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The Devil is in the Details: A Response to the Report of the Postsecondary Review in Ontario

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Introduction

This article discusses the recommendations of the Postsecondary Review Panel's Final Report - Ontario: A Leader in Learning.

The Postsecondary Review was announced by the government in the Ontario Budget 2004 to "review the design and funding of Ontario's postsecondary education system and recommend innovative ways in which its institutions can provide the best education to students and support Ontario's prosperity".

The purpose of this paper is multi-fold. First, this paper will set the context for the decision to commission Rae to conduct a study and provide recommendations. Second, this paper will provide a summary of the Rae Review process. Third, a summary of what the Rae Review Panel heard will be presented. Fourth, the position and politics of the approach to the Rae process will be discussed. Fifth and finally, the findings and recommendations of the Rae Report will be summarized and a critical review will be presented.

Context of the Decision to Commission Rae

On October 2, 2003, the Conservative party, under the relatively new leadership of Ernie Eves, was defeated in a provincial general election by the Liberal Party led by Dalton McGuinty. One of the major themes of the Liberal campaign was education and the restoration of public services in Ontario (Achieving Our Potential). The Liberals argued that, after ten years of Conservative rule under former Premier Mike Harris, and more recently, Ernie Eves, basic public services and programs had been under-funded and eroded to near critical levels.

With this in mind, the Liberals set out an ambitious plan of increased public investment in publicly funded programs and services. Education, in particular, was important personally for the new Premier. But even the best laid plans can encounter difficulty and the Liberal plan was no exception. In a highly political manoeuvre, the Premier-elect requested that the recently retired Provincial Auditor Erik Peters return to review the books of the province. The retired auditor returned with a deficit for the province of Ontario for the fiscal year 2003-2004 of \$5.6 billion. This meant the government had to look at new approaches for addressing education's challenges.

The task of returning the books to a balanced position was great, particularly with an agenda that required significant new investment. In response to the challenge, the Provincial Finance Minister, Greg Sorbara, announced in the first budget of this newly elected government, a new health premium that would raise additional funds for this newly adjusted Liberal plan. As well, the government announced the appointment of former New Democratic Party Premier Bob Rae as special advisor to the Premier and Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities would conduct a study of postsecondary education in Ontario and provide recommendations to the government.

The appointment of Rae was originally to result in a Royal Commission that would embark on a protracted period of study and research. This has always been a tool available to governments that wished to put off action on a particular issue. The original thinking was that such a Royal Commission could take two to three years to conduct its work, which would mean the government would receive the recommendations with less than one year to the next provincial general election. In this way, the government could go into the election with grand commitments around implementing the newly presented plan for postsecondary education without having to spend scarce dollars. One of the important factors to consider about this period is that the fiscal situation made this agenda even more difficult. To be sure, healthcare and elementary-secondary education were clearly a high priority to Ontarians. So with a fiscal challenge, and a really crowded agenda, the government preferred more breathing room.

Bob Rae has been very public about his first meeting with the Premier to discuss the idea of leading a Royal Commission. Rae has indicated that he did not believe that it was necessary to embark on a full-scale, Royal Commission, and that he personally did not want to commit the time necessary for a multi-year endeavour. What resulted was a compromise. Rae agreed to lead the Postsecondary Review that would start in the spring of 2004 and report to government by the winter of 2005.

Rae was to lead a review that included a panel of advisors. This was a very interesting mix of people, including Leslie Church, a graduate student from the University of Toronto, the Honourable Bill Davis, former Premier of Ontario and the architect of the College system in Ontario, Don Drummond, Chief Economist for the Toronto Dominion Bank, Inez Elliston, a retired educator, Richard Johnston, the recently retired President of Centennial College and Huguette Labelle, a former federal public servant.

Rae had a significant lead in selecting the panellists, and the membership was widely heralded, primarily by the college sector, as having not only a "balanced" representation from both the college and university sectors, but perhaps even stacked in favour of the college sector. After all, the architect of the system and former Premier would

not allow for recommendations that were not in the best interests of the college system and college students.

One other approach to this task that was undertaken by Rae was a commitment to action. Rae received a commitment from the Premier that this would not be a report "that was on a shelf" (December 3, 2004). To ensure this, Rae requested that the Premier, The Finance Minister and the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities meet with him very regularly to ensure that they were apprised of this work and thinking and so that he could get "buy-in" as his deliberations proceeded. As it turned out, this was an extraordinarily successful approach - the government was not surprised by Rae's recommendations and was able to plan for his recommendations. Three factors worked in favour of Rae's approach. First, education was a "pet" interest of the Premier - one to which he attributes his entering politics. The challenge for Rae was to convince the Premier that "education" was more than K-12. As it turned out, this was not a difficult task. The Premier was sympathetic to the argument that the success of Ontario's and ultimately Canada's economy lay in the capacity of society to produce a more highly skilled and educated workforce. As well, all indicators were that China and India, among others, were making massive investments in higher education. Second, the Finance Minister had been Minister of Colleges and Universities earlier in his tenure during the Peterson administration, and was well aware of the importance of education in the lives of people, and postsecondary education for immigrants with whom he could associate. Third, the higher education sector, although it had been a weak lobby generally, did help establish one factor quite clearly - Ontario was funded tenth out of ten provinces in Canada. This was a statistic that resonated with all who discovered it, and there was clearly something very wrong and uncomfortable with the reality. How could Ontario have a "world class" system of higher education that was so poorly funded?

There were a number of factors that were working against bold recommendations from Rae and full implementation from the McGuinty government. First, higher education was not "top of mind" with Ontarians. Polling continued to indicate that healthcare, elementary-secondary education, jobs and the economy and the environment, among others, all polled higher than the investment in postsecondary education. As previous governments knew, it wasn't a priority for Ontarians, and they had a capacity to bear more of the burden privately in the form of higher tuition fees. Only as tuition debt skyrocketed did the issue come to the fore. Even then, it did not seem to have much traction.

Second, expectations in the rest of the policy fields were also very high. Whether it was re-building much needed capacity and infrastructure in environmental protections, post-Walkerton, or whether energy sector restructuring was also necessary to avoid instability and potential power outages, the rest of the agenda was pretty full. And of course, where Ontarians were still pretty occupied

and concerned was elementary-secondary education, as well as healthcare. Rae had no doubt that health care expenditures would continue to rise, as they had since he had been Premier almost 15 years earlier, at almost double digit levels.

Third, much of McGuinty's cabinet was comprised of neophytes who were more susceptible to political pressures, versus "doing the right thing". There was not wide support for implementing Rae's recommendations within the cabinet and caucus the Premier, Finance Minister and Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities. It was the weight of the Premier's office and personal commitment that carried the day for a very sceptical group of legislators.

Rae Review Process - Unique and Politically Astute

The Postsecondary Review was carried out in three, unique stages. The first stage involved examining past studies and reports on postsecondary education and undertaking research and analysis of best practices in Ontario, other parts of Canada and the world.

The second stage was a consultation phase and involved listening to Ontarians' ideas about postsecondary education. Extensive consultations were held with the public, education and business stakeholders and knowledgeable experts in the field of postsecondary education. The consultations were conducted in three formats. Roundtable discussions with college and university students and representatives were held in all regions of Ontario. In addition, larger town hall meetings were held throughout Ontario and were open to the public. Finally, the Review panel accepted written reports and briefs from stakeholders.

The roundtable format allowed for a unique approach to stakeholder consultation. These meetings were attended by students and representatives from colleges, universities and the community with a regional versus sectoral focus.

The third and final stage involved analyzing all the information from the background research and consultation stages to the development of recommendations to government. The final report was released to the government in February 2005.

In terms of background research for the Review Panel, several sources were used to provide grounding for the discussion paper, Higher Expectations for Higher Education. However, given the range of recommendations in the final Report, the Discussion Paper contained a modest literature review and has unfortunately contributed minimally to the literature on higher education.

The highlight of the communication by the Review Panel was its website (www.raereview.on.ca) which was quite innovative. It contained a message from Mr. Rae, clear guidelines for participation, information about the mandate of the Review and ongoing resources

and information about submissions. It also provided an opportunity for online feedback and ideas from stakeholders continuously. This process of communication was especially appealing to students who contributed significantly to the consultation process.

The participation took place over an eight-month period in Roundtable Dialogues, Town Hall meetings and through online submissions from stakeholders. Representatives from all publicly-funded Ontario colleges and universities and more than 7,000 Ontarians contributed to the Review in 24 roundtable discussions, and 17 town hall meetings in 15 communities. In addition the Review received 2,300 written submissions (Postsecondary Review Website).

What the Review Panel Heard

Highlights of the discussions and submissions focused on four key areas:

- **Accessibility** - ensuring that every qualified student in Ontario can find a place in a college or university regardless of financial circumstances and means. Encouraging those whose parents could not attend postsecondary education to do so.
- **Tuition** - balancing any tuition increase with an increase in student financial support programs. Encouraging up-front loans and grants. Ensuring that student support programs reflect the repayment processes that make sense including repayment tied to future earnings.
- **Accountability** - need for more accountability in postsecondary institutions around student experience, retention, graduation and success.
- **Funding** - need to develop transparent, accountable funding model for colleges. Need to implement an accountability framework for utilization of funds. This area also addressed the role of the federal government as funding partner for sustainability.

As will be discussed further, the recommendations and Report did not focus enough on collaboration and transferability or on system design which may have moved the college - university transfer agenda forward.

Politics of the Approach to Rae

The postsecondary lobby is weak, and always has been. Most of what has occurred can be best described as a very limited form of elite accommodation, where more often than not, the president of the University of Toronto and the ministry responsible for postsecondary education met and made policy (Drea, 2003). Beyond a limited form of elite accommodation, the sector has not been very successful at more traditional tactics associated with most other lobby and government relations groups/efforts.

The university sector has always been particularly effective, not so much for its efforts, save the limited elite accommodation referred to above, but rather because so many of the regulators and legislators are graduates of universities, and not colleges, and are fundamentally predisposed to the university. As a result, the university sector has done considerably better than the college sector.

One could argue that although Rae did not undo years of inequalities, colleges were definitely not forgotten within his deliberations and recommendations. Indeed, colleges and apprenticeships figured quite prominently in both.

Rae was very aware that postsecondary education was not a priority with the public, so it seemed while he kept one eye on ensuring thoughtful policy recommendations, he directed most of his efforts to building sufficient support for his recommendations. Clearly Rae was not someone who would be content for his work to go unappreciated or not acted upon. Rae was determined to gain the respect for his efforts that he was unable to achieve as premier.

Rae was quick to understand the landscape and key players. Both formal and informal channels were created to ensure the efficient exchange of information as necessary.

The sector is dominated by a very few key players, and a second tier of relevant but less influential/powerful individuals/groups. The university sector is represented quite ably by the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) under the leadership of Dr. Ian Clark.

The College sector is dominated by the Association of Colleges and Applied Arts and Technology of Ontario (ACAATO) under the leadership of Joan Homer. Students are represented by a number of groups, most prominently the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) and the College Student Association (CSA). While the CSA has recently increased its profile and its advocacy efforts, the CFS was the most vocal of the groups.

In basic terms, the positions groups/organizations took was quite predictable - universities wanted more funding, less interference and accountability, as well as no obligation to cooperate with colleges and exclusive jurisdiction over degree granting. The colleges wanted increased funding, more autonomy from the government and some edict from the government that would require the universities to work with them on transferability arrangements that would ensure transparent and predictable pathways for students.

Students were fairly united on one issue - tuition was too high and the resulting debts were becoming too onerous, leaving too many students foregoing education because of the perceived costs, or others leaving long term financial constraints. They had common concerns about the potential ending of the two-year tuition freeze. Students were also united on the student assistance plan - they

unanimously believed that the OSAP program - Ontario Student Assistance Plan - was not working to adequately support students. It was broken they believed, and needed more than some tinkering. Where students were not united was on the solutions to the challenges that faced postsecondary education.

The CFS was more radical, to the point of disruption and protest. From the very beginning when Rae first began to articulate his visions of an income contingent loan plan, the CFS became a vocal opponent. This often manifested itself in shouting matches at the town hall meetings. The CSA was a more moderate group that engaged in other efforts, aimed at a more thoughtful exchange of opinions.

Each of the above sectors made its positions known early. Along with formal submissions to the panel, each positioned itself in the arena of public opinion, in the form of letters to the editor, op-ed pieces, paid advertisements and other communication efforts. Insiders, who refused to be publicly acknowledged as part of this research, argued that one particular communications effort galvanized the Rae Review research staff and the Panel's feelings about the interests of the sector.

Rae had requested that Ian Clark prepare a private letter to Rae with his policy advice. Clark penned such a letter but copied his counterpart at ACAATO, and the letter subsequently became very public. The policy advice from Clark argued that the system was essentially fine the way it is, save the need for additional funding and the removal of colleges from the degree granting business. As well, it argued that government requirements for transferability were not necessary as numerous relationships existed. Insiders suggested that this galvanized the inherent differences between sectors and institutions - universities were more concerned with research and individual faculty, where as the colleges were more concerned with students.

Beyond what must be described as a "galvanizing" moment, there was also another important factor during Rae's deliberations. ACAATO hired David Lindsay, former Chief of Staff to Premier Harris as President of ACAATO and to act as its chief lobbyist. Beyond lobbying, Lindsay was charged with moving ACAATO's agenda forward in a more aggressive way. Lindsay worked to coordinate the sector and unleashed a campaign approach to government relations and the Rae Review. This meant very strategic efforts were made aimed not only at advancing the policy interests of the colleges, but also building support amongst legislators, officials, and the general public, so as to create the political will necessary for legislators to opt to put more money in the postsecondary sector over other sectors. This was a dramatic departure for ACAATO and the sector as a whole.

Summary of Rae Findings

A mission for Ontario:

- Recommendation for a new Council on Higher Education to help set targets for growth in participation and quality improvements, and report publicly on progress and performance. The Council would also encourage collaboration between colleges and universities.

Accessibility:

- Recommendation for new legislation that enshrines the commitment that every qualified student in Ontario will find a place in college or university regardless of means.
- In addition, revise student financial assistance programs to the level of \$300 million dollars, to include new up-front grants for more than 95,000 low-income students, more access to loans that better reflect the actual costs of study for low- and middle-income students, and new loans to help parents contribute to their children's education.
- Further, the Ontario government should call on the federal government to focus its student financial assistance on living costs, and follow the province's lead in providing substantial up-front grants and improved loans to meet student need. Encourage that a coordinated system with the federal government would enable graduates to repay their loans at rates tied more directly to their incomes.

Design and accountability:

- Recommendation that there be more cooperation and collaboration between all postsecondary institutions to ensure that students can transfer.
- In addition, tuition should not increase at all until the student assistance system is reformed and government has made significant new investments. Tuition levels would then be set by institutions, subject to a new provincial regulatory framework that ensured predictability, transparency and affordability for students.

System funding:

- Recommendation that a responsible funding partnership be established with all stakeholders to ensure sustainable revenues for the sector.
- In addition, a substantial increase in provincial investment - a total of at least \$1.3 billion new base funding to colleges and universities by 2007-08 to include:
 - \$700 million for quality improvements and innovation to make the student experience more rewarding and

- o successful.
- o \$180 million for expansion of graduate education.
- o \$160 million for new enrolment and outreach, to expand participation in higher education.
- Further, a commitment from the federal government to be a reliable and steady partner through transfers to the province for base operating support, and investments in priority areas, such as apprenticeship and graduate education. The provincial and federal governments should build on real opportunities for productive collaboration.

Analysis of the Recommendations

As with any large-scale report containing several recommendations, the devil is always in the details. The first issue for Rae and the Panelists at the time of the Report released in February 2005 concerned those recommendations which the government would choose to implement. There was speculation that some recommendations would be announced in the May provincial Budget (May 11, 2005) and this proved to be true.

In several areas of the Report, Rae used bold language especially in the areas of funding, tuition and increasing enrolment of underrepresented groups. However, in the areas of college - university transfer and collaboration, the comments and recommendations were weak and vague. This was disappointing to colleges which had been advocating for clear financial incentives for collaboration and a mechanism to audit transferability in the province.

It was apparent from the Report that Rae and the Panelists had heard repeatedly about the significant change that the postsecondary education sector faces. A rapidly changing student body, increasing student debt loads, deteriorating buildings and equipment, lack of consistent pathways for students and a need for a coordinated research effort to remain competitive were all key factors addressed in the Rae Report.

With respect to student accessibility, there were several recommendations made in the Report that would make a significant difference to students if implemented. A recommendation for the creation of a single electronic information "doorway" or portal to provide students with an information source on entrance requirements for programs and institutions, costs, linkages to other program options, quality assurance measures and employment opportunities would result in a one-stop, coordinated approach to information gathering. This could be particularly helpful in all areas of postsecondary education, especially Apprenticeship programming where dealing with government bureaucracy often becomes the focus for potential students as they attempt to get the information that they need in order to register in a program.

The Report made a recommendation for setting participation

targets to increase the participation of students from traditionally underrepresented groups including those from low-income families. The notion of tracking students using the Ontario Education Number was a component of this recommendation which would provide information and data to institutions in their long term enrolment planning and provide a better understanding of degree completion and transfer activity. Building on this recommendation was another recommendation - the First Generation Strategy, to provide the information and financial assistance to assist students who are first in their families to participate in higher education. Although a significant financial incentive was recommended, it would still require extensive cooperation between Boards of Education, postsecondary institutions, community services and the Ontario government to be successful.

An overhaul of student financial assistance was proposed in the Report. This would require a partnership between the federal and provincial government in order to be comprehensive and successful. The Ontario government announced that it was increasing financial aid for 135,000 low- and middle-income students in 2005-2006 (September 7, 2005). There have been no similar commitments from the federal government.

Further recommendations aimed at specific groups including Aboriginal students, students with disabilities and Francophone students focused on increasing participation of these groups and easing the transition into postsecondary education. A key component of this would be a commitment by government to increase the support services for these students once they enrol in postsecondary institutions. The Ontario government is making some headway in this regard by establishing province wide committees to provide input into these underrepresented student areas.

With respect to tuition and affordability, the Report made several recommendations in the areas of grants, loans and donations including introducing a provincial grant for low-income students to cover tuition and ancillary fees for the first four years of study to a maximum of \$6,000 and increasing loan amounts for students. The notion of supplemental loans was raised in the Report in order to help students whose parents refuse to provide the required assistance. While income contingent loan repayment was discussed at roundtable meetings, this plan did not materialize as a recommendation in the report - perhaps because of the high costs associated with starting this type of loan repayment plan or perhaps because of criticism from students in programs where employment prospects are such that it would take many years to repay loans. The recommendation that the Ontario government should continue the Ontario Student Opportunities Trust Fund on a permanent basis was well received in that it would provide some stability for colleges and universities in their advancement/endowment efforts.

The recommendation on tuition fees was to establish a regulatory framework enshrined in legislation to guide and allow

institutions to make decisions about tuition levels. This provides institutions with the autonomy they had been requesting to set tuition based on market demand. The recommendation also stated that, while tuition set-aside would be discontinued, institutions would be responsible for supporting low-income students and students in need. This could well be the recommendation that is most precarious to both institutions and students.

In the Report, accountability was linked to both tuition and the discussion of transferability or pathways. With regard to transferability, it was recommended that government mediate a solution to the limitations on degree completion and credit transfer. Mediation could include the aggressive provision of financial incentives and disincentives to stimulate progress in this area. This is most likely the most frustrating component of the Report in that it could likely make the most difference to students, both financially and academically. There was a recommendation to establish quality standards and measures to ensure improvement in the postsecondary sector. While difficult to mandate and measure across the system of postsecondary education in Ontario, one measure would include student engagement surveys in addition to the current Key Performance Indicator measurements taking place annually in the province. Recommendations were made for surveys to be conducted as part of a broader quality assurance framework still to be developed by the new Council on Higher Education. While this type of student survey would be typical for colleges, it would be a different type of quality assessment for Ontario universities.

A revenue framework that supports growth and that is sustainable formed the basis for a recommendation to increase both operating and capital funding to bring Ontario's postsecondary system financially in line with that of other provinces. An announcement on May 11, 2005 in the Ontario Budget Speech - Investing in People: Strengthening Ontario's Economy responded to this recommendation with the announcement of a \$6.2 billion cumulative investment by 2009-10 for colleges, universities and training. This investment would also include an additional \$683 million in 2005-06, rising to \$1.6 billion by 2009-10. This was the largest investment in education in 40 years, a 39 per cent increase compared to the 2004-05 funding base. While this funding has now reached postsecondary institutions, the promised consultative approach to an accountability framework has not materialized. In addition, the federal government has yet to make a firm commitment to supporting other areas listed in the Report including immigrant education, labour market training, apprenticeship enhancements, research funding and graduate education enhancements.

In terms of system funding, the Report recommended a provincial funding mechanism that would be more equitable for both universities and colleges which included the same funding for students in similar programs across institutions, providing a core funding envelope to ensure a predictable and stable enrolment-

related, program weighted amount of base funding and the addition of clearly defined funding envelopes for graduate students, apprenticeship and access priorities including Aboriginal and Francophone students. Partial funding has been received but further announcements by both the Ontario and federal government are anticipated.

Finally, in the area of research, the Report recommended establishing an Ontario Research Council reporting to the Premier to advise on and coordinate research priorities and to work with federal funding agencies on coordinated research efforts. As this Council would be welcomed by university and college researchers, it is hoped that this will be a priority in the next funding announcement.

The Rae Report and its recommendations have made a significant impact on postsecondary education in Ontario, especially for the colleges. This was clearly a win-win for postsecondary students but if there was a clear winner - it would be colleges for the first time ever. The May 11, 2005 Ontario Budget was the vehicle for the announcement of the largest funding investment in 40 years and was a testament to Rae's balance of "bold" and "budget". He knew which recommendations would be realistic in terms of financial feasibility and those that would inspire a renewed commitment to postsecondary education in Ontario.

Time will tell if the Ontario government will be in a position to implement additional recommendations and whether or not the federal government will step up its commitment to postsecondary education in the areas of research, Apprenticeship programming, creation of pathways and student financial assistance.

Rae's recommendations and Report are a brilliant balance of issues, positions, and politics. A more delicate balance has not been made. Most will find something in his words. He has left considerable wiggle room for government and for the new Higher Education Council. He manages and sets directions without too much detail about implementation. There are bold recommendations that are rooted in Ontario solutions, not simply adopted from other jurisdiction. For instance, with respect to collaboration between colleges and universities, Rae states, "Students need clean pathways." And, ...nowhere near enough progress has been made. A college diploma is the conclusion of a course of study, not the end of the road. We need to recognize the value of student experience, give credit for work that has been done, and establish clear and transparent equivalency standards so that there is recognition for what each student has accomplished (page 14).

And to go further, he argues that "It is surely a waste of those public resources to require students to repeat courses covering the same material because of an exaggerated sense of self reference by any college or university" (page 15).

Strong language, indeed. But he did not stop short of recommending the government take action. Rather, it is recommended that the new council take his recommendations under advisement.

McGuinty's First Budget Post-Rae Review and Reaching Higher
On May 11, 2005, Finance Minister Greg Sorbara tabled his second budget; one that was a postsecondary budget, he argued. He boasted about what he called a "historic investment in post-secondary education," an investment he indicated was "the most significant injection in 40 years" (page 2 Budget Speech).

The McGuinty plan for higher education - Reaching Higher - meant an additional \$6.2 billion by 2009 - 2010. While this is not exactly what Rae recommended - it is over 5 years instead of 3 - it is a highly courageous move for any government. Not unlike the Rae recommendations themselves, the budget too is short on details, and at the time of writing much is still unclear. One thing is for sure. If the government keeps its promise, this will have been an important watershed in postsecondary in Ontario. Ontario colleges and universities have hoped that they will have much needed new funds to take the Ontario system from tenth place to the Canadian average, but also some much needed policy and structural change, making the Rae Report, truly a blueprint for many generations.

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