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Exploring the potential contribution of college bachelor degree programs in Ontario to reducing social inequality

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ABSTRACT

During the past two decades community colleges and technical institutes in several jurisdictions, including parts of Canada, the United States and Australia, have been given the authority to award bachelor degrees. One of the motivations for this addition to the mandate of these institutions is to improve opportunities for bachelor degree attainment among groups that historically have been underserved by universities. This article addresses the equity implications of extending the authority to award baccalaureate degrees to an additional class of institutions in Canada's largest province, Ontario. The article identifies the conditions that need to be met for reforms of this type to impact positively on social mobility and inequality, and it describes the kinds of data that are necessary to determine the extent to which those conditions are met. Based on interviews with students, faculty, and college leaders, it was found that regulatory restrictions on intra-college transfer from sub-baccalaureate to baccalaureate programs and lack of public awareness of a new type of bachelor degree may be limiting the social impact of this reform.

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Introduction

The establishment of community colleges in Canada and the United States dates back to the early twentieth century. Until near the end of that century, these institutions concentrated on offering associate degrees, certificates, and diplomas. It was only in the 1990s that some community colleges (hereinafter referred to frequently as 'colleges') were given the authority to award bachelor degrees, the beginning of a trend that has continued during the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

One of the main reasons for the addition of bachelor degrees to the repertoire of colleges in many states and provinces was to improve opportunity for bachelor degree attainment. Up to half or more of the students who enter postsecondary education in many states and provinces start in a college. Until the late twentieth century, the only way that these students could earn a bachelor degree was to transfer to a university after

attending a community college. However, the transfer route has proved difficult for many students. The difficulties that college students face in attempting to earn a bachelor degree through transfer to a university have important equity implications, since students from lower socio-economic groups, minorities, and people with disabilities are overrepresented in the college sector. Proponents of the community college bachelor degree have argued that this reform could provide better opportunity to earn a bachelor degree for learners who have been underserved by universities. This article examines that claim by explicating the conditions that it rests upon and bringing to bear data from interviews with institutional leaders, faculty, students, and public officials.

Among the American states and Canadian provinces in which colleges have been empowered to award bachelor degrees, the two where the most bachelor programs are offered are Florida in the United States (Russell 2013) and Ontario in Canada (Colleges and Institutes Canada 2017). This article addresses the college bachelor degree experience in Ontario – the largest province in a country where educational policy rests largely at the provincial level – with respect to meeting the needs of the kinds of students who have been underserved by the universities.

The first section explores some possible conceptual underpinnings, focusing on the literature on the social role of the community college. The predominant theme of this literature is that the community college perpetuates rather than reduces social inequality by restricting access to the baccalaureate for less privileged members of society. The next section provides information on the nature of Ontario's colleges and the introduction and evolution of baccalaureate-granting by the colleges. The section which follows identifies the conditions under which the college bachelor degree might, however modestly, improve opportunities for the kinds of students who have been underserved by universities; and it also discusses the types of data that would be needed to assess the extent to which these conditions are met. The penultimate section presents findings from interviews that are pertinent to the conditions indicated in the section that precedes it. Concluding comments are offered in the final section. The authors attempt to contribute to policy by identifying measures that could enable college bachelor degree programs to be more effective in addressing the needs of underserved populations; and to theory, by extending the literature on the social role of the community college to take account of the phenomenon of new providers of baccalaureate degrees.

The social role of the community college

Beginning with an article by Karabel in 1972, a body of literature emerged which critically examines the impact of community colleges on social mobility and inequality (Karabel 1972). Karabel found that college students came predominantly from lower income families in which the father was most likely to be a blue-collar worker. In contrast, students who went directly to the university were more likely to be from higher income families in which the fathers were predominantly white-collar, professional or managerial workers. He cited research that showed that only a little more than 20% of community college students obtained a bachelor degree, while the figure was about three times as high for those who started postsecondary education in a university. The inference was that higher level occupations would be closed to the vast majority of community college students, thus consigning them to jobs like those of their fathers. Or, as Zwerling expressed it, community

colleges assist in 'channelling young people to essentially the same relative positions in the social structure that their parents already occupy' (1976, 33; cited in Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker 2014, 375). Hence, the overall impact of the college was to perpetuate rather than to reduce social inequality. Later contributors to this body of literature, such as Dowd (2003) and Chase (2011), noted the high proportions of minority students in community colleges and the consequent contribution of the colleges to stratification of the work force by race.

At the time of Karabel's 1972 article, offering courses in the arts and sciences that prepared students for transfer to a university was still the predominant function of American community colleges. However, offering occupationally focused programs that prepared students for direct entry into the labour force was on the ascendancy and would soon become the primary function (Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker 2014). The shift toward vocational programs was alleged to weaken the colleges' transfer function, as the occupational programs were viewed as terminal education not leading to a bachelor degree (Brint and Karabel 1989). Alternative explanations were offered to explain the 'vocationalization' of the community college: student demand, pressure from industry, ambitions of college leaders, and the interests of politicians and senior government officials (Brint and Karabel 1989; Dougherty 1994).

The bachelor degree occupies an absolutely crucial place in the literature on the social role of the community college. It has been viewed as the gateway to positions of higher income and social status, its absence as a deficiency that may prevent people from developing their full potential and leading satisfying lives. Deriving from the importance of the bachelor degree, also crucial in this literature is how the choice of initial postsecondary institution influences the chances of earning a bachelor degree. In a longitudinal study of over 700,000 bachelor degree-seeking students who started postsecondary education in a community college in 2007, 33% were found to have transferred to a four-year institution, and 14% obtained a bachelor degree within six years (Jenkins and Fink 2016). The bachelor degree attainment rate of college students in this 2016 study was about the same as the 15% figure that Brint reported in his 2003 examination of similar studies (2003), and down from the over 20% rate that Karabel found in 1972.

Degree completion rates for postsecondary students, including the ones cited thus far in this article, have typically been calculated for a six-year period from the time of entry. Recently, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center has also been providing some data based on an eight-year period (Shapiro et al. 2015, 2016, 2017). Perhaps not surprisingly, degree completion rates have been shown to be higher when calculated over a longer period. However, the data provided in these reports do not enable us to say exactly how much higher the rates of bachelor degree attainment are for students who begin postsecondary education in a community college. For example, the 2015 report shows that 15.1% of the members of the 2009 cohort of students in public community colleges had completed a degree or certificate in a four-year institution (which we will take as an indicator of completion of a bachelor degree) within six years (Shapiro et al. 2015). The corresponding rate for students who started in a four-year public institution in 2009 was 61.2%.

The 2017 report (Shapiro et al. 2017) notes that the eight-year rate of degree attainment for the 2009 cohort of community college students was 6.1 percentage points higher than the six-year rate, but that figure refers to the total of two-year and four-year degrees. If the

ratio of two-year degrees to four-year degrees earned after eight years was the same as the reported ratio earned after six years (40–60), then the rate of bachelor degree attainment of community college entrants after eight years would have been 2.4 points higher than after six years, i.e. 17.5%. This is higher than the more recent six-year rates referred to earlier, though lower than the rate cited by Karabel in the 1970s, and pales in comparison with the 67.9% eight-year rate for the 2009 cohort of students in public four-year institutions (Shapiro et al. 2017).

Brint's 2003 examination of the research literature showed that when student background and test scores were controlled for, starting postsecondary education in a college reduced a student's chance of earning a bachelor degree by 10–20% – about the same as Brint and Karabel had found in 1989 (11–19%). Pusser and Levin suggested that '[p]erhaps no statistic has brought more negative publicity to community colleges over the years than the percentage of students who transfer to four-year colleges and complete baccalaureate degrees' (2009, 8).

The early literature on the social role of the community college posited two principal factors that reduced the chances of a college student attaining a bachelor degree. One was that students who entered community colleges were diverted from the academic (arts and sciences) stream toward the vocational (occupational program) stream. When this literature was developing in the 1970s and 1980s, the phrase 'terminal education' was still widely used when referring to occupational programs in community colleges. In fact, the idea that these kinds of programs could lead to a bachelor degree was still sufficiently novel at the beginning of the present century for Townsend to title a 2002 article that made that point '*Terminal* students do transfer' (Townsend 2002). The decline in the overall rate of bachelor degree attainment for college students in the United States between the 1970s and the 1990s that was noted earlier may have been due in large part to the increasing prominence of vocational programs during that period. It was observed that the transfer rate was substantially higher for students in academic programs than for students in vocational programs (Grubb 1991; Townsend 2002). It was not until relatively recently that substantial effort has gone into developing pathways from occupational programs in community colleges to bachelor programs in universities (Townsend, Bragg, and Ruud 2009).

The other major constraint on bachelor degree attainment for community college students came from the attitudes and policies of universities toward college-to-university transfer, especially as these pertained to awarding transfer credit. Whether motivated by genuine concerns about the academic qualifications of transfer students or by institutional interests, universities have often displayed reticence about accommodating transfer students. Brint and Karabel observed that as community colleges grew, their relationships with state universities often deteriorated, and the ensuing turf wars resulted in confusion for students over whether their college courses would be accepted by universities (1989). The increasing prominence of occupational programs in the colleges exacerbated the transfer credit barrier because issues of curriculum fit between the two types of institutions were more problematic for vocational than for academic programs (Baker 2002; Townsend, Bragg, and Ruud 2009). However, it is determined and rationalized the amount of credit awarded to transfer students seems to have a significant impact on whether they succeed in obtaining a bachelor degree. A longitudinal study of 13,000 students in the United States found that the odds of completing a bachelor degree for

students who were able to transfer most or all their college credits were 2.5 times greater than the odds for those who could only transfer less than half of their college credits (Monaghan and Attewell 2015).

Later literature on the disparities in bachelor degree attainment between those who start postsecondary education in a community college and those who start in a four-year institution considered other impediments to smooth transfer such as the culture shock that many students experience when moving from one type of institution to another; increased costs; the difficulty that students have identifying appropriate pathways, and issues associated with the geographic distance between sending and receiving institutions. In general, large distances to the nearest postsecondary institution may limit participation, especially for persons from lower income families (Frenette 2003). In addition, many students are place-bound due to work or family responsibilities, and thus may be unable to travel the necessary distance to the nearest university, or the nearest university that has a program with affinity to the community college program which the student has completed (Shields 2004; Floyd 2005).

Before leaving the literature on the social role of the community college, it is important to note that in concentrating on the bachelor degree, this literature tends to undervalue the contribution that colleges make to reducing social inequality through their other programs. While colleges attract some students who might otherwise have enrolled in a four-year institution, they also admit many students who might not otherwise have entered postsecondary education at all. Determining the overall impact of the community college on inequality is a complex task that involves measuring the outcomes of each of these effects and weighing one against the other. That the second one might be quite substantial was acknowledged by Brint when he noted that ‘the consensus of researchers today is that most students attending community colleges would not otherwise attend any postsecondary institution’ (2003, 27).

Regardless of what its net impact on social inequality might turn out to be, the fact that only a relatively small proportion of incoming community college students end up with a bachelor degree is a problem because so many students who enter postsecondary education start in a community college and because a large proportion of community college students are from underserved groups (Shapiro et al. 2017). In the United States, more than a third of first time freshmen begin postsecondary education in a community college (Shapiro et al. 2016), and in Ontario, the corresponding figure is more than 50% (Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development 2017a, 2017b). Shapiro et al. (2017) note that 75% of entering community college students are minorities and 44% are low income. Moreover, many of the students who enter community colleges say that their goal is to obtain a bachelor degree – 81% in the Jenkins and Fink (2016) study noted earlier.

Given what Clark referred to as the ‘problem of the gap between aspiration and scholastic ability’ (1980, 28), it is probably unrealistic to expect that all community college students who aspire to a bachelor degree can actually attain that goal. However, the prominence of discussion of barriers to transfer from two-year to four-year institutions, and the outpouring of documents offering strategies for improvement in this process in recent years suggest that the present arrangements for transfer are not satisfactory. In this context allowing community colleges to award bachelor degrees has been promoted as an additional – not as a substitute – means for improving opportunities for students

who start postsecondary education in a community college to earn a bachelor degree. In contrast to many European countries where short-cycle postsecondary institutions evolved into institutions that mainly award bachelor and postgraduate degrees, in the United States and Canada the scale of bachelor degree provision by community colleges is far more modest (Wheelahan et al. 2017). In the American states and Canadian provinces in which community colleges have been authorized to award bachelor degrees, offering bachelor degree programs has constituted a small addition to the repertoire of institutional activity rather than representing a major transformation of institutional role. The next section describes the development of and experience with the college bachelor degree in Ontario.

Ontario colleges and bachelor degrees

In 1966, the Government of Ontario enacted legislation that established a system of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology. The primary mission of the new colleges was work-force preparation, and to ensure that they concentrated on that function the government excluded a liberal arts transfer function from their mandate (Stoll 1993; Skolnik 2010). The colleges were to be both separate from and an alternative to the universities for students who pursued postsecondary education. The government wanted the colleges to have 'parity of esteem' with the universities (Campbell 1975, 65), and to that end enabled the colleges to offer three-year programs leading to an 'advanced diploma', as distinct from the 'diploma', which was a two-year program (Baker 2002). It was thought that the advanced diploma could be the college sector counterpart to the three-year bachelor degree, which at the time was common in the university sector, though some university students chose to do the four-year honours bachelor degree. In furtherance of the idea of parity of esteem between separate postsecondary sectors, a commission on postsecondary education recommended that the colleges be allowed to award a bachelor degree instead of an advanced diploma for their three-year programs (Commission on Postsecondary Education in Ontario 1972). That recommendation was not accepted by the government, and Ontario remains the only jurisdiction in North America or Europe where students can do a three-year program of postsecondary education and not receive a bachelor degree. The only other jurisdiction that we found where colleges award three-year diplomas is Singapore.

Not having a mandated transfer function, Ontario's colleges operated largely in isolation from the provincial universities for nearly their first quarter century. When finally the presidents of the colleges and the presidents of the universities arranged to meet together in 1992, the heading on the news release for the event was 'Historic meeting opens doors between colleges and universities' (Council of Ontario Universities 1992).

What brought the heads of colleges and universities together was increasing interest in the colleges and in the government in creating pathways that would enable graduates of occupational programs in the colleges to continue their education in a university. The increased interest in pathways for graduates of applied programs in the colleges was occurring simultaneously in other countries such as the United States (Walker and Floyd 2005) and Australia (Wheelahan et al. 2009). The impetus for the new interest in pathways was that colleges were noticing that increasing numbers of their career program students voiced the desire to continue on to the bachelor degree, and that in many of the fields in

which the colleges were offering career programs employers were raising the educational requirements for entry and career advancement (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training 1993; Clark et al. 2009).

In this context, it was understandable that the colleges were concerned about the difficulty that their students faced in attempting to attain a bachelor degree. There is no study for Ontario comparable to the American study cited earlier that found that 14% of college students obtained a bachelor degree within six years (Jenkins and Fink 2016). Recent Ontario studies of the movement of students from colleges to universities show transfer rates in the range of 5–8% (Kerr, McCloy, and Shuping 2010; Trick 2013). If the percentage of Ontario transfer students who earn a bachelor degree were the same as Jenkins and Fink found in the United States, 42%, that would imply an upper estimate of a little over 3% of Ontario college students going on to obtain a bachelor degree.

A recent Ontario study suggests that the success rate of Ontario transfer students in earning a bachelor degree may be higher than 42%. A study of transfer pathways between Seneca College in Toronto and near-by York University showed that 47% of transfer students had obtained a bachelor degree and 20% were still enrolled at the time of the study (Smith et al. 2016). If all the remaining 20% were to graduate that would boost the completion rate for transfer students to 67%; and if 67% of the 5–8% of students who transfer were to complete a bachelor degree, that would still constitute at most only 5.4% of all the students who begin postsecondary education in a college. However, these two institutions have a lengthy history of collaboration and among the better articulation arrangements found in the Province. Seneca sends more transfer students to university than any other college, and York receives more transfer students than any other university (Lennon et al. 2016). Thus, the degree completion rate of students who transfer from Seneca College to York University is likely higher than the average rate between all colleges and universities in the Province.

During the 1990s, Ontario colleges continued to push the universities to work with them to create pathways to the bachelor degree, and to push the government to exert pressure on the universities to get them to cooperate with the colleges. Some task forces were established to study the issue, and a mechanism for consultation between the colleges and the universities was created. However, by the late 1990s, these initiatives had failed to result in much tangible progress. For example, a 2015 study showed that two-thirds of Ontario students who enter a four-year bachelor program in a university after completing a two-year diploma program in a college receive one year or less credit (Decock and McCloy 2015), and that is in spite of improvements that have been made since the 1990s. Frustrated with the lack of progress in improving opportunities for college graduates to transfer to provincial universities, in 1998 the colleges recommended to the government that they be allowed to award bachelor degrees (Association of Colleges of Applied Arts & Technology of Ontario 1998). Within just two years the government accepted the recommendation and enacted legislation that gave the colleges the authority to award bachelor degrees in applied areas of study. The legislation did not define applied areas of study, but in practice the term has been taken to mean programs that are designed to prepare graduates for specific occupations.

Different reasons have been suggested for why the government gave the colleges the authority to award bachelor degrees. Galea (2015) probed the reasons for the decision in interviews with 15 senior government and institutional leaders, most of whom were either

involved in the decision-making or the advocacy pertaining to the college bachelor degree. The top three reasons that he found were: responding to labour market needs, lobbying by the college presidents, and the combination of 'limited university transfer options and student demand' (Galea 2015, 83). If, as their 1998 brief suggests, the lobbying by the college presidents was motivated by their frustration with the lack of progress on transfer, then two of the top three reasons relate to the problems of college-to-university transfer. Moreover, in one of the interviews the person who had been the Minister responsible for colleges and universities at the time stated that 'it was very difficult [for college students] to obtain degree granting at any existing postsecondary institutions [i.e. the universities]' (Galea 2015, 86). The major competing explanation focused on ideology. In 1995, a conservative, pro-market government had come to power, and some suggested that it opened up bachelor degree granting to the colleges to further its neoliberal agenda (Jones 2004; Fisher et al. 2009). This explanation is supported by the name of the relevant legislation, *The Postsecondary Education Choice and Excellence Act*, and the fact that it also allowed private institutions to award degrees. Previously there had been a longstanding policy of not allowing private institutions to award degrees, thus limiting the scope of the market for degree education in Ontario. These two explanations are not mutually exclusive: the government's ideological predisposition may have accounted for how quickly it addressed the concerns of the college presidents – a group that was important to the government's economic agenda – over the transfer issue.

In connection with the earlier discussion of the social role of the college, what is perhaps most noteworthy about Galea's findings is that addressing the particular needs of groups that had been underserved by the universities was not mentioned explicitly as one of the major reasons for giving colleges the authority to award bachelor degrees. However, Galea suggests that interviewees likely assumed that because colleges have always been more responsive to these groups than universities that characteristic of colleges would 'extend into [bachelor] degree granting' (2015, 87). After all, improving bachelor degree opportunities for these groups had been central to the colleges' advocacy for improvements in transfer. The groups that had been identified as being underrepresented in universities relative to colleges were: low-income families, first-generation postsecondary students, Aboriginal people, persons with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, persons who had been unsuccessful in previous academic studies, single-parent families, and persons living in rural areas (Clark et al. 2009; Norrie and Zhao 2011; Colleges Ontario 2015). Members of these groups are also overrepresented among graduates of college programs who apply to a university relative to university applicants who have not previously attended a college (Henderson and McCloy 2017).

Among jurisdictions in which formerly non-degree granting colleges have been allowed to offer bachelor degree programs, the goal of reducing inequality has been more explicit than in Ontario in some, and less explicit in others. Besides concern over its low overall rate of bachelor degree attainment in comparison with other provinces, other reasons why British Columbia enabled four community colleges to offer the third and fourth years of bachelor degree programs in the early 1990s were to reduce urban–rural discrepancies in bachelor degree attainment, and to improve opportunities for Aboriginal students (Dennison 1997). In contrast, when the Alberta Government decided in 1995 to allow colleges to award applied bachelor degrees, it emphasized the need for colleges to respond to labour market needs (Community College Baccalaureate

Association 2017). While the dominant emphasis in Florida was on raising the state's overall bachelor degree attainment rate and responding to labour market needs (Furlong 2005; Bilsky, Neuhard, and Locke 2012), Floyd (2005) drew attention also to improving access for place-bound students. The concern for addressing the needs of graduates of college career programs shown by institutional leaders in Ontario echoes concerns found in the US literature on the applied baccalaureate (Townsend, Bragg, and Rudd 2008, 2009; Floyd, Felsher, and Falconetti 2012), particularly in the state of Washington (England-Siegerdt and Andreas 2012). Webb et al. (2017) suggest that related developments in Australia and England reflected an attempt to widen bachelor degree access by expanding the range of providers of higher education.

Allowing community colleges to award bachelor degrees was less controversial in Ontario, or other Canadian provinces, than it was in the United States, but some of the same concerns were raised in Ontario as in the United States (Skolnik 2008). Chief among these was that offering bachelor degrees would divert college attention and resources away from addressing the needs of the most academically and economically disadvantaged students (Townsend 2005). Implicit in this warning is the assumption that students in college bachelor degree programs would be relatively more advantaged than those in other college programs. If this turned out to be the case, it would call into question just how much, if at all, allowing colleges to offer bachelor degree programs would be likely to reduce social inequality. A similar claim has been questioned in other jurisdictions. Citing Foley's (2007) research, Moodie and Wheelahan observed that in Australia, while the vocational education sector 'has a broadly representative student population overall, low socio-economic status (SES) students are concentrated in lower-level vocational qualifications' (2009). Although the specific means by which Further Education Colleges in England attempt to improve bachelor degree access is different from that of colleges in Ontario, Florida or Australia (Parry 2013), a similar claim has been made about how FE colleges can contribute to widening participation and improving social mobility (Avis and Orr 2016). However, Avis and Orr report that widening participation has not resulted in upward social mobility (2016).

The legislation that gave colleges the authority to award bachelor degrees established a quality assurance agency, the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB) that was charged with reviewing all applications from colleges to offer bachelor degree programs and make recommendations to the Minister, who has the final say on whether to approve an application. To be approved, a new bachelor program in a college has to meet the Ontario Qualifications Framework standards for the Honours Bachelor Degree, the same standards that a new honours bachelor program in a university must meet. However, the review processes of the two sectors are different. Each new college program must undergo an external assessment by the PEQAB, while in the universities the primary responsibility for 'quality assurance of new programs lies with institutions, and their governing bodies' (Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance 2016).

In an international comparison of quality assurance processes for college bachelor programs in 12 North American and overseas jurisdictions, it was found that the PEQAB had the largest number of and the most prescriptive quality benchmarks of any jurisdiction (Skolnik 2016). Colleges have complained that some aspects of the PEQAB assessment requirements are more suitable to a research university than to an institution that concentrates on applied bachelor degree programs (Crow, Marsden, and Rubidge 2011).

In spite of whatever restraining effect the approval process may have had on the development of new bachelor programs in the colleges, the growth in the number of bachelor programs in the colleges and in enrolment has been considerable. Starting with a pilot project in which 12 programs were approved in 2001 (Hurley and Sá 2013), the number of programs had increased to 108 by 2016 (Wheelahan et al. 2017). Enrolment increased from 4278 in 2006 to 14,395 in 2015, more than a tripling (Wheelahan et al. 2017). Having achieved a substantial scale of activity, it is perhaps timely to ask what impact the college bachelor degree is having on social mobility and inequality in Ontario. The next section attempts to explicate the conditions that would have to be met for the new degree to have a positive impact on these social phenomena and the data that would be needed to determine the actual impact.

Conditions under which college bachelor degrees could reduce social inequality

Critics of the community college have argued that colleges perpetuate social inequality because relatively few of the students who enter postsecondary education in a community college are able to attain a bachelor degree, and thus are denied the types of jobs, careers, and educational opportunities that are open to holders of bachelor degrees. Therefore, one condition that would have to be met to alter this situation is that:

1. College bachelor degree programs in Ontario would have to attract, admit, and graduate the kinds of students who have been underserved by universities – including graduates of college diploma programs.

Since colleges have traditionally admitted such students to their certificate, diploma, and associate degree programs, an alternative way of viewing Condition I is that it means colleges would have to admit the same kinds of students to their bachelor degree programs as they have been admitting to their lower credential programs. The second condition refers to the outcomes for graduates:

- II. Graduates of college bachelor degree programs would have to have access to jobs, careers, and educational opportunities that are comparable in income and social status to those of university graduates.

A bachelor degree awarded by a community college is in one respect an old type of educational credential since bachelor degrees have been around for a long time; but in another respect, as Hurley and Sá (2013) have argued, it is a new type of educational credential, because it is only recently that community colleges started to award bachelor degrees. Hurley and Sá suggest that because it is a new type of degree, the Ontario college bachelor degree faces a significant struggle to gain legitimacy. The perceived legitimacy of the degree, in turn, is likely to affect the employment and educational outcomes of those who earn the degree. Hurley and Sá point to some factors that have helped in the battle to gain legitimacy, such as the rigorous quality review process and increasing recognition by appropriate professional bodies. They concluded that as of 2010, the degrees 'have obtained enough legitimacy to survive', but they still faced strong competition from traditional degrees (Hurley and Sá 2013, 174).

One way of ensuring that college bachelor degree programs enrol the same types of students who traditionally have attended community colleges is to connect the bachelor degree programs with the diploma programs that are already a well-established feature of college programming. This is the approach that was adopted in Florida when colleges were given the authority to award bachelor degrees (Floyd and Falconetti 2013). College bachelor degrees in Florida ‘operate as 2 + 2 intra-institutional and inter-institutional articulated programs’ (Bilsky, Neuhard, and Locke 2012, 42). Students must complete a two-year associate degree before being admitted to the upper division coursework of the bachelor degree. They earn a credential at the halfway point which would enable them to enter the labour market rather than continuing on for a bachelor degree if they so choose. A key feature of the Florida model is that ‘students can begin their journey to a four-year degree, *regardless of their academic preparation*’ (Bilsky, Neuhard, and Locke 2012, 42). Where a bachelor degree program was instituted in a field in which there was already an existing associate degree program – which was normally the case – creating the curriculum for the bachelor degree program essentially involved developing the third- and fourth-year courses.

When Ontario colleges got the authority to award bachelor degrees, they were not allowed to adopt a 2 + 2 model like the one used in Florida. The PEQAB took the position that every college bachelor degree program had to be created from scratch. Until 2014, the use of a 2 + 2 model was prevented by arbitrary limits on the amount of credit that a college could award when a student transferred from one of its diploma programs to a related bachelor degree program (Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board 2010, 2016). Since the arbitrary limits on transfer credit have been eliminated, colleges must still obtain approval for their transfer credit policies, including the amounts of transfer credit they feel are appropriate to award in different situations. The external control over the process of transfer from diploma to degree programs in the colleges is likely an obstacle to fulfilling Condition I, though it is impossible to say just how much of an obstacle it is.

A scenario that conceivably could make it difficult to meet Condition I is if students from more advantaged backgrounds take up some of the spaces in high demand college bachelor degree programs that would otherwise be filled by traditional type college students. Webb et al. (2017) suggest that this might be occurring in Australia, where there has been a similar attempt as in Ontario to widen participation in bachelor degree programs by allowing other types of institutions to offer degree programs. They found that people from low socio-economic areas made up 25% of the population but constituted only 15% of students in VET bachelor degree programs (Webb et al. 2017). A data limitation in this study is that the VET category includes private universities and non-university higher education institutions other than TAFEs. In a study in two Australian states, Gale et al. (2015) found that students from high SES areas showed stronger preferences for TAFE bachelor degree programs than did students from lower SES areas. Students from schools in high SES areas constituted 47% of preferences in Victoria and 39% in South Australia, both well above the 25% representation of high SES in the general population (Gale et al. 2015). Webb et al. (2017) suggested that high SES students could be attempting to use the TAFE bachelor degree to mitigate the consequences of weak academic performance in secondary school.

We do not know of any data that could be used to explore whether something similar could be occurring in Ontario. Close to one in six students in college bachelor degree programs in Ontario has previously attended a university (Wheelahan et al. 2017), and it is possible that some of these are relatively privileged, second-chance students who did not do well at university. It is also possible that students move from university to college, not because of weak academic performance, but to seek preparation for a specific occupation and/or a job-ready, labour market credential. This is likely the case for university graduates, since they already have a degree. University graduates have shown a considerable interest in further study at a college, constituting the following percentages of students in different college program categories: graduate certificates, 77.5%; diplomas, 12.3%; advanced diplomas, 11.0%; certificates, 8.5%; and degrees, 4.4% (Wheelahan et al. 2017).

Available data on socio-demographic characteristics of students cross-tabulated by the type of postsecondary program and the type of institution in Ontario are quite limited. It is known that overall, colleges reach higher proportions of people in five equity groups than do universities: Aboriginal people, persons with disabilities, rural residents, single-parent families, and low- and middle-income families (Colleges Ontario 2015). If the proportions of college bachelor degree students in these categories were similar to what they are for other college programs, Condition I might be met. However, data that are available from the Ontario College Student Satisfaction Survey for the two of these five equity groups plus one additional group suggest that this is not the case. Aboriginal students, students with learning disabilities, and first-generation postsecondary students all comprise a smaller proportion of bachelor degree students than of the total college student body. The most pertinent comparisons are with certificate and diploma students. Students classified as Aboriginal are 6.0% of certificate students and 4.8% of diploma students, but only 1.9% of those in bachelor degree programs (Wheelahan et al. 2017). For the first generation, the corresponding figures are 32.1% and 35.1% for certificates and diplomas, respectively, compared to 24.6% for bachelor degrees; and for learning disability: certificate, 19.3%; diploma, 17.2%; bachelor degree, 13.8%.

There are greater deficiencies with respect to the data needed to assess how well the college bachelor degree is faring in relation to Condition II, the one pertaining to post-graduation outcomes. For example, neither the Canadian National Graduates Survey nor the Youth in Transition Survey list the college bachelor degree as one of their educational categories. Ontario – as opposed to national – surveys of college and university graduates provide some information on outcomes such as salaries of graduates. However, the salaries are only for six months and for two years after graduation and thus do not shed light on career development of graduates of the respective types of institutions. Yet, it is generally thought that the impact of not having a bachelor degree, or the right kind of bachelor degree, could affect both initial hiring and career advancement, and may have a greater impact on the latter than the former.

Although the data challenges are greater with respect to Condition II, a few surveys of employers in Ontario have provided some relevant information. A survey of 378 employers that was done for the government as part of an evaluation of the college bachelor degree project concluded that college degree programs were ‘filling a gap in the labour market by offering training in areas that are not normally offered by universities, and where in some cases, entry-to-practice requirements will soon require a degree’ (R.A. Malatest &

Associates 2010, 56). In a 2013 survey of 1004 employers contracted out by Colleges Ontario, the majority of employers said that in evaluating job applicants, they would treat a college degree as being equivalent to a university degree, citing the practical orientation of the college graduates as an attractive qualification (Navigator 2013).

Recognizing the limitations of existing sources of data, an attempt was made to shed some light on the possible social impact of Ontario's college bachelor degrees through interviews with institutional leaders, faculty, students, and provincial officials.

Interviews with institutional leaders, faculty, students, and provincial officials

The data reported in this section are from research conducted under the auspices of the Pathways to Education and Work Research Group at the University of Toronto. The research was supported by funding from the Ontario Human Capital Research and Innovation Fund of the Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development. Information about the research, including presentations deriving from the research can be found on the website of the Pathways to Education and Work Research Group (<https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/pew/Presentations/index.html>).

The published literature on the community college bachelor degree in Canada and the United States has tended to concentrate on the pros and cons of colleges awarding bachelor degrees; state and provincial processes for approval, governance, and finance of programs; and program development and implementation issues experienced by institutions. As such this literature largely reflects the perspectives of state and provincial officials and institutional leaders. In designing the present study, the authors felt that it was important to get the perspectives particularly of faculty and students. With respect to the latter, we were interested especially in what students found sufficiently attractive about college bachelor degree programs to invest their time and money in a new type of bachelor degree.

Interviews were conducted with institutional leaders, faculty and students of seven colleges which were selected to provide variation in size, region, and scale of their bachelor degree programming. Interviewees included 18 institutional leaders, 35 faculty members, and 45 students. The category of institutional leaders included presidents, vice presidents (academic), and other administrators who had broad responsibilities for college bachelor programs. In the two colleges which did not offer any bachelor degree programs, only institutional leaders were interviewed. In addition, four provincial officials who were knowledgeable about college bachelor degrees were interviewed.

The students in the study were from five colleges, and included two in their first year of a bachelor degree program; 10 in second year; 9 in third year; 10 in fourth year; and four recent graduates. The study also included 10 students in diploma programs. The interviews of bachelor degree students addressed prior education, reasons for choosing to enrol in a college bachelor degree program; decision-making processes; personal expectations, and questions about how students viewed their participation in a college bachelor degree program, how they presented their participation to others, and the reactions of others to their participation. The interview data were analysed thematically via NVivo. The findings from different stakeholders were compared and triangulated. More detailed information on the interviews and the data analysis process can be found in Wheelahan et al. (2017).

Why do colleges award bachelor degrees?

In response to an open-ended question about why colleges award bachelor degrees, the answers most commonly heard from institutional leaders were to provide access to the bachelor degree for persons who had been underserved by universities, including graduates of college diploma programs; and to meet the needs of employers for workers with a high level of applied learning that is grounded in theory. Some interviewees stressed that offering bachelor degree programs was an extension of rather than a departure from their historic mission of providing access to education, particularly for those who might not otherwise have access, and being an instrument of labour force development.

That college leaders in Ontario view providing bachelor degree access to the kinds of students who have been underserved by universities as one of the major reasons for their institutions to offer these programs does not guarantee that the programs that they create and oversee will satisfy the first of the conditions indicated earlier. However, it does indicate that this vision is prominent in their minds, and it raises questions as to how that vision might guide the design and implementation of the programs.

Major goals in the design and implementation of college bachelor programs

Table 1 gives a list of the major goals indicated by college leaders for their bachelor degree programs. Fulfilling these goals relates quite directly to meeting Condition I. For example, the applied, experiential nature of programs indicated by the first two goals could make them attractive to students who prefer a more hands-on type of learning experience as opposed to a more straightforwardly academic learning experience. Those students whose preferred approach is congruent with the first two goals might perform better in programs of that nature, and thus have a better chance of graduating. Designing programs that satisfy the first two goals should be within the power of the colleges. In fact, one of the PEQAB requirements is that college bachelor programs include a period of supervised employment of at least 14 weeks (Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board 2016). Fulfilling the fifth goal, pertaining to the learning environment of the bachelor degree programs, might also increase the likelihood of successful attainment of the bachelor degree. It is also something that is within the power of the colleges to provide, subject to the financial constraints under which they operate.

While the first two and the fifth goals pertain to the ‘attract’ and ‘graduate’ aspects of Condition I, the third and fourth goals relate to the ‘admit’ part of that condition – though they have implications for ‘attract’ and ‘graduate’ as well. With respect to admitting students directly from secondary school, it would appear that PEQAB requirements

Table 1. Major goals for the design and implementation of College Bachelor Programs: Perceptions of College Leaders.

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1. Programs should provide career-focused, applied study that is grounded in theory
 2. Experiential learning through such means as co-ops and internships should be a prominent feature of programs
 3. Admission should not be limited by traditional university admission requirements
 4. Programs should be accessible to diploma graduates most of whom have difficulty getting credit at universities for their courses taken in diploma programs
 5. Colleges should extend features of their environment that contribute to learning to the bachelor degree programs, e.g. academic support services and small classes
 6. Bachelor programs should be accessible to students in communities that do not have a university
-

prevent the colleges from dispensing with traditional university entrance requirements. The situation with respect to the admission of diploma graduates is less clear. The issue came up in many of the interviews with faculty who indicated that intra-college transfer students had to do anywhere from one to three extra semesters. Several interviewees expressed the hope that since the PEQAB removed numerical limits on transfer credit, it may well be that with sufficient ingenuity, effort, and perseverance, colleges could get approval for 2 + 2 transfer arrangements. However, some thought it unfair that they have to go through such hurdles to gain approval for a practice that is common in other jurisdictions, when the transfer policies of their counterparts in Ontario universities do not require approval from an external agency.

In visits to one of the colleges, the researchers learned of another development that could help to make bachelor programs more accessible to diploma graduates. After getting approval to offer bachelor degree programs, this college initially adopted a horizontal organization in which all bachelor degree programs were grouped in the same division and administered as a class of programs. One of the chief motivations for the move was to create a bachelor degree culture that it was thought might be beneficial in the PEQAB assessment process. However, this approach was found to have shortcomings, particularly raising the possibility of developing a class structure among faculty, something which has been a concern in other jurisdictions (Levin 2004). Valuing social cohesion among faculty, the college changed to more of a vertical organization in which bachelor degree programs were more closely connected to diploma programs in the same field. This enables students in a diploma program to interact with students in the related bachelor degree program. As one faculty interviewee expressed it, the closeness to the bachelor degree program ‘opens diploma students’ eyes’ to further opportunities beyond the diploma.

On the surface there does not appear to have been a great progress in regard to the last goal in [Table 1](#), increasing geographic access to bachelor programs. Most of the programs are offered by colleges that are in cities that also have a university. Only one of the colleges is in a city that is more than 15 km from a city that has a university. However, in most cases there are no more than one or two universities within commuting distance of a college that offers bachelor degree programs, and these universities might not have bachelor degree programs in the fields of the college programs or that have an affinity with the diploma programs from which college students are seeking transfer opportunities. Indeed, the fact that the greatest demand for college bachelor degree programs is in the Toronto area, which has four universities, suggests that the mere existence of a university is not sufficient to address the needs that college bachelor degree programs appear to be meeting.

It was pointed out that in areas where the local college does not offer bachelor degree programs, there may be insufficient numbers of interested students for offering bachelor degree programs to be economically viable. Some leaders of larger colleges suggested that the most practical way of meeting the needs of the students in these areas who aspire toward a bachelor degree would be through transfer arrangements between smaller colleges in less populated areas and the larger colleges that are offering a substantial number of bachelor degree programs. An interviewee in a large college remarked that due to its historic emphasis on creating pathways to universities for its students it had always viewed itself as a feeder institution, and that recognizing that it could be a receiver institution in its own bachelor degree programs requires a rethinking of its institutional identity.

Perceptions of college bachelor degree programs

Table 2 shows the reasons most frequently given by students for enrolling in a college bachelor degree program. One thing that stands out in this table is that most of the items align directly with the goals indicated by institutional leaders in Table 1. Insofar as the goal items listed in Table 1 may be thought of as colleges' intentions for their bachelor degree programs, Table 2 shows that in the view of students these intentions are being realized. The two items in Table 2 which do not map directly to Table 1 are the third one pertaining to characteristics of the faculty who teach in the programs, and the last one pertaining to tuition fees. However, the knowledge and practical experience of the faculty would seem to be a necessary element of the applied nature of the programs, and their accessibility is an important aspect of a supportive learning environment. As for the last item in Table 2, although the subject of tuition fees did not often come up in the interviews with college leaders and faculty, it is well to be reminded that keeping costs down has always been viewed as an important part of making community colleges accessible. In Florida, there is a legislative requirement that tuition be less in college than in university bachelor degree programs (Furlong 2005).

The interviews revealed that the key factors that made a college bachelor degree attractive to the students were: the applied/experiential nature of the program, that the program was in a specific field that was aligned with the career toward which they aspired, that it was available locally, that its costs were perceived as being lower than attending a university, that they could meet its admission requirements, and the small classes and other aspects of the learning environment which made them feel that they could successfully complete the program.

Students' biggest concern about enrolling in a college bachelor degree program, which appeared to be unanimous, was related to public perceptions of the degree. They believed that bachelor degrees from colleges were likely held in low esteem by much of the public. Some said that they felt fatigue from having to constantly explain what a college bachelor degree was and justify their decision to enrol in their program. Most worried about how the fact that their bachelor degree was from a college would affect their employment prospects and their chances of getting into a master's program. They felt that public perceptions of the college bachelor degree were based on a lack of information and that colleges should 'get it out that their degrees are just as credible as a university degree'.

In large part, the concerns that students voiced about public perceptions of the college bachelor degree were shared by college leaders, though the college leaders were not as sweeping as the students in their comments about how they thought their degrees were perceived by the public. College leaders seemed less worried than the students about how

Table 2. Most frequently given reasons why students enrolled in a College Bachelor Degree Program.

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1. Applied, practical hands-on educational experience
 2. Experiential learning through work placements, co-ops, internships
 3. Knowledge, practical experience, and accessibility of teachers
 4. Willingness to admit students whose grades might not be high enough for admission to the university
 5. Credit awarded for diploma studies
 6. Small class size
 7. Tuition fees generally lower than at universities
-

the public image of the degree might affect the employment prospects of graduates, but some expressed frustration at the reluctance of universities to accept college bachelor graduates to master's programs. One college leader said that the problem was that many of the public and many in the universities still had an old idea of colleges that does not fit what colleges actually are today. This leader thought it was important for colleges to put out accurate information about their bachelor degrees but that the historic image of a college was so ingrained that it would take time to bring about changes in the public image of a college.

The responses of college leaders and faculty tended to focus more on the shorter than the longer term prospects for students. Interviewees were quite bullish on immediate employment prospects, because they believe that the graduates are prepared so well for employment. We were told that graduates would likely be in high demand because they would be ready to 'hit the ground running' and would not require training or close supervision. They 'don't just know it, but know how to do it'.

While comments on the qualities that contribute to immediate employability were more numerous than those on qualities that might be important for longer term career adaptability and growth, some interviewees did comment on the latter. A few interviewees were concerned about the lack of breadth in some programs and offered both explanations and remedies for it. A few stressed the importance of theoretical foundations and achieving an integration of theory and practice. One college leader maintained that college degree programs focused not only on practice but also on helping students understand the theoretical foundations of what they do as practitioners.

Concluding comments

Critics of the community college have argued that the institutions perpetuate social inequality by failing to provide sufficient access to the bachelor degree. One of the principal motivations for allowing colleges to award bachelor degrees is to provide an additional means for bachelor degree attainment for people who have been underserved by the university monopoly over bachelor degrees. The objective of this article was to explore conceptually and – to the extent possible – empirically, the potential impact on inequality of Ontario colleges offering bachelor degree programs. It was suggested that two conditions must be met for college bachelor programs to contribute to a reduction in social inequality, the first pertaining to the kinds of students who are admitted to the programs, the second relating to the kinds of jobs, career, and educational opportunities experienced by graduates of the programs. Some limited data from previous surveys raise doubts with respect to the first of these conditions being met, while providing a few findings that are consistent with the second condition being met with respect to employer perceptions of college bachelor degrees. Our study was intended to provide an additional perspective on the social impact of the Ontario college bachelor degree.

The data from our interviews in nearly one-third of the colleges provide some indication of progress toward satisfying the first condition. Those responsible for the design and implementation of the programs say that one of the main reasons, if not the most important reason, for starting the programs is to provide access to the bachelor degree for the underserved population; the espoused goals of the programs would contribute to attracting, admitting, and graduating the kinds of students who thus far have had difficulty

attaining a bachelor degree; and these goals align well with what students in the programs say are their reasons for enrolling. However, we also found frustration over externally imposed restrictions on transfer between college diploma and degree programs. These restrictions may constitute the largest impediment to meeting Condition I. Further research pertaining to Condition I should include the development of comprehensive population data on the characteristics of students in college bachelor degree programs in comparison with students in bachelor degree programs in universities. Another important direction of research would be to obtain data on transfer students coming into college bachelor degree programs: their prior academic backgrounds and qualifications and the amounts of transfer credit that they receive.

It is a greater challenge to obtain data pertaining to the second condition, both because of the limitations of present sources of information on student outcomes and because of the relatively short history of graduation from college bachelor degree programs in Ontario. The interviews revealed a concern that the idea of colleges awarding bachelor degrees has not yet been widely accepted as a normal feature of the higher education landscape in Ontario, but they did not provide systematic information about the employment experience of graduates or their subsequent pursuit of other types of education. There were differences between students and college leaders with respect to the focus their concerns about societal acceptance of the new degree. Students were particularly concerned about how the degrees might be perceived by family, peers, and employers. College leaders felt confident about employment prospects of graduates, but were concerned about the apparent reluctance of Ontario university graduate schools to give full recognition of college bachelor degrees.

In the absence of data on the actual experience of graduates, it is impossible to gauge the extent to which the kinds of concerns voiced by interviewees could be manifested in differences in outcomes between graduates of college and university bachelor degree programs. The relative newness of the college bachelor degree also makes it more difficult to obtain the kind of comparative data on the experience of the two groups of baccalaureate graduates that are needed to judge whether Condition II is being met. As was noted earlier, the major surveys of postsecondary graduates in Canada do not include graduates of college bachelor degree programs as a distinct category. Also, because colleges and universities historically awarded different credentials, there has been little coordination between the two postsecondary sectors in the development of data collection processes and instruments. The issues that are the focus of this article highlight the importance of having more coordination between the university and college sectors in the collection of data not only on student outcomes, but also on other aspects of postsecondary education including the socio-demographic characteristics of students, and the student experience.

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