008, pp. 12-13)

I think the inclusion of these best practices in the discussion paper would have been more effective with references to the actual collaborative programs from which they were derived; nevertheless, these best practices provide a realistic checklist which could benefit future programs.

In a 2009 report written for HEQCO, Andrew Boggs and David Trick also examine the effectiveness of college-university transfers through a study of several programs existing in Ontario. As in the discussion paper described above, Boggs and Trick shed light on the best practices that have led to the success of several transfer programs which they mention in their report. In their report, Boggs and Trick ask the following questions: “Under what conditions does institutional cooperation blossom? How successful have college-university partnerships in Ontario been to date?” (Boggs & Trick, 2009, p.1). To find answers to these questions, Boggs and Trick turn to the field of economics which “advances a number of reasons to explain the difficulties in forming and maintaining cooperative relationships” (Boggs & Trick, 2009, p.3). For example, they explain that collaborative programs do not work when partnering institutions are “unaware of each other’s goals and capacities”, or when the “governance processes of one or both parties may allow constituencies within the organization to veto arrangements that might otherwise produce a net benefit for the organization as a whole” (Boggs & Trick, 2009, p.3). In their report, Boggs and Trick look at seven college-university transfer arrangements in Ontario which they categorize into three types:

- Bilateral agreements: Students seek to apply some portion of the credits earned toward a college diploma toward a degree program at a university. Institutional agreements are deliberately designed to coordinate and govern the flow of students from a diploma to a degree program.
- Multilateral (or ‘open’) articulation strategies: A single university opens its doors to accept diploma graduates from a select group of programs into a specific degree program. This may or may not involve a formal agreement with the colleges sending students.
- Concurrent use campuses: Colleges in this model work in collaboration with one or more universities to locate joint diploma/degree programs and/or degree articulation opportunities on the college campus itself. (Boggs & Trick, 2009, p. 5)

For the purposes of my paper, I am interested in their investigation of the bilateral agreements between Mohawk College and McMaster University; Seneca College and York University.

According to Boggs and Trick, the “critical factor for success” in the bilateral agreements was “the ability of the partners to plan together, to resolve disputes and to operationalize their plan” (Boggs & Trick, 2009, p. 11). Moreover:

All of the bilateral partnerships reported that initiating the partnership required an extensive commitment of time from academic leaders. This time commitment continues at a somewhat reduced level once the partnership is established, and is especially pronounced when there is a high level of academic integration to be maintained or when new programs are being added to the partnership. (Boggs & Trick, 2009, p. 11)

So far, the “critical factors for success” identified by Boggs and Trick are very similar to the “best practices” identified in the CO-COU Joint Task Force discussion paper; however, through their interviews of the bilateral partners, Boggs and Trick also shed light on some of the conditions which led to unsuccessful arrangements:

Some partners reported difficulty in sharing resources; this was attributed to the lack of clear precedents (focal points) and to the difficulty of objectively valuing in-kind contributions from each participant. Some partners reported that considerable effort was made to win the support of internal constituencies with a potential veto over the partnership, including governance bodies and organizations representing faculty and staff that may have had concerns about reputation, sharing of resources, and sharing of work. (Boggs & Trick, 2009, p. 11)

The conditions which led to unsuccessful arrangements identified by Boggs and Trick might have been avoided if the partners followed the list of best practices suggested by the CO-COU Joint Task Force.

In this section of my paper, I presented an overview of the issues which have been raised in the literature on college-university transferability. Many of the authors I have cited voice a strong desire for the Ontario government to initiate a program of system-wide transferability between colleges and universities similar to those which exist in British Columbia and Alberta. In their report, Boggs and Trick ask: “How do the results of Ontario’s approach to college-university relationships differ from those of jurisdictions with a system-wide approach to promoting student transfer?” (Boggs & Trick, 2009, p. 1). Interestingly, they conclude as follows:

The system-wide partnerships we examined outside of Ontario tended to have a single purpose: to facilitate transfer from one institution to another, and especially transfer from a college to a university. Most system-wide partnerships were characterized by an authoritative third party (such as a legislature) that mandated cooperation by all institutions and prohibited free-riding; provisions to define the mandate of each segment of the higher education system and define appropriate areas for cooperation and for competition; and a governance body to oversee the implementation of the transfer arrangements. With this framework in place, higher education systems have succeeded in facilitating the transfer of large numbers of students from the college system to the university system, where the majority of transfer students perform successfully. Notwithstanding these successes, system-wide transfer systems require ongoing leadership from the center, backed by legislative or other authority, to prevent the centripetal forces of institutional differentiation from undermining the public interest in facilitating transfer to a degree-granting university for large numbers of students. (Boggs & Trick, 2009, p. 18)

The main conclusion here is that “system-wide transfer systems require ongoing leadership from the center, backed by legislative or other authority”. To date, the college-university transfer programs in Ontario have been entirely voluntary – a fact which may have contributed to their success. I believe that, if colleges and universities are forced into such arrangements, the outcomes would not all be as successful. Moreover, such a widespread change would also require Ontario universities to hand more of their autonomy over to the government – a situation which would not be achieved without strong resistance.

Case Study: The Seneca-Woodsworth Facilitated Transfer Program (FTP)

In the previous section, I provided a list of best practices recommended by the Colleges Ontario and Council of Ontario Universities (CO-COU) Joint Task Force on Student Mobility and Pathways, as well as several suggestions made in a report by Bogg and Trick, which characterize successful college-university transfer programs which existed in Ontario in 2008 and 2009. Recently, another bilateral partnership has emerged which did not exist when the previously mentioned discussion paper and report were published. I am referring to the Facilitated Transfer Program (FTP) between Seneca College and Woodsworth College, Faculty of Arts and Science at the University of Toronto. In this section of my paper, I have chosen to present the Seneca-Woodsworth FTP, which has enjoyed four successful years, as a case study which highlights the factors which have contributed to its success.

In 2006, the College-University Consortium Council created the Changes Fund competition. The purpose of this competition was to “promote innovative pilot programs directed at facilitated transfer agreements between Ontario colleges and universities” and the winner would receive a grant to help develop their program (Meehan & Shook, 2010, p. 2). “A joint proposal between the Liberal Arts Program (LAT) at Seneca College (formerly General Arts and Science) and the Faculty of Arts at the University of Toronto” won the competition in the spring of 2007, after which the two institutions began to negotiate their agreement (Meehan & Shook, 2010, p. 2). As Peter Meehan, Acting Chair, School of Liberal Arts, Seneca College and Cheryl Shook, Registrar, Woodsworth College, Faculty of Arts and Science, University of Toronto explain in a follow-up report written for the College-University Consortium Council, their original “proposal outlined the desire on the part of both institutions to negotiate a facilitated transfer agreement that would provide qualified students who complete the two-year LAT diploma with a clear and expeditious pathway toward completing a subsequent Bachelor’s degree at the University of Toronto” (Meehan & Shook, 2010, p. 2).

In March of 2008, the Faculty of Arts and Science Council at the University of Toronto approved a motion to initiate a pilot of the program. According to the minutes of the March 3rd, 2008 meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Science Council, a motion “to enter into a 3-year agreement with Seneca College to facilitate the admission of appropriately qualified students from Seneca College’s Liberal Arts Program into the Faculty of Arts and Science effective 1 September 2008” was approved (Minutes, 2008, March 3, p. 8). The report from the Faculty of Arts and Science Committee on Admissions submitted to the March 3, 2008 meeting provides a further explanation about why and how the pilot project came into being:

The pilot has been developed as part of a province-wide project sponsored by the CUCC (College University Consortium Council), a body created jointly by the MTCU (Ministry of Training, Colleges & Universities), COU (Council of Ontario Universities) and the Council of Presidents (Colleges). The Ministry invited proposals to the Change Fund, the U of T (Arts & Science) partnered with Seneca College (Liberal Arts Program), which also partnered with Trent University, in making a successful proposal to establish a pilot agreement project for students who want to complete a degree in FAS after completing a 2-year Liberal Arts Diploma at Seneca. The joint proposal was submitted in January 2007, approved in the Spring, and discussions began in the Summer. (Report, 2008, March 3, p. 1)

Due to its experience with the administration of the Visiting Students program at U of T, as well as its historical connection with non-traditional and mature university students, Woodsworth College, one of the seven undergraduate colleges of the Faculty of Arts and Science at the University of Toronto, took the lead in the management of this new program. By taking the lead, Woodsworth College assumed all of the responsibilities associated with this program – including provision of academic advising and support, as well as the assessment of student satisfaction and success.

The structure of the Seneca-Woodsworth FTP is similar to that of the bilateral transfer agreement between Seneca College and York University which was assessed by Boggs and Trick in their report for HEQCO. The Seneca-York transfer agreement was established in 1998 and, according to Boggs and Trick, it is quite successful. According to the York University website, the Seneca-York transfer agreement works as follows:

Students of Seneca's Liberal Arts Diploma who have completed one year with a minimum grade point average of 3.0 (B or 70%), and two 3-credit York-approved Seneca courses with a minimum grade of 'C' in each, will be eligible for admission consideration. During the second year of the program, students must complete a specific 9-credit course at York University and two 3-credit York-approved courses at Seneca, with a minimum grade of 'C' in each. Successful candidates who meet all of the above criteria are granted 42 transfer credits and may continue at York University to complete their Honours Bachelor of Arts (BA) Degree. (York University, 2012)

According to the March 3, 2008 report from the Faculty of Arts and Science Committee on Admissions, the existing agreement between Seneca College and York University provided a “useful precedent” for the creation of the Seneca-Woodsworth FTP at the U of T (Report, 2008, March 3, p. 1). In order to convince the FAS Council to approve the motion for the pilot FTP, Seneca College was presented in the report as having “a strong academic history” with “faculty familiar with university study and research” and as “willing to coordinate its curriculum to ensure an appropriate transition for its graduates to study at the U of T” (Report, 2008, March 3, p. 1). To explain why Seneca College was chosen over other Ontario CAATs as the best fit for the pilot project, the report points out “that few other colleges have the faculty depth, programmatic strength, track record and specific design of their program” to effectively enable such a partnership (Report, 2008, March 3, p. 2).

In order to be accepted to the Faculty of Arts and Science at the University of Toronto, students enrolled in the Seneca-Woodsworth FTP during the pilot stage of the program had to complete the Liberal Arts Program at Seneca, as well as at least one half-credit course at the University of Toronto, achieving minimum grade of 60%. According to Meehan and Shook:

degree credit for these students would be recognized in two distinct ways: (a) credits for courses taken at the University of Toronto would be retained in their Arts & Science record upon formal admission as degree students to the Faculty of Arts & Science; (b) credit for specific LAT courses taken at Seneca will be assessed in detail, with the understanding that some of these courses will qualify for “credit for credit” transfers, and also recognizing the high level of academic preparation that is central to the LAT curriculum overall. (Meehan & Shook, 2010, p. 2)

In terms of transfer credits, the agreement contains a “prescribed list of specific LAT courses that will be accepted at the University of Toronto for degree credit” (Meehan & Shook, 2010, p. 2). Normally, students from other Ontario colleges who are accepted to the U of T two-year liberal arts diploma programs are awarded a maximum of 2.0 full-course equivalents in the Faculty of Arts and Science; however, students accepted to the U of T from the Seneca-Woodsworth FTP are awarded 6.0 full-

course equivalents.

One of the key questions driving the study by Boggs and Trick was: “Under what conditions does institutional cooperation blossom?” (Boggs & Trick, 2009, p. 1). As a result of their study, they found that bilateral arrangements are successful when the partners demonstrate that they are effectively able “to plan together, to resolve disputes and to operationalize their plan” (Boggs & Trick, 2009, p. 11). Boggs and Trick attribute the success of the Seneca-York agreement to the ability of the two institutions to govern the program through “joint committees” and the fact that both institutions clearly established their roles and expectations during the formation of their agreement (Boggs & Trick, 2009, pp. 11-12). From an early point in the development of the Seneca-Woodsworth College FTP, Seneca College and the Faculty of Arts and Science at the University of Toronto articulated their respective roles in the management of the program, which may be viewed as one of the factors resulting in the success of the pilot project and the signing of a permanent agreement in 2011. In a University of Toronto media release published at the time of the official signing of the agreement in May of 2011, Seneca President David Agnew stated that the partnership “speaks to our commitment to our students’ success and ensures ongoing co-ordination and collaboration between our two institutions that will allow us to explore further opportunities for our students” (University of Toronto, 2011, May 26).

While the commitment to the program demonstrated by both partners is a key factor in the success of this collaboration, there are many other factors which have contributed to the success of the Seneca-Woodsworth College FTP. One of these factors is the high level of collaboration between the administrative staff and the team of advisors in the two institutions. Qualified students in the Seneca College LAT program are identified and counseled during their transition from college to university. According to Meehan and Shook:

Through the course of the first year, the LAT program team identifies students who are potential candidates for transfer to the University of Toronto. Through the course of the FTP, these students are then given multiple opportunities to meet with advisors and the academic support team at Woodsworth College, and to interact with the University of Toronto’s St. George campus while completing their two-year LAT Diploma. The main focus in the first year of the LAT program is to acclimatize students to an academic culture and to the various rigors and skills that will enable their success as degree students at the University of Toronto. This includes exposure to the range of disciplines included in the core LAT program (English, Philosophy, History, etc.) as well as detailed instruction in academic research and writing and effective strategies for time management. This is a time-tested approach that has served Seneca’s LAT graduates who have gone on to studies at York University for the past thirteen years. (Meehan & Shook, 2010, p. 3)

Throughout the process, the academic advisors of Woodsworth College are not isolated to the St. George Campus at the University of Toronto. They take a very active role in the transition process by providing advice to undergraduate students who have already transitioned to the University of Toronto through the FTP as well as to Seneca College students who are still in the early stages of the program by acting as helpful recruiters and ambassadors. When they visit the Seneca College campus, the Woodsworth College counsellors provide their contact information “and students are encouraged to email Woodsworth College’s advisors if they have further questions or need additional information. Financial advising is also provided, discussing OSAP, bursary support, and balancing part-time work with academic studies” (Meehan & Shook, 2010, p. 3). Their presence on the Seneca College campus further illustrates the high level of collaboration between the two institutions.

The Seneca-Woodsworth FTP is highly conscious of the needs of individual students in the program. In order to further help students during their transition, students are enrolled as visiting students during the summer session when the St. George Campus at the University of Toronto is less crowded and more time may be devoted to their needs. During their time as visiting students, the students have full access to all of the facilities and services offered at the St. George campus at the University of Toronto, as well as “a learning strategist, academic advisors and the Academic Writing Centre at Woodsworth College (Meehan & Shook, 2010, p. 3). According to Meehan and Shook:

In early spring, students who have been identified by the Seneca team are invited to the St. George campus for a tour, and detailed information about the upcoming summer session is provided. Students in the LAT who are recommended by the Seneca team submit a special Visiting Student application form to Woodsworth College. Woodsworth provides a list of “recommended” courses for the Seneca group and offers in-depth academic advising to make sure students are able to explore degree program options and take appropriate prerequisites.

Woodsworth provides opportunities to meet with an academic advisor and student academic progress is monitored. Students may take up to 2.0 full-course equivalents in the summer session though the recommended course load is 1.0. (Meehan & Shook, 2010, p. 3)

The expectations are made clear to students throughout their engagement in the program, thereby ensuring that only those students who are serious about success remain. Also, care was taken to identify the problems which students might face through a “pre-pilot” trial which took place during the 2008 summer session. As Meehan and Shook explain:

This “pre-pilot” gave Woodsworth direct contact with Seneca students and insight into the transition issues they might encounter coming to the U of T. Woodsworth advisors and academic support staff met with students on numerous occasions to provide guidance and get feedback. Students signed a release from permitting Woodsworth and Seneca to share information in order to evaluate the potential success of the FTP and highlight areas where collaboration and/or additional programming might be warranted. Eleven students participated in the pre-pilot project and six successfully completed courses. (Meehan & Shook, 2010, p. 4)

Interestingly, the five students who withdrew after spending some time in the program “cited difficulties in balancing work and school as the reason for discontinuing their studies at the U of T in the summer”, while “others openly stated that the U of T was not the right ‘fit’ for them” (Meehan & Shook, 2010, p. 4).

In order to find out more about the Seneca-Woodsworth FTP, I decided to speak with Cheryl Shook, Registrar of Woodsworth College. Cheryl Shook has been an instrumental leader throughout the development and implementation of this program. In 2011, her efforts were recognized by the University of Toronto community through a Chancellor’s Award in the category of Influential Leader. According to the University of Toronto media release about the award:

Another unique program organized in large measure by Ms. Shook is the Joint Program with Seneca College. Ms. Shook was the face of U of T to the initial 50 Seneca liberal-arts students during the pilot project and continues to support incoming students. This is an important initiative at a time when governments are interested in fostering ties between post-secondary institutions and may serve as a model to develop partnerships with other community colleges. (University of Toronto, 2011)

According to Cheryl Shook, while the FTP is resource intensive for Woodsworth College, “because we already had systems in place, it was less resource intensive than it could be, allowing us to focus on the advising rather than developing new systems”. The system works because “the students feel valued by the U of T” when the Woodsworth advisors visit Seneca College and assist them during the transition process (C. Shook, personal communication, November 14, 2012).

Throughout the implementation of the program, Seneca College and Woodsworth College have taken steps to document student success. When students enter the program, they sign an agreement which allows Woodsworth and Seneca to exchange data on how the students are doing – both in terms of academic progress and personal student experience. The results of the feedback collected from students are outlined by Meehan and Shook as follows:

- Student feedback, both at Seneca and at Woodsworth College, has been overwhelmingly positive about the program.
- Students feel that the LAT has prepared them well for academic work at the U of T.
- Students cite the most challenging transition issues from college to university as balancing working hours with study time, the size and complexity of the St. George campus, and for some the commute between the two campuses when doing courses at both (fall/winter session)
- Evaluation of student feedback indicates the summer session is the optimum time for LAT students to take their first U of T course.
- Students appreciate academic advisors visiting the Newnham campus.
- Seneca faculty and staff have observed a discernible increase in morale among students who have attended the counselling sessions with representatives from the U of T.

- In the later stages of their Seneca program, these students also appear much more confident in their studies and more goal-specific in their academic pursuits.
- Seneca students take advantage of the academic advising available.
- Responses from Seneca students coming to the U of T have been overwhelmingly positive in terms of their overall student experience on the St. George campus. (Meehan & Shook, 2010, p. 5)

The “overwhelmingly positive” responses from Seneca students engaged in the FTP and their high rate of success provides solid proof of the effectiveness of this program.

Conclusion

As I was writing this paper, I came across a news release on the Colleges Ontario website which describes a report which was recently submitted by the province’s 24 colleges to the Ontario government entitled *Empowering Ontario: Transforming Higher Education in the 21st Century*. According to the news release, the report urges the Ontario government to “permit colleges to offer three-year degrees”:

The 26-page report says colleges should have the authority to offer new three-year degrees and to convert some of the three-year diploma programs to degree programs. The report says many of the colleges’ three-year programs already meet the province’s standards for baccalaureate education. ... The report says many students are interested in the career-focused programs at colleges but they want a degree rather than a diploma. As well, research has found employers in Canada and internationally put a higher value on a degree. The report also calls for colleges to get the authority to rename four-year degree programs at colleges as honours programs. (Colleges Ontario, 2012, October 4)

When I reflect upon the colleges’ demand to be permitted to offer three and four-year degrees, I cannot help but disagree with their request. The main reason why I disagree is that I feel that giving colleges the authority to grant three or four year degrees would change the unique character of these institutions. If given the authority to grant such degrees, the “colleges” would in effect become more like “universities”.

As I have established in the preceding sections of my paper, colleges provide several diverse and valuable services to students in the province of Ontario. While they were originally created to provide vocational training, through the development of articulation agreements and transfer programs they provide alternative pathways to university education for many individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. As I mentioned in an earlier section of my paper – for a number of reasons, one of which being the inability to pay high university tuition fees, not all Ontarians have an equal opportunity to enter university directly from high school, so many opt for enrollment at a community college; however, during the course of their college studies, such individuals may keep university enrolment in mind as a possible option for the future. My concern is – if colleges are granted the authority to grant three or four-year bachelor degrees, would they raise the cost of tuition thereby disadvantaging the sector of the population which they have traditionally served?

Also, in an earlier section of my paper, I mentioned that one of the positive aspects of the postsecondary system of colleges and universities in Ontario is that the high degree of differentiation which exists between the two sectors. Differentiation provides postsecondary students with many more choices. If colleges become more like universities through the ability to grant three and four-year degrees, would this not lead to a less differentiated postsecondary system in the province? As the student in the *Globe and Mail* article stated, being able to simultaneously earn a degree at a college and a university gave him the opportunity to experience the “best-of-both-worlds” through learning the “practical application” while building a “theoretical understanding” of his field (Anderssen, 2012, October 19). This would not be the case if colleges became more like universities. Therefore, I believe the Ontario government would better serve the people of the province if it decides to deny the request of the colleges to grant three and four-year degrees – instead, it should invest more time and money into the further development of successful articulation agreements and college-university transfer programs such as the Seneca-Woodsworth FTP.

End notes:

¹ The Task Force on Advanced Training chaired by Walter Pitman who had “served terms as Director of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and as President of Ryerson Polytechnic Institute” (Smith, 1996, Rethinking the Colleges Section).

² The College-University Consortium Council (CUCC).

³ The Ontario College University Transfer Guide (OCUTG).

⁴ The language of some of the following points has been paraphrased from the original report for the purpose of providing a brief summary to the reader.

⁵ Working title.

⁶ The language of some of the following points has been paraphrased from the original discussion paper for the purpose of providing a brief summary to the reader.

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[Contents](#)