

NOTES FOR

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ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF

COLLEGES ONTARIO

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Thank you, Tony. [Dr. Tony Tilly, president of Fleming College]

Thank you for inviting me to be a part of your annual conference.

C'est un grand plaisir pour que je parle à votre conférence aujourd'hui. C'est l'une de mes premières occasions de parler à une si grande assistance en ma qualité du Président du Conseil ontarien de la qualité de l'enseignement supérieur.

This is one of my first opportunities to speak to such a large group in my capacity as Chair of the Higher Education Quality Council.

There is a famous story that is told about Albert Einstein. It seems Einstein had developed a scientific speech that he used over and over again for different speaking engagements. The same chauffeur took him to each speaking engagement, and always stood in the back of the auditorium to listen.

One day the chauffeur said to Einstein: "I've listened to your speech so many times that I know it by heart. As a matter of fact, I know it so well that we could trade places and I could give it." So Einstein took him up on his offer. They exchanged clothes and places.

At the next place Einstein was to speak, the chauffeur was driven by Einstein. The chauffeur (in Einstein's clothes) was introduced and given the podium, while Einstein (in the chauffeur's clothes) stood in the back. When the speech was over, the Master of Ceremonies did something out of the routine and opened the floor for questions. Up on the stage, the chauffeur squirmed.

The first question was very a complicated one by a physicist. The chauffeur hesitated and then decided on his answer. He said: "I cannot believe you would ask such a simple question. Almost any one can answer it. As a matter of fact, to show you how easy your question is to answer, I'll even let my chauffeur in the back of this room answer it for you."

On that note, please let me introduce my "chauffeur" who is here this morning.

Dr. James Downey is the Council's first President. Jim Downey has been a great leader in higher education across Canada and internationally. In addition to his experience as president of three universities, Jim has served as an advisor to the governments of New Brunswick and Ontario on higher education issues, including the relationship between colleges and universities. Immediately prior to joining the Council as its full-time president, Jim was the founder and director of Canada's first centre for the study of co-op education.

So if you have any questions this morning, please feel free to approach my “chauffeur” during the break!

For most colleges, this year marks the 40th anniversary of the date when you admitted your first students. I know some of you opened a year earlier, and some later, so there are lots of birthdays that should be celebrated. People who were present in those early days recall the excitement of the times: the first temporary buildings ... the handful of people who formed the first faculty and staff at each college ... and the first students who took advantage of this new opportunity and became the colleges’ first graduates.

Four decades later, Ontario’s college system is still a system of firsts. At every college we see faculty, staff, student leaders, administrators and governors who are working to provide a first-rate experience for students. We also see college alumni who are making their mark as leaders and innovators in a wide range of fields. Some of these people will be honoured with awards later today and this evening. On behalf of the Council, may I congratulate all of the recipients. They represent the best of the college system.

I especially want to note how many college students are the first in their families to attend higher education. More than one-quarter of the students entering college this year come from families where neither parent has attended education beyond the high school level.

To see so many students have this opportunity has a special meaning for me, as I am sure it does for many of you. My parents each immigrated to Canada and settled in Vancouver, where they met. As a teenager I played a lot of sports, and I shall never forget being billed as the first Japanese-Canadian to play in the Pacific Coast Soccer League. Eventually I had the opportunity to be first in my family to go on to higher education. It changed my life. By the same token, as college leaders, you are changing lives every day.

Two years ago, the Honourable Bob Rae presented the government with an outstanding report on higher education. One of his core concerns was, how do we make higher education in Ontario as fresh and as vital for students in the future as it has been in the past? He thought that higher education policy in Ontario was excessively dominated by short-term budget issues. He also thought there had been too many ad hoc “reviews” that made recommendations under tight deadlines and then disappeared.

This is where the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario comes in. Premier McGuinty and his Cabinet, to their credit, have accepted Mr. Rae’s advice that there should be an independent advisory body that will provide assessments of our higher education system and advice about how to improve it.

Cabinet appointed me as Chair in May. At the end of September the government appointed four more members. You may have seen their names:

- Gisèle Chrétien, the former president of Collège Boréal
- Navin Dave, Canadian Managing Partner – Regions with KPMG LLP
- Norie Campbell, Senior Vice President, Legal, and Assistant General Counsel with the TDBank Financial Group.
- Philip Steenkamp, the Deputy Minister, who is the ministry's non-voting representative on the Council.

I understand that one or two additional people may be appointed in the near future.

In the meantime, the Council has been meeting monthly to plan our priorities. The statute creating the Council gives it a broad mandate to advise the Minister on issues relating to quality, access, and accountability. Within this framework we have been asking: where can we make a real difference?

The Council will not just be a think-tank. We need to create the conditions that will make improvement possible.

Last August I circulated to all of the colleges, and to other stakeholders, a discussion paper on the Council's research priorities. I want to thank all of you who responded. The responses have been most helpful as we begin our work.

Let me share with you some early thoughts on where the Council will be going with its research program.

The statute governing the Council says that one of the Council's functions is "to evaluate the postsecondary education sector, report to the Minister on the results of the evaluation, and make the report available to the public." The Council sees this as an annual report.

We would like to provide our first annual report in 2007. We realize that this timeframe is tight, and I don't for a moment pretend that the first report will be comprehensive. The most important part of this first report will be to set out some issues that the Council will look at in more detail in 2008 and 2009.

Over this three-year period, we hope that the Council can provide significant advice on a number of issues. In this respect, we are looking at four priorities.

First, we believe we can help in the **creation of a quality framework for postsecondary education in Ontario**. We need a framework that allows the public to feel confident that every part of our postsecondary education system is focused on providing a high-quality experience for students.

In developing this framework, I want to be careful not to assume that quality at a college should necessarily be measured in the same way as at a university. Colleges and universities have different mandates. Even within the college system, there is much differentiation. As is often said, “One size does not fit all.”

Some elements of the quality framework are already in place. The framework is much stronger than it was just a few years ago. Colleges were leaders in introducing and making use of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). You have created and implemented the Ontario College Student Engagement Survey (OCSES). You are also introducing system-wide reviews of each college’s quality assurance processes.

We need to ask, what would it take to complete the framework? This involves doing some research on practices in other jurisdictions and asking whether any might be worth adopting in Ontario.

One aspect of this is to make sure we give appropriate recognition to **apprenticeship** as a legitimate option in postsecondary education. For historical reasons, apprenticeship has often been ignored in postsecondary education policy. But I think all of us here would recognize that apprenticeship can and should be a viable option for many students leaving Grade 12.

I know that for my older brother, who had a very successful career as a sheet metal worker, the opportunity to pursue an apprenticeship was as transformative as the opportunity to go to university was for me. As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes said, “Every calling is great, when greatly pursued.” So the Council needs to think about how it can give attention to apprenticeship programs, along with diploma and degree programs.

We also need to assess and support the value of **life-long learning**. When we think of quality and access in higher education, we typically think of full-time students in their late teens or early twenties. But learners come to college at many stages of their lives, and often they are seeking to advance their careers without necessarily obtaining a credential. The Council needs to recognize the contribution that colleges make to life-long learning – and universities, too – and to find appropriate ways to assess quality and accessibility in this area.

A quality framework needs to make information about quality available to students, parents and the public in a way that is useful to them. I think most of us have a sense that we can do better than the magazine or newspaper rankings. Whatever we do in the area of quality, we need to let parents and students know what we are doing and why they should feel confident about it.

The second priority in the Council’s research plan will be to advise on **ways to improve accessibility**.

Over the past three years the government has taken a number of steps to fix OSAP and to provide extra help for low-income students. Colleges and universities have also taken on additional roles. The Council's role in monitoring accessibility will be an opportunity to bring the public up to date on the progress that is being made.

The Rae Review also urged the Council to set overall participation targets for higher education, including targets for underrepresented groups. Doing so, in my view, would mean looking at both the future demand to attend higher education and also the capacity of the system to accommodate the growth. We need to do this in a way that does not duplicate the normal discussions that colleges and universities have with the Ministry on these issues.

Third, the Council wants to investigate what should be done to **encourage inter-institutional transfer**. I know from the responses to the discussion paper that many colleges see this as an especially high priority for the Council.

College-university transfer is sometimes a hot issue, but there is very little agreement about the facts. As I just mentioned, there are new data sources that will allow us to do better research on how many students transfer and how successful they are in their new institution.

Many people are persuaded that other jurisdictions in Canada handle college-university transfers better than Ontario does. The Council could usefully do some research on transfer models in other jurisdictions. The pros and cons of these models should be more widely understood in Ontario than they are. I want us to work closely with the College-University Consortium Council (CUCC) on this.

Fourth, we think the Council could offer some useful advice on **interjurisdictional competitiveness**.

The Rae Review encouraged Ontario to look at how higher education systems are evolving in other jurisdictions with similar economies, to see whether we are keeping up with the best in the world.

People need to know more about the strengths of our higher education system. They need to see that we are candid about our shortcomings, and we do our best to fix them. They need to know whether the quality of education we are able to provide in Ontario is keeping up with what is being provided for young people in the United States, Europe, India, China and elsewhere.

Those are four areas where we are thinking the Council could make a difference. Let me repeat that I am talking about a research agenda that would dominate the Council's work over the next three years.

The issues I have just discussed are, in my opinion, fundamental issues that will shape the future of the sector. Too often they have been overlooked because they do not easily fit with year-to-year budget planning. In fact, I believe the Council could provide a useful service by looking 5 or even 10 years ahead and asking if we are heading toward where we want to be.

While the Council needs to build for the long term, I also want it to start having an impact in the near term. Within the next couple of years, you are going to start asking, “What has this Council achieved?” And rightly so.

This is where I need your help.

The Council has a broad mandate to assess how well our postsecondary system is doing, and to advise the government on where we should plan to go. We propose to operate in an open and consultative way. We want to consider good advice from experienced practitioners such as yourselves, as well as the best research we can find.

We asked for your thoughts on this discussion paper last August, and I hope you will continue to offer your advice in future. We will be looking at the best ways to make this possible, without placing too much of a burden on your time.

The Council needs to provide advice to the government that will make a difference for students, their families, and their future employers.

We need to think clearly about the world that students are facing; we need to be realistic about how well we are preparing them for that world; and we need to be imaginative about how we can do better.

There’s a story of a tourist in Ireland who’s looking for a certain stately home. Exhausted after getting lost trekking across the countryside, he asks direction from a local farmer. The farmer takes him to the beginning of a long, winding road at the far end of which, barely visible, stands the stately home.

The tourist says, “That’s still a long road.” To which the farmer replies with a twinkle, “Sure then, ‘tis a long road, but if ‘t were any shorter it wouldn’t reach the house, now would it?”

The road to an excellent higher education system is a very long road – one to which there is no proper ending. There are, however, places along the way where a society can stop and check direction, take stock of provisions, and replenish its resolve to reach the goal.

Forty years ago was such a time in the life of Ontario. The present, if we all play our parts, can be another such time.