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In the Beginning: The Founding of the CSSHE and its Journal

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The founding of the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education took place over 40 years ago and this year marks the 40th anniversary of its critically important Canadian Journal of Higher Education. It is time to look back, and time to imagine the future of both the Society and the Journal.

I attended that intimate founding meeting in Winnipeg. It was held on May 29, 1970. With no more than 40 people in attendance, we listened to the late Edward (Ted) Sheffield open the meeting.

He had prepared a paper in 1969 on "Canadian Research in Higher Education." He told us that it was only an "impressionistic survey but it served to highlight the fact that research in this field is being undertaken by a great variety of persons in a great variety of organizations: universities, voluntary associations, and government agencies." Ted Sheffield noted, however, that little research in higher education was being conducted in university faculties of education.

Underscoring that Canada was slow to make higher education a specialized field of study, he reminded the audience that Robin S. Harris, Canada's first Professor of Higher Education, was appointed in 1964. Six years later, Ted Sheffield summarized the progress observing that "the Higher Education Group at the University of Toronto has increased to four and there is now a good deal of activity... at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education." In addition, he noted the emergence of recent program initiatives at the Universities of British Columbia, Calgary, and Alberta.

Cropping up at the time were "pedagogical service units" including the newly established Centre for Learning and Development at McGill University, the Institute for Research in Human Abilities at Memorial University, and the Study Group for Educational Methods at Nova Scotia Technical College.

Also, Ted Sheffield commented on higher education work emanating from departments beyond education including economics, sociology, history, political science, architecture, industrial engineering and English language and literature. As well, offices of institutional research were being established at many universities.

And of course, national voluntary associations such as AUCC, CAUT, and provincial counterparts such as the Committee of Presidents of the Universities of Ontario naturally concerned themselves with higher education issues.

Ted Sheffield continued by describing some of the work of government agencies. One of the most prolific researchers then and for decades to come was Max Von Zur-Muehlen from Statistics Canada, likely one of the most memorable participants at that founding meeting.

Also, Ted Sheffield reminded us that the first actual gathering of "all those interested in Higher Education as field of study and research took place on the eve of the 1969 annual meeting of the AUCC" in November of 1969. It was at that meeting that the idea of both the Society and a journal was tabled and a steering committee was formed to develop the plans for implementing the vision.

The founding purposes were formulated quickly and were as follows:

1. to encourage independent and critical study of the issues and problems in post-secondary education in Canada, and
2. collect and disseminate information about these activities.

Sheffield punctuated his kickoff speech with the following statement:

So. . . we have established that there are many people in many settings in Canada who are interested in higher education as a field of study and research. We have heard many of them say that they would like to associate with one another. We have created the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education. We're off!

Indeed, he was correct; many of us did need “association” and in my case, I was fortunate to have both Ted Sheffield and Robin Harris as early mentors. Along the way, I have been fortunate to have colleagues such as the late George Geis (McGill and Toronto), Michael Skolnik (Toronto), and Cicely Watson (Toronto).

Recently, a few other key higher education colleagues and I reflected on the progress and future of the Society and the Journal. The circle included Alexander (Sandy) Gregor (Manitoba), Janet Donald (McGill), Gilles Nadeau (Moncton), John Dennison (UBC), and Glen Jones (OISE/Toronto). Responding to the question “what was your earliest memory of the CSSHE?” Sandy Gregor noted,

I was just a neophyte observer. I do recall a very eclectic group – academics, practitioners, and a discussion that was obviously laying the outlines of what could and would become a significant national field of study.

He described Robin Harris and Ted Sheffield as “*pioneers . . . [who] had a profound impact on younger academics. The important linkage between the scholars and ‘consumers’ opened up the basis for some very significant collaboration across a post-secondary system that had but a thin infrastructure to offer this nascent field.*”

I recalled that the Centre for Learning and Development at McGill had been opened that year and eventually became the home for important contributors such as George Geis and Janet Donald. Gilles Nadeau, who was a doctoral student at the time, was unable to attend the inaugural meeting for financial reasons. Regardless, he still considers himself “*a founding member ‘in absentia’!*” In addition, Jeffrey Holmes and Miles Wisenthal from Statistics Canada were early intellectual contributors to the CSSHE. Also, we benefited from the credibility that senior academic administrators including Bill Sibley, Ron Baker, Don Ivey, and Tom Symons, lent to the fledgling society.

In addition, early leadership was provided by John Daniel and Bernard Sheehan. Later, Michael Skolnik, George Geis, Marcel Goldschmidt, Bruce Shore, and Janet Donald became part of the core group. Founding members recalled that they were conscious of the fact that the CSSHE tended to be Anglo-centric effort. I was charged with recruiting francophone members and speaking in favour of French leadership, including the inimitable Charles Belanger.

Among others, John Dennison, Paul Gallagher, and Michael Skolnik worked to ensure that the focus extended beyond universities. According to John Dennison, these individuals

picked up on the need for a broader view that examined the role of colleges and other training institutions. But early on, the Society had a somewhat narrower bent on planning and financing in universities. . . . I still believe that the Society and the Journal would be better off if its reach went beyond universities in a more consistent manner.

Janet Donald reflected on her early years in the field of higher education:

I assumed I was hired at McGill because of my background in staff development at the college level. I was involved with the evaluation of teaching in the CEGEP system when I came to my first meeting of the CSSHE at McGill in the early 70s looking for post-secondary expertise.

Glen Jones pointed out that “*the remarkable Cicely Watson (OISE/Toronto), the well-regarded educational planner who started focusing on postsecondary issues*” was also a prolific doctoral research supervisor.

In the course of conversation, I asked the group to consider the highlights and challenges to higher education, the CSSHE, and the CJHE, to date. Sandy Gregor indicated that

heroic efforts to foster the development of and communication between research clusters across the country [by Janet Donald] was key to trying to establish and maintain a critical mass, an infrastructure for the Society. This . . . was complemented by Max and Gilles Paquet who created a research network (CHERN) at the University of Ottawa.

Gilles Nadeau commented that the “*small numbers of actively involved people in the study of higher education*” created its own challenges. He recalled that at the “*very divided – even divisive – meeting in 1972 at Memorial in St. John’s . . . the Society voted not to join the Canadian Society the Study of Education*,” a move that he considered to be “*a lost opportunity to deal with issues of critical mass with a splitting of influence, budget, and funding sources both in elementary/secondary and higher education studies.*”

According to John Dennison,

the CSSHE and CSSE did come together at a critical time to persuade SSHRC to invest in research in education. I remember a Saturday summit around my dining room table with Miles, Charles, John Daniel and friends from the Canadian Educational Research Association where we developed our wish list for developing research capacity. SSHRC funded it by helping us travel across the country doing proposal workshops and gave us our own jury so our peers were evaluating our research proposals instead of people with other priorities!

Regarding the CJHE, the group noted that that its original name was STOA. They were certain that it was “*Greek for something*” and less certain that it meant “*meeting place*.” John Dennison recalled that Ed Monahan and Malcolm Ross sought federal support as start-up money for the Journal. He remembered being invited to “*write a piece early on non-university higher education. The Journal sure helped my career for sure.*”

In addition, John Dennison commented that “*the Journal also allowed us to talk across our sub-disciplines. We did a series of analyses on the contributions of history, economics and psychology to higher education for the 1981 conference in Halifax . . . [which were] later published in the Journal.*”

Glen Jones pointed out that “*the CJHE has changed dramatically over the decades as a mirror of the changes in higher education as a field. Over time the Journal became more open to different methodological approaches going from the kind of essays that marked its earlier years.*” By the late 1980s, the Journal had established itself as a strong national voice and has gradually improved ever since. He added that, in his view, “*it’s the CSSHE’s most important legacy.*”

Regarding the future of higher education as a field of study, it is my belief that it is the best of times and the worst of times. Others shared their thoughts.

In the opinion of Glen Jones, the situation is getting worse.

At a time when public expenditure in higher education is so high and higher education is heralded for its importance to national prosperity, our policy research infrastructure and data systems in higher education are poor.

He pointed out that currently, Statistics Canada collects far less information than in the past. Also, national surveys have declined. As a result, “*we know very little about university and college faculty and we have surprisingly little data on students.*” Despite tremendous growth in higher education programs in Europe, China, and Southeast Asia with accompanying government support to ensure that good data are available to support higher education policy decisions, Canada is headed in the opposite direction. Sandy Gregor added that although doctoral students across Canada are conducting research on key issues in higher education, “*we seem only slightly more advanced at researching our own post-secondary ‘backyards’ than we were on that May 29, 1970.*”

The group agreed that the CJHE was a key way of attracting more attention to the importance of studying higher education issues. In times such as these, the impact of the Journal needs to expand and be, as John Dennison suggested, “*a go to place’ for decision-makers who control the purse strings as well as a meeting place for scholars.*”

We concluded our reminiscing with a heartfelt toast:

Long live the CJHE!