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On the governance of higher education in college systems (0135)

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Abstract

Where higher education is only one of the types and levels of education offered by college systems, issues of governance are keyed to cross-national debates about the purpose and character of these institutions. The questions are similar whether college systems are regarded as parts of higher education, as in the USA and Canada, or as separate tertiary sectors, as in Australia, Scotland and England. One set of arguments has to do with the organisational coherence and educational effectiveness of institutions with multiple missions. Another has to do with pressures on funding and the search for alternative sources of income. A third has to do with the dependencies that arise from relationships with universities. Central, state and local governments continue to exert their interest, authority and direction. For their part, colleges encounter accountability pressures from several different directions, with their academic-vocational-transfer functions making distinctive demands on their management and governance.

Paper

The governance of higher education in colleges that provide other types and levels of education is distinctive in many respects. This is particularly so where higher education is a minority of the provision and where colleges are administered as a separate and discrete sector of further, technical or vocational education. However, college systems offering these kinds of programmes are regarded, in some jurisdictions, as parts of higher education. Whatever their place and profile, college sectors and institutions confront similar dilemmas about their role in higher education; and, more broadly, about their organisational coherence, educational effectiveness and relationships with partner institutions. These debates and developments have important implications for the national and sub-national governance of higher education in these settings (Grubb, 2003; Moodie, 2008; Parry, 2009).

In the state systems of USA and Canada, colleges offer academic, vocational and general education in contexts where higher education is largely coterminous with post-secondary education. The governance of US community colleges is a

district and state responsibility, with accreditation undertaken by regional agencies (Cohen and Brawer, 2008). The establishment and control of Canadian colleges is a responsibility of the provinces, with state-level approval required to offer higher education programmes. Compared to their more numerous and transfer-oriented US counterparts, more prominence is given to vocational education and training, with only a minority of college students registered on credit courses (Skolnik, 2008).

By contrast, the two-sector tertiary systems in Australia, Scotland and England are based on a division between institutions of higher education (mostly universities) and colleges of further or technical education. In Australia, the colleges come under the states and territories whereas the universities are mainly a federal responsibility. The separation of the Australian sectors is stronger than elsewhere, with a curriculum model of courses in higher education and a competency-based framework for all vocational qualifications in further education. The colleges are only publicly funded for vocational education and training; and their small amounts of higher education are funded mostly by fees charged to students (Wheelahan et al, 2009).

Unlike Australia, the two-sector systems in Scotland and England have overlapping boundaries, with around one-quarter of the student population in Scottish higher education taught in colleges (nearly all at levels below the bachelor degree) compared to one in twelve higher education students in English system (where some colleges also teach bachelor degrees). In both countries, the higher education in the colleges sector is publicly funded. In Scotland, it is overseen by one national qualifications authority and financed through a joint funding council for further and higher education (Gallacher, 2005). In England, undergraduate education in colleges financed directly or indirectly by a higher education funding council. Other types of higher-level education are supported by a further education funding body. This has resulted in mixed and divided governance arrangements (Parry, 2005).

Anglo-American experiences figure large in the cross-national debates and controversies accompanying these developments. The first has to do with ambiguities of purpose and identity. In pursuing a social role as points of access to post-secondary education and an economic role as providers of vocational training, many colleges have become comprehensive institutions. They are subject thereby to ‘persistent dilemmas of comprehensiveness’ (Dougherty, 2009). In addition to their academic-vocational-transfer functions, some institutions have begun to offer full bachelor degrees at the same time as enabling young people in compulsory schooling to take college courses.

As a result of this diversity, flexibility and accessibility, colleges have brought large sections of the population into college education and into higher education. Against comprehensivism are arguments which claim that, by providing a wide variety of courses, not all can be done well; that they compete for organisational

energy and resources; and they undermine the effective working of other courses (Dougherty and Townsend, 2006).

A second series of arguments is concerned with patterns of funding and their relationships to quality. Colleges face increased competition for reduced public funding, with governments creating quasi-markets to distribute resources and linking allocations to policy priorities, efficiency savings and performance outcomes. Colleges, some for the first time, are expected to turn to fee-charging. All are expected to be more enterprising in their search for alternative sources of income.

The lower costs of colleges are a major incentive for governments to expand higher education in these locations. As teaching-mainly institutions they do not carry the costs of research. Compared to universities, their staff teach longer hours and receive lower salary levels. The cost base is lower too because students do not reside on campus. On the other hand, average class sizes are smaller and do not generate the economies of scale enjoyed by many higher education institutions (Parry et al, 2012).

A third troubling issue is partnership and its associated dependencies. As lower-tier institutions in differentiated systems of mass higher education, colleges are frequently in a subordinate position to universities and other degree-awarding authorities. Universities have had a long history of being reluctant to accept the credits or degrees and diplomas of lower-level institutions. This has been a considerable impediment to the free movement of students, despite bilateral agreements and statewide mandates to reduce friction in the transfer process. More controversial has been evidence showing that students starting at a community college rather than a four-year establishment have a significantly lower probability of attaining a baccalaureate degree (Dougherty, 2010).

The extension of higher education within college systems has created complications and contradictions for governance. Central, state and local governments continue to exert their interest, authority and direction. In some contexts, this has been to resist academic drift and curriculum stretch. Elsewhere, it has been to promote, if not prefer, the growth of higher education in college sectors. At the institutional level, colleges and their governing bodies encounter accountability pressures from several different directions, not least from the regulatory bodies for higher education and from neighbouring universities with whom they are expected to compete as well as collaborate.

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