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Crossing Borders and Contesting Values: Questioning the University in British Columbia (0218)

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In 2008 the Province of British Columbia (BC) created five new universities through re-designation, giving rise to a unitary sector comprised of more institutions than not whose educational practices challenge the traditional university focus on liberal arts education and research specialization. Although developments in BC are a response to expectations for mass access and credible vocational education, a fuller understanding of these shifts in practice emerges through analysis of universities as complex socio-cultural constructs shaped by both internal and external influences. The overriding consideration for all the universities must be delimitation of boundaries in keeping with normative expectations and ensuring balance between legitimacy and integrity. My review of scholarly opinions, legislation, and policy suggests alignment across a matrix of practice boundaries—liberal arts degree programs, breadth of study, bicameral governance, peer review, tripartite faculty responsibilities—is necessary to delimit the university as an idea without unduly limiting any specific institution.

Crossing Borders and Contesting Values: Questioning the University in British Columbia

In 2008, the Province of British Columbia (BC) created five new universities through re-designation. Previously, four established research-intensive universities provided the *de facto* definition of the university sector despite previous inclusion of two outliers, focused respectively on career-based, online degree programs and integrated preparatory, vocational and academic programs. The now unitary sector is comprised of more institutions than not whose educational practices challenge the prevailing idea of the university as an institution focused on liberal arts education and research specialization. Further compounding the questions for BC's university sector is the fact that the new universities have disparate histories and educational mandates. Three are former university colleges, which have a longstanding dual sector mandate. Another is focused on undergraduate and graduate programming in art and design. The fifth is a former community college lacking both the dual mandate of the university colleges and the provincial special purpose mandate of the art and design institute.

As destabilizing as these recent changes are, the overriding consideration for all the universities should be the delimitation of practice boundaries in keeping with normative expectations and appropriate balance between legitimacy and integrity within each institution and across the sector. Refiguring the university affords the opportunity to challenge its borders and strengthen its traditions in the face of greater contestation by society in aggregate. Speaking on the unfulfilled promise of the university, Stephen Toope, president of the University of British Columbia, the oldest and largest university in BC, implores academic staff to cross borders—disciplinary and societal—to extend the limits of current thinking and respond more effectively to the challenges of our era. In order “to add

strength to what we have inherited” we must have the courage to “cross some borders . . . [and] enter into the no-man’s land of contested values” (Toope, 2008, p.6). I suggest that the university has already entered “the no-man’s land of contested values.” Our responsibility is to engage this contestation, not for fear of losing what has been, but with commitment to strengthen what may yet be.

Scholars such as Peter Scott (1993) have pointed out that the university has never been singularly defined. Further, since its origin as an institution, the university has been a dynamic idea, transforming its mission to meet the expectations of any given era or place. J.C. Scott (2006) describes shifts that have occurred over three significant periods: before the nation state, during the pre-eminence of the nation-state, and in the current globalization era. These eras demarcate shifting boundaries in response to societal, economic, and intellectual contexts: the development of scholasticism and academic autonomy; the affiliation of teaching, research and service with national interests; and the internationalization of the university through knowledge generation and transfer across permeable global borders.

More recently, in jurisdictions like the UK, Australia, and BC, unitary university sectors have emerged in response to expectations for mass access and credible vocational education. These shifts have added greater complexity, if not outright confusion, to the idea of the university. Given the conflation of mandates and institutions under the name “university,” some scholars feel the university is perilously close to lacking any definitive parameters. Others suggest a democratizing effect arising from adaptations that provide access for a broader spectrum of people and support a broader range of programs. Regardless, a fuller understanding of the effects of these shifts in the university idea arises through analysis of universities as organizational cultures.

Organizational culture scholars recognize that organizations are dynamic social constructions drawing from shared histories and beliefs. Building upon these observations, neo-institutional scholars conclude that organizations pursuing legitimacy often emulate practices of more established peers, but they must be mindful of internal cultural norms, for integrity is lost if institutional identity is sacrificed in the pursuit of legitimacy. For this reason, a reflexive isomorphic-polymorphic perspective is useful in understanding cultures within complex institutions like universities. Pedersen and Dobbin (2006) note, “the formation of identity through uniqueness and the construction of legitimation through uniformity [is a] dual process constituting [an] organization” (p. 901).

My research proceeds from the understanding that legitimation and identity formation within universities is an ongoing process of setting and enacting boundaries. In examining scholarly opinions, legislation, and policy pertaining to the mandates and practices of BC universities I develop hypotheses on university practice boundaries in this jurisdiction. A key benefit of my grounded theory approach is that it offers an understanding of a process and a “macropicture of educational situations rather than a detailed microanalysis” (Cresswell, 2008, p. 448), which may later flow from case study applications.

Several outcomes emerge from this study to date. Developments in the UK, Australia, and BC university sectors over the last century or so demonstrate an increasing focus on meeting the socio-economic needs of the state and international networks. Considering these histories through the theoretical lenses of organizational culture and neo-institutional literature provides a framework for

understanding organizational change dynamics in universities, which are adapting to remain relevant while struggling to retain historic identities within the contested idea of the university. The field of contestation can be conceptualized through several key variables that shape expectations in any given jurisdiction: institution type, sector group, educational practices, normative traditions, and societal values. Within the BC university sector, legitimacy and integrity emerge through alignment across a matrix of educational practice boundaries—mandate inclusive of liberal arts degree programs, breadth and depth of study, bicameral governance, peer review and quality assurance, tripartite faculty responsibilities—that delimit the university as an idea without unduly limiting any specific institution. Upon completion, this study will provide a primer on the cultural dynamics, operational practices, and institutional capacity requirements that should inform public policy discussions and enactments concerning the operation of BC universities. As the new universities were created without much detailed preparation to address the normative expectations of university practice boundaries, the questions raised by the primer may yet aid these institutions and government in responding to outstanding issues related to their credibility and success as universities.

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