QUALITATIVE LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH ON HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION

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Scholars and practitioners view institutional change both to and in colleges and universities as lethargic if they want a specific form of change, such as more responsive to the needs of business and industry, and wrongly directed if they want to maintain traditions. Yet, such observations are based upon either short-term perspectives or ideological commitments, or both. Little research is conducted on institutional change over long-term periods, such as decades. Little if any scholarship that is grounded in field methods research discusses institutional dynamics and actions more than as a snapshot or as a limited period of one to five years. Ethnographic research in higher education may span a period of a year or two (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Moffat, 1989; Weis, 1985), but change of the institution is not the focus; where it is the focus (Cooper & Kempner, 1993; Hardy, 1996; Marginson & Considine, 2000), the investigative period is a few years at most. Even work that attempts to span a decade or more does not include active research in the past and instead is a form of “looking back” to what was (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Holland, Thomson, and Henderson (2006), UK scholars, promote qualitative longitudinal research that is interdisciplinary and focuses upon the dynamic character of social life within the context of social theory.

This research is a qualitative longitudinal study of higher education institutions in Canada and the U.S. The institutions investigated from the period of 1989 to 2013 were designated community colleges at the initial investigative period (i.e., 1989). Yet, at the end of the investigation, although four of the institutions remained community colleges, three developed into universities, and three of the other four were authorized to grant baccalaureate degrees, a mission and function previously alien to community colleges.

To understand institutional change during the period of 2000-2013, I relied upon field methods research (Burgess, 1984; Maxwell, 2005) with emphasis upon interviews of 60 institutional participants, specifically faculty and administrators. The major theory that guided the initial investigation (1989-1999) was globalization theory, whereas institutional theory (Scott, 2013) and neoliberalism (Ball, 2012; Crouch, 2011; Quiggan, 2010) guided the second phase (2000-2013) of the investigation and served as analytical frameworks for data analysis. This investigation explains both major shapers and consequences of institutional change and adherence to or rejection of government policy, or a melding of compliance and acceptance.