

TAKE AN INTEREST IN ONTARIO'S FUTURE

BY ROBERT C. GILLETT

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Post-secondary education is seen around the world as the foundation for economic development and, increasingly, as a pre-requisite for career success. In various speeches, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty and his minister of Training, Colleges and Universities, Mary Anne Chambers, have acknowledged that having the poorest funded post-secondary system in Canada is not sustainable and will ultimately erode the economic strength of this province. There must be a seamless education system that eliminates some of the current barriers for students continuing their education and also allows individuals in the midst of career change to have easy access to institutions that can meet their retraining needs.

Ontario has commissioned a major review of its post-secondary education system under the leadership of former premier Bob Rae and a panel of leaders from a diverse cross-section of the province, including another former premier, Bill Davis. Mr. Rae's mandate is to review the design and funding of Ontario's post-secondary education system and recommend innovative ways for our institutions to provide the best education to students and support Ontario's prosperity.

The Rae Review should be of concern to all citizens, whether they are parents, employers, students, or just participants in Ontario's economy. The Rae review could establish new directions for the Ontario post-secondary education system, which has not fundamentally changed since the advent of community colleges 37 years ago. Although to date the media have given the review very little coverage, it is truly one of the most important reviews that this government has undertaken and could have a profound impact on the health of Ontario's economy well into the future.

Soon, the impending wave of retirements will increase the competition for skilled labour in Canada, the United States and around the world. Ontario needs to increase its participation rate in post-secondary education if it is to have a sufficient skilled-labour pool to address both the retirement wave and the additional pressures of growth.

The increased need for workers will be felt in all sectors and in all provinces and it is essential that Ontario produce its own labour pool to address its demands for highly skilled workers. The continuing advances in technology, combined with the increasing global competitiveness, necessitates the acquisition of skills that are acquired in completing a college or university education.

Recent research studies of Ontario's K-12 system have revealed that almost 25 per cent of students do not finish high school and only 40 per cent of high school graduates go on to complete a post-secondary diploma or degree. The government has indicated that it would like to see that percentage rise to 65 per cent of all graduates; however, for that to happen, colleges and universities must be able to increase enrolment opportunities and remove some of the systemic barriers that may currently inhibit access.

It should also be noted that more than half of the students in colleges today are mature candidates who have already experienced the world of work and have now entered college to focus on a new career or to upgrade their qualifications as a result of new skill requirements.

The Rae review focuses on the key areas of access, quality, funding, system design, transferability, governance and accountability, all of which are essential components of a successful post-secondary system. It offers the people of Ontario the opportunity to make their views known on the kind of post-secondary system they want for the future. It also allows them to comment on how they feel the government should address the problems detailed in Mr. Rae's preliminary report and on the Rae review website (www.raereview.on.ca).

On Monday, the Rae review team will hold a Town Hall meeting at the University of Ottawa where our community will be given an opportunity to make its views known. It is my hope that the people of Ottawa will take advantage of the opportunity and outline the kind of changes they believe are needed to establish a world-class, 21st-century postsecondary education