Ontario’s Colleges:
Time to chart a new direction
in higher education

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Check against delivery
In a moment of irrational exuberance, as Alan Greenspan used to say, I ambitiously titled this talk “Ontario’s Colleges: Time to chart a new direction in higher education.”.

But before I leap into the future, let’s ground ourselves in a little history and look back – in fact about 10 years back – when Bob Rae issued his report on higher education to our previous premier, Mr. McGuinty.

Mr. Rae was commissioned to recommend how to improve the postsecondary system to make sure colleges and universities were institutions of high quality, accountability, and accessibility … a list of attributes no Ontario higher education institution could find unfriendly or inconsistent with our objectives.

The starting point for his diagnosis was blunt:

\[ \text{We have a large, mature system without a sufficiently clear sense of purpose and without enough money to do the job.} \]

He observed that the system’s efforts were diffuse, even inefficient in the way it used funding, and concluded by saying:

\[ \text{The first step towards solving this challenge is to establish a mission for Ontario as a leader in learning. This mission will help us achieve our goals for reform: great education, improved opportunities for more people to attend and a secure future for higher education.} \]

A decade later, it is worth taking stock and asking how much progress has been made since that report was tabled, and where we go for the next decade.

I will argue that while we have made progress in some areas, we have also slipped back in others.

And we need to recommit ourselves to finding a way forward that will continue to build a postsecondary education system that serves the students, the employers, the people of Ontario with excellence – a system that meets the tests of quality, accountability and accessibility.

But first, it’s necessary to acknowledge some inconvenient, perhaps even uncomfortable, truths about our postsecondary system.

First among these is that money does matter.

With the adoption of the Reaching Higher policy in 2005, we had a healthy injection of government funding into higher education that increased per student public support to levels that hadn’t been seen since the first half of the ‘90s.

But since 2008, there has been a slow but steady erosion of that support from government – in fact we are back to the same level as when it was found we did not have enough money to do the job.
And we have a sustainability issue among colleges and universities that has to be acknowledged and addressed – it will not fix itself.

This isn’t some kind of self-inflicted wound – Ontario’s demographic realities are driving lower enrolments in several parts of the province, and risk exacerbating divides along north/south, urban/rural and large/small lines.

Because without a significant change in direction, the financial situation of some postsecondary institutions in this province will likely become even more, in the vernacular of the day, precarious.

Second is that the postsecondary sector is, I argue, unique among public sector systems in two fundamental ways: we operate in a highly competitive environment – against each other and the world – and that many institutions now receive less than half of their funding from the government.

Let me stop on that point: some publicly assisted postsecondary institutions in Ontario are now receiving well under 40 per cent, some under 35 per cent, of our revenue from government, and the largest source of funding has become student tuition.

Both of those factors make us very different from the vast majority of the broader public sector entities that the government deals with – whether hospitals, school boards or social services agencies.

This isn’t some kind of special pleading – it’s pointing out the obvious, which is that it deeply complicates, even muddies, the public policy framework in which we operate.

On the one hand, we are expected to be market-driven and competitive, both domestically and increasingly internationally.

That inevitably implies measured risk-taking and innovation – both of which are usually accompanied by an occasional failure. At innovation conferences they talk about F being the new A, but I can tell you that an F is not, in the environment of question period, opposition politics and social media, warmly embraced by all.

Competition also drives certain behaviours in recruitment, marketing and admissions that we think are completely necessary and normal, but which would seem strangely out of place, perhaps even unseemly, in another sector.

It would be as if northern school boards were funded by the provincial government to recruit students from the GTA, or public hospitals rented out exhibition halls to hold recruitment fairs for patients from each other’s backyards – but that’s what’s happening in our postsecondary marketplace.

On the other hand, colleges are Crown agencies, subject to a range of rules and regulations that were written for a different, much less competitive, world than the one we operate in.
Finally, in the uncomfortable truth category, we need to acknowledge that in many ways the postsecondary institutions that comprise the higher education are not a system, but 44 publicly assisted institutions that occasionally work together, but more often than not do not … or at least not enough.

There are some very strong and productive bilateral relationships around the province – Seneca’s with York continues to grow – but on a multilateral basis, when we do get together, we tend to congregate on our separate sides of the street with universities on one side and colleges on the other.

Yet within those two bodies, among the colleges as a group and the universities as a group, there are distinctions again – perhaps in some ways as significant as the college/university line.

Research-intensive universities competing for top spots in global ranking tables carry the same label as small undergraduate-focused institutions.

Among colleges, major urban institutions that in some systems would be called polytechnics with growing baccalaureate degree and graduate certificate enrolments are alongside smaller colleges primarily focused on diplomas.

Yet at the same time, as anyone working or learning in postsecondary today will tell you, we’re increasingly sharing the same students.

In the past year at Seneca nearly 40 per cent of our new full-time students have already studied, or earned a credential, at a university or college; in our winter semester last year more than 10 per cent of our new students had attended graduate school.

Among our tens of thousands of part-time students nearly 70 per cent have a degree or diploma – many are newcomers seeking to Canadianize their credential or expertise.

And of course the traffic in the other direction is also substantial – there are thousands of university students who came from colleges.

It wasn’t always that way.

When Mr. Davis led the inspired decision to establish the college system nearly 50 years ago, there was a deliberate choice to create a parallel, not a subordinate, option for students.

In fact, although we’re casually referred to as community colleges in Ontario, we are not.

The American version of the two-year community colleges, which were often called junior colleges, was specifically rejected as a model by our system designers.
They saw two systems side-by-side, but operating separately, with colleges meeting the demand for the increasingly sophisticated occupations associated with a rapidly technologizing economy – as well as dealing with the reality that in those days, university enrolment was, as a proportion of the population, relatively small.

And as with so many other domains, not only did the external environment change the ground rules, but our customers had different ideas. Almost from the get-go they started to jump the fence between colleges and universities, and demanded we make it easier for them to do so.

That was the start of the pathways among us that now, I believe, has led us to a different and more unified view of postsecondary in Ontario than the architects planned, particularly now that we have moved into the knowledge-based economy.

Now, I know that in polite company we don’t often talk about money, but you can’t have a conversation about the future direction of higher education without talking about how you are going to pay for it.

I travel internationally and in my less competitive moments I am proud to tell any student or parent or government official around the world that the truly marvelous thing about getting educated in Ontario is that you cannot go wrong with any one of our publicly assisted institutions.

From certificate programs to PhDs, from baccalaureate degrees to diplomas, our students are well-educated and our graduates go on to great careers and accomplishments.

Along the way they have helped build a brand for Canadian education that is very strong worldwide.

And I give enormous credit to the faculty, staff and administrators who are having to do more with less, and are doing more with less.

Great teaching and learning is happening every day in Ontario for hundreds of thousands of students, domestic and international.

And I say international advisedly because the number of international students in Ontario has grown tremendously in recent years – the latest figures I have seen for the province had nearly 115,000 international students a couple of years ago, and I would guess that number will be at 150,000 very soon.

Collectively, it represents a globalization of our campuses and an enrichment of the student experience, but it also represents billions of dollars being spent in Ontario -- a good deal of it outside any institution’s campus.

And in the face of declining public funding and tuition caps for domestic students, international tuition has also become a vital and sustaining source of revenue for virtually all of Ontario’s colleges and universities.
The old argument that international students are taking advantage of publicly built infrastructure is now, for most of us, turning around 180 degrees – today international students are helping fund our new buildings and our infrastructure repairs, and they are supporting expanded services and operations that benefit domestic students.

And I believe the newfound importance of international students in Ontario has awoken us to another reality – that the true competition, and opportunity, in postsecondary is not across the GTA or even in the next province, but around the world – and that too ought to be a determining factor in the future shape of our system.

So with that as background, let me outline three elements of a new direction for postsecondary in Ontario, and what we together need to do to get there.

As a start, we need to establish a true partnership between colleges and universities that dispenses with notions of hierarchy and rests instead on the principle that we are the building blocks of a student-centered system with different but complementary strengths.

As reskilling and second, third and fourth careers become more commonplace, colleges and universities will share even more students as they pursue their goals by furthering their education – wherever it makes sense.

Yet there persists an implied or assumed rank in the postsecondary world, rather than a mutual understanding of the different strengths that colleges and universities bring to the table.

To some extent it reflects a nostalgia for a time when the demarcation lines were clearer – but there is no going back.

The sophistication and expertise at colleges has grown and our credentials are evolving, and will continue to evolve, because student needs, economies and work itself are evolving, and will continue to do so.

Other countries have done a better job of inculcating a respect for the applied education that colleges deliver – career and profession-focused education with its hard-wired connection to the employers and workplaces of the province, vital to moving their economies into the knowledge and digital spaces that are the future.

From China, which instructed 600 of its universities to become polytechnic institutions focused on preparing students for professions and careers, to India, which has a massive skills development agenda designed to train half a billion young people over the next decade, countries are appreciating the importance of sophisticated and in many cases technology-intensive applied education and training for their economies.

And from all corners of the globe, countries are also increasingly turning to Ontario’s colleges to help them build those systems, and build them they will.

We ignore that trend at our peril.
We also need to get the balance between government and the system right.

That means making sure the institutions that have the responsibility of delivering quality, accountable and accessible education have the nimbleness and the tools to do our jobs while respecting the need for government to have oversight of – and a line of sight into – the work we do.

I spoke earlier of the unique competitive nature of postsecondary education; it’s a strength of the system that needs to be supported through streamlined accountability frameworks and more flexibility to respond to market needs.

Finally, we have to embrace the reality that the system will, and must, transform as we evolve to meet changing student needs and competition that is both broader and growing.

Let me say loudly and firmly that innovation is alive and well in all corners of post-secondary in Ontario: expanding world-class online education, creative partnerships with Aboriginal learners, new teaching and learning technologies at the heart of pedagogy, interesting support programs for our students with disabilities and mental health issues, groundbreaking college degrees, exciting international partnerships, new market-focused programs, more pathways between institutions for transferring students … the list goes on.

But more is needed, and the real question is how we sustain the transformation taking place both inside and outside the classroom and whose hands are gripping the steering wheel.

The government has worked closely with the sector over the past few years to advance several files – credit transfer, online education and strategic mandate agreements are some examples where we have made real progress.

Underpinning the agenda is a policy of differentiation, a loaded word in postsecondary education that has yet to be sharply defined by government, yet hangs over a system that is somewhat apprehensive about what it really means.

Where do we go from here?

Of course we share and support the government’s vision of a postsecondary system that is highly responsive to the needs of the economy – that has been in the DNA of the college system since our birth, and is reflected in our close connections with the employer community.

But there’s a lot to how we shape and continue to build that postsecondary system.

As a starting point, it’s undeniable that our government’s vision must be driven by the underlying fiscal reality and its sharper-edged agenda of affordability and sustainability.

And while some might say that it’s not all about the money, the truth is, it’s a lot about the money.
And inevitably one of the areas being looked at is whether too many institutions are trying to crowd into the same space.

Because we have to admit we cannot afford, nor do students need, every university to be research-intensive or every college to aspire to offer a comprehensive set of programs.

If we are properly connected through pathways and transfer options, then institutional specialization and differentiation need not penalize any student.

Second, although we've seen some significant innovation among municipalities, school boards, hospitals and other public sector agencies, postsecondary has been virtually immune to structural change.

It's time to ask whether rethinking the how of delivering postsecondary education could achieve better outcomes for students through stronger critical mass, enhanced infrastructure and scale for efficiencies – a system that is truly ready for the global marketplace not just of students, but also of opportunities to share our expertise.

A student-centred system isn’t built from the perspectives of institutions, but asks how the programs and offerings of those institutions can be most effectively and comprehensively delivered to the incredibly diverse group of students we serve today across Ontario, and even beyond.

And as much as the fiscal situation, technology and global competition are crucially important, student mobility and aspirations should be a major driver of the transformation needed in Ontario.

Being student-centred means respecting the reality of today’s students and their journey. Many are not in a sprint through postsecondary. They are searching from a huge range of choices for a future they can be passionate about.

Students who follow a linear path from a high school to a singular postsecondary program to a long-lasting job are today’s minority. It can take two, three or even four tries through different programs and institutions to get it right.

We are also preparing today’s students to be lifelong learners, to be ready for multiple careers in their time in the workforce.

We need a system that treats all those new realities as normal, and makes every postsecondary journey as seamless as possible.

A number of transformational options should be explored, on the twin principles that one size does not fit all and that we move ahead with coalitions of the willing, including:

- Integrated university-college and college-university models with a broad set of credentials that connect to and build on each other more innovatively than our current ladder.
- New governance structures that encompass broader regional institutions.
• Larger federated structures where allied entities specialize in complementary fields of study.
• Specialized roles to niche players in certain disciplines and areas of study.

We need to be creative about how we approach that transformation to preserve what’s best about our current competitiveness, how to enhance our flexibility and nimbleness, how to make sure we have the resources we need to deliver on the quality agenda that is at the top of everyone’s priorities.

And it’s about building a single system, not any single institution.

From my involvement in health care governance, I will observe that locally designed partnerships and initiatives tend to be more sustainable and deeply rooted than a top-down diktat – they are built from a sense of common purpose and genuine need.

And so I say to my colleagues: let’s not wait for anybody to draw the map for us – we can take the leadership in transformation.

Recently I read an interview with an inspiring leader in American higher education who talked about embracing differentiation and reclaiming audacity – and thought he must have been talking to us.

Let me summarize.

Starting with our broadly shared vision of a high-quality, accountable and accessible postsecondary system, with the emphasis on the word system, there are three necessary ingredients:

• One, a newly forged partnership between colleges and universities based on a respect for the deep traditions of scholarly pursuit at universities and applied education at colleges, traditions that are now blending
• Two, a stronger trust-based relationship between the system and government based on a mutual understanding of the need for a responsive, innovative and competitive postsecondary system; and
• Three, an embrace of the power of transformative structures, programs and networks in the postsecondary system that puts supporting our students through their educational journey as the driver of our work

If this is a transformative moment in the history of Ontario’s postsecondary system, it deserves a transformative plan.

And when students are truly at the centre, the rest follows.