

The Impact of Community Colleges: A Study of the College Concept in British Columbia

John D. Dennison et al. *The Impact of Community Colleges: A Study of the College Concept in British Columbia*. Vancouver: B.C. Research, 1975. Pp. viii, 184, \$5.00.

Is it any wonder that so many discussions of "education" are confused? Journalists and parents alike commonly interpret it as meaning only "schools," and it takes patient reading to find out whether the reference is to elementary or secondary levels. As for the differences between public and private schools, or the relative importance of the several varieties of "pre-school" institutions, they are usually conspicuous by their absence. Do all parents understand the objectives of comprehensive curricula, the sensible rationales of "vocational" versus "academic" subjects, Canadian Studies, community-oriented programs?

Equally confusing from lack of definition are assumptions that "education" simply means universities. The evolution — or revolution — of the university, no less in Canada than elsewhere (with double the number of universities, in the post-war era), has changed it completely from the élitist institution of the past, with a tiny minority of male students from the ranks of the wealthy, devoted to classical studies and preparation for a few exalted professions, to a vast proliferation of studies, departments, professions and quasi-professions new and old, and a wider range of students than ever before in history. The new gamut of issues — career versus intellectual or citizenship training, research specialization versus teaching, the social versus the technological sciences, student participation in government, to mention only a few — render any simplified argument about education, even when "higher," "further," "adult," and "continuing" education are defined, most likely to be misleading if not wholly nugatory.

Yet there are still many adults ready to pronounce emphatically on "the proper function of the school," still many youngsters whose educational objective is to "go to university." Against this background, community colleges have had to find their way, sort out their functions and their constituencies, find governmental support and — most important of all, in the long run — public standing. In Canada, the unique character of the *community college*, as distinct from the junior college (of United States origin), technical colleges (of British origin), the regional college (a British Columbia invention), classical colleges and arts colleges of various vintages, has only recently achieved recognition. And some would say, viewing the varied paths which colleges have followed in Ontario, in Quebec, and other provinces, the specialized insistence of the technological-training Institute, and the vocational courses in public schools, private and public colleges, and Manpower training facilities, that clarification and clear public recognition have not been achieved yet. What *has* happened is (a) a deep and growing consensus on the importance of the "community" label, and (b) the development of the multiple curriculum: transfer courses, career courses, developmental or orientation courses, and general education.

What forces are at work affecting the opportunities and the decisions of young people looking ahead to work or further education — to say nothing of the same socio-economic "area" of opportunities and decisions for older men and women? Few who have not studied this, or been immersed in it, realize the complexities of these questions, though their overriding importance, not only for educators but for the nation, would be readily agreed upon. In view of this, the authors of *The Impact of Community Colleges* are to be complimented for the thoroughness with which they have directed their enquiries to every facet of the subject. The results provide an encyclopedia of data on (a) who are "college students" — both in socio-economic and in educational-attainment terms, (b) the views, expectations and concerns of students (most innovative and significant chapters these, which call for further comment below), (c) the "constituencies" of colleges, both in terms of potential population and those who complete courses, and (d) the colleges as community institutions, quite special groups of instructors, and as resources dependent on public support. While reliance has had to be placed on quantitative questionnaire responses, considerable care and ingenuity has been exercised in placing the alternatives and multiple-choice questions before the respondents.

In the light of the mixed pattern which British Columbia has originated (one of the several reasons for confusion in public discussions), the authors have put some of the

broader findings in a framework which considerably aids judgement by comparison, by surveying not the Community Colleges alone (the nine recognized as such at the time of the researches, 1971-1975), but (1) the universities, (2) the technical institute (BCIT), and (3) the vocational schools, as well (Table 3-1 to 3-6). While there are inter-relationships between these four basic post-secondary institutions (and issues to be resolved, which are beyond the scope of this review), their constituencies are sufficiently diverse to highlight many of the differences measured in the course of the study. This fourfold approach must have added considerably to the labours of the research team over the four years of this study. But, because of the wide scope and the care applied to definitions, there is little doubt that the materials of this extensive survey can be of interest and value to all other provinces.

Of the twelve chapters, two (2 and 13) explain the methodology in detail; an appendix reproduces eight of the major questionnaires; there are over 70 tables of the main results; and nine charts and maps. From the studies concentrated on the colleges alone, it is possible in a limited space only to mention some of the more significant findings. The gap between the expectations or aspirations of younger students (and their parents) for "the university" as educational goal, and the actual attainment — even though community college is one of the most reasonable intermediates — shows up from several measurements. Forty per cent of college students indicate on their questionnaires their aim to be "some kind of university degree"; only about 5 per cent actually transfer. The differentials between students — in age and socio-economic status, not in educational outlook alone — who take so-called "academic" courses, compared with those who elect at the start for career courses, show up again and again. No institution is better equipped to replace this confusion with a more rational balance, but the obstacles — which are those of "images" and sub-cultural patterns — are hard to combat. One of the ironies is that academic-transfer students are less inclined to be familiar with course-work requirements than career-technical students. "The difference is hard to explain, especially in view of the fact that college counsellors visit secondary schools to present information to potential college students (and in some cases to their parents). College administrators endeavour to explain academic and training requirements in college publications, and instructors state their expectations during the first class sessions. In spite of all this, knowledge about many educational aspects of the college remain obscure to a large proportion of beginning students" (p. 60).

To be fair to the colleges, there is evidence that those who do stay with the colleges, particularly (a) in developmental areas and (b) by transfer to career programs, gain in learning about themselves and "community" as well as the specific "knowledge" obtained from courses. On the other hand, there are some provocative differences between the assessments of graduates by potential employers (pp. 106-111), and student views of the relevance of their career training, and their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the jobs attained (pp. 85-88). The effort by the researchers to penetrate this little-studied area is particularly praiseworthy. It is relevant, however, to remind the reader that part of this particular survey (made possible in the Vancouver area through the cooperation of Vancouver Community College and the Vancouver Board of Trade) relates to an older and more concentrated industrial-commercial area than the rest of the province, and also draws on a social spectrum with large lower-income components. Indeed, the "open door" policy of colleges, and the opportunities they have offered to so many different types of "students," are far too often an information-gap in popular comments. The thoughtful assessments in this book on college instructors (pp. 113-116, 121-125), educational philosophy and objectives (pp. 119-120, 103-106), and administration and financial issues (pp. 126-140) should be read by all commentators as an essential preliminary, in future. All these issues have national, not just local, bearing.

It is no criticism of this exhaustive compilation to say that it should be the starting-point for a series of qualitative and descriptive case-studies of the most vital issues in community college operation which now demand attention. One of these should be to line up "families" of all the great range of courses today being offered — academic, occupational, and developmental alike — and in each group to obtain a clear picture of the kinds of students who take them, their backgrounds, their needs, their gains from what they have studied, and the extent to which they have put them to use. There should be no expectations of homogeneity, or simple "norms," from this review: variety is the essence of the community college contribution. But such a sympathetic inspection would illuminate the differentials of B.C.'s regional and educational community, the *citizenship* challenges of truly-informed adult education, and the special contributions of the colleges themselves. It should of course incorporate the fullest discourse and judgments from the instructors, as well as counsellors, advisory committees, planners, and other relevant groups.

At another and quite different level (though it would be powerfully armed by studies of the aforementioned type) is the need for a vigorous appraisal of the *regional* coordination of colleges, along with the merits of long-range planning (preferably 5-year budgeting, but at least 3-year in a trial period). Financial preoccupations in the present era, exploding urbanization, the need to preserve small towns and rural cultures in the outer areas of all provinces, and changes in the Canadian occupational structure, all add to the imperatives of this development of policy.

Other studies could readily be suggested to everyone aware of the value of community colleges. But from now on, no researches can be favoured which are not first guided by the map which this study has so meticulously prepared, and by the multiple perspective it presents to the reader — the broad view so earnestly needed today to replace the one-track criticisms and prescriptions of "education" which surface so continuously in the popular media. This review by no means covers all the valuable material in this B.C. Research Institute compendium, or the stimulating questions — of such importance to education, citizenship, employment, and the culture of the region in which colleges operate — which the research makes it easier to perceive and formulate. Professor Dennison and his able collaborators merit the thanks of all sectors of the educational community in Canada, and the interested public at large, for their five years of devoted work.

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