

## Book Review

*Higher Education in Canada: Different Systems, Different Perspectives.* Glen A. Jones (Ed.). *Garland Studies in Higher Education, Volume 11.* New York: Garland, 1997, 367 pages, hardcover.

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There are many ways of conceptualizing higher education: we could look at systems theory, organizational theory, or process theory, for example. Any number of disciplines like sociology or economics have many different approaches to understanding the purpose, function, and role of institutions of higher learning in Canada. In order to plow through this often tedious read, I kept asking myself, how can we answer the question "What causes institutions of higher education to change, given that they are known as institutions that are very slow to change?" Inhabited by scholars and academics who resist change, certainly for its own sake, and who often view their role as defending, like the Senate, the tradition of a "sober second thought" on everything—including change—postsecondary institutions, unlike institutions of commerce or the arts, do not actively seek change. It is, therefore, indicative of the nature of academic work that although this book was published in 1997 and is being reviewed almost three years later, much of the documentation of the chronology stops in the earlier 1990s or even before.

This volume is the 11th in the *Garland Studies in Higher Education*. *China's Universities, 1895-1995: A Century of Cultural Conflict* is another in the series. Those reading about us from abroad will note the diverse, decentralized, and bureaucratic nature of our institutions and liaisons with government. Information that we who work in higher education may take for granted was novel and informative to a graduate student of education from China who looked at this book with me. To her it was a discovery, for example, that each provincial or territorial government assigns responsibility for higher education to a member of the cabinet who might also look after elementary and secondary education. She better understood the role of coordinating and advisory structures in the postsecondary environment, but is still unclear (as many of us are) of the role the federal government plays in higher education aside from making transfer payments to the provinces. She also learned that universities in Canada have a common model of bicameral governance: a board of governors oversees administrative and financial matters, and a senate is responsible for academic affairs.

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This book—14 articles by 14 authors, including one by the editor Glen Jones—acknowledges the diversity of the Canadian scene and the historical role the provinces have had in determining the parameters of the educational jurisdiction. This collection is primarily a study of the role that provincial and territorial governments have played in influencing how universities become instruments of governmental policy and how their funding and governance has been subject to perceived social and economic needs. Postsecondary educational systems in all 10 provinces and the two territories are viewed by the authors and described by Skolnik as consisting of the various “policy and planning structures, institutions, programs, and related activities of each of its constituent political jurisdictions and the formal and informal interrelationships among those educational jurisdictions” (p. 326).

Thus each chapter, although distinct in the specific history and politics, reveals a similar trend: institutions, controlled at one time by some church or other, are overtaken by governments who set them up with quasi-independent governing bodies. Institutions grow up and breed others: the University of Saskatchewan begat the University of Regina, and earlier and more remarkably, the University of British Columbia, started under the aegis of McGill, in turn helped spawn the University of Victoria. Normal schools, agricultural institutes, and even Bible colleges laid the cornerstones of many universities. Then, particularly after World War II and again in the 1960s, increased enrollment, and later, in the 1980s and 1990s reductions in funding caused systems to further change and adapt.

Institutions are molded by external pressure for specific and diverse purposes; they are subjects of internal studies, external reviews, and Royal Commissions. In every jurisdiction changing professional requirements for professions such as nursing and teaching, for example, cause institutions to change how they articulate and offer programs. And, of course, the power of both provincial and federal governments comes from their ability to give or withhold funds; and the cutbacks to postsecondary education that characterized much of the 1980s and 1990s is a motif running through most of the articles.

A topic I was looking for and did not find was Aboriginal education. How institutions have responded to the needs of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples would give the reader a way of understanding in microcosm how postsecondary environments respond to social and economic needs and initiate change. In his discussion of the Saskatchewan scene, Bill Muir notes, “Another issue requiring attention at the national level is Aboriginal postsecondary education, which requires provincial-federal government cooperation” (p. 108). Yet the same article fails even to mention the four Saskatchewan Native Indian Teacher Education Programs (NITEPs) and the catalytic role they have played over the last 20 years in changing the face of Saskatchewan’s public education. With the exception of Aron Senkpiel’s piece on the Yukon and Gail Hilyer’s on the Northwest Territories, the reader is left wondering if this kind of omission helps to define the problem.

The other glaring omission is the lack of any discussion of globalization and one of its most powerful tools: computer technology and its influence on instructional design and delivery. Even the most entrenched Luddite would

concur that new forms of instructional technology, including e-mail, Internet access, and Web-based teaching platforms, have done more superficially to call into question the role of educational institutions, at least since the advent of the printing press. Whether the impact is profound or trivial, or whether you are an early adopter or someone who still needs a secretary to communicate successfully with others, these are questions that listservs and chat rooms around the world are vigorously debating. Whether instructional technology will transform and democratize teaching and learning and lead to a decline in traditional hierarchical power relationships, as some see it, or will become yet another tool in the arsenal elites have to maintain their primacy in the social order, institutions of higher learning are at the center of such debate. It is too bad that none of this is raised, much less discussed, in this volume.

It is not only the content and approaches that contribute to the stodginess of this book. The solid binding, quaint typeface, and antique ivory paper ("on acid-free 250 year life paper" brags the the front material) all contribute to a feeling that this book was printed at the end of the 19th century rather than the end of the 20th.

Such editorial decisions reflect more than just taste or attitude. A brief look at the notes on the contributors helps us to appreciate the perspective. These writers for the most part are academics who during their careers became administrators of university systems, as well as advisors to government, writers of many reports, and members of provincial and federal commissions and councils of education. Many of the authors, now retired, including Ron Baker who wrote the piece on Prince Edward Island, were instrumental in creating the complex systems that they describe. Baker blithely quotes some of his own anecdotes and witty punch lines and even refers to himself in the third person as the first president in 1969 of the University of Prince Edward Island. Some might say that such a pretense of objectivity characterizes the history of Canadian education, which has always been known for its "personalities"—almost exclusively men—for whom we like to use words like *vigor* and *drive* (rather than *hard-nosed* and *ambitious*) in the hero-in-history approach to the narratives of institutional development. We note, for example, that Gordon Mowat, Professor Emeritus of Educational Administration, University of Alberta, who contributed the article on Alberta "has had many important government positions in education in Alberta" (p. 347). In the article about Alberta there is an odd table listing the deputy ministers and ministers of education and advanced education from 1945 to 1992 and the "chairmen" of the Alberta Colleges Commission, Alberta Universities Commission, and the Provincial Board of Postsecondary Education. It is hardly surprising to see the co-author's term with the latter board from 1967 to 1969 as if somehow to prove the importance mentioned in the biographical note. In other words, members of the establishment have written about the institutions they helped to set up and run.

In itself this is not a bad thing. Aron Senkpiel's article on the Yukon and Gail Hilyer's on the Northwest Territories are refreshingly informative precisely because they give the view from the inside: pioneers involved directly in brokering, innovating, consulting, politicking, and consensus-building, seeking the expedient solutions necessary to build and administer an institution.

Most frustrating to me about this book is the absence of discussions of teaching and learning in these institutions. The article on the Quebec scene from 1945-1995 by Janet Donald does reflect her own concerns for improvements in the quality of education in that province. As she points out,

In the context of global competition, in which a greater level of general and specialized competence is required, education is viewed as a success for a nation. Education is also seen as contributing to a reduction in social fragmentation. Social justice and access are continuing themes and the theme of integration has developed from them. (p. 184)

Michael Skolnik, professor of higher education at OISE, attempts a "synthesis based upon the thirteen jurisdiction-based essays which precede it" (p. 325). He notes this collection is "somewhat unique in that it is organized totally by jurisdiction." He too sees telling omissions: barely a mention of "privatization, pedagogy, and personnel" (p. 339). "The fruitfulness of maintaining this distinction [between what happens outside the classroom, 'the big picture,' and what happens inside the classroom] is increasingly problematic as learning becomes the policy issue" (p. 340). Even more surprising to Skolnik is the lack of attention, except for the article on Ontario by Glen Jones, to "personnel-related issues: faculty role, morale, autonomy, working conditions, compensation, and unionization" (p. 340)

In his preface Glen Jones hopes "that the volume will assist both Canadian and international readers in obtaining a clearer understanding of Canadian higher education" (p. xi). What readers will conclude is that the diverse, decentralized, and bureaucratic nature of our postsecondary institutions and their links with governments are treated in a dull fashion in this volume. This book contributes to the stereotype of Canadians as slightly pompous in their pragmatic, polite, and pleasant approach to all things, including higher education. The acerbic struggles between church and state for control of educational institutions, vehement calls for changes to curriculum demanded by students in the 1960s, or to tuition and student loan rates in the 1990s, the domination of one individual, like Walter Murray at the University of Saskatchewan from 1907-1937: these are vivid tales of unique personalities and ideological conflict. Unfortunately, such issues are not dealt with in this book.