TRANSFORMATIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ALBERTA: THE GLOBALIZATION, NEO-LIBERALIZATION, AND COMMERCIALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Table of Contents

Introduction.............................................................................................................................................................................. 3

History of the Purpose of Higher Education in Alberta......................................................... 4
  Neo-Liberal Influence on Higher Education ........................................................................... 7
  Current Trends in Higher Education................................................................................. 9

Forces Influencing Post-Secondary Transformations ......................................................... 15
  Corporate Imperialism in Higher Education ..................................................................... 24
  Aligning Internal Policy to Market Demands .................................................................... 33

Barriers to Liberal Higher Education and their Consequences for Society..................... 35
  The Impact of De-Liberalizing Higher Education .............................................................. 41
  Possible Solutions to Overcoming Barriers ...................................................................... 43

Benefits to the Commercialization of Alberta’s Universities ............................................. 47

Discussion of the Future of Liberal Higher Education in Alberta ................................. 51

Conclusion................................................................................................................................................................................. 58
Transformations of Higher Education in Alberta: The Globalization, Neo-liberalization, and Commercialization of Higher Education

Introduction

In the new knowledge economy of the twenty-first century, higher education in Canada is often perceived by government and private sector leaders as the means to economic prosperity. The relatively recent trend towards neo-liberalization and globalization has resulted in an intensified focus on educating and training people in the professional and applied fields so that they can contribute to the creation, development, and management of those new products and technologies which, many assume, will lead to greater economic efficiency and competition. In addition, there is an increased emphasis on academic research and its practical application in industry. In spite of that, most Canadian governments have significantly reduced funds and grants to post-secondary institutions, while supporting steps toward the privatization and commercialization of public universities and colleges.

Due to reduced state subsidization of higher education, many Canadian institutions of higher education are increasingly forced to depend on the donations and investments supplied by private companies and on student tuition fees in order to cover operational costs. Meanwhile, the civic, social, moral, intellectual, and cultural purposes of higher education are increasingly devalued for their lack of economic contribution, thereby putting liberal higher education at future risk. Moreover, over-reliance on the private sector could potentially lead to a considerable loss of autonomy and academic freedom for Canada’s public universities, which could further jeopardize liberal arts programs in the humanities and social sciences. Undoubtedly, the
commercialization of higher education may benefit the Canadian public in a number of ways, including greater accountability, increased efficiency, higher quality of skills training, and the capacity to indulge adult students who have a variety of needs and commitments; but at what cost to liberal education and society?

The subsequent paragraphs examine the movement towards the privatization and commercialization of higher education in the province of Alberta, and further examine how Alberta’s traditional system of liberal higher education may be impacted by such educational reform: beginning with a brief history of Alberta’s traditional higher education system and its relation to neo-liberalism; followed by an investigation of the forces affecting post-secondary transformation in Alberta and how certain barriers to higher education impact the Albertan public; further followed by a number of potential solutions to such barriers and by an examination of the case for the privatization and commercialization of higher education; and, concluding with a discussion of the future of higher education in Alberta. Liberal higher education may survive well into the future of Alberta and the rest of Canada, but may happen only when major changes in post-secondary policy and legislation are implemented.

**History of the Purpose of Higher Education in Alberta**

Since its earliest inception, higher education in Alberta has served a variety of purposes, depending on the period in Alberta’s history. For instance, Alberta’s higher education system has been assigned the roles of transmitting knowledge and reproducing culture; improving the intellectual and moral self, which some argue indirectly contributes to the betterment of society; and preparing people for work, which
government and private sector leaders argue is essential for maintaining a strong
economy (Spencer, 1998). Alberta’s 4 public universities, 20 colleges, 2 technical
institutes, and specialized Banff Centre continue to serve the varied needs of Albertans.
The University of Alberta, which was Alberta’s first formal post-secondary institution,
opened its doors in 1908 as a result of prioritized government policy, and for the
following 58 years the University of Alberta remained Alberta’s sole provider of
university education (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials, 2008).
However, the demand for liberal higher education had become so great by the mid-
1960s that the University of Calgary was founded in 1966, followed by the founding of
the University of Lethbridge (Canadian Information Centre for International
Credentials, 2008). During the 1970s, Athabasca University was established as
Alberta’s fourth official university in order to provide distance education programs for
part-time adult students and for those individuals who live in remote areas where access
to traditional university institutions is virtually impossible (Canadian Information
Centre for International Credentials, 2008). Athabasca University was a sign of things
to come, as the development of new information technologies throughout the 1980s and
1990s accelerated.

Besides transmitting knowledge and building Alberta’s intellectual community,
Alberta’s universities have fostered a knowledgeable workforce, which many argue is
the key to a strong and competitive economy (Axelrod, 2002). However, in the early
twentieth century, the province of Alberta began focussing on vocational training and
opened the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art in 1916 in order to provide
technical training to veterans of World War I and a maturing youth (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials, 2008). Consequently, Calgary became home to Canada’s first skill-oriented technical school, which later became the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) (Monchuk, 2008). By 2008, SAIT had become so successful in training highly skilled workers who were in great demand by Alberta’s diversified industrial sector that from 97 to 99 percent of SAIT graduates secured employment over the previous five years (Monchuk, 2008). Statistical data shows that Calgary has more engineers per capita than does any other North American city, which attests to Alberta’s strong emphasis on training a highly skilled workforce that meets the needs of industry and markets (Monchuk, 2008).

Government support for Alberta’s technical vocational training grew significantly when the oil boom of the 1950s led to the brisk economic expansion of the province (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials, 2008), undoubtedly facilitating Alberta’s industry-driven apprenticeship and industry training system. Alberta’s college level education also took root in 1916 when private colleges were formed in order to respond to labour market demands, and later, in 1957, Lethbridge became the location for Alberta’s first public junior college (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials, 2008). By the late 1960s, a network of technical institutes and colleges was established throughout Alberta, which was taken a step further when, in 2004, the Universities Act, Colleges Act, Banff Centre Act and Technical Institutes Act were combined as the Post-secondary Learning Act, which the
Alberta government claimed would best serve the needs of Albertans (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials, 2008).

**Neo-Liberal Influence on Higher Education**

Evidently, the dividing line between the purpose behind university education and vocational training has become much more tenuous in recent years. The neo-liberal ideals underlying globalization have resulted in a significant reduction in government involvement in public institutions, apart from when these institutions can be turned into profit-making enterprises. According to Statistics Canada, the year 1999 marked the first time since 1965 that participation in post-secondary education had fallen for students who come from families that earn less than $60,000. This is understandable given consideration of diminishing government support for post-secondary students and the government expectation that higher education will be paid through family savings (Canadian Labour Congress, 2006). In contrast to classical liberalism, which views individual freedom as an inherent right and as the driver behind the economy, neo-liberalism places limits on individual freedom in that one must not choose to be a non-consumer (Yochim, 2006).

Unmistakeably, neo-liberalism is having a major impact on higher education systems throughout the world. Neo-liberal policies, with their emphasis on human capital development, are largely responsible for the deconstruction of those public apparatuses which had traditionally safeguarded the public from unrestrained capitalist activity (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, n.d.). Human capital theory assumes that vocational training results in more productive and higher paid workers who increase
profits for their employers and contribute to building a prosperous society (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, n.d.). Consequently, Canadian universities and colleges are increasingly compelled to kowtow to a neo-liberal and corporate hegemony that downplays academic freedom and critical evaluation in favour of profits and markets. Furthermore, such neo-liberal assumptions may be deceiving for many students, since the real labour market does not tend to operate in such a simplistic fashion (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, n.d.). There is much more complexity in establishing and maintaining a productive and prosperous society than the neo-liberal based human capital theory suggests, especially when one considers the various relations between mutually influential political and economic powers, subjective experiences and capacities, and educational attainment (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, n.d.). It is particularly problematic for Canadian liberal higher education that neo-liberal educational policies are often based on the view that students are passive recipients of an education system that will strengthen the economy and support the interests of the corporate elite (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, n.d.), which is clearly an undemocratic and unethical position.

In Alberta, the neo-liberal/neo-conservative agenda gained momentum when the Klein government was introduced in the early 1990s. In the period between late 1993 and early 1994, the Klein conservatives began restructuring the Alberta government and its programs based on the notions of a fiscal crisis, a hierarchical political structure, a public seeking positive change, and an opposition divided on a number of important issues (Taylor, 2001). The Klein government had found its exemplar in the New
Zealand government, which offered an early version of such strategies as deregulation, the significant reduction of various public services, and the corporatization of certain public institutions (Taylor, 2001). However, the reforms introduced by the New Zealand government were largely ideological in nature, whereas the reforms launched by the Klein government were motivated mostly by financial interests (Taylor, 2001). By focusing greater attention on monitoring and accountability measures, the Klein government managed to decrease state regulation and increase privatization within Alberta (Taylor, 2001). Consequently, Alberta’s public universities and colleges found themselves under the scrutiny of a government that places private interests above the public good. The Klein government implemented educational policy that contrasts sharply with the educational policy typically implemented by interventionist states (Torres, 2000). Interventionist, or Welfare, states tend to consider publicly funded education as an investment, and to support the development and diversification of higher education (Torres, 2000). On the other hand, neo-liberal proponents have a tendency to argue that a privatized post-secondary system would be better equipped to cater to market demands than a publicly funded system, since they believe that privatization increases efficiency, productivity, and effectiveness (Torres, 2000).

**Current Trends in Higher Education**

Arguably, current trends lean toward the increased commercialization and privatization of Alberta’s higher education institutions. For instance, the revenues obtained from sponsored research have become a valuable indicator of the success rate of post-secondary institutions in acquiring funds from such sources as donating
agencies, granting councils, and private corporations (Alberta Advanced Education, 2005). Other measures show that Alberta’s two largest universities, the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary, successfully compete with other research-focused Canadian universities in terms of the number of patents issued, the number of new companies established, the number of invention declarations, and the amount of revenue received from the issuing of licences (Alberta Advanced Education, 2005).

In 2007, Alberta’s Minister of Advanced Education and Technology instigated discussions on the design of a policy framework for the roles and mandates of Alberta’s publicly funded system of higher education (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007). Such a policy framework is intended to guide the future governance of Alberta’s post-secondary institutions and is based on the neo-liberal notion that higher education must be aligned with the competitive global economy, which is in step with the move towards a knowledge-based economy, the move towards considering students as resources for building a strong knowledge economy, and the move towards the development of extensive collaborative associations between differentiated post-secondary institutions and between post-secondary institutions and stakeholders (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007). Clearly, this policy framework is meant to substantially increase research activity originating in Alberta’s private sector, while the design and delivery of post-secondary programs are expected to meet the needs of Alberta’s public and private sectors.

The policy framework outlined by Alberta Advanced Education and Technology corroborates the alteration in how post-secondary students are educated and in how
universities identify their activities. For instance, many university administrators across North America label students as consumers, while referring to research and education as consumer products (Washburn, 2005). The same university administrators also commonly use terms such as branding and marketing, and often support business partnerships between private corporations and certain university departments (Washburn, 2005). Such partnerships can affect which courses and programs continue to be offered to students. For example, as universities invest substantial funds in commercially lucrative fields, such as biotechnology and information technology, many of these same universities are reducing the number of available courses, especially those liberal arts courses that provide little financial return (Washburn, 2005). Another development which puts liberal fields of study at risk concerns the increased hiring of academic administrators from within the ranks of the private sector (Washburn, 2005). Since many of these administrators are frequently not chosen for their academic experience, and since a sizeable number of them serve on the boards of directors for large corporations (Washburn, 2005), it is not surprising to learn that many leaders of publicly funded universities are embracing a corporate management style that places less value on the intellectual and non-commercial university tradition than on those financially lucrative research and educational programs that are best synchronized with market forces and the business community.

Obviously, allowing public universities to become highly commercialized and corporate in nature will put a number of universities at considerable financial risk when there are significant economic downturns, which are expected to intermittently occur
within our capitalist-based economy. For many universities in the West, international competition is fierce in the recruitment of foreign students, given that such recruitment is viewed by most universities as a way to earn profits (Bekhradnia, 2005). Also, it is becoming more and more difficult for many Eastern universities to ignore market links to higher education when the World Trade Organization regards higher education as a commodity (Bekhradnia, 2005). Yet, universities in a number of poor and developing countries, such as Indonesia, continue to consider higher education as a “moral force,” while certain other countries, such as Bulgaria, consider higher education as the means to “social safety and innovation” during societal transformation (Bekhradnia, 2005, p. 42). Nevertheless, one could argue that Western public universities are no longer fundamental to society and culture. In Canada, as in most other Western countries, policy-makers concern themselves with decentralization and centralization issues in the governance of higher education, while attempting to evaluate the extent to which public universities and colleges should receive government funding, especially when there are other public needs to consider (Iacobucci & Tuohy, 2005).

It is somewhat surprising that most Canadian governments are not providing the degree of public investment in higher education as in the past, since universities are considered essential in building a strong knowledge-based economy. Part of the problem in the decline of government support for higher education relates to the fact that the benefits of liberal higher education are not apparent over the short-term (Bloom, 2005). Rather, long-term investment in liberal higher education is required before its true value to society may be realized (Bloom, 2005). Reduced levels of government
support mean that public universities can no longer rely on government protection from the highly competitive market (Jones, McCarney, & Skolnik, 2005). Consequently, many higher education institutions have no choice but to reposition themselves in collaborative partnerships with the business community, a situation that often leads to the abandonment of critical investigation (Jones, McCarney, & Skolnik, 2005). Then again, the tensions that exist between those who encourage the new entrepreneurial spirit of the university and those who perceive the collaboration between the university and the private sector as weakening academic freedom have given rise to an assortment of interdisciplinary studies which critically examine the emerging global knowledge-based economy and how the development of regional and local economies affects society and culture (Jones, McCarney, & Skolnik, 2005).

In Canada, more and more students are acting in response to labour market demands for post-secondary graduates (Trends in Higher Education, Vol. 1, 2007). For example, between the years 2000 and 2006, the number of full-time students rose by more than 31 percent, which is a much higher rate of growth than at any time in the past (Trends in Higher Education, Vol. 1, 2007). However, over the next decade, participation rates in higher education are expected to increase even more, due mostly to demographic changes brought about by inter-provincial migration (Trends in Higher Education, Vol. 1, 2007), which could potentially deepen Alberta’s current post-secondary placement crisis. Another factor which may contribute to post-secondary enrolment rates relates to the current economic downturn. For instance, statistical data show that university participation and enrolment rates have actually increased during
past recessions (Trends in Higher Education, Vol. 1, 2007), which would likely place an
even greater burden on Alberta’s post-secondary system. Therefore, it is reasonable to
assume that there are often higher participation rates in higher education during
recessionary periods, in view of the fact that reduced employment opportunities tend to
come with such periods and that university or college credentials may provide an edge
for graduates when seeking employment.

Above and beyond the issue of rising enrolment and participation rates in
Canada’s higher education system, Canadian universities are expected to lose
approximately 22,000 faculty members through retirement and normal attrition, leaving
most universities in Canada with the task of replacing up to half of their present faculty
over the next ten years (Trends in Higher Education, Vol. 2, 2007). On the whole, it is
projected that from 30,000 to 35,000 new faculty will need to be appointed within
Canada’s university system by 2016 in order to deal with faculty shortages, increased
student enrolments, increased research activity, and enhanced quality of teaching
employees be highly skilled and knowledgeable in their professional and technical
fields, which suggests that high student-faculty ratios are counterproductive to students
who need to acquire certain proficiencies. Students must be involved in active and
experiential learning in order to realize their potentialities (Trends in Higher Education,
Vol. 2, 2007). Certainly, Canada’s public universities and colleges will need
substantially more funds in the future to help cover the costs of hiring new faculty and
constructing the additional facilities necessary for administering to a larger student population.

**Forces Influencing Post-Secondary Transformations**

Indeed, globalization and neo-liberal policy have profoundly influenced transformations in the governance of Alberta’s post-secondary institutions. Globalization, which may be defined as “the process whereby countries become more integrated, mainly via movements of goods, capital, labour, and ideas” (Bloom, 2005, p. 22), gives rise to the likelihood that Canada’s federal and provincial post-secondary policy agenda will be affected by those decisions and policies made in relation to higher education systems in other parts of the world. For instance, the Klein government had adopted the neo-liberal strategy of New Zealand’s Prime Minister, Roger Douglas, in order to accentuate vocationalism and marketization, and to introduce new policies that would boost competitiveness and effectiveness (Kachur & Harrison, 1999). Douglas’s strategy was to “create a crisis, then strike fast and hard before opposition can be mobilized against the new policies” (Kachur & Harrison, 1999, p. xiii). Klein’s New Right ideas also supported the assumption that the country or state with the highest educated labour force would gain the upper hand as a competitor in the new knowledge-based global economy (Kachur & Harrison, 1999). Therefore, during periods of market instability, higher education could be blamed for the ensuing social and economic problems. However, it may be argued that a causal association between higher education and productivity does not exist, as the facilitation of technical skills is only
one of a number of roles performed by post-secondary institutions (Kachur & Harrison, 1999).

Without a doubt, Alberta’s expanding oil industry is having a large impact on Alberta’s treatment of its higher education system. In 2008, there were approximately $1.6 billion either approved or allocated by the Alberta government for projects aimed at improving Alberta’s universities and colleges, while the Ingenuity Fund and the Alberta Heritage Fund were set to direct additional billions toward research (Church, 2008). However, there are doubts about whether the Alberta government will adhere to its commitment, given that many of Alberta’s universities and colleges have continued to fall behind similar post-secondary institutions in other provinces in the aftermath of the vast funding cuts of the 1990s, according to such indicators as tuition fees, student placements, and faculty-to-student ratios (Church, 2008). According to Dr. Martha Piper, former vice-president of research and external affairs at the University of Alberta, a large portion of the current funding for higher education in Alberta draws from funds created by previous governments or from funds set up for short-term capital projects (Church, 2008). Nonetheless, research in new technologies, such as nanotechnology and biotechnology, is rapidly garnering substantial new funding support from both private businesses and the Alberta government (Church, 2008). On the other hand, such funds tend to be reserved for research, applied studies, and professional programs, while excluding those departments and programs associated with the liberal arts.

Dwindling government support for liberal education has changed the nature of how institutions of higher education raise funds, especially since many governments
assume that forcing higher education institutions to function within the market system will lead to greater competition and will meet market needs. Traditionally, Canadian universities have indirectly served the private sector by producing qualified graduates, advisors, impartial research findings, and research contracts (Tudiver, 1999). However, over the past three decades, federal and provincial governments have attempted to unite university and business interests through the creation of numerous research ventures (Tudiver, 1999). Even though many of the grant programs that originated from such government attempts continue to be problematic in how they are defined, universities often enter into collaborative research partnerships with private companies in order to receive government grant money, which may be made available once it is demonstrated how the related research will benefit business or the markets through the creation of new products (Tudiver, 1999). In addition, private donors and corporate funding agents often place limitations on how recipient institutions use donations and funds (Snowdon, 2005), which can negatively impact the running of those departments associated with the social sciences and humanities. As expected, university administrators are often quick to enter into university-private agreements that present new funding prospects. Then again, public universities may be dangerously sacrificing their autonomy by entering into such arrangements.

Decreased autonomy is a growing problem for many of Canada’s post-secondary institutions. Traditionally, academic autonomy meant the preservation of an educational institution’s academic freedom (Sossin, 2005), which “allows tenured professors to speak their mind without repercussion from employers” (Tudiver, 1999, p.
However, in today’s neo-liberal political environment, academic autonomy is described more as the degree to which government intervenes in educational and research programs (Sossin, 2005). Even though Canada’s governments and public university institutions, supposedly, have the best interests of the public in mind when it comes to higher education, their views on the purpose and value of post-secondary programs, especially those related to the liberal arts, tend to be quite differentiated (Sossin, 2005). Subsequently, expectations about the future role of private universities and colleges in Canada’s system of higher education raise questions about academic autonomy and accountability (Sossin, 2005), since it may be argued that commercialism overrides the public good when it comes to the goals of most private or privatized post-secondary institutions. But one does not need to look beyond Alberta’s public universities and colleges in order to see explicit corporate activity.

One of the ways that the commercialized or corporate university differs from the traditional university is that it does not engender knowledge through research for the sake of free dissemination to the public (Tudiver, 1999). Rather, the corporate university treats new knowledge as a commodity and as intellectual property (Tudiver, 1999). The corporate university also tends to work closely with industry. For instance, a 1986 survey, which included the University of Alberta, found that approximately 90 percent of engineers, 76 percent of computer scientists, and 66 percent of researchers in the biological sciences acted as consultants for both Canadian and U.S. businesses (Tudiver, 1999). Furthermore, in 1997, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) listed approximately 25 Canadian universities, including the
University of Alberta and the University of Calgary, that have considerable liaison, partnership, and technology transfer associations with the private sector (Tudiver, 1999). During the 1990s, the University of Alberta adopted technology transfer as one of the objectives underlying its academic mission and proceeded to expand its liaison department, which predicted a 5 percent rise in income from external contracts and the creation of at least 50 spin-off companies for the university by the turn of the new millennium (Tudiver, 1999). Similarly, in 1989, the University of Calgary established the for-profit corporation University Technologies International Inc. in order to promote its intellectual property as a commercial product (Tudiver, 1999). By the end of the 1990s, Canadian universities had established some 312 spin-off companies so that they could develop and market their innovations (Tudiver, 1999). Of course, one of the downsides of such commercial activity by universities is that certain information about their commercial dealings may not be made public, whereas the traditional university allows information about their commercial ties and operations to be made available for public scrutiny.

Private universities and colleges that are offshoots of big corporations illustrate that higher education can be a very profitable enterprise. In 1998, the online University of Phoenix reported an annual growth rate of 20 percent and an annual tuition of $6,500, while the DeVry Institute of Technology reported that it served some 48,000 students across Canada and the United States (Tudiver, 1999). Large commercial online universities, like the University of Phoenix, do away with the need for full-time salaried professors, given that part-time instructors can be taken on as needed (Tudiver,
It may be argued that the use of part-time instructors diminishes the traditional nature of higher education and lowers the quality of education received by students. It also may be argued that the greatest threat to traditional liberal education comes from those “alternative knowledge organizations” that challenge traditional concepts of knowledge, which can affect “changes in student culture and mentality…changes in how and where knowledge is generated, and in challenges to the traditional communicative culture of the university” (Jones, McCarney, & Skolnik, 2005, p. 10).

But organizations external to the public post-secondary system are not the only threats to traditional liberal education in Alberta and the rest of Canada. The post-secondary funding mechanisms in place for each province also place traditional liberal education in a precarious position.

The funding mechanisms for each province are often used by provincial governments to force universities and colleges into greater competition and enhanced performance through focusing on performance outcomes for post-secondary institutions (Snowdon, 2005). Performance assessments in higher education refocus emphasis from a credit system of inputs to a performance-based system of outputs, which are aligned with the skills and training required by industry (Mason, Arnove, & Sutton, 2001). In an attempt to make its performance-based funding appear more appealing, the Alberta government claimed that it would employ the funding mechanism more as a counterbalance for cost burdens than as a performance award (Snowdon, 2005). The Alberta government established nine different performance indicators on which to base funding decisions, such as expenditure efficiency, revenue generated through research
and entrepreneurial pursuits, and enrolment growth rate (Snowdon, 2005). However, such performance-based funding mechanisms result in not only greater exposure and accountability of certain academic activities, rules, procedures, and substantive outcomes (Stein, 2005), but also in greater uncertainty about the future and about how government funds are to be distributed (Snowdon, 2005).

There are a number of questions raised about evaluating higher education based on performance measures, which many governments use to make funding decisions. For example, how can the value of higher education be quantified in accordance with specific measures of performance when such value may be differently perceived by industry, government, the public, and the individual student? At times, there may be multiple and competing accountabilities, depending on the type of activity and behaviour (Stein, 2005). In addition, performance measures tend to draw attention to the costs and tangible aspects of higher education, since quality is next to impossible to measure (Stein, 2005). Such emphasis on costs and quantity often suppresses creativity, originality, and critical thought (Stein, 2005), as forcing improvements in performance founded on a set of standards may be counterproductive to the goals and objectives of the educational institution, the educator, or the student. There is also the concern that performance measures may induce higher education institutions to cater more to the needs of industry than to the needs of the individual student and the greater society.

A number of performance measures clearly reflect the neo-liberal agenda of funding governments, such as the amount of revenue generated through entrepreneurial activity beyond the traditional role of the university (Lang, 2005). However, the true
net worth of those programs related to the liberal arts has a tendency to remain obscured from appraisers external to the higher education system. Furthermore, most governments frequently fail to consider that universities usually have extended phases of production, such as with four-year undergraduate programs, which make performance-based funding inappropriate when governments expect recipient post-secondary institutions to change processes or behaviour before receiving further funding (Lang, 2005).

Even though performance funding is usually based on annual cycles, performance indicators designed to measure graduation rates may not be analysed for up to two years after a program ends, which can make it difficult for higher education institutions to plan for the future when they are uncertain whether their funding will continue (Lang, 2005). In addition, as the range of performance indicators is narrowed and made more specific, the reliability of measuring a post-secondary institution’s total performance is greatly diminished (Lang, 2005). On the other hand, when performance indicators show that the performance of a sizeable number of educational institutions warrants the maximum funding set by government, then performance funding may be considered a form of entitlement funding and could be quite costly for the funding government (Lang, 2005). Nevertheless, after at least 20 years of employing the performance funding model, most government objectives have been met, while many public higher education institutions continue to be concerned about their loss of autonomy and about the lack of equilibrium that exists between performance funding and the real costs of their operations (Lang, 2005).
It may be argued that the Alberta government’s tight control over funding through the use of performance-based mechanisms is forcing Alberta’s higher education institutions to raise tuition fees, while attempting to increase the number of positions available for students. Yet, in order to create more available space for new students, Alberta’s post-secondary institutions require much greater public funding than they are currently receiving. Even though the Alberta government announced in its 2005 budget that over the course of three years it would increase overall funding for higher education by 30 percent and increase principal operating grants by 18 percent, the number of seats available for new students continue to be well below the number of applicants seeking enrolment (Snowdon, 2005). The recognition that the increased demand for higher education would likely continue provoked the Alberta government to allow certain private post-secondary institutions the right to offer a number of degree programs (Snowdon, 2005). Other government strategies include enlarging the number of joint college-university transfer programs, promoting distance education, and establishing university colleges with degree granting privileges (Snowdon, 2005). Furthermore, by requiring post-secondary institutions to provide matching funds, such as private donations, in order to receive government funding, the provincial government is able to substantially reduce its own expenditures (Snowdon, 2005). Besides helping improve student access to higher education in Alberta, such strategies allow the Alberta government to avoid extending funds to those existing post-secondary programs that are not aligned with the needs of the private sector.
**Corporate Imperialism in Higher Education**

The neo-liberal policy agenda that underlies performance-based funding is sometimes referred to as academic capitalism or corporatism, which links the objectives, goals, and functions of higher education with marketplace demands (Barnetson, 1999). Under academic capitalism, knowledge is valued for its economic utility, while the market dictates which research projects and disciplines receive precedence over the others (Barnetson, 1999). The transformation from the traditional university to the corporate university may be explained by resource dependence theory, which states that the need for organizations to survive cause them to adapt their behaviour to the needs of those external agents that control important resources, even though many such organizations have the means to undermine the policy dictates of controlling external agents (Barnetson, 1999). In this context, it is logical that university administrators are seeking more innovative and effective means for raising funds and are taking a favourable stance towards government’s “productivity agenda,” which is deeply biased towards specialized training in fields related to technology, science, and applied research (Laidler, 2005, p. 39). Conversely, it may be argued that Canadian universities are over-selling themselves in the bid to attract greater funding from the private sector (Laidler, 2005).

Internal policy changes within Canada’s university system reflect the emphasis shift towards adopting a corporatist schedule of private-public partnerships (Laidler, 2005). For instance, both private funding agents and universities are devoting increased attention to interdisciplinarity in order to address concrete problems in a more timely,
efficient, and effective manner (Laidler, 2005). On the other hand, focusing on interdisciplinarity in order to achieve practical outcomes that will best serve the needs of private corporations could have dire consequences for basic research in the “humane sciences” (Laidler, 2005, p. 42). Not only might new incentives created by private-public partnerships and interdisciplinarity influence graduate students and faculty members interested in basic research to relocate to fields that focus more on applied research, but the majority of teaching might also become much more practical in nature (Laidler, 2005). One could argue that such homogenization towards applied studies and research across programs and disciplines may result in institutional isomorphism (Kyvik & Skodvin, 2005). Such interactions also entice universities to extend their operations into costly fields of research, such as nanotechnology (Laidler, 2005). However, in attempting to raise the funds necessary for indulging in expensive areas of research, which will satisfy funding governments and private investors, universities are often enticed by the appeal of misusing their internal redistribution system by offering those courses and programs that will produce the most income at the expense of traditional academic goals (Laidler, 2005).

One indication that applied education and market-based research are forcing out basic research and “curiosity-based scholarship” involves the federal government’s neglect of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), which is an agency devoted to funding Canadian research in the liberal arts (Axelrod, 2002, pp. 99-100). Throughout the 1990s, SSHRC’s budget had not changed, despite a major increase in grant applications (Axelrod, 2002). By the end of the 1990s, the SSHRC
had the capacity to fund only some 5 percent of students and approximately 15 percent of faculty applicants (Axelrod, 2002). Yet, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council supplied funds to no less than 20 percent of its student applicants and 60 percent of its faculty applicants during the same time period (Axelrod, 2002). Additionally, the “strategic research grants” program, which the SSHRC initiated during the 1980s in order to entice academics away from the social sciences and humanities in favour of applied fields, was made available to those researchers who agreed to study such topics as global competitiveness and social unity in the global environment (Axelrod, 2002). Clearly, the SSHRC’s strategic grants program was strategic in the sense that it allowed government the opportunity to direct academic research according to its own agenda.

The Canadian federal government has not tried to hide the fact that its agenda include supporting the commercialization and corporatization of higher education in Canada. A report issued in March 1999 by the Expert Panel on the Commercialization of University Research, which was appointed by the federal Ministry of Industry, Science, and Technology, was clearly designed to serve economic ends by recommending that “universities make ‘commercialization’ a fourth fundamental objective of academic life, alongside teaching, scholarship, and service, and that academics who produce marketable and profitable research be promoted and tenured especially quickly” (Axelrod, 2002, p. 101). However, due to considerable opposition from various faculties and researchers, the federal government discontinued its efforts to realize its plan (Axelrod, 2002). Nonetheless, the federal government managed to
continue its commercialization of higher education through such funding initiatives as the National Centres of Excellence (NCE) program, which required close collaborative associations between Canada’s universities, governments, and private sector (Axelrod, 2002). By the end of the year 2000, the NCE program had absorbed some 96 university organizations, 135 agencies belonging to the federal and provincial governments, and 567 private businesses (Axelrod, 2002). Undeniably, Canadian governments and private corporations are placing considerable pressures on Canada’s higher education institutions to prioritize the research and professional programs that will best serve industry and the economy. Still, higher education institutions are not totally without fault when it comes to their commercialization and corporatization.

There are three sets of change agents recognized as affecting transformations in Canada’s higher education system: corporate and governmental forces; breakdown in the unity and integrity of the university system due to the rapid expansion of a number of different academic disciplines; and adoption of new modes of management which were developed within the private sector (Sibley, 1987). It may be argued that it is the employment of new modes of management that is largely responsible for the critical attenuation in the autonomy of Canada’s higher education institutions (Sibley, 1987). In order to achieve the efficiencies expected by external funding agents, university administrators are increasingly pressured to adopt a managing style that is best suited for private enterprise (Curri, 2002). The pressure for university administrators to adopt a corporate managing style may be further intensified by the simultaneous existence of both administrative and academic cultures within the university system, since
hierarchical and collegial systems tend to influence one another (Curri, 2002). However, by adopting the management style of highly competitive private corporations, universities are departing from those principles fundamental to the character of the traditional public university system, which may give rise to distrust of the system (Sibley, 1987). Therefore, to a degree, universities should be held accountable for any reduction in their autonomy. Arguably, many universities operate according to the assumption that they are nothing more than organizations (Sibley, 1987). While it may be true that university institutions are organizational forms, they are, nevertheless, special in the sense that they have the unique mission of serving the public’s social, cultural, and economic needs (Sibley, 1987).

Certain critics who support the traditional mission of Canada’s public university system contend that neo-liberal educational policies are manoeuvres to Talorize higher education through the transformation of faculty into a division of the labour force that produces learning as a commodity (Green, 2003). One cannot deny that there are major problems intrinsic to the machine-like organizational approach that is being imposed on higher education (Green, 2003). By adopting an aggressive top-down managerial approach and a performance-based business model, post-secondary administrators are subscribing to a market metaphor that describes the root of most problems in the public sector as not conforming to those models established within the private sector that best serve the needs of the economy, the business community, and the markets (Green, 2003). Nevertheless, private-based models, such as business-style accountability
measures and performance-based checks, are increasingly taking root in Canada’s universities and colleges (Green, 2003).

As well as private-based accountability measures and performance monitoring, Canadian federal and provincial governments and private funding agencies use commercialization indicators, such as the number of patents, start-up companies, invention revelations, and licence revenues (Alberta Advanced Education, 2005), to advance higher education institutions toward higher rates of return, greater efficiency, and lower expenditures (Torres & Schugurensky, 2002). For example, the Association of University Technology Managers (AUTM) released data for 2002 showing that the University of Alberta had the third most license revenues in Canada at $7,718 for every $1 million spent on sponsored research, while the University of Calgary averaged license revenues of $15,778 per $1 million, which exceeded the average license revenues of $12,332 of Canada’s ten most research-intensive universities (Alberta Advanced Education, 2005). In addition, during the 2001-2002 period, the University of Alberta established 8 start-up companies and licensed some 25 new technological innovations, while the University of Calgary established 3 start-up businesses, disclosed 135 new inventions, and had 13 patents issued (Alberta Advanced Education, 2005). The argument has been put forth that such measures of commercialization are promoted by neo-liberal governments and private corporations in order to exert hegemonic influence over higher education so that concerns about social transformation, equity, autonomy, and accessibility are deemed less important than the ability to compete and be highly successful in this era of globalization (Torres & Schugurensky, 2002).
Considered on a global scale, due to the dynamics of neo-liberalization and globalization, dominant multi-national and trans-national corporations and international bureaucracies, such as the Bretton Woods institutes, are able to influence the determination and analysis of problems facing the global community’s higher education systems, and are able to prescribe solutions to these problems in ways that serve the interests of the world’s most powerful government and corporate regimes (Torres & Schugurensky, 2002).

Many analysts agree that there are often contradictory developments within the process of globalization, such as the trend towards homogeneity or convergence and the trend towards diversity, as illustrated by the multifaceted engagements between different cultures (Marginson, 2002). In higher education, the prevailing trend is towards convergence, which can be seen in the preponderance of courses and programs geared towards information technology and business (Marginson, 2002). It may be further argued that the trend towards convergence in higher education is creating a worldwide elite that subscribes to the Anglo-American language and associated methodologies and customs (Marginson, 2002). On the other hand, the neo-liberal notion that universities and other post-secondary institutions within the global matrix must trade academic personnel and knowledge, while competing with one another, in order to survive in the twenty-first century is a naïve vision that discounts the fact that higher education continues to be grounded in those national, local, and disciplinary cultures that are part of its history (Marginson, 2002). The very fact that globalization sets in motion competition between different cultural educational communities suggests
that individual educational institutions will resort to localized strategies in order to gain a competitive advantage (Marginson, 2002). Nonetheless, in such a system of higher education, the social sciences and humanities may become exceptions rather than remain fundamental parts of the modern university, since neo-liberal proponents perceive reliance on government for survival as the incapacity to compete in the global market (Marginson, 2002).

The vastness of Alberta’s oil and gas reserves provides a breeding ground for testing neo-liberal initiatives in forcing public institutions to become less reliant on government in favour of submitting to the needs of those large corporations involved in Alberta’s energy sector (Hall, 2007). Consequently, Alberta’s universities are under enormous pressure by Alberta’s right-wing government and private sector to correspond to those corporate ideals and management techniques most preferred by powerful industry executives (Hall, 2007). In 2004, Ralph Klein’s conservative government passed Bill 43, the Alberta Post-Secondary Learning Act (APSLA), which was designed to standardize, co-ordinate, and integrate the governance of all post-secondary institutions in Alberta (Hall, 2007). Under this new law, the deans and presidents of Alberta’s higher education institutions are referred to as Chief Executive Officers, who have the power to override peer review, collegial governance, and academic freedom (Hall, 2007). Without peer review, there would be few means of checking the exploitation of authority, such as the appointment of friends and associates to positions of authority within the higher education system (Hall, 2007). Primarily, Bill 43 raises the concern that the term “university” will no longer appropriately define a university’s
academic staff and constitutional principles, as the bill suggests that professors are no more than corporate employees answerable to boards labelled as corporations (Hall, 2007). Understandably, a number of academics question the legality of APSLA, since, according to the constitution, the constitutional conventions on which Canada’s traditional liberal universities are founded override legislation that produces such contradictions (Hall, 2007).

Without question, the situation that is developing within Alberta’s higher education system has the potential to influence educational legislation in other provinces. Many Canadian universities are beginning to appear more as corporations than as liberal institutions of higher learning (Côté & Allahar, 2007). By hiring professional managers in place of administrators who are well-grounded in academia, there is the danger that the original values of liberal higher education in Canada will be lost forever (Côté & Allahar, 2007). According to Michael Locke, an emeritus professor who uses the label “edubusiness” to refer to the corporatization of higher education, “the promotion of edubusiness erodes the academic objectives of the traditional university and feeds the substitution of business values and ethics for academic values and ethics” (Côté & Allahar, 2007, p. 123). In line with Locke’s statement, many university professors and educators in other post-secondary institutions across Canada are forced to produce increasingly larger numbers of graduates, while attempting to retain some semblance of system quality and legitimacy by continuing to function as gate keepers over their students (Côté & Allahar, 2007).
Transformations of Higher Education

Aligning Internal Policy to Market Demands

But overstretched faculties and increased student enrolments are not the only problems confronting many of Canada’s universities and colleges. A growing number of university professors are devoting more of their time and energy to various research activities, given that those who raise the most money through research and who develop the most innovative designs, which could potentially be transformed into licensed commercial products, tend to be the most valued by their respective institutions (Washburn, 2005). Therefore, one may deduce that teaching has become much less of a priority than in past decades. To make matters worse, many universities in Canada and the United States are replacing full-time faculty with part-time instructors and graduate student teaching assistants so that they can continue to offer courses in the humanities, which comprise the heart of the public university curriculum (Washburn, 2005). Meanwhile, valued professors in fields such as computer science and biotechnology are hired with the expectation that they will be required to do little, if any, teaching (Washburn, 2005). In spite of that, most universities and colleges attempt to fill as many student vacancies as possible. Furthermore, professors employed in the more liberal and less commercially oriented fields are expected to show that they can raise funds as effectively as those professors employed in the applied and professional fields (Washburn, 2005). However, it is unrealistic to assume that liberal arts departments can compete in raising funds with those departments related to science, technology, and professional studies, since funding governments and private investors overwhelmingly devote their attention and support to those pioneering fields that are expected to propel
the economy in the future. On the other hand, if higher education institutions continue to structure themselves according to the needs of private corporations, it is unlikely that they will continue to contribute to the global economy through the unconventional inquiry and creative problem solving encouraged by liberal forms of higher education (Washburn, 2005).

The structuring of higher education according to interests of the private sector is illustrated within Alberta’s university system. For instance, approximately 60 percent of the executive courses offered at the University of Alberta are tailored to meet the special needs of the private sector and government (Waisberg, 2007). In particular, while many private companies emphasize leadership training for their most experienced and valued employees, other businesses are seeking corporate management training that focuses on social responsibility in order to address public concerns over accountability issues within the private sector (Waisberg, 2007). Therefore, ethics, governance, and board effectiveness are often considered important components of university-based executive education (Waisberg, 2007). Other course topics favoured by the business community include risk management and talent management (Waisberg, 2007). However, the cost of providing custom executive training can be substantial, as a customized program at the University of Alberta can cost from $6,000 to $10,000 per day, which does not include the cost of program development (Waisberg, 2007). Yet, many private companies are willing to pay handsomely for such university services, given that it would be much more costly for businesses to develop their own executive training programs (Waisberg, 2007). For example, the University of Alberta’s
Executive Education Department has provided customized leadership training in coaching and teambuilding for the Servus Credit Union of Edmonton, Alberta, in order that the company’s various branch managers can apply what they had learned without long work interruptions (Waisberg, 2007). The University of Alberta, like other universities across Canada, is also attempting to develop programs that target a specific market niche, such as MBA specializations in international business, natural resources and energy management, and technology (Pratt, 2005). Many universities have also diversified their courses in order to attract students seeking specialized learning (Pratt, 2005).

**Barriers to Liberal Higher Education and their Consequences for Society**

Undoubtedly, the growth of niche markets in higher education will put further pressure on liberal arts departments to find new ways of marketing liberal education. However, as students continue to experience rising debt loads, many students may become reluctant to enrol in liberal arts programs, since the benefits of receiving a liberal education are not always immediately obvious in a work environment.

Moreover, some students may decide against continuing their post-secondary education altogether and choose, instead, to enter the job market early. Such a situation is evident in the oil rich province of Alberta, where many high school graduates have moved from other Canadian provinces with the expectation that they will find jobs offering good rates of pay without having to attend a post-secondary institution (Arif, 2007). Then again, many high school graduates continue to choose some form of post-secondary education before entering the workforce, as demonstrated by the scarcity of seats
available for undergraduate students at the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary. Nonetheless, it is understandable that many Canadians choose against pursuing higher education, since tuition fees in a number of provinces have more than doubled over the last ten to fifteen years, thereby contributing to a debt load of $25,000 for the average arts student graduating from a Canadian university (Campbell, 2005). It is little wonder that many Canadian universities have raised tuition fees to unprecedented levels when one considers that government support for higher education has steadily deteriorated over the last two decades.

The steep decline in federal support for post-secondary education since 1993 has had a drastic effect on Alberta’s higher education system (Campbell, 2005). In 1993, direct provincial transfers for post-secondary education were estimated at 1.54 percent of Canada’s gross domestic product, while, in 2005, post-secondary provincial transfers were estimated at only 1.04 percent of the gross domestic product (Campbell, 2005). Alternatively, federal spending on university-based research increased significantly over the same period (Campbell, 2005). Studies reveal that the majority of Canada’s high school graduates who do not pursue post-secondary education claim that the high cost of continuing with their education after high school represents the main barrier to attending university or college (Campbell, 2005). Even though a number of provinces, including Alberta, have introduced some type of tuition freeze or cap for a limited period of time over the past ten to fifteen years, such action has not benefited students over the long-term (Campbell, 2005). Yet, our society places a premium on attending university or college and graduating with a degree or other credential.
In recent years, more Canadian high school graduates are urged to attend Canada’s universities and colleges than ever before (Côté & Allahar, 2007). However, it has been discovered through certain studies, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), that a growing number of Canadian and American students are disengaged from their studies, even though they may have high academic expectations (Côté & Allahar, 2007). In fact, NSSE research has found that there are now far more disengaged students enrolled in university programs within Canada and the United States than at any other time in the past (Côté & Allahar, 2007). NSSE results show that student class preparation, in terms of studying, writing, reading, and other related activities, deteriorated from 64 percent to 56 percent between 2000 and 2002 (Côté & Allahar, 2007). A large part of the disengagement problem stems from credentialism and grade inflation (Côté & Allahar, 2007). In order to incorporate a substantial number of students into the new knowledge economy and to keep students motivated, many of today’s high school students are given inflated grades for moderate to low effort (Côté & Allahar, 2007). Consequently, many high school graduates continue to expect high grades in university or college, even though they may be ill-prepared for higher learning (Côté & Allahar, 2007).

According to Thomas Collins, former administrator and Dean of Arts at Canada’s Western University, grade inflation in higher education is a result of internal funding systems that financially reward faculties and departments for enrolling extra students into certain courses (Côté & Allahar, 2007). Collins bases his argument on his observation that he and a number of his colleagues were unable to grade a significant
number of undergraduate students by traditional standards, since the majority of these students would have failed to pass course assignments and successfully finish their courses (Côté & Allahar, 2007). In order to support his observation, Collins reviewed statistical data that showed an average grade decline of 14 percent for a group of students who began their first year at Western University with a 79.5 percent average grade and finished the same year with a 65.3 percent average grade (Côté & Allahar, 2007). Furthermore, Collins notes that only 4 out of seventeen first-year students were able to appropriately structure fundamental sentences and paragraphs, which means that the remaining 13 students wrote at an unacceptable literacy level (Côté & Allahar, 2007). Consequently, Collins and some of his colleagues agreed that marking these students accurately could result in a loss of funds and faculty positions, as significantly less students might enrol in more advanced courses later on (Côté & Allahar, 2007). Collins suggests that grade inflation, which is often used to secure funding for faculties and departments, exists in most Canadian universities and that university administrators choose to ignore this problem for the reason that it would take a considerable amount of funds to assemble remediation programs for ill-prepared students (Côté & Allahar, 2007). By catering to the ill-prepared, it is also possible that course content and program quality may be seriously diminished for those students who enrol in the humanities and social sciences for the sake of learning.

Increased student disengagement, society’s obsession with credentialism, and the market-worth of individual post-secondary programs place liberal education in an extremely uncertain position. In 1999, the Canadian Conference of Deans of Arts
attained concord on the contention that arts and humanities faculties and departments are beleaguered not only by government, but also by internal institutional forces (Axelrod, 2002). According to Axelrod, “the bleakest scenario suggests that in the years ahead humanities and social science programs are more likely to face death by a thousand cuts than by the guillotine” (p. 95). The University of Montreal has already discontinued a number of liberal arts programs (Axelrod, 2002). To make matters worse, several provincial governments are attempting to control the direction of higher education within their respective provinces (Axelrod, 2002). For instance, the Alberta government has introduced a new system of post-secondary funding which requires that new student placements be created only in those programs for which there is substantial labour market demand (Axelrod, 2002). Along somewhat similar lines, the Manitoba government created new legislation which forces Manitoba’s universities to have government approval before altering, expanding, or closing an academic program, while the Ontario government has pledged its funding dollars to only those higher education programs and projects approved by the Ministry of Colleges, Universities and Training (Axelrod, 2002). As a result, the Ontario government’s funding dollars go primarily to post-secondary programs in such fields as information technology, applied science, and medicine, while largely ignoring the fine arts, humanities, and social sciences (Axelrod, 2002).

Like the majority of Canada’s provincial governments, the Alberta government shows a lack of concern for university-based liberal education. Each year, thousands of qualified students are notified that they will not be accepted into Alberta’s universities
because of the unavailability of space (Failing our Grads, 2008). In 2006, the University of Calgary received approximately 14,130 student applications and enrolled only some 6,600 new students during that time (Tetley, 2006). The Alberta government is addressing this problem by encouraging close collaboration between Alberta’s universities and private sector, which will allow universities access to private funds in return for signing research contracts and for adjusting their courses and programs according to private interests. The Alberta government has also allowed a 275.3 percent increase in undergraduate tuition fees between the years 1990 and 2006, which is the largest tuition fee hike among the provinces for that time period (Schmidt, 2006). But as a short-term solution, the Alberta government decided to transform Mount Royal College into a university, thereby creating an additional 2,500 new undergraduate positions (Tetley, 2006). Yet, the Alberta government has not publicly recognized Mount Royal College as a legitimate university institution, which suggests that the government is not earnest about expanding Alberta’s university sector (Failing our Grads, 2008), unless the expansion is restricted to research and professional departments.

On the other hand, the Alberta government promised in 2006 that it will augment Alberta’s higher education system with 60,000 new university openings by the year 2020 (Tuition Proposal Merits Attention, 2006). However, increasing access for some 60,000 new students will make it necessary to also increase the number of qualified faculty (Zvengrowski, 2005). One might wonder where the Alberta government expects to find the funds necessary for such a large and costly expansion of
Alberta’s university system. Presently, there are far too few faculty and support staff to warrant increasing the number of new undergraduate positions. For instance, in the 1970s, the University of Calgary had approximately 8.5 students per faculty member, whereas the present ratio is approximately 17.5 students per faculty member (Zvengrowski, 2005). The provision of at least 10,000 new student placements in applied degree programs and university transfer courses by Mount Royal College and Grant MacEwan College is insignificant in relation to the tens of thousands of new student applicants who will be vying for acceptance into Alberta’s higher education system within next few years (Go East Young Students, 2007).

**The Impact of De-Liberalizing Higher Education**

If Alberta’s public is to be appropriately prepared for the rapidly changing knowledge economy, the Alberta government must invest substantially more in its higher education system, which includes investing in the liberal arts. The humanities and social sciences contribute immensely to the foundation and maintenance of a “humane, decent, or civil society” (Dyzenhaus, 2005, p. 172), and by not investing in liberal education Canada’s federal and provincial governments are ignoring their responsibility to society. Thomas Hobbes, a devoted utilitarian, argued that the public good comes before the private good and that “the public establishment of a civil society is necessary for successful private interaction” (Dyzenhaus, 2005). For Hobbes, liberal education is essential in structuring a civilized society (Dyzenhaus, 2005). A society that strives to be civil and humane is one which realizes that the public sphere must be given priority over the private sphere in order for a society to be considered truly
Transformations of Higher Education 42

civilized (Dyzenhaus, 2005). For example, health care in Canada is considered a public
good that should not be valued in economic terms (Dyzenhaus, 2005), which also
makes a strong case for regarding liberal higher education as a sound public investment.
Liberal higher education may be perceived as a producer of human capital, not in the
sense of “generating economic returns on investment,” but in the sense of generating
“the resources of a civilized society” (Dyzenhaus, 2005, p. 170).

It could also be argued that liberal education is an economic driver in the sense
that it can provide potential answers as to how to deal appropriately with foreign trading
partners who have dissimilar customs and traditions to our own, while explaining how
to best avoid social breakdown within our own society (Bekhradnia, 2005). The effects
of higher education on society may be seen in the social unity and public participation
of a wide range of cultures within Canadian society (Iacobucci & Tuohy, 2005). In
addition, liberal education facilitates a better understanding of the experiences of others,
and tests one’s own presuppositions against those of others, both of which form the
basis for mutual cooperation between different societies containing different cultures
and traditions (Iacobucci & Tuohy, 2005). Harold Innis, a prominent Canadian
economist, cautions, “To buy universities is to destroy them and with them the
civilization for which they stand” (Tudiver, 1999, p. 1). Obviously, the affects of
higher education on society go well beyond the markets.

A deficiency in independent inquiry and critical thought jeopardizes any
challenging of the status quo (Tudiver, 1999), which can lead to stagnation throughout
Canadian society. Liberal education not only provides the means for individuals to
engage in lifelong learning, as individual needs tend to change throughout the course of one’s life, but also as a driver for positive social change (Bekhradnia, 2005). Liberal education provides the milieu for dialectical and dialogical thinking, which, according to Paulo Freire (1993), “perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity,” and “which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved” (p. 92). Moreover, liberal forms of higher education can serve knowledge-based societies by emphasizing the importance of social justice and public well-being, societal values recognized by UNESCO during its 1997 Hamburg gathering as essential in a world that is increasingly threatened by environmental decay, major conflicts, poverty, illiteracy, and corporate control (Welton, 2005).

**Possible Solutions to Overcoming Barriers**

A post-secondary system that is deficient in humanities and social science programs could threaten the social improvement of Canadian society. However, in order to preserve the liberal arts in Canada, there must be better solutions to overcoming barriers to liberal higher education than placing higher education institutions at the mercy of the markets and corporate investors. One alternative to the current public funding scheme could be based on the number of students each university or college attracts rather than on quotas set by government (Chant, 2005). For instance, instead of filling quotas in order to receive government funding, universities could be funded according to the number of students eligible for funding (Chant, 2005). In addition, universities could be allowed greater discretion in determining tuition fees, which
would augment government funding (Chant, 2005). Such a system would make universities accountable to students rather than to a government that bases its funding decisions on set measures of performance (Chant, 2005). Furthermore, the current tendency for universities to provide applied research, professional, and technical departments with the majority of funding could potentially be reduced, since the contest for students might force universities to distribute funds more evenly among departments rather than lose students to those universities that offer quality liberal arts programs (Chant, 2005). On the other hand, over-reliance on higher tuition fees by public universities and colleges would likely create even more problems of accessibility for students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Besides allowing universities and colleges greater discretion in setting tuition fees, and providing public funding based on the number of eligible students, there are also a number of possible solutions put forth that relate to how government can acquire the additional finances needed to fund higher education institutions to the extent that their autonomy, academic freedom, and quality are not compromised. Institutional autonomy must be assured for Canada’s universities and colleges, otherwise critical discussion and the expansion of new ideas will be greatly diminished. Similarly, academic freedom must be allowed if basic research in the humanities and social sciences is to continue. The freedom to explore questions unrelated to industry and business interests can sustain the liberal arts (Tudiver, 1999), as well as the integrity of the university (Axelrod, 2002). In addition, tenure is necessary if high quality academic programs and long-term research programs are to be maintained, rather than relying on
corporate short-term means to high productivity (Tudiver, 1999). In order to raise the additional finances necessary to adequately fund public universities and colleges, and preserve their autonomy, academic freedom, and quality, Canadian governments would require making only moderate tax alterations (Tudiver, 1999). For example, the 1998 Alternative Budget, which was drafted by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, illustrated that the federal government could easily acquire some $12 billion in tax revenues, which would allow at least a 10 percent increase in government spending on public programs. Currently, Canada’s federal and provincial governments provide generous aid to private corporations in the forms of tax breaks and subsidies (Tudiver, 1999). By abolishing such tax breaks and subsidies, and by reinstating taxes on high income earners and corporations to those levels prior to the 1980s, Canadian governments might be better able to provide the funding needed by many under-funded public institutions (Tudiver, 1999), including publicly funded universities and colleges.

If Canadian governments are serious about improving the efficiency, quality, and accessibility of higher education, such goals should be expressed according to the needs and policies of each province and post-secondary institution (Snowdon, 2005). Governments must also recognize that higher education administrators need to know well in advance when changes to funding mechanisms are intended so that quality and access issues may be addressed before it is too late (Snowdon, 2005). Too often, government notices about funding changes come too late for many higher education institutions to react accordingly, since most universities and colleges in Canada are funded on an annual basis with insufficient discussion on the matter taking place
(Snowdon, 2005). Furthermore, it is important for governments to keep the number of funding mechanisms to a minimum and to keep them uncomplicated so that university and college administrators better appreciate the impact that changes to funding and funding mechanisms may have on their institutions and institutional departments (Snowdon, 2005). What's more, as well as highlighting accountability, performance reporting, and monitoring by a governing body within the higher education system, governments could develop an understanding that the commercial activity undertaken by post-secondary institutions and the funding provided these institutions by private sources are not alternatives for government funds or are not to be used as determined by the federal or provincial governments (Snowdon, 2005). Then again, such solutions are pointless without the governmental will to re-invest in higher education in order to improve quality, expand programs, and increase capacity.

As neo-liberal attitudes and ideals become more and more entrenched, it becomes less likely that most Canadian governments will invest in higher education to the degree as before this particular era of economic globalization. Rather, it is increasingly likely that close affiliations between higher education institutions and the private sector, the privatization of higher education, and the commercialization of Canada’s higher education system will persist. Therefore, it is vitally important that contract provisos involving research funding and sponsorship in the arts and sciences be made unconditionally public, since public higher education institutions should not only be answerable to government and private funding sources but also to taxpayers and students (Axelrod, 2002). It is also important that ethical issues be addressed openly so
that research departments are not pressured by their private sponsors to withhold questionable findings and practices from public scrutiny (Axelrod, 2002). Moreover, academic staff should be allowed to direct their own research programs and the design and content of their educational programs (Axelrod, 2002), otherwise the loss of autonomy may be unrecoverable. But does a certain loss of autonomy and academic freedom for public universities and colleges justify the often harsh disapproval of the commercialization and privatization of Canada’s higher education system, and might such commercialization and privatization actually secure the future of the liberal arts?

**Benefits to the Commercialization of Alberta’s Universities**

Besides having the potential to provide new facilities, more student openings, and high quality programs, commercialized post-secondary institutions, like most commercial enterprises, can be highly effective in communicating information about the state of management to administrators and presidents (Green & Iacobucci, 2005). For instance, if the governing body, such as a board of directors or shareholder, sees that an institution is losing money, or is not earning at least the amount of profits as other similar institutions, then it is most likely that the governing body will determine that the lower managers are not performing as they should and will likely take steps to rectify the situation (Green & Iacobucci, 2005). Likewise, the markets, as they relate to student numbers and fees, private donations, and private investments, can be useful measures of how well universities are performing (Green & Iacobucci, 2005). In addition, since students are often better informed about the job market and job possibilities in various fields than government, privatized post-secondary institutions
have the flexibility to respond to student/consumer demands in a relatively short period of time (Green & Iacobucci, 2005). Furthermore, the trend towards the commercialization of higher education implies that the majority of public universities will eventually be managed by well-qualified professional administrators who will take over the administrative duties previously performed by academic staff, thus allowing staff more time for research and teaching (Parker, 2005).

The argument could be put forth that the trend towards the commercialization of higher education in Canada will ultimately lead to greater autonomy for Canadian universities, which stands to reason in view of the fact that private post-secondary institutions have always benefited from greater autonomy, in certain respects, than publicly funded post-secondary institutions (Yusuf, 2007). For example, the privatization and commercialization of public universities allow them to take a more assertive approach to the extension of their research and development facilities and programs, allow them to be more entrepreneurial, and allow them to establish policies that are alluring to high calibre students (Yusuf, 2007). Understandably, the universities with the most robust and respected research programs tend to attract the most qualified faculty and the brightest students who are most likely to contribute, through their innovations and entrepreneurship, to the creation of job opportunities for local residents and to the creation of more extensive links to industry and other universities (Yusuf, 2007).

Private for-profit post-secondary institutions are also becoming increasingly popular among those students who do not want to deal with the level of bureaucracy
and the often longer time frame involved in earning a credential as with public non-profit universities and colleges (Morey, 2004). As well, a number of for-profit higher education institutions report that they are experiencing a significant increase in enrolments by students from minority backgrounds, which may be due to the specialized nature of professional training, a more convenience-based approach to student services, easy access to useful financial aid information, and hard-hitting market strategies (Morey, 2004). For instance, more than 50 percent of students enrolled at DeVry University and ITT Technical Institute belong to minority groups (Morey, 2004). Possibly the best example of a for-profit post-secondary institution serving the needs of a diverse range of students is the University of Phoenix. The University of Phoenix offers a variety of certificate and degree programs, including bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees in such fields as nursing, education, business, technology, and management (Morey, 2004). Undoubtedly, a large part of the appeal of the University of Phoenix relates to its provision of online courses and programs. In 2004, the University of Phoenix catered to some 79,300 online students worldwide, while it served some 174,900 students on its 47 campuses and in its 87 learning centres (Morey, 2004). However, part of this university’s appeal concerns its provision of credit for life experiences (Morey, 2004). The University of Phoenix accepts approximately 90 percent of student applicants for its bachelor degree programs (Morey, 2004), thus providing higher education for a portion of the population which, otherwise, may not have attended university or college.
Even though it is conjecture to think that the University of Phoenix model will come to dominate Canada’s higher education system within the next one or more decades, the positive outcomes of private and commercialized universities and colleges are too enticing for neo-liberal governments to ignore. Canadian governments realize that higher education institutions must have flexible bureaucracies and programs to be able to compete successfully in the global economy (Education isn’t secondary, 2007). Therefore, it is highly likely that the Alberta government and other provincial governments will place a much larger emphasis on allowing the operation of privatized and commercialized for-profit universities and colleges in the near future. Surveys conducted by Alberta Advanced Education consistently show higher graduate satisfaction with the overall quality of private-based design and delivery than with programs generally offered by public post-secondary institutions (Fernhout, 2005). In contrast to the rather large and unsupportive first-year classes typical of most major public universities, many private university colleges, such as Concordia University College of Alberta and Edmonton-based King’s University College, offer accredited programs in the liberal arts and certain applied fields with average class sizes of between 20 and 30 students, thereby allowing interaction between faculty and individual students (Fernhout, 2005).

The commercialization of public universities and colleges may also benefit the greater society beyond the benefits private university colleges provide for individual students, as public universities tend to have the facilities necessary for undertaking major research in the medical and technological fields. The ability of universities to
Transformations of Higher Education

commercialize research has the potential to create job opportunities and to improve the living conditions for a large portion of the population (Gerein, 2008). For example, in partnership with the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary, the Alberta Ingenuity Centre for Carbohydrate Science began developing vaccines and treatments for such diseases as tuberculosis and Candida Albicans, which is a form of yeast that can be particularly dangerous for those with already weakened immune systems (Gerein, 2008). TheraCarb, a spin-off company, provides the centre with the means to commercialize those research products that hold the most financial promise (Gerein, 2008). Similarly, the National Institute for Nanotechnology, which is located at the University of Alberta, performs multi-disciplinary research into developing new technologies that can be applied to such diverse fields as environmental conservation and biomedicine (National Institute for Nanotechnology, 2008). The institute’s collaborative partnership with the University of Alberta, the National Research Council, and the Alberta government, allows the technology transfer and commercialization of its products (National Institute for Nanotechnology, 2008).

Discussion of the Future of Liberal Higher Education in Alberta

Obviously, the commercialization of higher education can provide substantial financial rewards for both public and private universities, as well as for private companies willing to invest in those educational departments and research programs that best serve their business interests. For example, the CEO and founder of the Blackberry company, Research in Motion, claims, “if we locked the doors of universities tomorrow, companies would immediately feel the loss of highly qualified
workers, then there would be a decline in quality of life” (McDaniel, 2005, p. A6). But is a highly commercialized and privatized higher education system necessary for the general public to benefit from research outcomes and the generation of new knowledge? Would significantly greater government support for higher education also lead to breakthroughs in such fields as medicine, environmental protection, and information technology? Would substantially increased government funding produce similar benefits for individual students as those benefits provided by many privatized post-secondary institutions? Would the future of the humanities and social sciences be more secure under a similar government funding system as that prior to the 1980s? These are some of the questions that may be asked when comparing Canada’s traditional form of higher education with those corporate forms that continue to unfold. One cannot deny that, traditionally, the university had the role of passing down humanity’s acquired knowledge from one generation to the next and of providing the means to build on that knowledge (McDaniel, 2005). However, beyond existing as mere repositories and disseminators of knowledge, universities have always provided certain economic benefits for society.

Presently, Alberta’s taxpayers receive about a 14 percent rate of return from annually investing in Alberta’s post-secondary institutions, while Alberta’s economy receives approximately $13 billion, or roughly 5.5 percent of the province’s total income, as a result of the activities of these institutions and their students (Robison & Christophersen, 2007). Not only does Alberta’s economy gain from spending by faculty, staff, and students originating from outside Alberta, as well as from supplying
Alberta’s workforce with human capital, but also from the tendency that university and college graduates are less likely to be unemployed, to abuse alcohol, to smoke, to commit crimes, and to depend on social assistance, which, when applied across the student population, adds up to approximately $27.2 million in averted expenditures each year (Robison & Christophersen, 2007). Therefore, higher education also contributes indirectly to the public good by reducing crime and by reducing the need for health care and welfare.

Moreover, even though the Alberta government contributed approximately $658 million to Alberta’s technical institutes and colleges in 2006, taxes with a net value of $2.5 billion were produced thereafter, amounting to four dollars of additional tax revenue for every dollar contributed to Alberta’s technical and college institutions (Chalmers, 2008). Researchers further calculated that the additional economic activity kindled by graduates’ higher spending and higher productivity could potentially generate additional tax revenues, while additional earnings could result in the payment of more income taxes (Chalmers, 2008). Based on these findings, it is clear that public investment in higher education remains a good choice for Albertans. Furthermore, these findings do not differentiate between the contributions made to society and the economy by the liberal arts and by technical, professional, and other applied programs. Still, one may argue that the training provided in the technical, professional, and scientific fields mostly benefits the economy, whereas a liberal education does more to benefit society, as a whole.
Clearly, there are a number of conflicting interests that underlie the case both for or against maintaining higher education in its traditional liberal form. Such important values as academic freedom, autonomy, and social justice are often downplayed in favour of financial interests; and, of New Right ideals of business and government leaders who emphasize accountability and competence in their rhetoric about how privatized and commercialized higher education institutions can best serve the public good. Of course, there are always trade-offs within a system where there are opposing interests. However, a prevailing focus on one interest tends to impede the momentum of other competing interests. For instance, labour market demand can interfere with student interests, while political agenda can interfere with the dissemination of traditional cultural values (Rhoades, 1983). Even different fields and institutional sectors within the same higher education system may be responsive to different needs and interests: technical and professional colleges tend to be more responsive to the needs of industry and markets, whereas many universities continue to cater to the needs of their students (Rhoades, 1983).

Nevertheless, as educational policy and legislation become increasingly market-driven and industry oriented, there is the potential for the development of an undifferentiated system of higher education in Alberta and the rest of Canada. Since the door has already been opened in Canada for the offering of accredited degree programs by privatized universities and colleges, it may just be a matter of time before labour market demands and powerful corporate interests transform the Canadian higher education system into one that devalues liberal education to the point of exclusion. In
consideration of recent trends, Canada’s public institutions of higher learning are rapidly becoming as market-driven as those highly commercialized private post-secondary institutions distinguished by little government control over their operations (Rhoades, 1983).

On the other hand, allowing higher education institutions almost absolute control over academia could lead to the monopolization of knowledge, which could also block future differentiation (Rhoades, 1983). The monopolization of new knowledge stemming from privately funded research is clearly an issue that needs to be confronted if academic freedom and social justice are to be maintained within Canada’s higher education system. One need only look to certain other countries in order to realize how the transformation of different higher education systems might unfold within Canada. For example, the state controlled Swedish higher education system is in the process of transforming into a form of vocational education that could potentially result in the subordination of educational and social concerns to a system of cost-benefit analysis geared towards the labour market and industry (Rhoades, 1983). In Sweden, major private interest groups have influenced educational policy-making to the extent that general knowledge and related values are considered too outmoded for the realities of the working life, while research-based and vocational forms of education are heavily endorsed (Rhoades, 1983).

The move towards a market-driven higher education system is perceived by some to be part of a new form of imperialism (Tikly, 2004). This new imperialism concerns the assimilation of the world’s economies and their higher education systems
into the unfolding global economy of the twenty-first century (Tikly, 2004). It may be argued that American-style capitalism is at the heart of economic globalization and is largely responsible for the fading distinction between public universities, which were previously intended to serve the educational needs of the populace, and private institutions (Rossides, 2004). For instance, public universities, like private universities, are regularly involved in market-based activities: “charging for their services as much as possible, privatizing lucrative law and business schools, entering into partnerships with private developers to convention centers and research parks on public land, and running huge, even billion dollar fund drives” (Rossides, 2004, p. 675). Unequivocally, most neo-liberal governments support such corporatization of higher education, since they are devoted to the vision that a market society will take care of itself (Rossides, 2004). However, such educational reform is more about protecting the status quo than about enhancing the higher education system in order to better serve the greater society, as well as the economy.

Many advocates of neo-liberalism view government funding of higher education as a deformation of economic development and free trade (Marginson, 2002). They contend that if a university’s management and marketing programs are sufficient the university will succeed in the global competition against other post-secondary institutions (Marginson, 2002). Such a contention discounts the value in providing free access to publicly funded higher education and in maintaining the social sciences and humanities, since they are not considered essential to the efficient economic performance of higher education institutions (Marginson, 2002). Given that those
disciplines associated with the liberal arts are often considered too inflexible to adapt to rapid changes in market priorities, executive managers tend to view the more liberal disciplines as obstacles to be overcome, rather than as paths to success (Marginson, 2002). Policy-makers and corporate funding agents also often fail to consider that a destabilized academic identity suggests a critical loss of facility and that liberal education and corporate goals need not be mutually exclusive (Marginson, 2002). Furthermore, even though it is becoming increasingly important for both employers and employees to be able to cooperate and communicate with others who have vastly different cultural attitudes and customs, liberal education is rarely perceived as contributing to the economy (Bloom, 2005). Yet, liberal education can not only facilitate an appreciation of other cultures and traditions, but can also encourage people to question their own presuppositions and traditions (Bloom, 2005).

In view of the fact that the Alberta government relatively recently passed legislation giving the for-profit DeVry Institute of Technology the power to grant degrees, which most likely will be extended to other for-profit post-secondary institutions over the coming years (Axelrod, 2002), it may be reasonable to assume that the future of publicly funded liberal education within Alberta is at serious risk, especially since such legislation reinforces the Alberta government’s move towards decreasing its funding for liberal arts programs in favour of those programs associated with the applied and professional fields. Unquestionably, without greater government support for public investment in the liberal arts, the quality of programs in the social sciences and the humanities will continue to deteriorate: “Huge classes…diminishing
library resources, minimal research funding, inadequate government support to universities with less and less independence, and academic and research agendas driven increasingly by commercial interests, all cheapen higher learning and erode its scholarly foundations” (Axelrod, 2002, p. 117). It is also highly likely that broad-based liberal education will be further devalued in the coming years as post-secondary institutions are increasingly pressured to train students speedily and cost-efficiently in order to supply a labour market in sync with the knowledge economy of the twenty-first century (Axelrod, 2002).

**Conclusion**

Even though higher education in Alberta has always prepared people for work and supplied Alberta’s labour market with highly trained and knowledgeable graduates, Alberta’s public universities and colleges have also always provided a social service through the reproduction of culture, the facilitation of moral purpose, the transmission of accumulated knowledge, the development of Alberta’s intellectual community, and the self-improvement and self-development of individual Albertans. However, as neoliberalism and globalization began to take form throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it became increasingly clear that Alberta’s public universities and colleges would eventually be forced into commercializing many of their operations and into aligning themselves with private corporations in order to compensate for significantly decreased government support. The unfolding scenario in Alberta, as well as in the rest of Canada, is the transformation of traditional liberal higher education into a market-based
system that relies on efficiency and productivity in order to be successfully competitive and profitable in the new global economy.

The consequences of having a highly commercialized higher education system, which is considerably dependent on the markets and on private funding sources, are both negative and positive. For instance, since many of Alberta’s universities and colleges are investing large portions of available funds in such progressive and financially lucrative fields as biotechnology and pharmaceutical research, there is less financial support for the liberal arts in Alberta. As a result, the quality of those programs and courses offered in the social sciences, humanities, and fine arts could potentially be impaired to the point of no return, as the funds needed to provide for a rapidly growing number of student applicants through the hiring of new faculty and the construction of extra facilities are in short supply. In addition, the weakened academic autonomy that frequently accompanies receiving private-based funds and donations, which are often provided with certain strings attached, leave many higher education institutions no choice but to offer less liberal arts courses and programs, sometimes resulting in department closures. The government funding mechanisms based on performance outputs also place the liberal arts at risk, since such performance-based mechanisms emphasize the costs and quantifiable aspects of higher education, thereby disregarding the long-term benefits of a broad-based liberal education that facilitates critical and creative thought.

In contrast, a system of higher education that is aligned with the markets and with business enterprises may provide a number of benefits for both the public and
private sectors. For instance, commercialized post-secondary institutions are less likely to lose money, given that the corporate hierarchical administrative style adopted by many such institutions allows more accurate operational assessments and more control over the performance of lower managers and staff. Hiring professional administrators to manage business affairs also allows academic staff the opportunity to devote a greater percentage of their time to basic research and teaching responsibilities.

Moreover, for-profit private universities and colleges, such as the University of Phoenix and the DeVry Institute of Technology, are more likely than publicly funded institutions to be able to construct new facilities and to provide additional student openings. Besides having greater autonomy, privatized higher education institutions can offer students the convenience of receiving a degree or certificate over a shorter time frame with less bureaucracy than can public non-profit educational institutions. Privatized post-secondary institutions can further offer students face-to-face contact with their professors and other learning facilitators. Commercialized university institutions can also benefit society through their spin-off companies that allow technology transfer and the commercialization of research created products, such as medicines used in treating various disorders and diseases.

When considering the benefits of a privatized and commercialized system of higher education, the future of higher education in Alberta appears quite positive and progressive. However, the role of maintaining and disseminating cultural and liberal knowledge through the humanities and social sciences may be disappearing in favour of specialized training in the scientific, technical, and professional fields. Even though
Alberta’s universities and colleges have always provided both economic and social benefits, the balance is increasingly towards support for the markets and private interests at the expense of the public good. Yet, a number of studies reveal that liberal arts graduates are just as likely as science and technology graduates to find employment, to avoid a life of crime, and to not require social assistance. Meanwhile, the Alberta government continues to under-invest in higher education and to under-value liberal arts programs. Until the liberal arts can provide similar financial rewards as the more applied and professional disciplines, liberal programs and departments will likely face greater hurdles in the near future. Then again, maybe public online universities such as Athabasca University will provide the means to protecting the future of higher education in Alberta and the rest of Canada.
References


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