

# Non-Collegial Universities

*Ontario's community colleges want some of their courses to count towards a degree.*

By Ian Urquhart

When the Liberal government at Queen's Park announced last spring that it was handing off the issue of post-secondary education to a task force headed up by former NDP premier Bob Rae, it seemed a clever way to buy time. Instead, the government may have opened up a can of worms.

The worms are the community colleges and universities, long at odds with each other. But heretofore, their mutual animosity has remained more or less out of public sight. Now, however, with the rain of the Rae task force falling on the post-secondary ground, the worms are coming to the surface.

Last month, Ian Clark, president of the Council of Ontario Universities, wrote a "personal" letter to Rae decrying the colleges' "drift" toward becoming more like universities.

"The drift is inevitable because it is driven by the very human dynamics of money and status," he wrote.

In other words, colleges are envious of the higher salaries (for staff) and prestige enjoyed by universities and want to be just like them.

As Clark sees it, this movement will diminish the colleges' intended role: to provide skills training to students who do not want to attend a university. The Clark letter was soon making the rounds in the post-secondary community and causing a stir.

Joan Homer, CEO of the Association of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology, responded with her own letter denouncing Clark's "two-silo" vision as "no longer valid for the 21st century."

Wrote Homer: "The premise that the 19-year-old non-university bound secondary school graduate would never want or need access to a degree is wrong."

What is going on here? Specifically at issue is whether students who begin their post-secondary education in a college and then decide to move

on to a university will get credit for their college courses.

The colleges are pushing for credit for their courses so that their students don't have to start from scratch when they move on to university. The universities are resisting on the ground that automatic credit for college courses would water down the value of a university degree.

But there is more to it than that. There is also a cultural gap between the colleges and the universities.

The universities, some of which (Toronto and Queen's, for example) are older than the province, see themselves as elite institutions in pursuit of knowledge.



The colleges, which began operation only in 1967, see themselves as providing a service – skills training – to their students.

One observer of this cultural divide compares it to the oft-cited Mars and Venus split between the genders.

Where does Rae stand? I asked for his comment on the Clark letter and received an e-mail in which he said: "The key is to remember a couple of things - the importance of building clear pathways for students and that different mandates for colleges and universities shouldn't mean huge walls between them."

As the universities see it, "pathways" is a code word for granting credit to college courses.

Indeed, in his interim report earlier this fall, Rae raised the question of whether "selected colleges" should be allowed to deliver the first two years of some university programs, "like junior colleges do in other jurisdictions." He cited the examples of British Columbia and the United States.

The universities believe that this is where Rae is headed with his final report, due in January, and that the government is encouraging him in this direction.

Why? To save money. The Liberals are wrestling with the twin challenges of a budgetary deficit and their own election promise to increase post-secondary spaces by 50,000.

The Liberals never said whether those spaces would be in colleges or universities, but consider the arithmetic. Currently, provincial funding per college student is \$4,800; per university student, \$6,600. That's a gap of \$1,800. Spread over 50,000 spaces, the government could save \$90 million a year by putting those spaces in colleges.

When I put this scenario last week to Minister of Colleges and Universities Mary Anne Chambers, she dismissed it, saying, "I hadn't even thought about that."

But she deplored the divisions between colleges and universities and said: "I would like to bring them together ... This is one of the reasons why the consultation process (Rae's task force) is so important."

Perhaps Rae can pull it off for the government with a recommendation that both sides can accept.

But he could just as easily toss the government a hot potato with a recommendation that is strongly opposed by one side or the other.

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