

Separating Fact from Fiction

THE NEW BRUNSWICK COMMISSION ON POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Funding

Myth: The Commission claims its recommendations for new funding will be enough to finance three new polytechnics and pull New Brunswick out of last place in per capita post-secondary education funding in Canada.

Fact: The Commission's recommended \$50-million over three years for the entire post-secondary system is grossly inadequate. It would take an increase of \$58-million per year just to bring New Brunswick up to the average per capita spending for universities alone. It would take \$120-million to pay for the deferred maintenance just at the University of New Brunswick.

Though the Commission is enthusiastically selling its polytechnic proposal to New Brunswickers, the report lacks any detailed funding plan for these new institutions. There is no accounting for start-up and equipment costs, construction costs, infrastructure costs, or transitional costs to accommodate the over 3,000 students and faculty who will be displaced if this plan goes ahead. What is clear is that if the report's recommendations are accepted, New Brunswick will slip even farther behind other provinces in research funding and per capita core funding because of these new costs.



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Governance

Myth: The Commission recommends that the senior academic body in the proposed polytechnics be denied the powers of a university senate to make academic decisions. Instead it proposes that the senior academic body be limited to reporting to the Board of Governors through the president of the polytechnic. The Commission also suggests that the senates at the University of New Brunswick and the Université de Moncton be stripped of their current powers and similarly limited to reporting to the Board of Governors through the university president.

Fact: The university model of governance across Canada is one in which boards of governors are responsible for administrative and financial matters and senates are responsible for academic decision-making. The Commission's preference for a corporate managerial model in which all power rests with the president and the board would set New Brunswick institutions apart from all other universities in the country. It would seriously harm the province's universities by taking educational decision-making away from those most qualified to make such decisions on behalf of the institution.



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Polytechnics

Myth: In its report the Commission hints that its proposed polytechnics will resemble Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Caltech, and L'école polytechnique de Montréal,

Fact: MIT and Caltech are two of the best engineering universities in the world. L'école polytechnique de Montréal is one of the leading university education faculties in Canada whose faculty receive about one quarter of all university research funding in engineering in Quebec. The proposed New Brunswick polytechnics will be nothing like any of these respected institutions. For the most part they will be little more than expanded community colleges, a change that can be accomplished without the expense or damage of creating new institutions or shutting existing universities.

Myth: The conversion of a university to a polytechnic is a unique cutting edge way to position New Brunswick for the 21st century.

Fact: The conversion of an existing viable university into a polytechnic is completely unheard of. In the Canadian context and internationally, the overwhelming trend has been to convert polytechnics to universities. This move of downgrading a university to polytechnic is a step backward for New Brunswick that will harm students, faculty and the communities of Saint John, Edmunston and Shippigan. It will also undermine the research capacity of New Brunswick.

Myth: Polytechnics will be able to do useful applied research.

Fact: New Brunswick is already last among Canadian provinces in per capita funding for post-secondary education and near the bottom in matching funding for research. Current core operations are in dire need of upgrading before New Brunswick can compete nationally in research and development. The notion that poorly funded polytechnics can fill this gap is unrealistic. The Commissioners ignore the more feasible option of allowing New Brunswick Community College an expanded role, similar to that allowed community colleges in the rest of Canada.

Myth: The Commission is proposing adequate funding to make its recommended changes.

Fact: New funding of \$50 million over three years has been set aside for the entire New Brunswick system of post-secondary education. Of that new funding \$30 million will be attached to a special purpose fund leaving an undetermined amount to fund three new institutions. As elsewhere in its report, the Commission is vague about exact funding requirements but it is clear that the new funding will not be nearly enough to offer the comprehensive quality education the Commission is promoting.

Myth: The creation of polytechnics will enhance access for low-income and rural residents of New Brunswick.

Fact: The creation of the new polytechnic means the closure of the UNB St John campus and the displacement of over 3,000 students. Many students are already voicing concern that they will not be able to finish their studies if forced to leave Saint John. The commission undermines its own commitment to access when it calls for the full deregulation of tuition fees with the following caveat: "We propose that the tuition fees charged by colleges and polytechnics offering the first one or two years of university work not be lower than the lowest fee charged by a university for that type of program." In other words, the creation of the polytechnics is in no way designed to make education more affordable for New Brunswickers.

Myth: The Commission claims that students and faculty from UNB Saint John will not be adversely affected by the closure of the campus.

Fact: There is also no comprehensive plan in the commission's report to deal with the massive task of transitioning over 3,000 students, many of whom are enrolled in four year programs, out of UNB St. John without disruption. Nor is there a plan for UNB faculty in Saint John who will have to relocate in Fredericton. In addition, there is no analysis of the social and economic impact the loss of a comprehensive university would have on New Brunswick's biggest city.



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Tuition Fees and Student Financial Assistance

Myth: Deregulating tuition fees promotes access and institutional differentiation.

Fact: New Brunswick has the second highest tuition fees in the country and close to the highest student debt levels. Raising tuition fees through deregulation will make it more difficult for students to start and complete their programs. Even if the Commission's promise to cap debt at \$28,000 for a four year program were true, that level of debt will continue to deter low income and aboriginal students from ever considering university study. Recent data suggests that debt levels of over \$10,000 for a four-year program cut in half the likelihood a student will finish their program. The argument that deregulated tuition fees encourage institution diversity is dubious and has not been borne out by practice in other provinces in which fees have been deregulated. In Ontario, the deregulation of fees simply led to a competitive race among older, well established institutions to raise fees. The result is not diversity but uniformly high fees and massive increases in debt for all but those from the wealthiest families.

Myth: The significant tuition fee hikes that would come with deregulation would be offset by the changes to student financial assistance suggested by the Commission.

Fact: The national experience in recent years is that despite the promises, no program of student financial assistance has kept pace with tuition fees hikes. In the past 10 years, fees have increased by nearly 100% but student financial aid increases have been in the range of 70%. The Commission's own calculations are unrealistically low — suggesting it would cost \$14.3 million per year to cap student debt at \$7,000. However, those calculations assume 2004 tuition fee levels, not the substantial increases that will occur following deregulation. Further, the Commission promises that any student need above the level of the loan cap will automatically become a grant or bursary. Experience elsewhere suggests that "need" will be defined in such a way that most students will not benefit from the promise.

Myth: By following the model implemented by former Ontario Premier Mike Harris that calls for 30% of any fee hikes to be set aside for student financial aid, the Commission claims that such a policy "would dampen any enthusiasm that might exist for excessive tuition fee increases."

Fact: The Ontario model that the Commission is recommending has led to tuition fees as high as \$20,000 in deregulated programs. The fact that 30% of these increases had to go back into student financial assistance did absolutely nothing to "dampen" enthusiasm for tuition fees hikes. There is not a shred of evidence to suggest that a requirement that 30% of fee hikes go into student financial aid did anything to contain large increases in a deregulated environment.

