Public policy, community colleges, and the path to globalization

JOHN S. LEVIN
The University of Arizona, Arizona, U.S.A.

Abstract. This study addresses the nature of government policy toward community colleges in the 1990s and the responses of institutions to these policies. This is an examination of Canadian and U.S. community colleges in two Canadian provinces and three U.S. states as well as analysis of government policy in two countries, at the federal, state and provincial levels. Government policies are viewed as directing community colleges toward economic goals, emphasizing workforce training and state economic competitiveness as outcomes, compelling colleges to improve efficiencies, increase productivity, and to become accountable to government and responsive to business and industry. Government responses to economic concerns at the provincial and state levels resulted in economic development policies applicable to community colleges. Institutional responses among community colleges, evident in behaviors such as marketization and productivity and efficiency, altered college missions, resulting in the pursuit of economic ends by these institutions.

Keywords: community colleges, globalization, interventionary state, mission, public policy

In the 1990s, public policy applicable to community colleges in both Canada and the U.S. directed these institutions to global competitiveness and to a re-fashioning of institutional mission. Government policies clearly endeavored to direct community colleges toward economic goals, emphasizing workforce training and state economic competitiveness as outcomes, compelling colleges to improve efficiencies, increase productivity, and to become accountable to government and responsive to business and industry. Pressures for efficiency and productivity accompanied claims of government restraint on public sector funding and directed colleges to behave like globally competitive businesses. Pressures to orient institutions to the marketplace, evident in the emphasis placed upon vocationalism and commercialism (Kenway 1998), were consistent with the needs of global capital. Furthermore, government responsiveness to economic concerns at the provincial and state levels became economic development policies applicable to community colleges. Institutional responses, evident in behaviors such as marketization and productivity and efficiency, altered community college missions, resulting in the pursuit of economic ends by these institutions.

The domain of politics was the arena where government policy and policy behaviors on the one hand and institutional responses on the other hand
interacted. Policy can be seen as government efforts to control decisions and actions of institutions in accord with the objectives of governments (Goedegebuure et al. 1993). Policy regulates institutions, permitting, requiring, or forbidding actions, which include those of both institutional members and government officials (Schlager and Blomquist 1996). Simply, policy reflects government objectives. Institutional responses are formally connected to policy implementation. For community colleges, the economic objectives of the 1990s overshadowed and in some cases replaced earlier objectives of accessibility, personal and social development, and a liberal or general education (Schugurensky and Higgins 1996). Institutional responses to policy were varied, although in general colleges altered structures, processes, and institutional mission to align these more with economic interests.

The community college

Since the 1960s, the community college in North America has been viewed and conceived as a social and educational institution that responds to its local community, offering open-access to postsecondary education and providing comprehensive education and training programs to meet the needs of individual students. Its image is based upon its mission: to serve the underserved and to expand access to postsecondary education and training. Historically, community colleges have prided themselves on fulfilling the needs of individual students and serving their local communities (Cohen and Brawer 1996; Dennison and Gallagher 1986; Roueche and Baker 1987).

Yet, within the last decade, with the rise in public and government emphasis and attention upon a global economy, the community college became not only a more prominent regional and national institution but also an institution that was affected by macro-level changes in the external environment. These changes include government policies to reflect both societal and economic concerns such as the training of a globally competitive workforce and private sector demands for an increase in workbased training and specific skill acquisition for workers.

Global forces, particularly economic ones, contributed to organizational change in the 1990s, and colleges in response to these forces altered their missions and structures. These alterations in effect moved colleges away from local community social needs towards local market needs and in line with national and international agendas of dominant influencers such as governments and businesses, suggesting a more pronounced economic role for community colleges.

In this multi-case investigation of community colleges in the United States and Canada, I refer to the process of change as globalization. Organizational behaviors in response to globalization, and to others’ responses to