Changing Academic Identities in a Canadian Dual Sector University (0229)

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On September 1, 2008, Kwantlen University College and four other post secondary institutions in British Columbia, Canada, became universities. Overnight, college instructors became university faculty members. On that day, Kwantlen, the institution where I have worked for almost 24 years, became Kwantlen Polytechnic University. Given my current position as Vice President Finance and Administration, this is 'insider research' which raises interesting methodological and ethical issues.

As Becher and Trowler assert, change in nomenclature from college to university may "involve a cognitive change in substance, signalled by an identifiable shift in paradigm, the viewing of familiar phenomena through new eyes" (Becher and Trowler, 2001, p. 174). Their observation suggests that when these institutions became universities, academics began seeing themselves differently. Levin's study of two British Columbia university colleges presented evidence of this. He found the institutions had developed dual identities – 'community college' and 'university' (Levin, 2003). The president of one institution described the situation this way, "We have an identity problem" (Levin, 2003, p. 456).

Academic Identities at Kwantlen Polytechnic University

During the time Kwantlen was lobbying for university status, a number of academic staff (instructors, deans and senior administrators) enrolled in doctoral and master's programmes. Perhaps they felt that if the institution was going to change its identity and become a university, they too should modify their identities by earning higher academic qualifications so they looked more like university academics (and less like college instructors).

As some sought higher degrees, academic departments (mainly in the social sciences) began hiring only doctorally qualified candidates into full-time

ongoing positions. Many of these were recruited with the promise that the institution would soon be a university and that they could pursue their academic research careers there. Over time, these instructors began to press the institution to provide them with more time, resources and support for their research. They also wanted to teach fewer courses. It may be that this new group of instructors already saw themselves as university academics or at least aspired to that identity.

Changing one's professional identity to meet the requirements of a changing workplace, or having the institution change to fit one's academic identity are not the only possible strategies for responding to Kwantlen becoming a university. There are other legitimate choices one could make. For example, one could maintain one's existing professional identity and assert the right to do so within the evolving institution. As well, one could passively or actively oppose institutional change or work for change that would at least protect one's position and status.

To this point, while Kwantlen's administration lobbied for the institution to become a university, others worried that they might not have a place in the new order. These concerns were made explicit during the institution's 2006-2007 strategic planning process. Based on data gathered during focus group discussions, the *Report of the Transitions Planning Secretariat* stated, "*Recent discussions about the possibility of Kwantlen becoming a university have raised concerns about the development of a faculty class system based on the courses being taught.*" (Kwantlen University College, 2006, p. 44). This observation perhaps echoes findings reported by Levin (Levin, 2003) in his aforementioned study of two other British Columbia university colleges. For example, Levin writes, "There is a conflict among vocational and academic faculty where the new university model has marginalized the vocational faculty" (Levin, 2003, p. 455). It may be that becoming a university is threatening the identities of these 'college instructors' who teach in vocational, trades or adult basic education or who came to Kwantlen with masters qualifications to teach first and second year courses university courses.

Becoming a university may differentially affect the identities of those who work there. For 'college instructors' this change could be worrisome. However, for doctorally qualified academics who joined Kwantlen because it intended to become a university, this change could be one that would provide them with status and opportunity to pursue more active research agendas. And, for those instructors and others who saw the 'writing-on-the-wall', earned higher degrees and developed professional research programmes, their hard work could be rewarded with a 'place' in the new university or at least the feeling that they belong.

Research Question

This research study asks: How is the institutional change in status from 'college' to 'university' influencing faculty identities at Kwantlen Polytechnic University? In it, I am addressing the following:

· What are the main academic identities at Kwantlen? Are identities complex and individual or are there a relatively small number of distinct academic identities at the institution?

· Is there an emerging dual sector academic identity?

· To what extent do academic identities correlate with discipline/department and level of courses taught (community college or university)?

· How are individual faculty members with differing academic identities reacting to the change to university status? What strategies are they employing?

· Which academic identities, based on faculty demographics have the potential to grow and which may decline in the future?

Research Methodology

The research methodology incorporates survey research and interviews. A web-based questionnaire asks instructors from across the university to respond to questions related to their academic identities and how Kwantlen's evolution to a university is affecting their identities. This survey will be administered in August 2010.

In addition, 8-10 in-depth interviews are being conducted concurrently to probe more deeply into issues of academic identities. Research subjects will have the flexibility to say whatever is important to them about their identities and the issues raised for them by changes in the institution.

Research Outcomes

The results of the research will be reported at the SRHE Conference in December 2010. At that time, I shall discuss how these academics are constructing their identities reflexively (Giddens, 1991) within this evolving academic community that in turn shapes their individual identities (Henkel, 2000)? As well, I shall discuss issues involved in undertaking this 'insider research. Finally, I shall reflect on the implications of this research for policy and practise relating to dual sector universities.

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