

## **On Complex Intersections: Ontario Universities and Governments**

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Universities and governments share many common interests and characteristics, but the one common characteristic that receives surprisingly little attention in discussions of their relationship is that both are enormously complex organizational forms. For those who study the relationship between universities and the state, there has been a quite natural tendency to categorize and simplify these organizational complexities. In order to study we define, and in doing so delimit the scope of our analysis; in order to measure we count, and in doing so make decisions about the “what” we are measuring.

Discussions of the public role and importance of universities are interesting examples of this tendency to categorize, simplify and define. We have learned a great deal from the economic analysis of the relationship between educational attainment and lifetime earnings and the macro-analysis of the role of the university in economic development. We know a great deal about aggregate demand for access to postsecondary education, participation rates, and certain types of accessibility. In short, we know much more about the public impact and nature of universities, especially in economic and social terms, than we did when the Government of Canada decided to invest in the mammoth expansion of our higher education system in the middle of the last century by providing direct grants to universities, a decision that initiated what J.A. Corry referred to as the Canadian university’s transition “from private domain to public utility” (Corry, 1970, p. 101).

My objective in this paper is to contribute to this discussion by taking a step back into the organizational complexity of both universities and governments in order to

demonstrate that there are important components of the public role of universities, and important components of the relationship between governments and universities, that are frequently missing from the debate. My goal is to illuminate a few important examples, rather than provide a comprehensive overview, of these missing components. The paper is organized into three major sections. The first focuses on the organizational complexity of the university in order to shed light on contributions to our society, while the second focuses on the organizational complexity of government. The third deals with issues of intersection between these complex organizational forms, and offers some observations on the provincial coordination of higher education in Ontario.

### **The Organizational Complexity of the University**

Universities are highly complex institutional forms. The complexity of their organizational arrangements is largely a function of two complementary characteristics. The first is that universities are knowledge-driven organizations. The expansion of knowledge has led to increased specialization, and increased specialization has led to the emergence of new academic programs and organizational units such as research centres and institutes (Clark, 1995). In 1963 Clark Kerr (1982) used the term “multiversity” to describe what he perceived to be a new, complex organizational form of the university comprised of semi-autonomous academic units defined by the disciplines or professions held together by a central administration. Forty years later, the picture of the multiversity painted by Kerr appears to capture the relative simplicity of an academic world before the rise of virtual research networks, research clusters, and a plethora of new and emerging external partnership arrangements.

The second characteristic that obviously contributes to their organizational complexity relates to the tremendous diversity of activities, operations, and services that universities administer. Universities maintain classrooms, laboratories, and libraries, but they also run restaurants, residences, counseling services, publishing companies, art galleries, animal care facilities, daycares, schools, medical centres, and bookstores. This list of activities can be impressively long even for small institutions, and for large universities it may be a challenge to even compile a complete list of operations, services and specialized facilities.

Given this organizational complexity, it is not particularly surprising that when asked what universities do, university leaders tend to return to the three words that capture what are commonly accepted to be the core activities of Canadian universities: teaching, research, and service. The case for public funding is based on the public dimension of these concepts. The evidence used to support the argument for public investment in higher education is based on the analysis of institutional and system-level data.

The problem, of course, is that there are types of activities that we know universities are engaged in but where there is relatively little data, even at the institutional level. There are ways in which our universities contribute to Canadian society that can only be discussed in the broadest terms, in large part because these are activities that take place at what Clark (1983) refers to as the understructure or basic unit level of the university but are largely invisible in system-level policy discussions.

For example, we know relatively little about the teaching activities of Canadian universities that are not associated with formal degree programs. Public discussions of

universities in Ontario focus almost entirely on participation in undergraduate and graduate degree programs, and our institutional and system-level data systems obviously focus on the registration of students in programs that “count” under provincial funding mechanisms. At the same time, we know that university’s are increasingly engaged in continuing education programming, especially in the professions, and that these activities play an important role in the complex intersections between universities, governments, and the broader society (see Brooke and Waldron, 1994; Jones, 2001).

Continuing education and extension programming takes place at the basic unit level of the university, and while most universities have a unit with a specific mandate to offer and coordinate continuing education, in reality these activities, broadly defined, are dispersed throughout the understructure and represent attempts on the part of these local units to respond to the needs of the broader society as well as the particular professional or knowledge communities to which they are directly affiliated. The form of these activities range from informal public workshops to extremely formal programs of study leading to a non-degree credential such as a specialized certificate or diploma. For professional program units, these activities may include highly structured continuing professional development activities designed to teach professionals about new research findings related to practice, or to upgrade practicing professionals in light of new professional standards. On the other hand, these activities can promote informal interaction between knowledge creators and knowledge users by creating sustained relationships through workshops, alumni activities, and partnership arrangements between the university, employers, and/or professional organizations.

There are undoubtedly social benefits associated with these continuing education activities, whether they involve introducing citizens to new ideas and new understandings, or whether they focus on ensuring that licensed professionals are aware of the newest research findings related to practice. There is also both a public and private dimension to these activities; there are continuing education markets in some sectors where students pay high tuition, while there are also examples of heavily subsidized activities based on the need to serve particular populations. There is a body of scholarship on continuing education, but for the most part the literature focuses on the relationship between the relevant component of the university and the populations that they serve (for example, continuing medical education and the health professions)<sup>ii</sup>. In other words, we know something about what is taking place at the understructure of the university, but relatively little about the scope and nature of these activities across the university and how the sum of these locally initiated activities relate to the more “traditional” teaching and research activities of the institution. When public resources for formal degree programs are scarce, do local units shift their energies towards the development of revenue-generating continuing education programs? Are subsidized extension programs retained despite decreases in government operating support because of the importance placed on the real or perceived social benefits that these activities produce<sup>iii</sup>?

A second example of activities that receive little attention in system-level discussions of higher education is the work and role of faculty in terms of contributing to informed public debate of social issues and public policy. At the system level we know relatively little about university faculty other than the most basic information such as age,

gender, salary, and area of study. At the same time we know that that the nature of faculty work differs enormously by discipline. As Braxton and Hargens have noted:

(the) differences among academic disciplines are profound and extensive. Their manifestations range from global characteristics, such as disciplinary structural patterns, to individual scholars' everyday teaching and research experience (1996, p.35).

We also know something about the role that faculty play in terms of contributing new knowledge and critical analysis to social and political debates that take place outside the academy. Faculty obviously disseminate their research through the traditional venues of the scholarly disciplines, but many are also not infrequent contributors to popular media discussions of social issues.

Faculty expertise is also used as a resource by government. Almost fifteen years ago I conducted a small study of selected political activities of University of Toronto faculty (Jones, 1993). Of the 450 professors responding to the survey, 17% indicated that they had been asked for advice by representatives of the Ontario government in the previous year. In addition, more than one-in-four respondents indicated that they had attempted to influence provincial government policy in some way during the previous year. While larger numbers of faculty in the social sciences and health professions reported involvement in these types of activities than other fields of study, over one-quarter of all faculty in all of the eight broad disciplinary categories reported some level of public or political engagement. The list of activities included everything from sitting on government committees to simply writing a letter. Of course some of these activities were more directly related to the role of faculty as "citizens," but many involved

activities where faculty members believed that they had a professional responsibility to apply their scholarly expertise to important policy issues.

One might well assume that there are social benefits associated with the contributions that faculty make to public debate and public policy, but these are not contributions that have been systematically studied or discussed at the system-level. Given the role of faculty in Ontario universities, it is rather shocking to note that there have been few systematic studies of what they do, their ambitions, or how they understand their public role. We know little about the relative emphasis that Ontario university faculty place on their teaching, research and service activities, and how this emphasis varies by discipline and by university. We know little about how changes in government funding or system policy impact on the day-to-day experience of our faculty.

### **The Organizational Complexity of Government**

The discussion and analysis of the relationship between universities and governments almost always focuses on the direct relationship between universities, represented by their institutional leadership, and governments, represented by a ministry or agency assigned responsibility for higher education policy. These discussions frequently ignore the complex organizational arrangements of government, just as they tend to ignore the complexity of the university in terms of the wide range of public activities associated with the institutional understructure.

As I have already noted, universities engage in a broad range of activities, and discussions of university-government relations frequently ignore the fact that many of these activities are regulated by other component parts of government, largely because

these activities are outside the boundaries of what is normally thought of as higher education policy. University-operated daycares must fulfill the same licensing standards and regulatory requirements of other child care facilities. Restaurants and food service facilities must meet government guidelines related to the preparation and serving of food. Specialized research facilities are regulated by health and safety codes, environmental regulations concerning the use, storage and disposal of certain chemicals, and a myriad of other government standards designed to protect the health and safety of workers, establish appropriate guidelines for the treatment of animals, and protect the broader public interest. In other words, the fact that universities are engaged in a range of activities means that they are regulated by multiple levels of government under legislation that has little if anything to do with higher education policy. The enormous complexity and diversity of university activities implies that they operate under a wider range of government oversight and regulatory agencies than most other organizations or corporations. Government regulation in all of these areas has a direct impact on how universities do what they do, but it is generally assumed that, with some important exceptions, universities should be treated like other firms.

There are also a wide range of relationships between component parts of government and component parts of the university that emerge as a function of the university's role in teaching, research, and service. Perhaps the most obvious examples of these direct relationships involve the complex interactions between professional schools, professional organizations, and government units assigned responsibility for issues of professional practice within a particular sector. These are areas of activity where

government has determined that it is in the broader public interest to intervene and regulate professional practice.

The certification of school teachers has long been the responsibility of the Ministry of Education in the province of Ontario, and at one point the education of teachers was the direct responsibility of government through Ministry funded colleges and normal schools. In the 1960s Ontario, like many other jurisdictions, reorganized teacher education and assigned universities with the public responsibility for educating teachers for practice. More recently, the provincial government established the Ontario College of Teachers, an agency that has assumed responsibility for the review and accreditation of teacher education programs, the establishment of standards for teacher certification, and for regulating the continuing professional education of teachers.

Faculties of education have a direct relationship to the Ministry of Education. The Ministry influences the number of students enrolled in teacher education programs, in some cases quite directly through targeted funding programs facilitated through the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. Programs designed to prepare teachers for practice and professional certification are accredited in accordance with standards determined by agencies outside the university operating under government regulation.

There is considerable variation in how professions are regulated and the relative authority assigned to professional bodies, government agencies, and the university in professional education, but the key point here is that these arrangements are almost always worked out within policy communities that involve both governments and universities, but which are beyond the boundaries of what one would normally consider higher education policy. Ernest Sirluck (1977) once described these types of relationships

as “secondary” to the principal relationship involving the central administration of the university and the government agency assigned responsibility for higher education policy, but Sirluck was writing as a university president with an institution-level perspective on university-government arrangements. From the perspective of the university understructure, these relationships may be central and extraordinarily important in their day-to-day activities. Health care sector reforms may have a much greater impact on decisions within a faculty of medicine than almost any regulatory change more directly associated with higher education policy. Nursing is perhaps the most dramatic recent example of the importance and influence of these relationships. The shift towards the baccalaureate degree as the minimum requirement for entry-to-practice in the nursing profession has led to significant changes in the demand for degree programs, and the development of new partnerships between university and college nursing programs.

These are not, of course, simply one-way hierarchical relationships involving authoritarian governments and subservient university units, but rather they are extraordinarily complex policy communities. Governments ask universities for advice on professional standards, they employ faculty as consultants, and they appoint faculty to advisory boards. In other words, universities frequently play a special role in these discussions that revolves around the specialized expertise of faculty and the university’s teaching and research function. University faculty also play an extremely important role as expert critics of professional standards and practices, and as research-informed advocates for reform.

This is, of course, the other side of the same set of activities that I discussed in relation to the work of faculty. Governments draw on the university as a public resource. They seek the technical advice and expertise of faculty in a wide range of policy areas. In some cases these “other” parts of government provide financial support to fund specific university initiatives and projects. They may fund university research initiatives in strategic areas related to the ministry’s mandate (think, for example, of the research needs of agriculture, transportation, and natural resources).

However we understand and define higher education policy, it is important to recognize that there are a plethora of other interactions between universities and governments that involve other component parts of government in intersection with specific programs and expertise operating at the understructure level of the institution.

### **Complex Intersections, Public Purpose, and Government Coordination**

In the early years of the twentieth century, the question of whether Canadian universities should be supported by the public purse was open to debate. The majority of Canadian universities were private, denominational institutions, and few of these institutions received provincial operating grants. A year after confederation the Government of Ontario decided that it would only provide provincial support to secular universities.

The question of whether the universities that received public operating support were “public universities” was, and continues to be, open to debate. Unlike the university arrangements that emerged as a function of the national reforms in continental Europe in the nineteenth century, Canadian universities were never viewed as public institutions in

terms of state ownership or control (Amaral, Jones and Karseth, 2002). In legal terms they were established as independent, not-for-profit, private corporations. They were never owned by provincial governments, and they were subjected to relatively little government regulation until provincial governments began to coordinate expansion in the 1960s (Jones, 1996).

By the early 1970s the higher education landscape had changed dramatically. The lure of provincial government investment had led many denominational institutions to secularize and become eligible for operating support, while many others entered into federation or affiliation arrangements with publicly supported institutions. Every university in Canada received government funding, and while the arrangements varied by province, these publicly supported institutions were assigned a public monopoly over the ability to grant secular degrees (Jones, 1996; Skolnik, 1997). Even with an assigned monopoly over degree-granting and government operating grants, the universities of Ontario tended to refer to themselves as “provincially-assisted” rather than “public” institutions (Monahan, 2004, p. 41). This phrase reflected the other reality of Canadian universities, that universities continued to be funded through a combination of both public and private (tuition fees, gifts, sale of goods, contracts, etc.) sources.

It is government, rather than the universities, which has historically played the central role in determining the balance between private and public funding. Given that the two largest components of university operating revenues are government grants and tuition fees for degree programs, it is important to note that provincial governments across the country have had considerable experience in influencing, if not directly controlling, both the level of grants and the level of fees (Jones, 1996).

The question of whether Canadian universities should be supported by the public purse is no longer a matter of debate. Canada's provincial governments, like every other government on earth, have come to recognize the public importance of higher education. There is also no question as to whether universities contribute to the broader society. We know that there are both private and social benefits associated with a university education. We know that universities contribute to the economic development of our nation.

The problem, as I have attempted to illustrate, is that there are also a range of university activities that contribute to our society that we know surprisingly little about. We know something about the social benefits associated with our formal degree programs, but we know relatively little about the social benefits associated with the wide range of other teaching and educational activities that take place within our universities. We know that university faculty contribute their expertise to public debates. They offer expert analysis and opinions through publications and media coverage. Governments ask them for advice, and engage them as consultants. In short, universities may play a very special role within our democratic society as a source of technical expertise, scholarly criticism, and policy alternatives. We know something about the economic benefits of higher education for our students, but surprisingly little about the impact of university education on other dimensions of their lives. This is far from an exhaustive list of activities that receive relatively little attention in the discussion of the contributions of the university to our society. This list does, however, provide support for the conclusion that our current attempts to measure the social and economic benefits of higher education

barely scratch the surface. There are a wide range of university activities that involve social benefits and the broader public interest that we know surprisingly little about.

Given these already complex intersections between universities and governments, how should the Government of Ontario coordinate universities? Perhaps the most obvious observation is that a highly centralized approach is problematic if not impossible. It is problematic because a centrally controlled approach to coordination would have an impact on the capacity of local units to respond to their knowledge communities, industries, professions, and students. Given the complexities of government, it would be impossible because of the level of collaboration between the various government departments that have a direct interest in universities that would be necessary in order to develop a coordinated approach.

This observation is also supported by policy trends in many other jurisdictions. Many of the countries that previously employed highly centralized approaches to coordinating and regulating higher education have taken a step back in the last few decades in order to provide universities with greater autonomy. This includes Japan, Sweden, and many of the countries of continental Europe (see Amaral, Jones and Karseth, 2002; Meek, 2002, 2003 ). The Canadian approach to university coordination, in contrast, has been highly decentralized, and Canadian universities have historically had very high levels of institutional autonomy (Anderson and Johnson, 1998; Jones, 1996).

A second observation is that given the complex intersections between governments and universities, the notion of a “buffer body,” an agency designed to separate universities from the political interference of government, may no longer be a viable structural mechanism for coordination. With the University Grants Commission of

the United Kingdom as perhaps the most frequent example, it was once argued that “buffer bodies” provided a mechanism for coordinating higher education at arms-length from the dangerous interventions of partisan politics (Meek, 2002). The problem, however, is that the interactions between universities and governments now involve such a wide range of government sectors and university units that a “buffer” may do more harm than good. In other words, among the possible roles that might be assigned to some sort of advisory body for higher education in Ontario, I do not believe that it is reasonable to assume that this agency can and should protect the universities from government, any more that we should assume that the agency can and should protect the government from universities. The intersections between government and university activities are simply too complex and multifaceted to be structurally routed through some form of buffer agency.

In my opinion, the problems with our current coordinating arrangements in Ontario stem from two basic issues. The first is that these coordinating arrangements need to consider the enormous complexity of higher education as a policy sector. In this paper I have tried to provide some indication of the organizational complexities of both the university and government, but the moment that we begin to discuss the coordination of higher education in Ontario we need to consider the complexities associated with coordinating a system composed of many universities and colleges of applied arts and technology. It is also a system that is increasingly influenced by two levels of government, rather than one. We now have a range of federal government initiatives designed to increase the research capacity of our universities. We now have a community college sector that grants applied degrees, and a university sector that is increasingly

involved in certificate and diploma programs. We now have a small number of new private universities, and a growing private/vocational proprietary sector.

What has been the impact of these shifts in policy direction? The first problem with our current coordinating arrangements in Ontario is that we really do not know the answer. The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities spends over 4 billion dollars a year, but it has almost no research capacity in terms of studying and monitoring higher education. As these major changes suggest, the problem is not whether the government has the capacity to make decisions, but rather whether it has the capacity to make informed decisions. We need more systematic research about higher education in Ontario. We need to know more about the work of our faculty and the role of higher education in the lives of our students.

The second problem is that the Government of Ontario has never really adopted a system-wide perspective to the coordination of higher education in this province. Ontario has a long tradition of binary, sectoral policy development, despite the evidence that one of the most important policy issues is associated with the relationships between the Ontario college and university sectors (Jones, 1997). We need an approach to coordination that recognizes that there is a public interest in higher education that may, at times, transcend sectoral and institutional interests. I am not arguing for greater government interference in higher education policy, I am suggesting the development of system-level higher education coordination that is mindful of the organizational complexities of our system. My sense is that both universities and colleges are best served by high levels of institutional autonomy, but that the government has a responsibility to steer.

These two problems are obviously closely related. You can't steer without some sense of where you are and where you want to go. Higher education in Ontario is clearly moving, but without a clear sense of who is going in what direction it has been difficult to decide who should pay for the gas, let alone understand the benefits of taking the ride. Given the complex intersections between universities, governments, and the broader society, it is also important to know what is happening on the ground.

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<sup>ii</sup> Houle (1980) is perhaps the most cited work on the role of continuing education in the professions, though most of the empirical work in this area can be found in the specialized educational journals of the various professions. The *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education* provides a forum for research findings on the role and work of central continuing education and extension units within the university.

<sup>iii</sup> One might logically presume that the answer to the first question is yes and the answer to the second question is no, but in the analysis of markets and influence in higher education there are often unanticipated findings (see Teixeira, Jongbloed, Dill and Amaral, 2004).

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# On Complex Intersections: Canadian Universities and Governments

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# On Complex Intersections

- The common view
- University as a complex organization
- Government as a complex organization
- Observations on the coordination of higher education in Ontario

Government

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University

# University

- Organizational complexity related to the continuing growth of knowledge and related specialization of programs and research
- Organizational complexity related to the diverse range of activities: libraries, bookstores, restaurants, daycares, medical services, nuclear reactors, chemical laboratories, animal care facilities, etc., etc.

# University Understructure

										<b>Institutional Level</b>	
<b>Faculty A</b>		<b>Faculty B</b>		<b>Faculty C</b>		<b>Faculty D</b>		<b>Faculty E</b>			
Unit A1	Unit A2	Unit B1	Unit B2	Unit C1	Unit C2	Unit D1	Unit D2	Unit E1	Unit E2		
Unit A3	Unit A4	Unit B3	Unit B4	Unit C3	Unit C4	Unit D3	Unit D4	Unit E3	Unit E4		
Unit A5	Unit A6	Unit B5	Unit B6	Unit C5	Unit C6	Unit D5	Unit D6	Unit E5	Unit E6		

# “Missing” Activities

- Non-degree teaching activities (continuing education, certificates, public education)
- Faculty contributions to debates on social issues and discussions of public policy
- Non-economic impact of higher education on students

# Complex Intersections

Ministry of Natural Resources		Ministry of Education		Ministry of Higher Education		Ministry of Health		Ministry of Agriculture	
				<b>Board and Senior Administration</b>					
Forestry	Environmental Science	Faculty of Education				Medicine	Nursing	Agriculture	
Chemistry	Biology			Dentistry		Botany	Veterinary Medicine		

# Universities and Government

- Governments regulate many university activities (like other firms)
- Complex intersections between component parts of governments and the understructure of the university

# Observations

- There are many university activities that are missed in discussions of public interest and the social benefits of higher education
- Attempts to measure the social benefits associated with universities are understated

# Buffer?

Ministry of Natural Resources		Ministry of Education		Ministry of Higher Education		Ministry of Health		Ministry of Agriculture	
				? ?					
				<b>Board and Senior Administration</b>					
Forestry	Environmental Science	Faculty of Education				Medicine	Nursing	Agriculture	
Chemistry	Biology					Dentistry		Botany	Veterinary Medicine

# Coordination

- Ontario needs the capacity to make informed decisions on the coordination of higher education (research, policy analysis)
- Ontario needs an approach to coordination that is system-wide (not sectoral)