

The changing role of research

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In an increasingly competitive global marketplace, many learning institutions are re-evaluating the focus of the education they provide and embracing disciplines that provide hands-on learning and real-world experience. As a result, one can find an increasing emphasis on applied research at colleges—that is, research specifically intended to help businesses and industries find solutions to practical problems and to help develop products and services.

To learn more about the changing role of applied research at Canadian colleges, we

spoke with sector leaders Dr. Robert Luke and Mary Butler. Luke is the Vice President of Research and Innovation at George Brown College and Butler is the Vice President of College and Community Development at New Brunswick Community College. Both have been recognized for working at the forefront of a culture shift that sees more Canadian colleges embracing applied research.

Academica: How is the role of research in Canadian colleges changing? Why are we seeing a shift toward applied research?

Mary Butler: Colleges have always been a resource for business and industry and a participant in solving everyday problems that our partners and community members face. The shift in the college sector has been in formalizing those research and problem-solving relationships, resulting in investments from colleges and the private sector. I think we're seeing this shift as colleges and their faculty and staff are now increasingly being acknowledged for their work and for having an impact on research and development.

Robert Luke: There has also been a shift because we're starting to understand that both the traditional university education and the college education are important, but neither alone are sufficient. When we talk about innovation, is there a direct correlation or causation between the amount of PhDs in a national economy and the innovative and productive capacity of that economy? Not really. But if you've got a PhD [grad], a master's [grad], an undergraduate, a technician, and an apprentice who all understand what innovation means in a particular vertical, then you're improving innovation and productivity and the economy.

Academica: What are some of the benefits you've seen by embracing wider use of applied research?

RL: Applied research provides industry with access to the skills and expertise of our faculty and students, our machinery and equipment, and ultimately creates jobs and wealth in the economy. Plus, we give our students what I call "innovation literacy," that is to be literate in the practice of innovation by learning specifically about product development, understanding customer needs, communication, teamwork, and project

management so that when they get out into industry, they are going to be a more productive and innovative employee.

MB: Our approach at NBCC has resulted in year-over-year growth in participation among staff and students, investment from private sector and community partners, and research grants awarded and revenue earned. In just three years our investment-to-revenue-earned ratio has reached 1:1.92. We can offer an enhanced teaching and learning experience and we have made numerous beneficial partnerships throughout communities across New Brunswick.

Academica: What are the challenges that colleges face in undertaking research?

MB: Colleges face several challenges in pursuit of research. First is a historical challenge: colleges are not as well known for their research capacity as universities. Second, although the federal government is investing in grant programs specifically for colleges, the policies, forms, and processes for applying for and engaging in these research projects are based on university models and have not been adapted practically for the college sector.

RL: I think the biggest challenge is the government balancing dollars between colleges and universities. \$60 million dollars (just 2% of program spending) per year goes towards colleges. We have to make choices about where education investment will go and this is where government comes in to say that we're investing in these areas because they're important to the national economy. I think people are starting to realize that complementarity is key and we can use an equal approach. It's no longer "either/or," it's "and."

Academica: Is there a risk that traditional fields of study, say literature and the arts, might suffer as applied research programs become increasingly prevalent?

MB: What we are seeing at NBCC is a growth in research related to social sciences and humanities. Colleges are uniquely placed to play an integral role in community development and social innovation. Technology is often an enabler of and catalyst for every aspect of research. Whether the research focus is on increasing literacy,

improving health outcomes for patients, or cataloguing archaeological finds, technology is an important and useful tool.

RL: To say that humanities might suffer is perhaps something of a "chicken little" argument given that just 2% of program spending is currently going to colleges and applied research. Turn the question around to say "is 98% of our investment going to go to researching anything and everything that crosses our mind, or should we make some decisions about what is important to the future?" So when universities sling around "jobs" and "skills" as a pejorative, a lot of us—even people like me who are educated in the humanities—are saying, "but don't we want people to have a job?" Show me the person who doesn't want a job.

Where does that lead us now?

There will always be a place for traditional fields of study in the world of postsecondary education, but at a time when learning institutions are becoming increasingly focused on real-world learning and practical results, it seems clear that the role of applied research is only going to grow. The struggle, it seems, will be in shifting to funding models that are still able to accommodate both approaches.

Interviewee Bios

Mary Butler joined New Brunswick Community College in 2011, bringing a unique blend of senior management, education, and business experience to the College. Responsible for College and Community Development, Mary is conscious of the College's place in the economic and social fabric of New Brunswick and works with a strong, award-winning team of creative thinkers and innovators to provide leadership in advancing and promoting NBCC and building the research and planning capacity of the College. As part of the NBCC team, Mary is committed to developing a culture of leadership and innovation at the College and throughout New Brunswick.

Robert Luke is Vice-President of Research and Innovation at George Brown College. He leads the college's applied research and innovation activities, focusing on collaboration with industry to address development needs and productivity challenges.

Robert is also responsible for institutional research and planning, emphasizing overall educational quality measurement/improvement and strategy implementation. In addition, he leads the George Brown department responsible for e-learning and teaching innovation.

Interviewees participated in the [Ontario Institute for Studies in Education](#) symposium at the University of Toronto

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