

# Government Policy and Postsecondary Education in Alberta: A ‘Field Theory’ Analysis

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*While the landscape of postsecondary education in Alberta continues to expand and diversify, there seems to be very little written about the organization of postsecondary education in the province over the past 15 to 20 years (Wimmer & Schmaus, 2010). This paper provides an analysis of postsecondary education in Alberta over the past 15 to 20 years using social theory, specifically “thinking tools” (Grenfell & James, 2004) provided in Bourdieu’s Field Theory to reveal power struggles in the system. Government policies that drive postsecondary institutions to struggle for position in market-like conditions while tightly controlling the parameters of that market are explored. We discuss the role government policy plays in the reproduction of power structures and their distribution of capital in the province of Alberta.*

*Alors que l’éducation postsecondaire en Alberta continue à s’étendre et à se diversifier, on a très peu écrit sur son organisation dans les 15 ou 20 dernières années (Wimmer & Schmaus, 2010). Cet article analyse l’éducation postsecondaire en Alberta dans les 15 ou 20 dernières années par le biais de la théorie sociale, notamment les outils de pensée (Grenfell & James, 2004) de la théorie des champs de Bourdieu, de sorte à dévoiler les luttes pour le pouvoir au sein du système. Nous nous penchons sur les politiques gouvernementales qui poussent les établissements postsecondaires à se battre pour leur position dans des conditions qui ressemblent à celles du marché tout en contrôlant strictement les paramètres de ce marché. Nous discutons le rôle des politiques gouvernementales dans la reproduction des structures du pouvoir et leur répartition du capital aux établissements postsecondaires en Alberta.*

Andrews, Holdaway, and Mowat (1997) trace the development of postsecondary education in Alberta since 1945. They summarize that since 1945, postsecondary education in the province is “characterized by both pragmatism and elitism” (p. 87). They conclude that over a period of 50 years (1945 to 1995), the Alberta postsecondary system was marked first by reconstruction followed by reduction. They end their book chapter by asking “what can be said of the future of postsecondary education?” (p. 87). The first part of this paper responds to the above question. According to D. Wood (former bureaucrat with the Department of Alberta Advanced Education), since the first round of major cuts to postsecondary education in Alberta in the early 1990s, we have witnessed the transformation of colleges to universities, degree granting status given to institutions other than Alberta’s major research universities, the development of collaborative degree programs, growth in Aboriginal postsecondary education, and research agendas undertaken at what had previously been non-research institutions (personal communication, November, 2007). In terms of government legislation, we note two major recent developments. The first, *Alberta’s Postsecondary Learning Act* (2004), brings together a long history of four

separate acts: *University Act*, *Technical and Vocational Act*, *Colleges Act*, and the *Banff Centre Act*. Bringing these acts together is significant because for the first time in Alberta's postsecondary history, we see all sectors becoming coordinated under one piece of legislation. The second is government's attempt to coordinate and clarify postsecondary education in Alberta through its *Roles and Mandates Policy Framework* (2007) with a focus on the division of institutions into six sectors distinguished by program offerings and research agendas. In providing context for the analysis, we begin with an account of the major changes in postsecondary education in Alberta over the past 15-20 years and then examine the Government's *Roles and Mandates Policy Framework* (RMPPF).

In the second part of this paper we provide an analysis of postsecondary education in Alberta over the past 15 to 20 years using social theory, specifically "thinking tools" (Grenfell & James, 2004) provided by Bourdieu's Field Theory to reveal power struggles in the system. Using the *Roles and Mandates* document we illustrate how postsecondary education in Alberta includes the political field; the bureaucratic field; the fields of students/learners, citizens, special needs groups, postsecondary institutions; the field of economic power; and the global education policy field. The dualism of government policy that forces postsecondary institutions to compete in the market on the one hand, and legislation that decrees what the market will be and calls for increased collaboration on the other are explored. We discuss the role government policy plays in the reproduction of power structures and their distribution of capital in the province of Alberta.

### **The Context of Postsecondary Education in Alberta—20 Years of System Change**

Postsecondary education in Alberta has been marked by much change in the past 20 years. Specifically, despite major reductions in provincial allocations to institutions in the early 1990s (details to follow later), Alberta's postsecondary education system has expanded. In 1995, there were 21 main postsecondary institutions in the province including: 4 universities, 11 public colleges, 4 degree granting private colleges, 2 technical institutes, 4 vocational colleges, and a great number (184) of other institutions including the Banff Centre for Continuing Education, Schools of Nursing, Private vocational schools, Bible colleges and seminaries, Aboriginal colleges, Community learning councils, and Community consortia (Andrews et al., 1997).

### **Publicly Funded Postsecondary Education in Alberta Today**

In 2013 we see a different picture of postsecondary education in Alberta where there is a total of 26 (21 public and 5 independent) publicly funded institutions. All 26 receive government funding and are governed by the *Postsecondary Learning Act* (2004). While the focus of this paper is on Alberta's publicly funded postsecondary system, we are aware that there remains a plethora of private, mostly for profit, institutions in the province with the majority offering programs in English language proficiency and training programs in technology, business, and health care. While the number of publicly funded postsecondary schools has not increased, the mandates and roles of many of them have changed. For example, recently, the number of universities changed from four to six when the former Mount Royal College in Calgary and Grant MacEwan Community College in Edmonton became Mount Royal University and MacEwan University respectively. What is also noteworthy is the public funding of independent

university colleges. Here, an additional five institutions, largely faith based, add to the number of institutions receiving public funding. The following overview highlights other major changes to Alberta's postsecondary landscape.

### **Postsecondary Learning Act (2004)**

All publicly funded postsecondary institutions in Alberta including the five independent institutions are now governed by one act. As noted earlier, this brought together the previous four separate acts (*University Act, Colleges Act, Technical and Vocational Act, and the Banff Centre Act*). This was not the first attempt in Alberta's history to merge the acts; there were at least two failed attempts at consolidation. The passing of the 2004 Act is significant in that it provides a clear path for increased government involvement in the coordination of postsecondary education in Alberta.

### **Colleges and technical institutes as degree granting organizations**

We note considerable growth in this area. In 1997, only four universities in Alberta were degree granting. A 2007 survey of postsecondary institutions shows degree granting status exists not only in Alberta's major universities but also includes baccalaureate and applied degrees from baccalaureate and applied studies institutions, at that time Grant MacEwan College and Mount Royal College, and applied and baccalaureate degrees in specified areas from polytechnic institutions, the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) and the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT).

### **Degree Completion at Regional Colleges**

There are a number of recent (in the past 10 to 15 years) collaborations between institutions that enable students to complete programs without having to relocate to main campuses. We use the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta (U of A) as an example to illustrate the increased opportunity for students to complete a University of Alberta Bachelor of Education Degree at an institution other than the main University of Alberta campus in Edmonton. These programs are referred to as the University of Alberta's Collaborative Degrees. Through special provincial funding, the first two such programs were offered at Grande Prairie Regional College and Red Deer College. Each new program had a focus intended to respond to the needs of teacher education not currently being offered in Edmonton. In the case of the Red Deer program, the focus was and still is on Middle School Learners (typically grades five to eight in Alberta schools). The program in Grande Prairie has a focus on teaching in Northern and Regional Alberta. More recently, two additional collaborative programs were established, one in Fort McMurray (Keyano College) and one in Medicine Hat (Medicine Hat College). Recently, admissions and funding were suspended for the programs at Keyano College and Medicine Hat College as a result of a 0% funding increase from the Alberta government to postsecondary institutions in 2010-2011. Earlier this year, the Keyano College site was re-instated.

Alongside the introduction of collaborative degree programs in the mid-1990s, the U of A introduced its Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (ATEP). Here too, students are able to complete a U of A Bachelor of Education Program without having to come to the main campus in Edmonton. The focus of all ATEP programs follows a community-based approach offered at

various locations in north central Alberta. Currently, there are ATEP programs at Blue Quills First Nations College (St. Paul), Northern Lakes College (Slave Lake), and Portage College (Cold Lake and Lac La Biche). To date, ATEP has well over 100 graduates who are teaching both in band-controlled and provincial schools.

### **Other major changes to postsecondary education in Alberta**

As mentioned above, the number of publicly funded postsecondary institutions in Alberta has increased from 21 to 26. Five independent institutions: Ambrose University College (Calgary), Canadian University College (Lacombe), Concordia University College of Alberta (Edmonton), The King's University College (Edmonton), and St. Mary's University College (Calgary) now receive provincial government funding. Over the past two decades we have witnessed four mergers of smaller, mostly college-type institutions into larger institutions. This includes the merger of Westerra with NAIT, Alberta College (one of Alberta's oldest postsecondary institutions) with MacEwan University, and Augustana University College with the University of Alberta (D. Wood, personal communication, November 2007).

According to Andrews et al. (1997), "During February, 1965, the government approved in principle the establishment of purpose-specific educational institutions to serve adult Albertans who wished to take academic upgrading and/or to acquire employment-entry skill training [and the result] was the creation of the Alberta Vocational Centres (p.67). AVCs (now a part of NorQuest College) are now public colleges with governing boards rather than being administered by the provincial government. Each now renamed institution has specialized mandate provisions.

Today, the term "Campus Alberta" is commonly used in both government and institutional documents. The Government of Alberta website describes Campus Alberta as:

A set of principles developed to ensure key stakeholders work together to deliver learning opportunities for Albertans. It promotes a holistic approach to learning that sees both formal and informal learning opportunities contributing to the process of lifelong learning. Campus Alberta is the driving force of the Next Generation Economy. It aims to increase learners' ease of entry and movement within the advanced education system . . . (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2006).

A considerable increase in enrolment in postsecondary education in Alberta illustrates another significant change in the system. In 2008, the proportion of Albertans aged 18-34 participating in postsecondary education was 16% whereas the proportion of Canadians participating was 22%. However, over a ten-year-period postsecondary enrolment in Alberta has more than tripled from 69,737 (Andrews et al., 1997) full time equivalent learners to 263,028 in 2007 (Government of Alberta, 2007).

Finally, we note that in 2007 each of the 26 publicly funded postsecondary institutions had a research role added as a part of its institutional mandate; whereas, in 1997 research would have been a role exclusive to Alberta's universities (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007). It is important to note that research activity taking place in Alberta's main universities is described as comprehensive (pure as in basic or exploratory) in function; whereas, research activity at all other postsecondary institutions is described as applied research and/or scholarly activity.

## **Roles and Mandates Policy Framework (RMPF) for Postsecondary Education in Alberta**

In 2005, the Government of Alberta launched a complete review of the province's postsecondary education system involving consultation with a wide variety of community stakeholders (Alberta Advanced Education, 2006). Among the recommendations of the final report was a need to "more clearly define the roles and responsibilities of Alberta's advanced education system partners" (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007, p. 1). In response to this recommendation, Alberta Advanced Education and Technology (2007) developed the RMPF. This document was the provincial government's effort to clearly define boundaries around the roles and mandates of publicly funded, postsecondary institutions in the province. As a result, a model was developed delineating the roles of these institutions into the following six sectors:

1. Comprehensive Academic and Research Institutions
2. Baccalaureate and Applied Studies Institutions
3. Polytechnical Institutions
4. Comprehensive Community Institutions
5. Independent Academic Institutions
6. Specialized Arts and Culture Institutions.

(Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007, pp. 9-10)

The Roles and Mandates Policy Framework calls for high levels of integration and collaboration between the different sectors, while at the same time, drawing clear boundaries around the types of programming and credentials that can be offered by each.

Initial reaction to this legislation was cautiously optimistic. The government's willingness to act on Alberta Advanced Education (2006) steering committee recommendations, positive reactions to the ideas of collaboration, accountability, and educational excellence, as well as a recognition of the need for government involvement in allocation of resources were all met with optimism by the Alberta Colleges and Institutes Faculties Association and the Confederation of Alberta Faculty Associations (ACIFA, 2007; CAFA, 2007). Caution was expressed around the problem of how stakeholders would be involved in the ongoing process (ACIFA, 2007) and the issues that may arise regarding the autonomy of postsecondary institutions and the achievement of goals involving collaboration and legislated roles (CAFA, 2007). Analysis of the Roles and Mandates Policy Framework using a Bourdieusian framework is an interesting and original way to explore the field of postsecondary education in Alberta.

### **Using Bourdieu to Research Educational Policy**

The goal of Bourdieu's sociology is to expose the structures that lead to domination, and the reproduction or transformation of domination, in different social worlds (Reay, 2004). The notions of field, habitus, and capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) provide interesting conceptual tools to explore these themes as they arise in postsecondary education. An exploration of these tools will help to ground the analysis that follows.

## Field, Capital, and Habitus

Field, capital, and habitus are the core of the many conceptual tools that Bourdieu applied to the study of the social world (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). A field can be thought of as a social space consisting of a network of relations between agents in a larger network of power. The Bourdieusian framework suggests that society is made up of a variety of relatively autonomous fields and subfields, each acting according to its own logic and power structure, and this notion was applied to investigate fields as diverse as education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1988; 1996), television, and journalism (Bourdieu, 1998), housing (Bourdieu, 2005), and science (Bourdieu, 2004). Bourdieu (1998) describes a field as a structured social space resembling a force field. This space includes agents who are dominant and those who are dominated resulting in enduring inequalities and struggles to transform or preserve the field. Individuals in the field use all of the power at their disposal to improve or preserve their position and a wide variety of strategies are implemented toward these ends. The current and potential position of an agent in the field is determined by the share and composition of power (capital) possessed by that agent and a field is characterized by a struggle for this power. The possession of power grants access to the profits or stakes that are contested in the field and determines the relative position of the agent described by terms such as subordinate, dominant, or homologous. The analogy of a sports field is also used to summarize the notion: a field consists of boundaries upon which a game is played, players of the game occupy positions and require skills to play, and there are rules that must be internalized by the players competing for stakes (Thomson, 2008).

Different species of power are represented by different forms of capital. Bourdieu (1986) describes the three guises of capital:

...as *economic capital*, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights; as *cultural capital*, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications; and as *social capital*, made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of a title of nobility. (p. 243)

Of particular interest in the context of this paper is the institutionalized form of cultural capital. An academic qualification is an institutionalized recognition, in the form of a degree, diploma or similar credential that symbolizes the value of the cultural capital of an agent relative to other agents in the field.

Bourdieu (1986) views all forms of capital as universally reducible to economics. Economic capital is the foundation of all other forms of capital which are covert forms of economic capital. Part of the role of cultural and social capital in a system of reproduction is to conceal their connection to economic capital from others and from their possessors. Social and cultural capital serve as a store house of capital; a storehouse that can both conceal economic capital (and power) and be converted when necessary. Different types of capital are convertible and it is this convertibility that forms the strategies aimed at preserving or increasing power and position in social space (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital, in the institutionalized form of educational credentials, is an easily concealed way to transmit capital. Families that possess a high cultural capital tend to begin the transmission process early in a child's life. Language skills, cultural competencies, and other forms of distinction are cultivated from an early age, giving the child a

distinct advantage in the competition for the scarce stakes in the field (Bourdieu, 1984). This capital is generally misrecognized as a natural competency when the child enters school and the school system rewards those who appear to be naturally more capable (Mills & Gale, 2007). This gives the child from a privileged family easier access to the institutionalized capital of academic credentials and to the concomitant benefits of better work opportunities and access to positions of power. Everett (2002) describes the symbolic nature of this capital: “Symbolic capital arises out of the other forms of capital, but only when the arbitrariness of the possession and accumulation of these other forms is misrecognized...Other forms of capital are converted to symbolic capital the instant they are deemed legitimate” (p. 63).

The conceptual tools of field, capital, and habitus work together to demonstrate the interdependent and mutually established nature of the objective and subjective aspects of the social world. The field consists of the objective relations and structures that form the constraints and possibilities in social spaces. The subjective representations and interpretations of these social spaces by individuals are explored through the notion of habitus. Habitus can be described as a system of dispositions constructed over time. These dispositions are developed through an agent’s embodiment in a family setting, the family’s emersion in a cultural milieu, and other forms of exposure to a larger cultural context. Habitus becomes “a kind of transforming machine that leads us to ‘reproduce’ the social conditions of our own production” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 87). This notion of cultural conditioning, which leads to unconscious cultural reproduction, has led to criticism of Bourdieu as being deterministic. Bourdieu counters this criticism by asserting that very different responses are possible from individuals with similar habitus and, because it can change in response to education and changes in the field, habitus can be a source of agency and freedom (Reay, 2004). For the purposes of this paper a collective understanding of habitus will also be necessary. Reay (2004) observes that “a person’s individualized history is constitutive of habitus, but so also is the whole collective history of family and class that the individual is a member of” (p. 434). This sense of habitus as a collective history is a useful way to understand the institutional habitus of various agents in the field of postsecondary education in Alberta. This paper explores postsecondary education as a field of struggle between objective institutions and their competition for position and stakes such as students, funding, and power in the province of Alberta. This struggle is shaped by institutional habitus and both influences and is influenced by the many interdependent fields represented by stakeholders such as the government, students, parents, faculty, and industry. The investigation of the field of postsecondary education in Alberta will be guided by three steps outlined by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992). Initially, the position of the field “vis-à-vis the field of power” (p. 104) must be investigated. This step is followed by a mapping of the “objective structure of the relations between the positions occupied by the agents or institutions who compete” (p. 105) for power within the field. Finally, the habitus of the agents active within the field will be investigated.

### **Bourdieu and Educational Policy**

The use of Bourdieu to examine educational policy has proven to be valuable (van Zanten, 2005; Rawolle & Lingard, 2008). His theory of cultural reproduction has been particularly influential. Briefly stated, the theory of cultural reproduction focuses on the connections between the class membership of an individual and the education system’s complicity in generating artificial barriers to class advancement resulting in the persistence of class inequalities (Bourdieu &

Passeron, 1977). Membership in a so-called higher class often results in the possession of more cultural and social capital which serve to disguise success in school as the possession of individual gifts. The awarding of educational credentials, therefore, serves to legitimate class difference and reproduce the existing class structure. The influence of the state and the dominant classes in educational policy renders the process of reproduction virtually invisible (van Zanten, 2005). This influence becomes embedded in the behaviour of the various agents in the field of postsecondary education, including the institutions themselves. Cross-field effects (Rawolle & Lingard, 2008) also influence educational policy and contribute to the reproduction of power structures. The economic field tends to dominate all others and is supported by the state which acts as a “meta-field,” an “ensemble of fields that are the site of struggles in which what is at stake is ... the *monopoly of symbolic violence*” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 112). Bourdieu describes symbolic violence as “violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 167). The state is in a position to wield symbolic violence in education by exercising its power to influence the objective structure of educational institutions, control the symbolic credentials awarded by these institutions, and take advantage of the mental structures of agents that misrecognize symbolic credentials for actual capital. Postsecondary institutions are extensions of the state when performing acts of consecration such as granting a degree. It is in the state’s best interest then, to maintain a dominant position in the field of postsecondary education, to maintain its *monopoly of symbolic violence* (Bourdieu & Farage, 1994). Provincial educational policy, seen as a set of coercive norms, is an example of this symbolic violence in action. Later in the paper we will present an example of educational policy as a set of coercive norms.

Another interesting application of Bourdieu in the task of examining postsecondary education is probing what Rawolle and Lingard (2008) describe as an emerging field of global educational policy. By expanding Bourdieu’s concept of social fields to a global level, they are able to identify the influence that “educational measurement” (p. 736) and comparisons between national educational achievements have on educational policy. They point out the role that global institutions such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations (UN), and the World Bank have in shaping policy concepts such as the knowledge economy. Rawolle and Lingard (2008) argue that such policy concepts, while not replacing national and provincial agendas, exert a profound influence on the development of more regional educational policy fields. The development of a global educational policy field, viewed as a political project executed by agents in global institutions such as the OECD, is linked to the neoliberal economic field that operates at a global level. The cross-field effects of these global fields and the provincial field of postsecondary education are evident in the prominence of the terms such as “knowledge economy” (The World Bank Institute, 2009) in provincial policy documents (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007). The remainder of this paper will use Bourdieu’s tools and concepts to examine educational policy in Alberta.

### **Examining the Roles and Mandates Policy Framework Using Bourdieu’s Thinking Tools**

What can the Roles and Mandates Policy Framework (RMPF) tell us about the field of postsecondary education in Alberta? The first step in answering this question will be to explore what the RMPF can reveal about the postsecondary education vis-à-vis the field of power. In Wacquant (1993), Bourdieu describes the field of power as a “system of positions occupied by



the holders of diverse forms of capital which circulate in the relatively autonomous fields which make up an advanced society” (p. 20). The possession of various forms of capital permits access to positions of power in the various subfields. What can the RMPF reveal about the main subfields that exist in the field of postsecondary education in Alberta? The fact that the RMPF is a government policy document points to the presence of the political field. This can be subdivided into bureaucratic and political fields for reasons that will become evident later in the paper. The RMPF document also mentions *A Learning Alberta* and the stakeholder discussions that point to other players. *A Learning Alberta* refers to learners, Aboriginal populations, community leaders, the immigrant community, the disabled, learning institutions, and others as stakeholders (Alberta Advanced Education, 2006). These stakeholders can be summed up as the fields of students/learners, citizens, and special needs groups. Each of these networks consists of various sub-networks that need not be analyzed for the purposes of this paper. The field of postsecondary institutions is also evident in the RMPF. The six sector model outlined by the RMPF explicitly describes six subfields and a case can be made for treating each postsecondary institution as a subfield within these sectors. The field of economic power is also evident throughout the RMPF. “Building a sustainable and value-added knowledge economy” (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007, p. 3) is one of the most highly valued outcomes expressed in the RMPF. The phrase “knowledge economy” appears eight times in the document. The prominence of the concept of a knowledge economy and the consistent references made to competing globally also point to the presence of a global educational policy field (Rawolle & Lingard, 2008). To summarize, an examination of the RMPF reveals the existence of various subfields. The field of postsecondary education in Alberta consists of, but is not limited to, a number of fields including the political, the bureaucratic, students/learners, citizens, special needs groups, postsecondary institutions, the field of economic power, and the global educational policy field.

To explore the position of postsecondary education in relation to the field of power it is necessary to identify the forms of power that exist in the field and the struggles that result. Bourdieu described the field of power as consisting of two poles populated by the *dominant dominators* and the *dominated dominators* (Wacquant, 1993). The dominant dominators possess and command primarily economic capital. The dominated dominators possess and command primarily cultural capital, especially in the form of educational credentials. Bourdieu also points to a middle ground that is occupied by professionals and bureaucrats who have a large volume of both economic and cultural capital. This description of the field of power sets up an antagonism between the economic pole and the intellectual pole that transfers well to the context of postsecondary education in Alberta. The dominant dominators wielding economic capital are in the political and the economic power fields. The dominated dominators, wielding cultural capital, are the postsecondary institutions and the agents that work within them. The bureaucratic field and the global education policy field can be said to occupy a middle ground, exercising economic capital as an arm of the government, and exercising cultural capital in the form of individual bureaucrats, departments and organizations. The dynamic fields of students/learners, citizens, and special needs groups have various degrees of capital and, in many cases, may not be a part of the field of power at all. From their dominant position, the political and bureaucratic fields in the Government of Alberta wield the political and economic power to exert an enormous influence over the field of publically funded postsecondary education in the province.

The second step in exploring the field of postsecondary education in Alberta involves using the Roles and Mandates Policy Framework (RMPF) to map the relations between the agents operating in the field. To begin this process, the six sector model outlined in the RMPF will be examined focusing on its role in defining the boundaries of the subfields of postsecondary institutions in Alberta. The RMPF describes the six sector model as “institutional differentiation” (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007, p. 9). It is interesting to note the order that the six sectors are listed in. The list starts with *Comprehensive Academic and Research Institutions*, and is followed by *Baccalaureate and Applied Studies Institutions*, *Polytechnical Institutions*, *Comprehensive Community Institutions*, *Independent Academic Institutions*, and *Specialized Arts and Cultural Institutions*. The arrangement is broad enough to allow for significant overlap between fields but the framework does imply a hierarchy of subfields and serves to restrict access to certain aspects of the upper tier such as graduate degree granting status and pure research. The RMPF establishes institutionalized barriers to entry into the upper tier and guarantees the universities their position of domination within the field. The six sector model explicitly assigns each institution to a specific sector and mandates the type of programming and research that will be allowed. Comprehensive academic and research institutions such as the University of Alberta, University of Calgary, University of Lethbridge, and Athabasca University are granted the almost exclusive right to award graduate degrees (independent academic institutions can award graduate degrees in limited niche areas) and undertake “comprehensive research activity” (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007, p. 9). This differentiation grants these institutions access to forms of capital in the field that are not available to other agents. Lucrative research funding, the prestige of graduate programming, and the entire market of graduate students are denied to institutions outside of the comprehensive academic and research sector. What reasons are used to justify policy that defines the boundaries of the field and denies some institutions access to prestigious forms of capital? An exploration of this question yields interesting results.

It is necessary to return to the reason for including a political field and a bureaucratic field in the exploration of the field of postsecondary education. One can see opposing forces at work within government policy. Alberta Advanced Education and Technology (2007) describes the need to ensure the postsecondary system “is appropriately aligned – and that alignment is reflected in the planning and funding processes” (p. 1) in order to accomplish long term outcomes for educational policy in the province. The bureaucratic need to “guide the system and more ably harness our people resources and strategic investments in innovation” (p. 1) is an understandable one. The different sectors of the postsecondary system perform essential services in providing education and training to meet learner needs and to meet the economic and social needs of the province. In what follows we explore the proposal that it was a competing policy agenda from the political field of government that led the bureaucratic field to perceive the need to introduce the RMPF.

As mentioned earlier, the 1990s were a period of dramatic budget cuts in Alberta’s postsecondary education system (Hauserman & Stick, 2005). Reduction in government financial support to education, an emphasis on performance indicators, and a shift to a business plan model are some of the indicators that the province was shifting to a more market based model. Hauserman and Stick (2005) describe postsecondary funding challenges in Alberta including a reduction from 9% of government expenditures in 1994 to 6.2% by 2000. Alberta enjoyed the highest per capita funding of postsecondary education in the ten provinces in 1984 but fell to second from last in per capita funding in 2000. These funding challenges led to more market

like conditions in the field of postsecondary education. Income generation in the form of fee for service projects, higher tuition fees, increased emphasis on applied research, and increased reliance on funding from private industry were the result. The various institutions that make up the publicly funded postsecondary education system in Alberta are not particles that are pushed to and fro by external forces. They are “bearers of capitals and, depending on their trajectory and on the position they occupy in the field by virtue of their endowment (volume and structure) in capital, they have a propensity to orient themselves actively toward the preservation of the distribution of capital or toward the subversion of this distribution” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 108-109). A combination of market forces and the propensity of individual institutions to preserve or subvert the distribution of capital in the system resulted in a more competitive environment as institutions struggled for limited resources in the field. Grant MacEwan Community College (now MacEwan University) was the first community college to venture into the degree granting business in Alberta (MacEwan University, 2013). As institutions struggled to adjust their credential offerings, in order to operate in a more businesslike manner, additional degree programs were established. MacEwan University (2013), Mount Royal University (2013), NAIT (2013), and SAIT Polytechnic (2013) have all established baccalaureate degree programming in an effort to increase market share and capital in the field. The dualism of neoliberal government policy that forces postsecondary institutions to compete in a market on the one hand and the legislation that limits what that market will be and calls for increased collaboration on the other is evident. What is it that leads to such apparently conflicting policy?

Benson (2006) suggests two poles of the state, “one constituting market power, the other constituting nonmarket (or even anti-market) civic power” (p. 199). The political field and the bureaucratic field outlined above represent the clash between the economic conservatism of the political party in power in Alberta and the bureaucratic and professional resistance that exists within the field. While the current political field seeks to reduce public expenditure and redistribute the economic burden of postsecondary education onto stakeholders other than the taxpayer, the bureaucratic field struggles to maintain control over the system and regulate the differentiation of educational institutes deemed necessary to meet the vision of the RMPF. The result is policy that places the province’s postsecondary institutions under the burden of both competing in a market and being asked to collaborate and remain bound to a strictly defined segment of that market.

The third step in using the RMPF to explore the field of postsecondary education in Alberta is to explore the habitus at work in the field. The interaction of institutional habitus and power struggles in the field help to explain the origins of the RMPF. The description of the field of postsecondary education provided above supports the proposition that the neoliberalization of the field in the 1990s influenced the structure of the institutional habitus of agents within the field. A Bourdieusian analysis suggests that funding cuts resulted in competition for the scarce resources (stakes) of student enrolments, government funding, and corporate sponsorship shaping the field to resemble a market. Neoliberal government policies were internalized and market logics were adopted. Business plans and strategies to increase market share were constructed which contributed to the motivation for polytechnic institutes and community colleges to offer degree programming to supplement their diploma, certificate, and transfer programs. This change in institutional habitus was identified by provincial policy makers who in turn presented the RMPF to constrain this blurring of the boundaries between subfields in Alberta’s postsecondary system.

## **What else can the RMPF tell us about the field of postsecondary education in Alberta?**

To what extent is the field of postsecondary education in Alberta a field of struggle to preserve or reconfigure existing power structures? In *La noblesse d'état*, Bourdieu describes two modes of reproduction; familial reproduction and school mediated reproduction (Wacquant, 1993). In familial reproduction, "the family itself directly monitors the transmission of power and privileges according to customary rules" (Wacquant, 1993, p. 26). School mediated transmission is more common in modern societies. "The transmission of power – including economic power – is more and more dependent upon possession of educational credentials" (p. 26). Transmission of family economic power is still practiced in modern liberal democracies but the exercise is often legitimized through the process of academic credentialing. In an interview with Wacquant (1993), Bourdieu describes how "academic credentials are thus both weapons and stakes in the symbolic struggles over the definition of social classifications" (p. 27). Educational credentials become a stake in the struggle for power between agents in the field of power. What function can the six sector model be said to play in the field of power in Alberta? A more speculative mode of exploration will be pursued to provide two answers to this question.

First, the six sector model serves a conservative function in maintaining the distribution of power between postsecondary institutions. By legislating the type of credentials that an institution is allowed to grant, the six sector model preserves the cultural capital of the comprehensive academic and research institutions and serves to maintain their position of power within the field. Baccalaureate and applied studies institutions, polytechnical institutions, and comprehensive community institutions are denied the opportunity to grant graduate degrees and to conduct comprehensive research (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007). This coercively limits their access to the symbolic capital (in the form of prestige) of being graduate schools and pure research institutions as well as limiting their ability to attract the type of academic staff interested in these pursuits. The acquisition of the cultural capital of pure researchers as well as the economic capital available in the form of research grants and facilities is also severely limited to all but the comprehensive academic and research sector by this legislation. The creation of the Campus Alberta Quality Council which oversees the application process that postsecondary institutions must participate in to grant new degrees also serves to preserve the balance of capital in the field. In 2013, there were eleven members of the Quality Council appointed by the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology, nine of whom were affiliated with the comprehensive academic and research institution sector (Government of Alberta, 2013). While providing an important quality control function, the Quality Council can also serve as a gate keeper determining the extent to which institutions outside of the dominant sector will participate in degree granting activities. While competition within sectors can remain fierce, and the borders between the fields represented by the sectors can overlap, the six sector model and the legislation that supports it serve to preserve the balance of power between postsecondary institutions.

A potentially more controversial discussion revolves around what role policy such as the RMPF plays in the reproduction of power structures and distribution of capital among the citizens of the province of Alberta. Bourdieu (1996) likens the role of the *grandes écoles* in France to that of the production of a nobility. The agents graduating from such prestigious institutions are set apart, both practically and symbolically, and their ascent to power is legitimized by their credentials. The academic system in Alberta is, at first glance, not as distinct as that of France. There is no division of culture, economic, and bureaucratic education into

different schools. The holders of high volumes of cultural capital are as likely to be educated at the same universities as holders of high volumes of economic capital. The fine arts school and the business school may exist on the same campus. A closer look at the Roles and Mandates Policy Framework reveals a different type of stratification. A Bourdieusian analysis suggests that agents with high familial levels of either cultural or economic capital are more likely to attend the institutions in the comprehensive academic and research sector (Bourdieu, 1996). Familial habitus can be said to predispose students to attend those institutions in sectors that seem most appropriate to them, serving to implicate the role of the postsecondary system in the reproduction of power. Naidoo (2004) observes that, for Bourdieu, “higher education is conceptualized as a sorting machine that selects students according to an implicit *social* classification and reproduces the same students according to an explicit *academic* classification, which in reality is very similar to the implicit *social* classification” (p. 459). The six sector model provides an interesting snapshot of the stratification of class structure that students may be sorted into. If the six sector model provides a snapshot of social stratification according to Bourdieu’s sociology, does this make it complicit in the reproduction of class structure?

Before addressing this question it is necessary to address the objections to this position. Objectors will point out that Alberta’s postsecondary system is an open system that strives to be inclusive. With adequate student financing, anyone with the right aptitudes can attend the most prestigious institution in the province. Two responses are called for. First, the right aptitude is misconstrued as an egalitarian concept. Familial habitus serves to advantage certain agents over others (Bourdieu, 1996). Those families with high levels of cultural capital will be the most likely to expose their children to these forms of capital at an early age. The head start these children enjoy is misrecognized for a greater aptitude or capacity to succeed and is translated into better access to advantageous opportunities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This advantage is not a guarantee, which leads to the second response: There are just enough exceptions to the rule to give the illusion of equal access to postsecondary education. As Bourdieu points out (in Wacquant, 1993), “reproduction operates but statistically, which means that the class (in the logical sense) perpetuates itself without all of its individual members reproducing themselves” (p. 29). There are enough agents whose social trajectory carries them beyond what would be expected and vice versa to give the system the illusion of impartiality.

The six sector model provides insight into the different levels and composition of capital possessed by postsecondary institutions. An important question to examine is how the capital associated with a postsecondary institution relates to the demographic of its student body. As a speculation requiring empirical research it can be postulated that there is a strong correlation between the habitus of the student body and the habitus of the postsecondary institute they attend. Students will attend institutions that closely match the familial habitus they possess (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Even with this limitation, education has an important influence on habitus that may open new trajectories to these students. If artificial barriers exist that limit these trajectories, these barriers serve the function of reproduction of class structure. By limiting the trajectory of postsecondary institutions with boundaries around the subfield of each sector, the RMPF limits the trajectory of students within these institutions. Without transfer agreements that give baccalaureate students from outside of the comprehensive research institution sector full and seamless access into baccalaureate and graduate programming, the social trajectory of students from these sectors is hindered. The extra time and economic capital required to qualify for entry into more advanced programming serve to limit the social trajectory of graduates from these institutions and thus serve to reproduce social structure.

## Conclusion

The field of postsecondary education in Alberta suffers from a dual mandate on the part of the provincial government. Struggles between a neoliberal market model of education and a more civic-minded model are evident. Postsecondary institutes in the province are put in the unenviable position of fulfilling dictated mandates with fewer and fewer resources. Resource scarcity leads to competition in a system that calls for collaboration and sets boundaries on the field within which competition can occur. The six sector model also provides a snapshot of the inequitable distribution of capital in the province and the structures that serve to reproduce the system. Collaborative efforts to ensure transferability between different sectors, or fewer restrictions on the granting of undergraduate and graduate degrees by institutions outside of the comprehensive research sector are required to maximize student's potential trajectory through the Alberta postsecondary system. Bourdieu's conceptual tools suggest that cultural capital is convertible to economic capital and that credentials are an institutionalized form of cultural capital. The Roles and Mandates Policy Framework limits the ability of institutions to offer certain types of credential and if pathways between sectors are not cultivated, institutions and students outside of the comprehensive research sector are denied access to important sources of capital.

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