



Extending the Neoliberal Transformation of Ontario Colleges in Canada: A Critical Perspective

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Abstract

Drawing on theories of political economy, critical pedagogy and labour relations, the changes and consequences for Ontario colleges are examined resulting from the neoliberal, market-based policies and practices of the current provincial government. The intent is to assess the impact for faculty and students of the government's initiatives by extending the implementation of a neoliberal paradigm. The analyses concern the decline of provincial funding, as well as the stratagem to internationalize and privatize college education. Attention is focused on the intensification of a corporate managerial model that has resulted in the casualization and commodification of academic labour.

Key Words: neoliberalism, retrenchment, austerity, restructuring, privatization, deregulation, labour relations.

Historical Background of Ontario Colleges

Following WWII and the adoption of the welfare state founded on Keynesian economic policies, there was a growing demand to extend postsecondary education (PSE) in Ontario (Krugman, 2011). In 1965, the Minister of Education, Bill Davis, responded by founding the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs). These institutions were to be accessible and affordable with applied as opposed to theoretical knowledge in the provision of equivalent standards with university undergraduate programs. They were not envisioned to be junior colleges with transfer credit to universities similar to colleges in Quebec. Nor were they to establish quasi-senates in the form of college councils, as currently exist in British Columbia colleges. However, an essential element of the CAATs legislative mandate was the provision of approximately 40 per cent of the curriculum in English and Liberal Studies, 20 per cent in related theory and 40 per cent in vocational training. The objective was to provide students with a well-

rounded education in their area of study and as citizens (Doughty & Meaghan, 2023).

Although contemplated to provide both vocational and avocational education as opposed to a trade school approach, Ontario Colleges were not founded on a collegial model with the principles of peer-related governance and academic freedom. As Gary Rhoades (1998) pointed out, college faculty were "managed professionals". Individual colleges had a Board of Governors (BOG) appointed by senior management. With the exception of a faculty representative, boards were corporate in nature. Several provincial inquiries highlighted the difficulties that ensued due to the exclusion of faculty participation in decision-making (Skolnik 1985, Pitman 1986 & Gandz 1988). Conflicts which arose led faculty in 1972 to join the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) that later resulted in faculty voting to strike (1984, 1989, 2017). The strike in 1984 over workload led to the arbitrated implementation of a Standard Workload Formula (SWF), but did not capture the amount of work faculty perform in and out of the classroom regarding preparation, evaluation, student support and administrative tasks. The introduction of baccalaureate degrees, post-graduate certificates and transfers to postgraduate programs resulted in a recent phase of development in Ontario colleges (Doughty & Meaghan, 2023).

The Neoliberal Influence on Education

Neoliberalism is a dominant, global economic paradigm that emerged in the 1990s centered on the principles of free markets, meritocracy and personal responsibility. The World Bank (WB) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) are among the influential international organizations driving the neoliberal narrative that accompanies the ideology of globalization. Education is viewed as central to the global race for future economic competitiveness. The neoliberal position emphasizes that educational systems are disconnected from social and economic



outcomes and should be centered on market-driven philosophies, based on competition and performance measurement to ensure greater efficiency and accountability. To meet the needs of the economy, neoliberal planning links education to economic development. Neoliberalism advocates for policies of economic-liberalization that extend the rights of the private sector over the public sector. Forms of neoliberal discourses, ideologies and types of governance support fiscal austerity, deregulation, privatization and reduced government spending. The aim of neoliberal restructuring is to transform government activity in select policy areas that relates to the economy and the provision of health, education and social services.

Western transformation of PSE resulted from the implementation of neoliberal tenets that introduced a corporate model of education. Public sector educational systems were compelled to function in a business-like manner (Slaughter & Leslie, 1999; Newson & Buchbinder 1988, Currie & Newson, 2000; Tudiver 1999; Buchbinder & Rajagopal, 1995). Neoliberal ideology changed the very nature of public education redirecting services to economic liberalization. It transformed colleges into corporate enterprises, turning these institutions into job training centers with curriculum commodification, research monetizing and intellectual achievement degraded. Restructuring in Ontario colleges was characterized by underfunding, competition, privatization and job deskilling (Lewin, 2017, Meaghan, 2004). College presidents designated as Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) commenced a new period of centralizing administration with greater control over faculty and their working conditions. College administrators who favoured the employment of contingent faculty and e-learning modes of curricular presentations, increased in numbers and authority. With greater influence and participation from business and industry, measurable “learning outcomes” and “performance metrics” linked curriculum to marketable skills with “core literacies”, accompanied by quantified, tracked and assessed accountability rituals. And students became fees-paying clients with an increase in tuition fees and debts.

With the expansion of non-academic centers (innovation, entrepreneurial, research), together with an increase in administrative positions (chairs, deans, directors, managers, and vice-presidents), funds generated in large, urban colleges for these additional services and personnel resulted

from the realignment and reduction of operational budgets. Northern and smaller colleges were required to rationalize and cancel programs that offered diverse opportunities for learning in their communities. Contingent faculty were not entitled to healthcare, pensions and other benefits and were for the most part excluded from union membership (MacKay, 2014).i “Digital diploma mills” that automated higher education also reduced and replaced the number of full-time college faculty (Noble, 2003). Increasingly, administrative numbers and influence grew exponentially as profits followed from the utilization of adjunct labour, and the promotion of “elearning” and hybrid methods of curricular delivery with technologically-mediated training (MacKay & Devitt, 2021).

During the next decade, various Liberal governments reduced social spending and initiated a funding freeze on colleges for a ten-year period. In 2017. The College Employers Council issued a final offer for college faculty with concessions. The proposal did not consider issues of unpaid overtime and uncompensated work, and it did not make provisions to improve the conditions for precarious instructors. Nor did it ensure faculty agency in academic-decision. The proposal was overwhelmingly rejected by faculty and led to the longest strike in the history of Ontario colleges. Kathleen Wynne’s Liberal government enacted back-to-work legislation and compulsory arbitration to end the strike. (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2017). The arbitration decision of William Kaplan established the concept of academic freedom and addressed some issues of precariate employment, however the utilization of a neoliberal agenda continued overtly and by stealth to circumvent college collective agreements.

The Provincial Government’s Fiscal Reductions for Colleges

The provincial election of Doug Ford’s Progressive Conservative (PC) government in June 2018 did not initiate the problems that have ensued in the CAATs. A lack of collegial governance and academic freedom as well as protection of intellectual property has plagued the colleges from inception. Mike Harris’ “Common Sense Revolution” of 1995-1997, further set the stage with an agenda driven by cutting taxes and spending, as well as downsizing and outsourcing government services.ii Increasingly, higher workloads and negative work environments with little support for academic faculty were a common theme. Ford’s



government did not attempt to ameliorate these historical problems; instead he instituted a number of interventions that further exacerbated the difficulties in these institutions. Demonstrating adherence to neoliberal principles, the provincial government maintained and extended cuts to college funding. His extended assault on the colleges transformed 70 per cent of full-time faculty into part-time, casual instructors (MacKay and Devitt, 2021). The continued reliance on adjunct faculty who are mostly women and racialized teachers is exceedingly problematic for the majority of faculty who lack job security, adequate remuneration, pensions, benefits and rights. Nor have e-learning methodologies been utilized in a prudent, balanced and evidence-based manner to enrich teaching and learning.

An initial manifestation of the government's PSE policies instigated fiscal prudence through fund raising, entrepreneurial activities and corporate-sponsored research, while disfavoured access initiatives and equity (Muzzin & Meaghan, 2018). Ontario has consistently been last of the Canadian provinces in funding higher education; currently revenues are increasing at a slower rate than inflation. In terms of an interprovincial comparison, to raise expenditures to an average of the other nine provinces would require \$7.1 billion in additional funding (Usher, 2020). Price Waterhouse Coopers (2017) launched an independent evaluation regarding the fiscal sustainability of Ontario colleges. The assessment demonstrated that government grants were reduced by 52 per cent of total revenue in 2009, and then decreased again by 43 per cent in 2015. The report stated that a projection of government funding will be reduced by a further 36 per cent by 2025. It was predicted that Ontario colleges will experience an operational shortfall of \$420 million and an accumulated debt of \$1,903 billion for the period of 2015-2025.

Funding Retrenchment of Public Colleges and the Recruitment of International Students

One of the cornerstones of neoliberal policies and practices is the reduction of government spending. International students can enrich the perspective of the educational experience by bringing varied backgrounds and cultures to postsecondary education. Far from the notion that international students are primarily engaged in intellectual exchange programs, the recent proliferation of their numbers in colleges is intended

by governments as a political strategy to raise the gross national product (GNP) of Canada and to grow provincial economies. The provincial government's claim is that international student fees subsidize domestic students, without discussion concerning the problems that have ensued with a substantial increase in the number of international students in the province. As Sebastian Lalonde, Chairperson for the Canadian Federation of Students points out, over \$1 billion in student financial aid has been reduced from OSAP and the government has not offered relief to students with OSAP interest loans (Lindo, 2021). International education is a \$22 billion industry with a shared responsibility for immigration with the federal government, while education is a provincial responsibility (Ronson, 2023). A Statistics Canada (2021) report indicates that in 2019 there were 638,300 international students in Canada in public and private colleges and universities. The number represents a 256 per cent increase in this student population since the mid 2000s, higher than the numbers combined in England, Australia and the United States. It was further reported that international students contribute to the economy by an increased participation rate of 57 per cent in the labour market.

A year after the election in 2018, the provincial government announced a reduction of 10 per cent in tuition fees for low-and middle-class college and university students (Association of Professors of the University of Ottawa, 2019). The tuition freeze that followed lasted for the second term of Ford's tenure (Friesen, 2023). With the loss of 20 per cent of operating funding, colleges began to admit international students in significant numbers to fill the funding gap (Friesen 2023a). The largesse expressed in the reduction of tuition for domestic students together with years of government underfunding, resulted in the province giving carte blanche to a substantial increase in the number of international students in both public and private PSE institutions (Frieson 2023b).

Approximately, 51 per cent of all new permits for international students were granted to Ontario institutions. International students in Ontario colleges pay three to four times the tuition fees of domestic students, and they contribute more funds than the provincial government (Usher 2020). Professor Mike Moffatt of Western University (2023) reported that the increase in this cohort of students occurred predominately at the college and not the university level. Currently, Ontario colleges



account for 29 per cent of the international student population in Canada (The Pie News, 2022). A problematic issue associated with international students is the practices of some third-party recruitment agencies that have enlisted students who are not academically proficient to undertake Canadian academic programs as a “back-door” entry for permanent residence.

In her annual report, Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk (2021) indicated that several Ontario colleges were not aligned with provincial regulations to accommodate large numbers of international students on main campuses. She estimated that grant-based funding was \$1.6 billion for colleges, while tuition fees, ancillary services and donations accounted for \$5.1 billion. She observed that the majority of international, first-time, student permit-holders were from India (63 per cent), creating a risk of dependency in terms of students originating from a single country. Lysyk affirmed that cost cutting in the name of finding efficiencies jeopardized the sustainability of colleges and universities. Sean Lougheed, president of the faculty union at Canadore College noted that student housing was at a crisis point in North Bay for the 72 per cent of the student body who are international students (Berman, 2023). International students work and study to economically sustain themselves and move along the path to permanent residence upon graduation. The toll is both financial and emotional with the rising costs of living and long periods of separations from their families.

Similar to the growing perception in Australia that international students are neglected and exploited (Compton and Weiner, 2008), international students in Ontario face numerous challenges. According to Mateusz Salmassi, Director of Advocacy for the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, international students are allowed to work an unlimited number of hours; 80 per cent work more than 20 hours a week (Government of Canada, 2022). From an academic perspective this situation is at cross purposes with scholarly studies. The majority of these students are a source of cheap labour in low-wage jobs in fast-food industries, retail, warehouses, factories and gig employment. A recent Royal Bank study indicates that they earn less than the general population (Macchardes, 2024). Transportation concerns, the use of food banks and exploitation have also been cited additionally as difficulties for these students. As well, large tuition fees result in many families selling valuable assets or incurring debt in order to

support the opportunity for their children to obtain a Canadian education.

The dilemma regarding international students became more problematic with respect to funding, due to the fact that the federal government only recently announced a cap on the numbers of international students who will be admitted to study in Canada. In January 2023, Marc Miller, the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, indicated that the PSE system “lost integrity” due to a flood of “subpar applicants” being admitted to colleges and universities. In an attempt to rebuild confidence in Canada’s international student program, the immigration department reduced the number of study permits by 35 per cent below the 2023 level (a decrease from 806,206 to 364,000) for a two- year period. The federal government will assign a fixed number of study permits for each provincial institution based on population authorized to accept international students. Unlike the provincial government plan, spouses will no longer receive a work permit. An exemption is permitted for doctoral and post graduate students in universities with a work permit granted for their spouses (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2023).

Under the new system students will be required for the academic year of 2024 to possess an authentic letter of admission and a cost-of-living requirement of \$20,635 (double the previous stipulation of \$10,000) apart from tuition, as well as to obtain a study permit. Miller indicated that students are scrutinized who miss payments, only intend to work and maybe required to leave the country if they no longer have valid status (Canadian Broadcast Corporation, 2023). The provinces most affected by the cap on admissions are Ontario, British Columbia and Quebec. The Interim president of Universities Canada, Philip Landon, stated that a cap is a blunt instrument; the target he suggested should be poor, quality, private schools directly. Betsy Kane, Vice-President of the Canadian Immigration Lawyers Association, submitted that it was also necessary to publish study approval and refusal rates for learning institutions to regulate overseas education agents, as well as for the provinces to take responsibility to ensure institutions are worthy of obtaining student visas (Keung, 2024).

The Government’s Austerity Measures as Postsecondary Educational Policies



Ross Romaneo, provincial Minister of Colleges and Universities (2020) delivered his educational plan covering a two-year period. The overview emphasized one of the key elements of a neoliberal agenda – a performance-based funding (PBF) model linked to the market, centered on economic factors over which colleges and universities have little control. The utilization of PBF indicators in funding represents increased corporate control over teaching and learning. Some of the ten key performance indicators utilized in the government’s evaluation for PSE funding included graduation rates, graduation employment and earnings as well as skills related to metrics. The government also indicated that by 2024-25, PBF funding would increase to 60 per cent for colleges and universities (Usher, 2020). The importance of private career colleges in “providing the knowledge and skills needed to get a job in today’s workplace” was also highlighted by Romaneo. The limited funds that were allocated to public colleges favoured short-term training projects in disciplines of information sciences, engineering, business and health sciences. And a limited allocation of \$178 million in capital funding was issued for all provincial colleges and universities. The government’s commitment of \$70 million was for a Virtual Learning Strategy that extended training partnerships to employers and industry with a focus on micro-credential strategies. There was a provision of \$1 million for eSports scholarships, in part for video gaming programs.

The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), highlighted the “uses and abuses” of performance-based funding utilized by the government in the assessment of operating funds allocated for colleges and universities (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2019). This organization stated that the government’s method of performance assessment interferes with collegial governance and extends the standardized testing of skills and competencies in the PSE domain (Spooner, 2020). Recommendations made to the government by the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) in 2020 expressed concern that PBF was a flawed model of financing, incapable of reflecting the depth of student education and the benefits of basic research. It was further noted that PBF provides an illusion of accountability while denying institutions funding to improve educational outcomes with respect to equity, accessibility and quality education. The Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) additionally warned that faculty teaching Liberal

Arts subjects and those in the “caring professions” may experience job reductions, as well as lower-quality educational standards (NetNews, 2020). And the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) also opposed this model of evaluation, commenting that it would have a negative impact on academic freedom (Weller, 2020). Due to public pressure, PBF measures of accountability are one of a number of policy issues the government has been forced to recently reverse.

In March 2023, the provincial government appointed private consultants to a Blue Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability to report to the Ontario Minister of Colleges and Universities. The Harrison Panel concluded that the postsecondary educational system was at “serious risk” and it would take a concerted effort to “right the ship”. The Panel noted that funding per college students was “just 44%”, and for university students “just 57%”, compared to the rest of Canada. College revenues included 31% from international students, 30% from government grants, 17.5% from domestic students and 21.5% from other sources. The Panel recommended a one-time increase in provincial grants of 10 per cent (with 2 per cent tied to inflation/per annum), a 5 per cent increase in tuition and increases in OSAP and student aid by 2024-2025. With inflation predicted to be 5 per cent in 2024, the increases may however be less in real terms (Blue Ribbon Panel, 2023).

In response to the formation of the Panel, the Ontario Universities and Colleges Coalition (OUCC) 2023, expressed concern that students, staff and faculty were excluded from participation while members were prioritized that had a history of dismantling public institutions. Consternation was also expressed that the student experience has been diminished as well as the economic vibrancy of regions, resulting from only 30 per cent of the operating budgets for universities and 38 per cent of the same budgets for colleges emanating from the province. Apprehensive was also evident in the concern that the Panel would recommend the elimination of specific programs, suggest the merger of northern institutions and call for additional privatization, as well as increasing precarity of employment and expanding technological-based learning. Four independent senators (Keung, 2023) also weighed in on the dilemma by expressing concern that many more study permits were issued by the federal government than available residence positions.



Considering that the Panel's terms of reference were to minimize public expenditures, the response by Jill Dunlop, provincial Minister of Education, suggested that prior to increasing budgets and tuition fees she wanted to ensure that colleges and universities were taking the necessary steps to operate as efficiently as possible (NWOnews, 2023). Premier Ford confirmed that he would not implement the recommendations of *his* Blue Ribbon Panel by increasing tuition fees for college and university students for a three-year period (Rusnowy & Keung, 2024). In February 2024, the provincial government announced a \$1.3 billion funding increase over three years for colleges and universities, consisting of \$10 million for northern and small universities and colleges, \$15 million for third-party efficiency reviews, \$65.4 million for research, \$100 million for STEM programs and \$16.74 million for capital repairs. Critics suggested that the proposal did not significantly address operational expenditures by falling far short of the \$2.5 billion that the 24 colleges and 23 universities required as suggested by Ford's Blue Ribbon Panel (Rushowy & Ferguson, 2024; Jones, 2024).

The financial situation for a number of public universities is no less dire than for colleges. Without economic support, the government puts at risk the success of public universities in a modern knowledge economy. The President of the Council of Ontario Universities (COU), Steve Orsini (2023), cautioned that the government faces a financial crisis concerned with a number of universities; he urged the immediate implementation of the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Panel. Salaries which constitute the largest expenditure were noted to be the lowest on a per-student basis in Canada. Even if the Panel's recommendations were to be instituted, Ontario universities will continue to have the lowest provincial funding in the country.

As of 2021-2022, eight Ontario universities declared deficits. Queen's University (Kingston) had a financial deficiency of \$62.5 million, while the University of Guelph declared a shortfall of \$19 million in operating funds. Several northern universities such as Nipissing (North Bay) announced that they have perilous financial situations arising from the decrease in government grants that will result in an increased enrollment of international students in the coming academic year (Frieson, 2023a). Both the University of Western Ontario and Wilfred Laurier University also declared a \$15 million deficit for the 2022 fiscal

year (Groleau, 2023; University of Western Ontario, 2022). Despite the demonstrated efficiencies of utilizing shared resources, economies of scale and assessment of space and faculty requirements, the Acting Auditor General, Nick Stavropoulos (2023), found that York University was at financial risk due to low enrollment and dependency on international students. He also commented that for the 2018-2023 period, the number of administrators had increased. And three satellite campuses were cancelled including, Toronto Metropolitan University/Sheridan College, Wilfred Laurier/Conestoga College and York University/Seneca College. A planned French university as well was also cancelled.

Although the Panel found considerable room for improvement concerning administrative costs, Orsini cited several cost-efficiency initiatives that have been undertaken by universities, such as offering joint courses, sharing purchasing agreements and instigating best practices regarding the utilization of space on campuses. He stressed that since 2006-2007 there has been a decline of 30 per cent in revenues and an increase in student enrollment by 20,000 in the province. A number of provincial universities are therefore currently running large deficits. With rising costs and inflation, the government was advised that these institutions can no longer absorb funding reductions and tuition freezes. The prediction was that by 2023-24, 12 out of the 23 universities in the province may need to reduce student services, face deficits, curtail faculties in arts, social science and the humanities and may experience insolvency (Groleau, 2023, Rushowy & Ferguson, 2024).

Public colleges have always been the Cinderella of the PSE system. Similar to universities in the province they endured chronic underfunding compared to other provinces in Canada. According to Linda Mae Lindo, New Democratic Party (NDP) opposition critic for colleges and universities, the provincial government reduced college operating grants by \$750 million in 2019. This problematic together with the costs associated with the pandemic and rising inflation has created a perform storm for colleges. OPSEU's (2023) response to the Blue Ribbon Panel called for a modest five per cent increase in tuition and a 10 per cent increase in provincial grants by 2024, as well as support for students in part-time programs. Also a theme of OPSEU's recommendations was the leitmotif of provincial funding which favours universities over colleges, resulting in a long-standing concern about



inequity, It was pointed out that a gap in tuition fees of approximately \$7,000/per student has existed between universities and colleges for a ten-year period.

Eliminating Educational Qualifications for Student Entrance to the Trades

One of the key policies of the provincial government emphasized the need to save money by reductions to postsecondary education spending. The structural changes that resulted from this neoliberal stratagem culminated in the deregulation of secondary school for graduation and postsecondary requirements for entrance to trade occupations. While issuing austerity measures for public colleges, the government favoured skills training and apprenticeship programs in the private sector. With the rationale concerning the need to significantly increase the construction of housing to accommodate an anticipated influx of immigrant populations, Ford stressed the shortage that exists in the skilled trades (YouTube, 2023). In prioritizing the demands of the marketplace, his investment of \$62.9 million together with educational policy changes, will allow students to enter a hundred skilled trade programs under new provisions. Ford's proposal will involve students who have completed grade eleven but have not graduated from secondary school. Some 30 credits from a Certificate of Apprenticeship will be credited towards an Ontario Secondary School diploma.

Although a prediction cannot currently be made concerning the number of students who will leave high school prior to graduation and not enroll in college trade programs, there may be a significant number of faculty job losses in secondary schools and colleges. And trades will no longer be under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, but forthwith will be transferred to the portfolio of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development. The government does not seem cognizant of the fact that the current housing shortage can be also be attributed to increased interest rates and zoning bylaws known as "red tape", in addition to a skills shortage in the predominantly, male construction trades. Nor did the government mention the shortage of 24,000 registered nurses or those in several other occupational categories with significant decreasing numbers.iii.

Trade specialists have noted that "soft skills" are needed in their occupations including,

organizational capabilities, customer communication, marketing, and financing that are lacking in the provinces plan for new apprentices. Students entering the trades are offered a proletarian status through vocational training under the guise of a truncated alternative education. The concept of educating the whole student through the completion of secondary and postsecondary education will be eliminated, including those aspects needed for participation as citizens in a civil society. This form of job creation instigates a source of cheap labour for trade industries that may lead to a reduction in wages and benefits. The new rules providing a fleet of young workers may benefit trade businesses, but when the boom is over will it be at the expense of these workers who might be unemployed or need to educationally retool? Entering the trades at such a young age and without a substantial amount of training may also have consequences for workers' safety and for those of the public. The changes concerning the limited qualifications for young trade workers may also enable employers to become more dominant economically and politically, perhaps rendering workers more vulnerable with respect to their rights.

Established workers in the trades will be tasked with on-the-job mentoring and training of the new recruits who wish to gain accreditation and red seal qualifications needed to succeed in a competitive industry. Thought has not been given by the government to the fact that some individuals in the trades become entrepreneurs in the middle phase of their careers. It calls into question if the workers trained under Ford's regime will have the ability to establish a company, engage in public relations and acquire an understanding of provincial laws and bookkeeping functions, necessary skills needed to be successful in business. The government's initiative to lower the educational requirements for entrance into the trades benefit trade firms, builders and the privileged class. It does not strengthen labour provisions and human rights. Further, there is no provision for affirmative action in the government's proposal regarding apprenticeship. A study published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives indicates that market forces do not deliver equitable outcomes (Osberg, 2021). It has been noted that racialized workers have higher rates of unemployment and lower wages than White workers (McCall, 2001). And women continue to experience discrimination in the construction trades (Hegewisch & O'Farrel, 2015; Bright, 2023).



Restructuring Police Foundation Studies

A further demonstration of the government's overreaching, neoliberal policies concern the proposal to privatize the training of new recruits entering the profession of policing. In April 2023, Ford announced changes to law enforcement programs based on his claim that there was an immediate need to hire additional officers to combat a growing crime wave (Martin, 2023). The provincial government specified that postsecondary educational requirements would be eliminated for new cadets under the *Community Safety and Policing Act*, which previously required a college diploma or a university degree, supplemented with training by police associations (Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development, 2023). This privatization initiative will require training for a basic constable to take place in a twelve-week course at the Ontario Police College in Aylmer Ontario. Ford stated that tuition fees of \$15,450 would be eliminated at a cost of \$34 million annually for some 70 new recruits (Declerg, 2023a). No other student population has been offered the elimination of tuition fees, despite labour shortages in other occupations.

A study by Seabrook and Owusu-Bempah of the University of Toronto found no systematic correlation between higher police budgets and reduced crime rates (Fagan, 2024). Nor has Ford appeared to avail himself of a study produced by Huey, Kalya & Peladeau (2019) for the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development. The University of Western sociologists suggested that the complex job of a police officer calls for highly qualified, diverse candidates with an understanding of the world, the development of critical thinking, problem solving, cultural competence and communication skills, as well as a proficiency in research data analysis and policing models. The government proposal diminishes democratic accountability, suppresses critical thinking and critique, while minimizing state obligations. For decades, college law enforcement programs required vocational programs as well as courses in Canadian government and politics, public administration, sociology, psychology and several English and liberal arts electives – courses consistent with the CAAT's foundational mandate for a holistic education. Problems in the recruitment and functioning of police officers may be attributed to the short-sighted reduction of the entrance requirements to the profession coupled with the limited private training of recruits.

Despite his populist claims to be of the people, Ford's suggestion regarding his policy changes to recruit younger, less educated officers puts him on the wrong side of educational history. His policy pronouncement will increase inequities and restrict inclusivity, equality and diversity (Takagi, 2024). Although individual officers are noted to be skilled, compassionate and persevere in the name of social justice, there have been media reports that excessive forces is at times utilized by the police against Black, Indigenous populations, LGBTQ community members and people with mental illness, as well as a failure to deal with issues concerning violence against women (Stelkia, 2020). The "bad apples" argument put forth to acknowledge racism and sexism among individual officers reduces the problem to a level of individual accountability and absolves institutional systemic biases against marginalized people.

Studies suggest that attention paid to the qualifications and training of police officers is essential in order to be successful in the complex job of contemporary policing. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) 2023, recently released a six-year study of Black, systemic racial discrimination within the Toronto Police Service (TPS) and the Toronto Police Service Board (TPSB). The Commission found that Black people were more likely to be arrested, charged, injured and killed by the police than White people and other racialized groups. To make their one hundred recommendations "legally binding", the Commission called for the enforceability of their proposals by the TPSB, including the inclusion of an anti-black, racism approach in training programs.

In 2004, the Toronto City Council ordered the Auditor General, Jeffrey Griffiths, to conduct a social audit of the policies and procedures followed by the Toronto police concerning sexual assaults on women (Doe, Dale & Bain, 2010). Women from the anti-violence sector and experts in sexual violence were included with senior police officers in the formation of the Steering Committee. Among the numerous recommendations to improve the policies and practices of the TPS, was the need for training designed and delivered by professional educators. Despite the fact that the community members were not informed about the process to monitor changes, at the conclusion of the Committee's work the Chief of Police subsequently issued a statement that almost all of the recommendations had been implemented. Empirical studies also demonstrate explicit and implicit class biases in policing that rely



upon stereotypes and prejudice, such as a person's appearance, the model of car they drive and the neighbourhood in which they reside. In terms of government practices of social control to subdue communities, policing was found to result in governance through coercion, containment, surveillance, regulation, discipline and violence (Soss and Weaver, 2017).

The changes proposed by the provincial government concerned with students entering the trades and police services, mandate that curriculum will be designed by private industry specialists and not augmented by academics. The neoliberal emphasis on economic issues impedes value-based education, qualitative analysis and social inclusion. Such significant changes dampen down democratic aspirations and further the aims of the status quo. It could be argued that this "dumbing down" process of education for the next generation is a way to forestall social change. Students will be offered vocational training rather than a well-rounded education. The proposed agenda will not inform students regarding matters relevant for participation in civil and political life. In contrast, college and university curricula offer students meta lesson taught in almost every social science and humanities course. In traditional postsecondary education, students learn to think critically and analyze evidence that can be brought to bear in an argument orally and in writing. Knowledge about cultural heritage, history and labour issues counter corporate power, distorted public discourse and dominate governments.

The government's forms of neoliberal, corporate practices originating in the private sector include elements of efficiency, continuous improvement and job-readiness. In the case of students entering the trades and police foundation studies, public educational requirements will be eliminated in favour exclusively of industry and occupational requirements as determined by the private sector. The concentration of power will be captured by state political forces. Policy directives of micro credentials will be utilized to eliminate traditional qualifications, undermining career certificates, diplomas and degrees, as well as the unionization of teaching faculty. The imposition of Taylorist principles will introduce a division of labour that requires fewer skills. Education transformed into modular, specific training units, will be identified by employers. These changes have been undertaken without consultation and due consideration for the consequences of educators.

The proposals were not reviewed by secondary, college and university educators nor brought forth in collective bargaining; they were imposed by fiat. The changes may lead to a degradation of political discourse. The Ontario Universities and Colleges Coalition (OUCC) 2023, emphasizes that labour and student unions represent independent democratic organizations vital to the education of the public. In a democracy, elected government officials ought to represent the interests of all the citizens. In the case of the provincial government, it can be argued that the initiatives to eliminating public, sector educational requirements arose in part from Ford's antipathy towards unions iv.

The Privatization of College Education

Privatization is a dominant characteristic of neoliberalism that directs public resources to private enterprises. Ford's infamous line that "I am going to privatize everything that is not nailed down" became his modus operandi shortly after his initial election to office (Canadian Union of Public Employees, CUPE, 2018). The imprimatur of a hundred plus budget decreases in government budgets, constitute privatizing aspects of health, education and social services.v The number of international students in colleges who pay more funds than the government to study in career colleges is a form of privatization. Operating budgets in Ontario colleges have declined from 75 per cent to 30 per cent from 1967 to 2020. Following the 10 per cent reduction in 2019, the budgets of colleges have had three annual freezes, resulting in a decrease of thirty per cent of funding when factoring in inflation (Cohen, 2023). The question is whether these institutions ought to continue to be considered in the public domain. Not only has the community component been substantially removed from the college mandate, but a more accurate description might be a classification as private/public partnerships (P3s) with the government (Meaghan, 2022).

Currently, a number of public colleges have paired with private, career colleges to deliver curricula. For more than a decade, Lambton College (London) has provided curriculum to Cestar, a private training institute, in order to teach international students. In return this enterprise recently remitted six million dollars to the public college. Fanshaw College (Sarnia) plans to increase the number of international students by fifty per cent over five years that will be taught in a partnership with a private school (The PIE News, 2023). Contracting out of curricular materials to private



colleges and business enterprises violates intellectual property rights and leads to additional job losses in the public sector. Intellectual property given to private colleges also calls into question the quality of private school educational projects. Private-for-profit colleges and corporate businesses are not subject to a tuition freeze; the delivery of course content is by non-unionized, contract staff. The working conditions, remuneration, benefits and rights of private college teachers are generally below public standards. Additionally, private institutions charge considerably more tuition than public colleges. Private colleges are generally concerned with short-term, career-oriented programs that often do not include subjects in Social Sciences, Humanities and English which round out the public, college educational experience. As a result, students may begin their careers without the necessary knowledge and skills that result from the provision of truncated programs.

The extensive increase in the numbers of international students in Ontario colleges created an uneven playing field for domestic students. Seneca College (Toronto) admitted 9,318 international students, the highest enrollment of any college in 2020-2021. Lambton College (Sarnia) was comprised of 82 per cent of international students, while Northern College (Timmins) had 80 per cent of the same population. Conestoga College (Kitchener) was an outlier in this regard with the number of international students substantially increased from 12,822 in 2021 to 30,395 in 2023. This initiated record-breaking profits of \$100 million for the college (Sarnia Newsweek, 2023). International students substantially contributed to a surplus on average of \$27 million in 2022 (and \$68.2 million total), a situation unheard of in the history of Ontario colleges.

In the spring of 2024, the federal government reduced the numbers of eligible international students to 364,000 from 1,028,850 (Keil, 2023). The federal minister, Marc Miller, announced the cancellation of “puppy mills” and declared that post-graduate work permits will not be issued to students who study in predominantly private colleges (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2023). Under pressure from the federal government, representatives of university associations and the media, the provincial government lifted a moratorium on six hundred private institutes that had been allowed to proliferate under public-private college partnerships (Keung & Rushowy, 2024). Approximately 96 per cent of

Ontario international permits will be allocated in future to public colleges and universities with four per cent reserved for private colleges and institutions, such as the controversial Yorkville University, Redeemer University and Tyndall among others.

With breath-taking hypocrisy, Jill Dunlop took credit for her government protecting the integrity of the PSE system (Keung & Rushowy, 2024) The Ford government however continued to refuse contributing billions of dollars as a result of the decrease in the numbers of international students, as well as to alleviate the decade of austerity for the PSE system. In February 2024, the provincial government announced a \$1.3 billion funding increase over three years for colleges and universities. Critics suggest that the proposal did not significantly address operational expenditures by falling far short of the \$2.5 billion for the 24 colleges and 23 universities in the public sector that were suggested by Ford’s Blue Ribbon Panel (Jones, 2024). As a consequence, public colleges in future will concentrate on educating domestic students, but it is anticipated that there will be program and staff reductions in thirteen northern public colleges, as well as some colleges in the greater Toronto area (Sarnia Newswire, 2024).

Academic Labour Relations

The provincial government’s neoliberal policies not only intended to decrease funding for public colleges but paradoxically to also extend greater control over teachers and teaching. Premier Ford’s further neoliberal ascendancy resulted in the extended corporatization of colleges, institutional differentiation, competition and the commercialization of research. Upon taking office, he indicated that he would cancel academic freedom, impose standardized curricula and deny the possibility that students could come to different conclusions (Davidson and Ruparell, 2020). The political economy of the state subordinated academic work to the marketplace. Government discourses of marketization envisioned external stakeholders as dominate in terms of setting college policies and strategic practices. The foundation of Ford’s educational reforms focused on the reduction of financial resources for the colleges, which led to an increase in corporate managerial influence, the necessity to seek funding through alternative means and the continued erosion of authority for college educators. The application of New Public Management (NPM) theories and practices resulted



in the implementation of audit and control regimes that further re-organized practices of academic work. In the process, several humanities and social sciences courses were eliminated, particularly those focused on gender studies, race and ethnicity and labour studies. English literature courses were degraded by being transformed into English for business writing.

In the neoliberal interplay between performance and academic work, economic growth and efficiency were favoured. The economics of the labour process resulted in a substantial increase in the numbers of adjunct instructors. Faculty were divided between those occupying full-time positions, and the numerical majority of temporary and contingent instructors who came under the control of management in terms of centralized decision-making and performance-related remuneration. The casualization of the academic workforce was intended to remunerate contract faculty only for the hours of teaching and not for time spent on course preparation, marking and advising students. Adjunct faculty work more, are paid less and are easily replaced. Itinerant faculty became what has been referred to as products on the educational assembly line with academics commodified as units of labour.

Neoliberal government directives emphasized compliance, monitoring, auditing and quality assurance. The implementation of corporate business models resulted in a movement away from traditional educational programs and services. The transfer of power from academics to managerial regimes resulted in an intensification of administrative power, a loss of autonomy for faculty and increased workloads. Conflicts which arose between academic values of autonomy and values of corporate governance, entrepreneurialism and commercialization, rationalized academic labour. Standardizing and homogenizing practices reduced education to vocational training, resulting in the commodification of curriculum, the deskilling of academic work and the degradation of academic workers. The result was the further deprofessionalization of faculty and the fragmentation of their work that deprived them of control over issues of curriculum, evaluation and academic advisement, while correspondingly placing a greater number of academic decisions under the control of administrators. By way of example, curriculum development has been shifted to departments controlled by managers within a number of colleges or outsourced to corporations,

and subsequently taught by precarious faculty. Outsourcing to private companies is a predominant characteristic of neoliberalism, as seen in the manner in which the work of librarians and counselors has also been fragmented and transferred to third parties outside of the bargaining unit.

Under the provincial government's regime, college administrators maximized the Standard Workload Formula to implement year-round teaching (eliminating professional development), as well as to reduce the number of different courses faculty teach. The work associated with Learning Management Systems, the online presentation for most courses, was not factored into the workload formula. Some of the time-consuming duties for which faculty are allotted two hours per week on their SWF include, posting, email communications, maintaining course outlines and online assignments, setting up virtual discussion groups, recording videos, updating links and dealing with numerous technical issues of network outages and incompatible file folders (Mackay & Devitt, 2021). Increasing faculty workloads has resulted in the introduction of overtime and an escalation in class sizes. In some colleges, on-line testing has been implemented that is less time consuming and costly, while evaluative methods such as written assignments have been discouraged. For a number of disciplines such as engineering and nursing, laboratory work has been separated from the classroom teaching of theory and delivered by instructors or technicians.

Conclusion

Ontario public colleges play a vital role in preparing students for the increasingly competitive global economy and as citizens in a democracy. The critical issue with respect to the government's postsecondary educational reforms begs the question as to what cost are these changes with respect to the public good? The government's neoliberal educational policies offer a short horizon that disregards how quality, public education can improve future outcomes. They are centered in the belief that markets best organize society and have led to the government transforming college education into a for-profit industry. Essentially, the neoliberal agenda is incompatible with the critical educational practices offered in Ontario colleges. Increased and sustainable government financial resources are a necessary prerequisite for these institutions to continue to contribute to the realization of human potential and the well-being of society. Commitment to academic autonomy and



integrity is essential for college institutions. Ontario colleges were once an egalitarian force to reduce the gap between the wealthy and the disadvantaged. Colleges need to return to their foundational roots to provide inclusive, affordable and quality education for local communities. Students should be provided with the knowledge and skills to sustain and develop lifestyles based on human rights, social justice, gender and ethnic equality, diversity, multiculturalism, promotion of peace and non-violence and global citizenship, in addition to skills to participate in the economy.

The restructuring of the campus workforce is an important issue that must heed the call of equity for adjunct faculty. It is imperative that the development and delivery of curricular materials is undertaken by full-time, qualified faculty who are supported in their academic endeavors. Further, decisions regarding the use of technologically-mediated methodologies should essentially be under the authority and direction of professional educators. Faculty must of necessity have significant involvement in decisions regarding issues of governance, academic freedom and intellectual property rights. The pressing issue concerning the financial dependency on international students requires vigilant monitoring to sustain the core mandate of colleges. The imbalance of the administration/faculty ratios and managerial dominance is also a critical issue that must be addressed. Most importantly, progressive vision and leadership is required by governments and college management with respect to academics and their work.

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Endnotes

i In the academic sector, the Ontario Public Service Union (OPSEU) currently represents 14,000 full-time professors, partial-load instructors, counselors and librarians, as well as support staff in public colleges and universities. In 2017, OPSEU attempted to unionize part-time and sessional instructors without success. The College Employers Council intervened to exclude these academic instructors from the bargaining unit by challenging a count of the vote with the Ministry of Labour.

ii The legacy of Harris' market-driven politics included initiatives that closed hospitals, the Bruce nuclear power plant, Enron and parts of Ontario Hydro, as well as privatizing Highway 407. He was also responsible for dismissing 10,000 nurses, downloading responsibilities to municipalities and increasing privatization in long-term care facilities (Kell, 2005). A reduction of \$400 million from the public education budget and the introduction of user fees for junior kindergarten were followed by a further extraction of \$1 billion from the educational system. Bill 160 introduced in September 1997 was a strategy to divide and conquer unions representing educational workers, by utilizing non-teaching professionals to deliver select programs (Rapport, 1996). The intent was to destabilize unions by creating two classes of teachers, including non-certified instructors who were not accountable for their teaching practices (Reshef & Rastin, 1993).

iii A report by the Ontario Nursing Association 2022, indicates that 15,000 nurses were registered to work in that period, however, the shortage of tens of thousands of nurses in Ontario hospitals and clinics was as a result of the exodus of large numbers to private clinics that were instigated by the Ford government. Numerous nurses also left the profession due to the onerous working conditions in Ontario hospitals (Ontario Nursing Association, 2022). There are several additional occupations that have shortages due to the retirement in numbers of baby boomers and resignations resulting from the pandemic. These occupations include: doctors, pilots, truck drivers, pharmacists, software developers, aircraft mechanics, welders, accountants, engineers, secondary school teachers and workers in the trades (Jani, 2024).

iv Despite his claim to be "working for workers," Ledham (2022) suggested that many workers do not

support the labour policies of the Ford government. She cited the celebration of CUPE and the Canadian labour movement's defeat of Bill 28 that denied educational workers fundamental charter rights to collective bargaining. President of the Ontario Secondary School Federation stated that the suppression of wages to 1 per cent harmed women-dominated fields of work. Similarly, the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario expressed concern over unjust practices of the Ford government. And the Ontario Public Service Employees Union stated that Bill 106 may allow the government to override collective bargaining agreements with respect to issues of pay equity. Resulting from a "second-class, minimum wage", Ford also failed to gain favour with the Canadian Union of Postal Workers. According to Tim Reid, IBEW Canadian Vice-President, eleven of the locals of the Construction Council of Canada are opposed to the Ford government's approach to labour. And a number of unions have expressed concern that \$3 million in funds has been removed from the Workplace Safety Insurance Board and returned to employers.

v During the first year of the Ford government (2018-2019), he claimed that the deficit was \$15 billion that he inherited from the previous Liberal government of Kathleen Wynne. Due to higher taxes and lower expenses, the deficit in that period was \$7.4 billion, half of Ford's claim (Crawley, 2024). Nonetheless, Ford proceeded with an unprecedented number of decreases and cancellations to programs that resulted in a savings of \$14.5 billion for the province (Crawley, 2024). Cuts to various educational sectors totaled \$1.8 billion and included teaching positions and classroom tutors in elementary and secondary schools, the cancellation of three university/college satellite campuses and a French university, as well as grants to low-income, postsecondary students. Reductions to environmental programs concentrated on eliminating cap-and-trade programs and reducing funds for green fund programs, greenhouse gas reduction, tree planting, flood management, invasive plant management and Indigenous fisheries. These budgetary decreases totaled \$2.19 billion.

Health care expenditures were reduced by \$1.56 billion and included the creation of an amalgamated health agency of local, public and regional programs, the Ontario Drug Benefit program, out-of-country OHIP coverage, youth anti-smoking initiatives, the cancellation of funding for the College of Midwives and laying off forty-four employees at the Telemedicine network. A total of \$306 million was extracted from social, community and legal programs. These decreases included funds



for Legal Aid, Children's Aid Societies, Victims of Violence, Ontario Provincial Police, Special Investigations Unit, Ontario Trillium Foundation, Basic Income Pilot program, the elimination of the office of Child and Youth Advocate and French Language Services. In arts and culture programs the Ontario Music Fund, Ontario Arts Council regional tourist offices and library services experienced a reduction of \$38 million. And in the research and technology sector of society, funds for artificial intelligence and stem-cell research were decreased by \$29 million (Toronto Star staff, 2024).