

## UNIVERSITY COLLEGES IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

As university colleges in British Columbia are now a decade old, this seems to be an appropriate time to reflect on the system of post-secondary education now firmly established in the province. Questions regarding academic standards, research capabilities, governance, and funding have been consistently pressed by the detractors of the university college concept. At the same time defenders have characterized the system as an opportunity to combine academic and applied disciplines, improve accessibility, and maintain comprehensiveness. Three Okanagan College faculty members, Drs James Brigham, Peter Dill, and I were largely responsible for conceiving this initiative and ultimately for convincing the provincial government to adopt the model. I welcome this opportunity to offer a personal perspective on the development and state of the university college system in BC.

By any Canadian standard, post-secondary education in British Columbia was in crisis a decade ago. The resource-dependent province's political leaders saw little need to raise per capita spending on post-secondary education above last place among the provinces. British Columbia was a magnet for degreed professionals from elsewhere in Canada and abroad. The province contributed to the brain drain from other regions and thereby benefited from others' human capital investments, but the corollary was that the province was not providing the educational opportunities for its own youth to qualify for positions which existed within its private and public sectors. This dismal provincial situation was aggravated internally. The three existing universities were all located in the extreme southwest corner of the province, making them geographically and economically inaccessible to that part of the population residing "beyond Hope." Post-secondary participation rates in the interior were half those of the Lower Mainland in the province with the lowest participation rates in Canada.

The cities and towns in the hinterland were well served by a community college system that had developed since the mid-1960s. These colleges provided a wide range of community education, vocational, technical and academic programs. Generally, they provided two years of programming towards arts degrees and at least one year towards science or more specialized degrees. In many communities "university transfer" colleges were institutions of first choice—even high-achieving students saw them as good quality and economical bridges to university entrance. Our concern was not that the colleges were under-achieving. On the contrary, transfer students were regularly tracked by Dr. John Dennison of UBC and they performed very well when they competed with "direct entry" students. Instead,

we were concerned that educational opportunities available to students outside of the metropolitan areas of Vancouver and Victoria remained limited. Of course, we also recognized the economic imperatives, that educational dollars generated locally were being spent outside of the region by students and governments and represented a huge drain on hinterland economies and that an educational institution is an economic generator in its own right.

With this history in mind, the university college model was chosen deliberately, although perhaps with too much caution. We calculated that the Social Credit government, in an era of public spending "restraint," was unwilling to fund a new university anywhere in the province. The faculty at Okanagan College was well qualified to teach at the university level, it welcomed the opportunity to offer upper level courses leading to a degree, and it was less than enthusiastic about acquiring a competing university in the region. We adapted an evolutionary model characterised by the slogan "Getting there by degrees." An implicit bargain was made with the provincial government: Give communities in the interior of BC the capability of granting undergraduate degrees and they will demonstrate the viability of offering university programs, at which time they will expect to advance to full university status. Stan Hagen, the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, convinced of both the economic and political efficacy of the proposal, adopted the concept; with the stroke of his pen he made it government policy. He used the legislative authority of the provincial universities to offer programs while legislation creating new provincial institutions was being developed. When the legislation, the revised "College and Institute Act" was announced, it was missing two features that had been repeatedly emphasized as crucial to the success of the institution: a research mandate and academic governance.

Four university colleges were established in the province under varying circumstances determined by factors such as the requirements of the mentoring institution and of the collective bargaining process at each institution. As an example, the new Okanagan University College collaborated with UBC to offer arts and science undergraduate degrees, and with the University of Victoria to offer a range of professional degrees including Nursing, Social Work, Fine Arts, and Education. A new campus to accommodate approximately 2000 students was built, and temporary funding was provided to improve the holdings in the library. Within five years, with basic programs developed, faculty hired, students enrolled, and the "Colleges and Institute

Act" passed in to law, Okanagan University College became an independent degree-granting institution.

Unquestionably, access to undergraduate degrees was improved in many British Columbia communities by this development. At some university colleges a broad range of basic undergraduate degree programs is offered, some distinctive programming has been achieved, and initiatives such as laddering of technical programs into degree programs has begun. A strong young faculty has been attracted to these institutions, and members are competing, with varying success, for funding from the national funding agencies, although some are working under excessive teaching workloads that preclude active research agendas. Students are graduating with degrees that are gaining acceptance by the business world, and by professional and graduate programs at good universities across Canada. At some of the university colleges, the initial goals have been achieved although great differences between institutions exist. These are important but modest achievements.

Some problems were predictable – an evolutionary process would ossify and would prevent further development, and lack of a research mandate and of academic governance would slowly strangle the academic program. In my own institution and its community, a strong sentiment exists to immediately take the final step to full university status. With a population of over 300,000 persons, it is the largest jurisdiction in North America

without a full status university. With approximately 9% of the provincial population it receives about 3.5% of provincial spending on post-secondary spending. The participation rate in post-secondary education continues to lag far behind those elsewhere in the province and the country. The lack of a research mandate is an impediment to achieving access equal to that of universities to academic grants, research chairs, improvements to facilities such as laboratories, and adequate funding from the provincial government. Per-student library holdings rest at approximately half those of Canada's weakest university. Synergies that one would expect to develop through cooperation with businesses and agencies such as the local cancer clinic and Experimental Station are limited. Finally, outside of British Columbia few even know what the term "university college" means. Credibility in the academic world is hard won, and gaining credibility is doubly difficult for an under-funded and novel institution.

Was the university college initiative worthwhile? My answer is a qualified yes. While some university colleges seem content with their status, at Okanagan University College, it is clearly time to evolve to full university status.

*Duane Thomson, Department of History, Okanagan University College*

