**Lineation and Lobbying: Policy Networks and Higher Education Policy in Ontario**

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DRAFT: March 7, 2012

Paper prepared for presentation at the conference entitled “Policy Formation in Higher Education: Issues and Prospects in Turbulent Times” organized by the Faculty of Education at York University, Toronto, Ontario, March 15-17, 2012

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*Three dogs are sitting on the corner outside a restaurant when a meat truck pulls up. As the driver steps out to deliver the meat, the dog begins strategizing about how to get some for themselves. One dog says, “I used to be a lawyer. Let me negotiate with the driver and talk him into giving us the meat.” The second dog says, “I used to be an architect. I know a secret passageway to the kitchen. I can lead us to the meat.” The third dog says, “I used to be a college president. I’m sure they will give us all the meat we want if we just sit here on the corner and whine and beg.” (Cook, 1998, p. xi).*

While one might argue that the leaders of Canada’s publicly-supported universities and community colleges have always lobbied government, in the sense of articulating the needs and interests of their institutions, there is considerable evidence that the nature and importance of these activities have increased exponentially over the last four decades (Charles, 2012; Constantinou, 2010; Paul, 2011). While the ‘whining and begging’ approach alluded to in the anecdote above may well have described the lobbying activities of higher education leaders in the 1970s and 1980s, many universities have adopted somewhat more sophisticated approaches, often employing dedicated staff or external consultants. As policy issues have become increasingly complex and technical, university and college leaders, at least in the province of Ontario, have come to rely on the advocacy efforts of their sector associations: the Council of Ontario Universities (for the university sector), and Colleges Ontario (for the college sector).

The most consistent and enduring focus of university and college efforts to lobby government has been money: particularly the total operating grant or annual increase in the total operating grant, but also at times the allocation formula, capital funding, and tuition regulation or re-regulation (a long and quite interesting story on its own). The set of issues other than those directly pertaining to money that have perhaps been the next largest focus of lobbying have been those pertaining to mission.

In the university sector, at least since 1981, there have been periodic calls for greater institutional differentiation which have meant a diminution of the mission of some institutions towards greater a greater emphasis and concentration on teaching relative to research. Universities have generally shown solidarity in resisting this type of change, though there have been exceptions. While the universities have lobbied to resist changes in mission, the Ontario colleges have lobbied for the opportunity to expand their mission, which, if some colleges expanded their mission more than others, would lead to greater differentiation among colleges. While there has been some solidarity among the colleges in this type of lobbying (such as for degree granting and the new charter), there has been less solidarity than in the university sector as individual and small groups of colleges have advocated for special treatment.

While arguments to increase the level of what Birnbaum (1983) has referred to as systemic diversity within the Ontario system are far from new, this policy issue now appears to be receiving greater political traction. Using pluralist political theory and policy networks as a foundation, the objective of this paper is to analyze some key elements and challenges associated with the intersection between lobbying, or what is more commonly referred to as government relations at the institutional and system level, and contemporary debates over the boundary lines surrounding current institutional types. The paper will begin by introducing a number of relevant theoretical concepts before turning to an analysis of the intersection between lineation and lobbying in the Ontario higher education context.

**Pluralism and Policy Networks:**

Pluralist political theory begins with the assumption that individuals and organizations have interests and that they will take action to further their interests. Pross suggests that “the essence of pluralism is the unorchestrated interaction of individual citizens, each striving through political action to improve or defend his or her position and lot in life” (1986, p. 227). Given the time, energy and resources necessary to become actively involved in the political process, most individual interests remain latent, but pluralism assumes that individuals will become politically active if they see ways of furthering their interests, or if they feel that their interests are being threatened.

One obvious way of furthering interests is to join an advocacy group or coalition of individuals or organizations that share common interests. Pressure groups have come to play a quite important role in contemporary politics in terms of keeping government informed of the views of group members, as well as shaping and influencing government policy. Since some organizations, groups and coalitions have more resources than others[[1]](#footnote-1), governments have often taken steps to make lobbying activity somewhat more transparent. In Ontario, the Lobbyists Registration Act of 1998 provides a formal definition of lobbyists and lobbying and requires all individuals who engage in these activities to be registered (Lobbyists Registration Office, 1999). The assumption underscoring the act is that the legislature should monitor lobbying activity through the receipt of regular reports from the Lobbyists Registration Office, and that citizens should have access to information on lobbying activity so that these processes become more public and transparent.

While there are certainly exceptions, government policy-making has tended to become increasingly specialized and decentralized. Relatively few issues are dealt with at the macro-level of the political system and receive broad public attention; instead, most policy issues are addressed at the meso-level where *policy communities*, composed of individuals and groups who are interested in the policy area, discuss and shape policy outcomes. Pross, in his classic work on group politics in Canada (1986), defines policy communities quite broadly to include the government-agency assigned responsibility for the policy area, as well as other agencies, pressure groups, individuals and members of the media. The term “policy network” refers to:

the relationship among policy actors around a policy issue of importance to the policy community. Policy networks account for informal relations in policy-making and are created in the “gray” area between state and civil society in response to new or failed governmental policies; they may emerge as a consequence of political pressure from the civic society or as an initiative of governmental and intergovernmental organizations (Padure & Jones, 2009, p. 108).

The image of the political system that emerges from these basic concepts is of a community of interest in a particular policy area, for example higher education, including a lead government department assigned responsibility for this policy area, for example the Ontario Ministry of Training College and Universities, as well as a range of individuals and organizations and media. Policy networks can be seen as a much smaller subset of this community that emerges around specific policy issues and include both formal and informal interactions that shape policy decisions and directions.

**The Ontario Higher Education System:**

While the history of higher education in Ontario can be traced back to the early nineteenth century, the provincial government’s involvement in higher education policy was extremely limited until the period of post-war expansion. The government did not create an office or agency with responsibility for higher education until 1951 when a part-time consultant was employed by the Ministry of Education. In 1956 the Premier asked a small group of senior civil servants from different departments to provide advice on the expansion and funding of the Ontario system. The “University Committee,” as this interdepartmental group became known, was eventually replaced by the Advisory Committee on University Affairs in 1961. The government’s need to plan and develop policy in this sector continued to increase as the system expanded; in 1964 the Government of Ontario created a distinct Department of University Affairs, with William G. Davis as the first Minister, and a new advisory agency called the Committee on University Affairs.(Beard, 1983; Jones, 1997).

The institutional autonomy of universities was regarded as a key principle within the system even as government involvement in the sector increased. The new Committee on University Affairs was, at least in part, designed to be a “buffer” agency that would provide “neutral” advice to government rather than functioning as an arm of the Department. The Committee included individuals nominated by the sector, and early suggestions that the province develop some form of system plan, or even move towards an integrated University of Ontario model, were rejected in favour of supporting a network of autonomous institutions (Jones, 1997).

The presidents of these autonomous institutions had began meeting in 1962 as the Committee of Presidents of Provincially-Assisted Universities, a title that reflected the view that the universities were independent rather than “public” institutions that were supported by government grants. The Committee later evolved into the more formal Council of Ontario Universities (COU)[[2]](#footnote-2). The COU was essentially a coalition of university presidents; it charged membership fees that supported a secretariat and Council research and advocacy activities. Like other political pressure groups, the COU provided a forum for determining the shared interests of member institutions and articulating those interests to government, but it is also important to note that the internal organization of COU also served to link institutions on multiple levels. In addition to functioning as a committee of presidents, each institution also appointed an “academic colleague” and these colleagues discussed sector-wide academic issues, and the Council facilitated interaction between institutions in a wide range of academic and administrative areas through, for example, supporting the creation of provincial associations of deans of medicine, law, and other specific areas, associations of librarians, etc. This internal structure obviously promoted the sharing of information between institutions in a range of specialized areas of activity, but in political terms it also meant that the COU secretariat, which facilitated these interactions, were kept informed of university interests across areas of government activity and this strengthened the integrated nature of its government relations activities.

Other provincial pressure groups also emerged during this time period. The Ontario Council (and later Confederation) of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA), a coalition of institution-based faculty associations was formed in 1963. Student interests were represented by a coalition of university student associations called the Ontario Union of Students (which went through a number of organizational changes, later emerging as the Ontario Federation of Students in the 1970s) (Fleming 1972; Jones, 1997).

While the expansion of higher education led to the creation of new universities, these new institutions essentially took on the characteristics of the existing universities. Universities had both teaching and research functions, similar governance structures, and were essentially treated the same by government. By the late 1960s decisions on government funding allocations were made using a common formula. Even the newest universities moved quickly to become comprehensive institutions with some combination of undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs. While there were clearly differences by institution in program mix and areas of emphasis (Waterloo’s focus on cooperative education, for example), there was little systemic diversity (Birnbaum, 1983) in that all universities shared a roughly common mission and relationship to government.

Systemic diversity within the higher education system emerged with the creation of the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs) through legislation introduced in 1965. The new CAATs would have a very different mission and relationship to government than the universities. While the universities were created as autonomous, not-for-profit, private corporations, the CAATs were established as crown corporations under an Act of the provincial parliament that assigned tremendous regulatory authority to the Minister. The mission of the colleges was also quite different from the universities; they were to be highly accessible institutions offering a comprehensive range of technical and vocational programs to address the needs of industry but, unlike the American community college model, the new CAATs were not designed to be feeder institutions to the university sector. The CAATs would not provide university-transfer courses, a decision that would lead to recurring discussions of how to facilitate student mobility between sectors. The universities would retain a public monopoly on degree-granting, a principle that would be enshrined in the Degree-Granting Act of 1983 (Skolnik, 1987), while the colleges would offer a wide range of one, two, and three-year programs leading to a certificate or diploma.

The core systemic differences between sectors were paralleled by distinct regulatory arrangements. Institutional autonomy continued to be a central theme within the university sector. While the legislation introduced to create a new Ontario Council on University Affairs (OCUA) envisioned an intermediary body with some regulatory authority, there was resistance from within the sector. The proposed legislation was never approved and OCUA was eventually created by order-in-council in 1974 with an advisory role quite similar to the former Committee on University Affairs. OCUA became an agency within the sub-government of the Ontario university sector; it received input from the community through a process of annual consultations held in different geographic regions of the province, and then provided advice to government in the form of advisory memoranda which would, following a response from government, become public and both the advice and government response were published in its annual reports.

Almost every government commission or task force that has reviewed the university sector has recommended some form of rationalization or institutional differentiation within the sector (for example, Committee on the Future Role of the Universities in Ontario, 1981; Commission on the Future Development of the Universities of Ontario, 1984), but these proposals were strongly opposed by COU and individual institutions. In her study of the various committees and task forces that had reviewed Ontario universities, Royce noted both the consistent argument that the Ontario system could be improved through institutional differentiation, and the consistent unwillingness, in the face of lobbying from within the policy community, or inability, in the face of other practical issues, of the government to actually reform the system (Royce, 1997), a point that I will return to in more detail below. In the absence of reform, the university sector continued to be characterized by high levels of institutional autonomy and minimal government regulation, an era that I have previously defined as “modest modifications and structural stability” where government policy changes took the form of minor tinkering within a stable structural arrangement (Jones, 1991; 1994).

Minor tinkering also characterized the level of policy change in the CAAT sector, but this was in the context of a quite different authority relationship with government. Most major CAAT initiatives, such as the creation of new programs, or capital projects, required government approval. Each college had its own governing board and each was encouraged to respond to the changing needs of industry and the labour market, but the government regulated the boundaries of CAAT activity and the fact that labour unions in the sector were provincial, (rather than institutional as in the university sector) with the provincial Council of Regents for the CAATs negotiating on behalf of management, further decreasing institutional flexibility. The college sector quickly established a reputation for being highly responsive, in part because in the absence of statutory requirements for, or a tradition of, academic self-government, college presidents could steer the institution in ways that would be unheard of in the university sector (Jones, 1997).

The key elements of the Ontario higher education system had emerged by the beginning of the 1970s and these characteristics largely defined the system until the 1990s. The university sector was composed of a network of autonomous institutions that received grants under a common funding formula and were generally treated as equals by government. There was little systemic diversity within the sector, except perhaps for the existence of several hybrid institutions that were largely treated as universities, such as Ryerson Polytechnic Institute and the Ontario College of Art and Design. The Ontario CAATs were crown corporations that were subject to higher levels of regulation than their university peers, and with a more restrictive mandate.

**Government Relations**

The expansion of the Ontario higher education system in the 1960s took place during a time period when the provincial coffers were full, but, in the early years of the 1970s, a global recession and major changes in tax revenues forced the government to reconsider the pace of its expenditures. While government relations might have once taken the form of a simple exchange between president and minister over the magnitude of the annual grant, the changing fiscal environment meant that governments had to be more careful. The rules of the game began to change[[3]](#footnote-3).

A funding formula had been used in the university sector since 1967, but in its earliest form the formula actually determined the level of government support to the system since the total level of government grant was influence by the number of students enrolled in the system as well as a calculation of inflation. The formula was quickly amended to become only an allocative mechanism; the government would determine the level of total funding that was to be distributed to the sector, and the formula would determine the share of funding that would be given to each institution based on enrolment and program mix. The question of determining the appropriate mechanism for calculating the level of year-over-year increase in grant was assigned to the Ontario Council on University Affairs. After consulting with the policy community, OCUA developed a mechanism for calculating inflation within the sector and made annual recommendations to government on the level of grant increase required by the sector. The government accepted this advice for a few years, but beginning in 1977/78 it decided that it would provide universities with a smaller increase than the level recommended by OCUA. The decision on the total level of funding moved inside government, and the era of complaining about government underfunding began.

The notion that government relations were characterized by the “whining and begging” suggested by the anecdote at the beginning of this paper may be an exaggeration, but perhaps only a modest exaggeration. University presidents, given their academic training, believed that governments would listen and provide more funding if the argument could be made more convincing, with all of the appropriate evidence, and with great clarity, a key theme underscoring a book by Michael Skolnk and Norman Rowan (1984) entitled *“Please, sir, I want some more” – Canadian universities and financial restraint*. The Council of Ontario Universities played a central role in lobbying for increased government funding on behalf of its members and it devoted considerable attention to preparing public reports on the financial needs of the system, though these efforts seemed to have little impact on the Ministry. In a move that illustrates the Council’s approach to government relations as well as its frustration, in 1982 the Council updated the detailed materials that it had submitted the previous year and renamed its report “Once More With Feeling.” Levin and Sullivan described the relationship between universities and governments in Canada as a political context in which “The two parties peer balefully at each other across a wide and apparently widening gulf” (1988, p. 1).

Convinced that the university sector was underfunded, the OCUA continued to produce an annual advisory memorandum on the financial needs of the system, even though its work seemed to have little impact on the level of government grants. In the early years these calculations discussed both the historical gap in total funding tracing back to 1977/78 (when the government began to provide less that the Council had requested) as well as a precise calculation of recent inflation. The size of the total funding gap since 1977/78 became so large that OCUA concluded it was unrealistic (and politically embarrassing) to continue with its traditional calculations so it modified its approach in order to reduce the size of the total gap to a level that would be less unfathomable, while still attempting to make its point that government funding needed to increase to address the “real” inflationary needs of the system.

While the government may not have been convinced by the OCUA’s advice on funding increases, it did listen to OCUA’s recommendations on modifications to the funding formula. In response to its consultations with the policy community, OCUA recommended changes designed to stabilize funding levels, decrease the impact of sudden changes in enrolment, and create an environment that would support longer-range university planning. Rolling average calculations were added, and eventually an enrolment corridor was introduced so that a university’s share of funding would not be impacted unless the institution’s enrolment moved above or below its corridor enrolment. With little ability to influence the level of institutional grants in the context of a stable, formulaic grant allocation system, university presidents worked closely with COU to create a common front in arguing that the entire system needed more government support.

Convinced that the university sector should be reformed to increase the level of institutional differentiation, and that the most powerful mechanism to promote differentiation was a redesigned funding system, the NDP government asked the Ontario Council on University Affairs to provide advice on reforming the approach to allocating resources in the sector. OCUA took its new role in recommending major system reforms quite seriously, and, with the support of the government, was moving towards a model that would differentiate the system by separating funding support for teaching and research. There was little support for these possible changes within COU or the institutional leadership. As Royce (1997) notes, the stage was set for a major reform to the university system under a government minister who was convinced that change was necessary even in the face of bitter opposition from the institutions themselves, with the reasonably clear, workable plan proposed by the intermediary body. The only thing missing was time.

An election was called and the NDP government was soundly defeated. The Conservative Party, under Mike Harris, was elected and their “Common Sense Revolution” became the agenda for the new government. The government moved quickly to address the provincial deficit; operating grants to universities and colleges were cut and tuition fees were substantially increased.

In an attempt to further reduce expenditures and simplify government processes, a large number of advisory bodies and government agencies were eliminated. The Ontario Council on University Affairs became one of the agencies slated to go, and with its reputation severely tarnished in the eyes of the university establishment by its role in supporting major reforms to the funding system, neither the COU nor the university presidents lobbied strongly on its behalf. With the elimination of the intermediary body, the relationships between government, COU and the university presidents became more important and more direct. The nature of government relations changed, especially in the context of a government that encouraged competition.

In his study of government relations in both the university and colleges sectors in Ontario, Peter Constantinou (2010) found that most of the university and college presidents he interviewed believed that the government relations function had increased in importance during this period, in part because the stakes had increased. With the creation of new targeted funding programs and the government’s interest in increasing market-like competition in the sector, it became extremely important to ensure that the government was aware of the interests of individual institutions, as well as the interests of the sector as a whole through the advocacy work of COU. It is also important to note that there was no formal government plan or strategy, and no clear mechanism for making strategic decisions. With the demise of OCUA and in the absence of a formal mechanism for system-wide planning or strategic development, lobbying became the logical response from higher education institutions and pressure groups. This was particularly important when final decisions for some major capital projects, especially under the SuperBuild initiative, were discretionary, and government relations became essential in order to lobby for specific projects (Constantinou, 2010).

The evolution of government relations in the Ontario College sector is a quite different story, in large part because the ground rules in the two sectors were quite different in the first place. As crown corporations, the CAATs were more clearly positioned as instruments of government policy related to addressing the skilled human resource needs of industry. The CAATs had far less autonomy than the universities and required government approval for a wide range of academic program and financial, including capital construction and real estate, initiatives. These regulatory requirements meant that the CAATs were used to working independently with the college branch of the Ministry, and the funding formula arrangements in the College sector encouraged competition between institutions.

While the university funding formula had been modified to provide a level of stability within the sector to facilitate planning, allocations in the college sector were far more responsive to changes in enrolment. The government determined the amount of funding that would be made available to allocation, and these funds were allocated to each institution based on its share of total enrolment (weighted by program). CAATs could increase their share of government funding only by increasing their share of enrolment, and the colleges were soon competing for a larger share of the pie. In the 1990s, the net effect of the funding arrangement was that colleges were competing to expand faster than their peers and consistently receiving lower government support on a per-student basis.

The provincial umbrella association, the Association of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology of Ontario (ACAATO) provided a forum for the exchange of views through the Committee of Presidents, but, unlike COU in the university sector[[4]](#footnote-4), ACAATO provided little support for research on the colleges and its advocacy activities were considered quite basic. According to Anne Charles, (2011) who conducted an extremely detailed analysis of policy development in the college sector, the importance of strengthening the advocacy activities of ACAATO became clear in the early 1990s when tensions began to emerge between the NDP Government and the college presidents, and was reinforced during the Harris era. ACAATO developed a much more strategic approach to its government relations activities, and this strategic approach to advocacy played an important role in the government’s decision to authorize degree-granting by the college sector (through the Postsecondary Education Choice and Excellence Act of 2000) and modestly increase the level of college independence (through the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act of 2002).

The importance of government relations in both the college and university sectors was reinforced during the Harris era. With the dissolution of the Ontario Council on University Affairs, the relationships between universities and government became more direct, and the Council of Ontario Universities began to work closely with government on a range of policy issues. Government reforms led to a reorganization and reduction of staff in the Ministry, a change that reduced the government’s policy research capacity, as well as its historical memory, in this area (Jones, 2005). In the college sector, the advocacy activities of ACAATO, which would be rebranded as Colleges Ontario, were strengthened. New government initiatives, such as the massive investment in capital construction under SuperBuild, meant that government relations were now viewed as essential since lobbying could influence the allocation of resources or new policy directions (Constantinou, 2010).

According to Constantinou (2010), while lobbying has become quite important in both sectors, there are subtle differences in how college and university presidents describe these functions. College presidents report devoting much more time to these activities than university presidents. There were differences in how colleges and universities presidents defined the boundaries of their political activities: all of the college presidents that he interviewed indicated that college funds were sometimes used to purchase tickets for political fund-raising dinners or events, while all university presidents felt uncomfortable participating in such functions and either did not attend, or attended but either arranged for the ticket to be sponsored by a third-party (such as a supportive alumni), or paid for the ticket with personal (not university) funds. Generally speaking, college presidents believed that university presidents had much greater political influence that they did. While there were differences in approach by sector, presidents from both colleges and universities reported that their respective advocacy organizations were becoming more sophisticated in their lobbying activities; college presidents noted that the decision to appoint David Lindsay, the former Principal Secretary to Premier Mike Harris and President of SuperBuild, as President of Colleges Ontario in 2006 had played a key role in strengthening the organization’s capacity for effective government relations.

**Observations On Lineation and Lobbying in Ontario**

As already noted, there is nothing new about the suggestion that there would be benefits and efficiencies associated with increasing the level of institutional differentiation within the Ontario higher education system. Numerous task forces focusing on the university sector have recommended reforms designed to rationalize the system through differentiation, and the review of resource allocation conducted by the Ontario Council on University Affairs led to recommendations designed to increase differentiation through major adjustments to the government funding mechanism. Advocating for greater institutional differentiation in the college sector has been a major preoccupation of a number of its leaders, and these lobbying activities played an important role in the creation of new legislation that allowed for the expansion of degree-granting beyond the existing universities and, subject to review and government approval, provided colleges with the possibility of offering degrees in applied areas. It also led to an attempt to provide some formal recognition of institutional differentiation within the college sector through the renaming of selected colleges as Institutes of Technology and Applied Learning (ITALs), though this was far from the notion of creating a truly distinctive sector that had been advocated by selected presidents and Polytechnics Ontario.

In some respects the level of institutional diversity in the university sector had actually declined over time. Distinctive institutions such as the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), Ryerson Polytechnic Institute, and the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD) would evolve to become members of the broader club of comprehensive universities. OISE abandoned its independent status to become a component faculty of the University of Toronto. Ryerson became Ryerson Polytechnic University, and then Ryerson University. The Ontario College of Art and Design would become OCAD University.

A number of quite recent events have reinforced the importance of institutional differentiation as a policy issue in the Ontario system. In July, 2010 the Deputy Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities asked the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) to review the issue of whether increased differentiation within the university sector might be advantageous, and HEQCO responded by creating a working group of senior officials, including the Deputy Minister, selected university presidents, and the President of Colleges Ontario. The Working Group’s final report, released in October of 2010, provided strong arguments for increased differentiation (Weingarten & Deller, 2010). More recently, Clark, Trick and Van Loon’s (2011) book on academic reform in Ontario has received considerable press coverage, especially their recommendation for the creation of a new sector of undergraduate universities that would be primarily focused on teaching. Finally, in February of 2012 the report of the Commission on the Reform of Ontario’s Public Services (Drummond, 2012) recommended a series of changes to the Ontario higher education system with institutional differentiation as a key theme. In short, there seems to be considerable interest in redrawing the lines that define the two sectors in order to allow for greater differentiation, though, as in the past, it is far from clear as to whether the government will act on these recommendations, or, if it decides to act, what it will do.

At the same time, the analysis of the history of government relations and system structure presented above provides the foundation for a number of important observations on the relationship between lobbying and institutional differentiation that may assist in explaining how this complicated issue is taken up within the higher education policy network.

The first, and most important, observation is that there are substantial differences in the implications of furthering institutional differentiation between the college and university sectors. A key characteristic of the legislation under which the colleges function is that considerable authority over the sector is assigned to the Minister. While the 2002 charter provides colleges with slightly more independence over selected matters, the colleges continue to be heavily regulated institutions. Institutional differentiation in the college sector is synonymous with forms of deregulation and expanding the missions of selected institutions, in that any policy designed to increase systemic diversity requires that the government take a step back from its control of one or more institutions in the sector. For example, the expansion of degree-granting essentially redrew the boundary lines of the sector to provide institutions with an expanded mission, and some level of programmatic differentiation has taken place since effectively only a handful of institutions have taken-up this expanded mission. Furthering institutional differentiation in the college sector implies expanding roles and deregulating (or reregulating) elements of the relationship between institutions and government.

In contrast, the university sector is characterized by uniformly inclusive missions (almost all universities offer some combination of undergraduate, graduate and professional programs operating under charters that provide institutions with considerable flexibility to pursue a teaching, research and service mission of their choosing) and high levels of institutional autonomy. Increasing institutional differentiation in the university sector means either restricting the mission or objectives of selected institutions (implied by the recommendations of the recent Drummond report) through regulation or targeted or performance-related funding, or creating new institutions with limited missions operating under more restrictive legislation than existing institutions. In other words, institutional differentiation within the college sector involves expanding missions through deregulation, while institutional differentiation within the university sector means restricting missions through regulation.

The second observation is that institutional differentiation has quite different implications in terms of the politics of advocacy within the pressure groups of the two sectors. Pressure groups advocate on behalf of the interests of their members and there are differences in how interests related to institutional differentiation are understood in the two sectors. While there have clearly been differences of opinion between colleges on the need to stray from the original mission and expand the role of the sector (Charles, 2011), all of the colleges have shared a common interest in decreasing regulation and increasing administrative flexibility (that is, to obtain some of the freedoms that universities already have). In other words, it is in the interests of all institutions to support some elements of deregulation associated with institutional differentiation even if there is limited consensus on specific modifications to the mission of the sector. Colleges Ontario can advocate for expanding the mission of the sector and deregulation because it is in the self-interest of the sector. On the other hand, there can be little consensus within the university sector over restricting the mandate of existing institutions or providing the government with additional regulatory tools. Given that the Council of Ontario Universities can only effectively advocate on issues where there is a consensus on a position among members, the whole issue of institutional differentiation becomes problematic because there are no member institutions that support the restriction of their own missions (though there are institutions that support the notion that government should restrict the mandate of selected peers). The issue of creating new undergraduate universities is equally troublesome for COU because there are members that have a vested interest in alternative proposals (for example, creating satellite campuses), there are members that fear that the creation of new institutional types will be a step towards restricting the mandate of existing institutions that are less comprehensive and research-oriented, and there are members that are concerned that academic drift will eventually lead primarily teaching institutions to evolve into new comprehensive institutions, thus expanding the size and level of future competition within the sector. The structure of the policy community and the existing structural and authority arrangements within the system have direct implications for how the issue of institutional differentiation is taken up within the sectoral pressure groups.

The third observation is that the lobbying activities of individual institutions advocating for differentiated missions are perceived differently within the two sectors. When five university presidents attempted to lobby for special recognition as Canada’s most research-intensive universities the reaction was almost uniformly negative; it was generally argued that the argument was elitist and designed to provide a rational for additional resources. Jack Lightstone (2010), the President of Brock University, argued that instead of focusing resources on a limited number of institutions, governments should ensure that all Canadian universities are research universities. In other words, institutional lobbying for a differentiated role that positions one institution above its peers is bitterly resisted within the sector. In contrast, when a collection of colleges took steps to rebrand themselves as differentiated institutions under the umbrella of Polytechnics Canada, the opposition from other colleges was comparatively muted. There were certainly differences of opinion on the degree to which colleges should be allowed to stray from their original mission, but there was general support for the position that colleges should have an applied research mandate and some other elements of the polytechnics initiative.

The fourth observation is that in the long history of this issue in both sectors, there is little evidence that the Government of Ontario has a clear picture of what sort of institutional differentiation it would like to facilitate. As Royce notes (1997), the resource allocation exercise in the early 1990s may have been the only time when almost all of the various pieces were in place for a major reform of the university sector – but then the government fell. The reaction to most recommendations for institutional differentiation in the university sector, even from task forces and commissions created by the government, has been silence. While there currently appears to be considerable interest in differentiation, there is little clarity on the goals associated with differentiation or the form that it would take within the university sector (for example, see Drummond, 2012). The government’s attempt to differentiate the college sector by designating selected colleges as ITALs has accomplished little; the designation refers only to a modest form of programmatic diversity (see Birnbaum, 1983) since the ITALs can have a slightly larger ratio of degree students, but there is no clear difference in mandate associated with the new title. Not all of the colleges that have the designation have chosen to use the title. The Drummond (2012) report suggests taking a step backward; the Commission argues in favour of institutional differentiation in the university sector, but recommends that no new degree programs be approved in the college sector.

Taken together, these observations suggest that there will continue to be strong resistance to any attempt to increase the level of systemic diversity within the Ontario university sector. From the perspective of most of the institutions and their pressure group, there is more to be gained by protecting institutional autonomy and the current broad mandates of all institutions, than in supporting a move to rationalize the system that might limit the autonomy and mission of selected peers[[5]](#footnote-5). On the other hand, there continues to be considerable interest in institutional differentiation within the college sector, with at least one college (Sheridan) already explicitly advocating for some form of special university status, and several others planning and advocating for a new status in more subtle ways. This analysis suggests that, focusing only on the politics of the two sectors rather than other substantive issues, it may actually be easier for the government to increase institutional differentiation in the Ontario higher education system by repositioning and reregulating institutions in the college sector, than by attempting to rationalize the university sector.

Acknowledgement: The author is grateful for the comments and suggestions provided by Michael Skolnik on an earlier draft of this paper.

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1. Differences in the power, influence, resources, and real or perceived legitimacy of individuals and groups participating in the political are key assumptions underscoring both post-pluralist and neo-pluralist theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a detailed history of the Council of Ontario Universities, see Monahan, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A detailed historical analysis of the politics and economics of higher education in Ontario during this period is provided by Axelrod, 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In reviewing a draft of this manuscript, Michael Skolnik reminded me that at one point COU was second only to Statistics Canada in terms of producing data and research on universities. While this function was never abandoned, there is little doubt that COU began to devote more attention to advocacy and less attention to research during this time period. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ian Clark makes a quite similar argument from a government perspective in his 2007 paper for the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)