A Comparative Analysis of Arrangements for State Coordination of Higher Education in Canada and the United States

This article examines differences between Canada and the United States with respect to the relationship between state/provincial governments and universities, particularly in regard to arrangements for state coordination of public universities. In attempting to relate such differences in higher education coordination to salient cultural and political differences between the two countries, the article employs the analytical framework developed by Seymour Lipset [14] in his comprehensive study, Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada.

Given the close economic, political, and geographic relationship between Canada and the United States, one might expect that educational researchers in each country would take some note of the practices and developments on the other side of the border. In fact, however, there have been few comparative studies in education that focus on these two nations. American educational researchers have tended to take a parochial outlook, and they seldom cite works of scholars in other countries [29]. Though it is more difficult for Canadian researchers to ignore the United States than the reverse, Brym [6] notes that Canadian social scientists have been quite ambivalent about comparisons with the United States, oscillating between the thesis that English Canadians are just like Americans and the antithesis that they are fundamentally different.

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education in Portland, Oregon, 1–4 November 1990.

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Within the field of comparative education, studies involving the United States for the sake of comprehensiveness have tended to be worldwide in scope or to focus on comparisons with the larger nations of Western Europe or Japan rather than with Canada. This tendency may reflect a perception that Canada and the United States are simply too similar and that comparative studies between these two countries would not be as useful or intellectually stimulating as those involving comparisons with countries that are more different or exotic, or as is the case with Japan or Germany, countries that provide a strong economic challenge to the United States.

However, it is because of the apparent similarities between the United States and Canada in so many realms that comparative educational studies between the two may be particularly instructive. The limited variation in institutional and cultural factors between these two countries — in contrast to comparison of either North American country with other nations — may enable the researcher to isolate the influence of particular educational variables more successfully. Lipset makes a similar point when he argues the benefits of United States-Canada comparative studies of political and social behaviour and practices: "Nations can be understood only in comparative perspective, and the more similar the units being compared, the more informative the comparison... Knowledge of Canada or the United States is the best way to gain insight into the other North American country" [p. xiii].

This article, then, represents an attempt to compare and contrast the ways in which universities are coordinated in American states and Canadian provinces. We hope that by examining these basic mechanisms and structures we will stimulate further comparative research on this and other aspects of higher education in these jurisdictions. We begin by outlining the conceptual framework for our analysis.

**Conceptual Framework**

Our analysis, as noted, utilizes the conceptual framework provided by Seymour Lipset. Lipset analyzes cultural and institutional differences between the United States and Canada over the broad range of social and political enterprise, covering such areas as religion, law and deviance, economic behaviour, the arts, social welfare, trade unionism, philanthropy, multiculturalism, and federalism. Surprisingly, in view of the extent to which education is generally thought to shape and reflect
national culture, very little attention is given to education in *Continental Divide.*

However, the analytic framework which Lipset employs to elucidate United States-Canada differences in other realms appears to be quite useful when applied to higher education. In another article [24], one of the authors has used this framework to explain some of the more striking differences between Canadian and American higher education. Some of these differences — like the virtual absence of private universities in Canada — are apparent even to the casual observer. Others, having to do with the intricacies of government-university relations, provide the subject matter of this article.

Lipset’s thesis is not new but rather draws upon a longstanding perspective in the works of various — mostly Canadian — political and social researchers and commentators. What Lipset has done is to synthesize the contributions of the many who have laboured in this vineyard; provide extensive documentation of differences between the two nations, especially drawing upon public opinion data; and apply his central hypothesis to diverse areas of social, economic, and political behaviour.

The thesis, briefly stated, is that longstanding differences between Canada and the United States are rooted in the respective organizing principles of the two North American nations that grew out of the American Revolution:

The United States is a country of the revolution, Canada of the counter-revolution. These very different formative events set indelible marks on the two nations. One celebrates the overthrow of an oppressive state, the triumph of the people, a successful effort to create a type of government never seen before. The other commemorates a defeat and a long struggle to preserve a historical source of legitimacy: a government’s deriving its title to rule from a monarchy linked to a church establishment. Government power is feared in the south; uninhibited popular sovereignty has been a concern in the north [14, p. 1].

From this difference in formative principles, one nation devolved a political culture characterized by antistatism, individualism, populism, and

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1The only references to education include a quotation by a former president of the University of Toronto about the shift in Canadian universities from humanities to more practical and vocationally relevant subjects and the expansion of graduate programs and research that were alleged to have resulted from American influence; a few comments on differences in university participation rates between the United States and other OECD countries; and the observation that there is “not a single large private university” in Canada.
egalitarianism; the other more class-conscious, elitist, law-abiding, statis-
tist, collectivity-oriented, and particularistic.  

A few examples of how Lipset attributes differences in various social
phenomena to differences in founding principles helps to illustrate the
argument. One of the most striking differences between the two nations
is in the degree of involvement of government in areas such as owner-
ship of industry, provision of welfare and social services, and regulation
of private economic behaviour. In Canada, the state has always domi-
nated the economy, and even conservative politicians have referred to the
welfare system as “a sacred trust.” In the United States, even something
as basic as health care is allocated largely on an ability-to-pay basis, and
a badly functioning private marketplace is generally thought superior to
a well-functioning public enterprise.

To Lipset, these differences between Canada and the United States
regarding the role of government reflect the differences between the original
Tory statist ideology in the former and the liberal-Whig commit-
ment to an antistatist individualism in the latter. He notes further the
compatibility between the founding statist conservatism in Canada and
socialism, because both are collectivist ideologies that embrace the idea
of public mobilization of resources to fulfil group objectives. In arguing
that the social democratic movement is the other side of statist conserva-
tism — and hence a natural development in Canadian political evolution
— Lipset quotes novelist Robertson Davies’s aphoristic description of
Canada as a “socialist monarchy.” In contrast to Canada, where social
democratic movements have been quite strong and social democratic
parties (for example, the New Democratic Party) have been elected in
several provinces, the liberal-Lockean tradition in the United States has
inhibited the emergence of social democratic movements.

Perhaps one of the areas that best illustrates his thesis is that of law
and deviance. Symptomatic of national differences in respect for law
and those who uphold it has been the tendency for the gunslinger to be a
national hero in the United States, whereas as novelist Margaret At-
wood has noted, “Canada must be the only country in the world where
a policeman [The Mountie] is used as a national symbol.” Lipset cites

3 Lipset is aware of the challenges to his ‘cultural determinist’ paradigm and considers
alternative explanations for differences between Canada and the United States, chiefly
structural theories that emphasize such differences as geography, climate, population
density, and market size, and (very briefly) economic lag theories which posit that cul-
tural differences will disappear as levels of economic development and economic structures
converge. He concludes, however, that “structure largely reinforces culture,” and that
historic differences in political values have persisted as the productivity gap has nar-
rowed and differences in income and occupational structures have been reduced.
public opinion poll data that show how Canadians and Americans differ consistently in the values placed on social order relative to individual liberty. For example, in response to the proposition, “it is better to live in an orderly society than to allow people so much freedom they can become disruptive,” the proportions of respondents agreeing (in 1988) were: Americans 51, Anglophone Canadians 61, and Francophone Canadians 77. Other opinion poll data show substantially larger differences in attitudes toward gun control or restrictions on cars, smoking, door-to-door sales, and other private behaviour.

Lipset argues that such differences stem from the two countries’ dissimilar histories, “the successful revolt in one and the reaffirmation of the monarchical base of legitimacy in the other,” and that the differences in founding principles were reinforced by the respective legal and constitutional arrangements established by each country in its formative period. In the United States, the Constitution and Bill of Rights emphasize due process and the protection of the individual from encroachment by the state. In contrast to the emphasis on individual rights in the United States, the Canadian tradition is one of emphasis on social order and the collective good, and to some degree, group rights, the latter in large measure prompted by the need to work out a peaceful accommodation between the victorious Anglophones and the Francophone minority.

Broad Differences in Higher Education between the two Nations

An American educator visiting Canada will immediately recognize two important differences in Canadian higher education. There are very few private universities in Canada, and there are no church-affiliated universities, whereas about half the universities in the United States are private, and of these about a quarter are church affiliated. Some Cana-

1 Whereas the phrase “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” was used in the founding documents of the United States, the preamble of the British North American Act, which was Canada’s founding document, refers to “peace, order, and good government.”

2 Over the past several decades, prompted by the civil rights movement and demands of many minorities, the United States has made attempts to recognize group rights, but courts have had an uneasy time reconciling these with the Constitution. Moving in the other direction, Canada enacted a Charter of Rights in 1984 which has some similarities to the U.S. Bill of Rights. However, not surprisingly, given its traditions, the Canadian Charter offers less extensive and stringent protection of individual freedoms than does the Bill of Rights, for example less protection of property rights, no protection from double jeopardy, little protection from self-incrimination, incomplete guarantee of trial by jury, and a “notwithstanding clause” that allows governments to override certain individual rights conferred by the Charter in the interests of the collective. Some observers consider these differences so great as to argue, like Kenneth McNaught [quoted in 14, p. 103], that “the Charter is distinctly un-American,” as its basic stress is still on the “dependence of liberty on order.”
adian universities refer to themselves as private, but because they were established by an act of a provincial legislature and receive the vast bulk of their funding through grants from a provincial government, their status is more akin to that of public universities in the United States than to U.S. private universities. There are bible colleges in Canada, but they are restricted to offering divinity rather than secular degrees and serve mainly to prepare clergy. In terms of private universities, there are only two small religious affiliated institutions that have limited authority to offer secular degrees (one in Ontario, one in British Columbia). But in short, there are no Harvards or Stanfords, or Notre Dames or Georgetowns in Canada.

A more subtle, but even more fundamental difference is that universities in Canada are not hierarchically differentiated as they are in the United States. The emphasis in public policy has been on establishing networks of institutions of approximately equivalent standards. To be sure, the older universities retain some edge in prestige, and possibly in quality too, but in the absence of national quality ratings of institutions — a uniquely American obsession — there is no evidence to confirm such suppositions. In recent years there have been calls for provincial governments to differentiate among universities in per student grants, which are generally based on enrollment and program mix, and designate flagship institutions for higher funding levels [7]. However, within the prevailing ethos of equality, these calls have gone unheeded [22, pp. 160–61].

There is also little horizontal differentiation among Canadian universities, with most being comprehensive institutions, involved in graduate studies, normally including the doctoral level, professional programs, and research [21]. Only a handful of institutions might be said to be specialized in regard to program area (such as technology or education), principal clientele (for example, native peoples), or educational philosophy, mission, or program delivery (generally no nontraditional institutions except for a few in regard to distance education and one fledgling open learning institute).

Canada has substantially fewer degree-granting institutions on a per

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3 Peter Leslie [13, pp. 56–65] has observed that higher education in Canada is in one respect more egalitarian than in the United States, in another respect less egalitarian. It is more egalitarian in that the quality of education and the value of a degree varies relatively little from one institution to another compared to the situation in the United States. Hence, there is greater equality of results. On the other hand, the emphasis on common minimum standards in Canada means that for many persons for whom there would be some place, somewhere in the American system, there is no corresponding place in the Canadian university system.
capita basis than the United States. There are about seventy degree granting institutions in Canada — about the same number as the Boston area alone — of which eleven are in one of the smallest provinces, Nova Scotia, and only sixteen in the largest province, Ontario.

The limited number of institutions, the absence of private or church-affiliated ones, and the limited extent of horizontal differentiation (including especially the near absence of nontraditional institutions) all result from attitudes that emphasize the role of university education as a public utility, suspicion of private enterprise in education, secularization of education, and equality of results as opposed to equality of opportunity, attitudes that stand in sharp contrast to the corresponding ones in the United States. These attitudes are backed by government policies and, in most provinces, legislation that strictly limits the authority to grant degrees. In Canada an institution cannot award degrees or refer to itself as a university without being authorized to do so by an act of a provincial legislature.

The remaining two differences of note between U.S. and Canadian higher education pertain to community college-university and federal-provincial relations. In most provinces, community colleges are mandated to provide only career, adult, and community education, not to serve as feeders to the universities. In only two provinces, British Columbia and Alberta, have the colleges had a transfer function like American colleges do. Quebec has a unique system in which secondary schooling terminates at Grade 11, after which any student aspiring to the university must complete a two-year pre-university program in a provincial college of general and professional education, an institution that also has a three-year career preparation stream. In line with the distinct mandates of universities and community colleges, there are no consolidated

6In a few provinces, particularly Ontario, American universities have attempted to mount off-campus programs of a type not available in Canadian universities, particularly involving nontraditional study. Ontario universities have vigorously opposed these initiatives, but because of strong support from organizations that represent the clientele for such programs (especially school teachers' federations), the government has permitted the American programs subject to meeting a list of conditions, of which demonstration that no Ontario university could offer the program has been the only occasional stumbling block [23, pp. 74–76]. Private degree-level education is, thus, the only service of which the authors are aware for which a jurisdiction prohibits its own residents from producing but licenses imports.

7In other provinces, there is increased interest among community-college graduates in subsequently going on to the university, particularly to enhance their professional credentials, and articulation is a subject of policy review in most provinces and of planning initiatives in a few. Many community-college graduates have been going to American universities to meet this need, and several Ontario colleges have formal articulation agreements with American universities [16, pp. 2–3].
higher education agencies that have purview over both sectors — though a recent survey of senior officials showed that a majority felt that improved structures for coordinating policy between these sectors was needed [25].

As Canada has a federal system in some ways similar to that of the United States, the division of responsibility for higher education between the two levels of government is broadly similar between the two nations. For example, the major source of research funding is national granting councils, and the major source of direct operating grants (for public institutions) comes from states/provinces. As in the United States, the respective roles of the two levels of government have tended to change from time to time as various fiscal exigencies and political expediencies have had to be reconciled with constitutional interpretations. At one time, the bulk of university operating funding was in the form of direct grants from the federal government to the universities. Now, in keeping with a general swing toward provincial autonomy but recognizing the greater revenue generating capacity of the federal government, the bulk of operating funds still come from the federal government, but in the form of unconditional transfers to the provinces, which the latter can spend as they wish, even if their wish is to spend it on hospitals or roads. In obeisance to provincial sensitivities over what is deemed to be their jurisdiction, there is no national department or office of postsecondary education, even though the university community has argued repeatedly that such would be not only in their own interests but in the national interest as well.

Differences in Arrangements for System Coordination

Aside from the broad differences described above, one can observe a number of specific differences in the structures and processes related to the coordination of higher education. These differences pertain to the role of the legislature and to the specific structures in place for state/province coordination.

The Role of the Legislature

Some of the more fundamental differences in the coordination of higher education between states and provinces can be attributed to differences in government structure. The parliamentary system employed by the Canadian provinces involves a series of structures and a political dynamic that sharply contrasts with the American state model.

Whereas there is a relatively clear separation of powers between the executive and legislative branches in U.S. states, the parliamentary sys-
tem involves the linkage of both types of authority within the provincial cabinet. In each province a single cabinet minister is assigned responsibility for administering higher education policy, often in combination with other policy areas, as well as for shaping the legislative agenda for higher education in cooperation with the cabinet. The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, composed of provincial ministers who have been assigned responsibility for education and higher education, provides a national forum for the exchange of information and the development of cooperative initiatives.

There are also important differences in the role of the legislator. Under the parliamentary system, members are expected to vote only along partisan lines. Strict party loyalty is maintained because the defeat of a major piece of government-initiated legislation is traditionally viewed as a sign of non-confidence and may require the government to resign.

The basic structural differences create a different political context for the coordination of higher education. It is generally the provincial cabinet, and not the legislature as a whole, which plays the dominant role in the development of legislated policy, in contrast to the dominant role that some state legislatures play within the coordination process [15, p. 7]. While McGuinness notes that in the past two decades, “increasingly sophisticated legislators, backed by professional staffs, became more directly involved in both the substance and procedures of state higher education policy” [15, p. 9], the Canadian experience is that few legislators, except relevant cabinet and “shadow cabinet” members, play any formal or direct role in the policy process. The context for policy change and institutional lobbying is also influenced by the perception that the “window of opportunity” for influencing the content of legislation, in a parliamentary system, occurs before the legislation has been formally introduced. Public debate of legislation, if it occurs, is usually limited to a rather predictable adversarial (for example, government versus opposition) approach following party lines. Higher education institutions that seek to change policy therefore concentrate their lobbying efforts on those few legislators and senior civil servants who play a formal role in the coordination process and on the party leadership in an attempt to change or influence party policy, especially during elections.

This is not to suggest that provincial legislators are uninterested in higher education policy. A Manitoba study found that most legislators wanted to learn more about and increase their contact with the province’s largest university. At the same time, respondents warned that increased lobbying efforts could create dangerous perceptions of institutional politicization or partisanship [11], another reason why lobbying efforts tend to focus only on those who play a formal role in the policy
development process. Thus, in the Canadian system, the cabinet is the dominant political force, and the important political dynamics centre on the relationship between senior government officials and the universities, individually or collectively.

**Coordinating Structures**

There are major differences in the structures in place for the coordination of higher education in Canadian provinces and American states. There are no consolidated provincial governing boards in Canada, whereas nearly half the states have consolidated governing boards for all or most public higher education institutions. In fact, whereas the multicampus system is a common model for public universities in the United States, there is only one comparable multicampus system in Canada, the University of Quebec. Further, whereas more than half the state governing boards have jurisdiction over both universities and community colleges, no province has a public agency, apart from the government ministry of higher education, which has responsibility for all postsecondary sectors [25]. Whereas all states have one or more public agencies responsible for universities—a consolidated governing board or a coordinating board, or in a few cases, a planning agency—four of the ten provinces have no intermediary body of any kind.

With respect to nomenclature, the United States has, in addition to the twenty-three consolidated governing boards, twenty-eight coordinating boards and three planning agencies [15, p. 6]. The higher education agencies in Canada are formally designated as councils (Quebec and Ontario) or commissions (Manitoba and the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission6), and are collectively referred to as intermediary bodies.

Millet [17, pp. 101–2] notes that U.S. coordinating boards typically have the authority to prepare a master plan, to approve degree programs, and to review and recommend the appropriation needs of institutions. McGuinness reports that while the majority of boards have program approval authority, a substantial minority have recommending power only [15, p. 6a]. Canadian intermediary bodies generally have less formal authority and stature than their U.S. counterparts. Only one, Manitoba’s Universities Grants Commission, has program approval au-

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6The Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission is a regional higher education coordination agency, being responsible for advising each of the three provincial governments, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island, on the funding and coordination of resources and programs for universities and related institutions in the Maritime region. The authority for the Commission is derived from three parallel pieces of legislation, one in each of the three provinces.
authority, though all have the power to recommend. Although all have the role of advising their respective provincial governments on the general development of the system, none are seen as having the authority to prepare meaningful master plans. With respect to advising on the appropriations needs of institutions, Canadian intermediary bodies play a similar role to that of coordinating boards in the U.S., in both cases the role consisting mainly of presiding over the application of funding formulas rather than adjudicating the merits of the arguments made by university funding officers.

Whereas recent trends in the United States have been towards formalizing and strengthening state-level arrangements for governing/coordinate higher education, trends in Canada have been in the opposite direction. By 1972, forty-seven states had either consolidated governing boards or coordinating boards. Since then, the other three states have adopted some type of state-level board, several states have replaced coordinating boards by governing boards, and many states reorganized their structures to strengthen their coordinating mechanisms [15, pp. 8-10]. In contrast, three Canadian provinces eliminated intermediary bodies during the 1970s and 1980s, and the four intermediary bodies that continue to exist have not undergone any significant changes since the 1970s.

It is also important to recognize that provincial intermediary bodies are wholly composed of government-appointed and ex officio members, and that, within the context of the parliamentary system, intermediary bodies generally provide advice to the cabinet minister/government department assigned responsibility for higher education, rather than to the legislature as a whole. Aside from annual reports, which are widely distributed, specific advice to the government is often treated with at least some degree of confidentiality.

In summary, structures for system level governance, coordination, and planning are more extensive, more formalized, and give more power

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9In Ontario, when the government wanted a master plan for restructuring the system a few years ago, it established a special commission to do the job rather than requesting the intermediary body to do it, possibly because the task was thought to be too contentious for a regular agency. In the end, the special commission opted not to produce a master plan but to recommend some tinkering with the funding formula instead [22, p. 161].

10The Ontario Council on University Affairs publicly releases the advice it has provided to the Minister of Colleges and Universities only after the Minister has had an opportunity to respond. This information, along with the government response, is published in the Council’s annual reports [2]. Manitoba’s Universities Grants Commission treats the advice it provides to government with a high degree of confidence, though its annual reports summarize important changes in policy.
to arms-length public agencies in the United States than in Canada. Given the frequent existence of multicampus governing boards, the more extensive network of higher education agencies, and the separation of the legislative and executive branches, the policy and planning environment for higher education in the United States is more complex and multi-faceted than in Canada, where major decisions frequently result from the interplay of only senior officials of the ministry responsible for higher education and university presidents. These differences in the arrangements for system coordination give rise to questions regarding the basis for the differences in structures and the implications of the differences. These questions are addressed in the next section.

Discussion

Although the greater prominence and stature of intermediary bodies in the United States than in Canada could reflect significant differences in the value attached to or interpretations of institutional autonomy vis-à-vis government and/or academic freedom, such is not the case. The articulation of the principles of academic freedom and the mobilization of collective faculty efforts in its defense developed later in Canada than in the United States, but academic freedom is at least as well respected and defended in Canada as in the United States, and probably is more secure in Canada. No governments in Canada have ever demanded loyalty oaths from professors in publicly supported universities, and no governments have dismissed faculty on ideological grounds [19, p. 26]. There have been a few cases where political belief was alleged to be a factor in denial of tenure but nothing approaching the frequency with which such cases are reported in the Chronicle of Higher Education. Thus, there would not seem to be a compelling need in Canada to have intermediary bodies to protect faculty from threats to academic freedom on the part of legislators or government officials.

Turning to the more general question of institutional autonomy — and Berdahl argues that the cause of academic freedom is strengthened if it is disengaged from the question of institutional autonomy [3, p. 7] — it is not apparent that there are significant differences between Canada and the United States in regard to appreciation of the value of institutional autonomy. Interestingly, in his book on statewide coordination of higher education in the United States, Berdahl, who is also co-author of the foundational study of university governance in Canada, presents a quotation from a president of the University of Toronto in the frontispiece. In fact, treatises on institutional autonomy by U.S. commentators
[such as 3, 5, 10, 17] are not dissimilar from the remarks of Canadian commentators [1, 4].

It may well be that the appreciation of the value of institutional autonomy and corresponding self-restraint by government is more important in maintaining institutional autonomy than the actions of an intermediary body. Of course, an intermediary body may play a valuable role in educating government in regard to "the complexity and fragility of a university and of the dangers of laying too heavy a hand on the management of its affairs" [20, p. 149]. On the other hand, coordinating boards, and certainly consolidated governing boards, may provide a vehicle for more intrusion into the affairs of an institution than a government would undertake in the absence or weakness of such bodies. In fact, though degrees of institutional autonomy are almost impossible to measure, the authors' impression is that even with the absence or weakness of Canadian intermediary bodies, Canadian universities enjoy greater autonomy than American universities; certainly they are far more insulated from the whims of legislators or the discipline of a free market than are American institutions. But Sibley, who was the chairman of a now defunct intermediary body, suggests that were governments to embark on a more dirigiste course, intermediaries could do little to oppose the move [p. 149].

If it is not differences in attitudes towards academic freedom and institutional autonomy that explain the greater interest in coordinating mechanisms in the United States than in Canada, then what other factors can be identified that might explain this difference? Following Lipset, we suggest that the explanation might lie in the constellation of statism, penchant for order over the excesses of freedom and unbridled competition, and acceptance of a broad and pervasive role of government as both legitimate and healthy to the social order and the public good.

Canadians have tended to regard university education — like health care — as a public good, and, as with health care, they have accordingly deemed not only public provision of university education, but a public monopoly in this field, as necessary in order to ensure an equivalent standard for all participants. The penchant for order relative to freedom has led them to shun not only competition from a private higher education sector but also competition within the public sector. This aversion to competition is seen most clearly in the initial policy in the western provinces of having only one provincial university. Indeed, Harris cites a statement of a minister of education during the period before some of the western territories became provinces urging that the West avoid the
"evils which by reason of competing institutions had been experienced in the Eastern Provinces," the evils referred to being those of destructive competition [9, p. 224]. Not until the 1960s, with considerable population growth and movement, was this policy relaxed. Berdahl observes that the desire to control premature expansion and proliferation of institutions was the principal motive for the establishment of consolidated governing boards in the United States [3, p. 27]. In Canada, an explicit policy of strict Government control over the expansion and proliferation of institutions made consolidated governing/协调 boards unnecessary for this end.

Southern, who was secretary to the British Columbia intermediary body for the universities prior to its abolition in 1987, argues that an intermediary has two major roles [27, pp. 41-44]. One is the buffer role, to shield universities from bureaucratic control and political interference, and the other is system planning. He notes that the buffer role can be played alternatively by lay institutional governing boards and statutory safeguards concerning hiring, promotion, and discharge of academic staff, and that the principal justification for the existence of an intermediary is system planning.

Given Southern's observation, it is ironic that the main planning for provincial university systems in Canada took place in the 1960s, prior to the establishment of the present intermediary bodies, and was done by government itself. Since the 1960s, there has been little system planning in Canada, until just recently in a few provinces, and no significant restructuring except in Quebec. As noted earlier, preparing effective master plans has not been seen as a role for those intermediaries that do exist, and there has been insufficient enthusiasm for planning on the part of provincial governments to warrant establishing intermediaries where they do not exist or strengthening them where they do exist.

The Ontario experience is instructive in this regard, because there have been frequent calls in that province for restructuring the university system — primarily in order to reduce costs — and the suggested means for doing so has been through a strengthened intermediary body. However, successive governments there have not responded to the calls for restructuring and have taken no action even on a government-commissioned study that called for minor changes in the role of the intermediary body [22, p. 162]. In contrast, in some U.S. states, concern about controlling costs has resulted in system planning being given a priority in recent years and higher education coordinating boards have led or played an active role in this process [15, pp. 1-2].

Why concern over costs has been more likely to lead to state coordina-
tion and planning in the United States than in Canada is not an easy question to answer. Although controlling costs has probably been the principal motivation for coordination in the United States, other factors there have provided more reinforcement for the idea of strong coordinating boards than has been the case in Canada. Although some of the same concerns that McGuinness [15, pp. 2–5] suggests underlie current state interest in system planning exist also in Canada, for example, the need for a strong tie between higher education and the state’s economy, others are nonexistent or weak in Canada: the feeling that there is a mismatch between the way that higher education is organized and the needs of the state and its people, perceptions of serious problems in the relationship between higher education and the public schools, and concerns that higher education may be overextended.

Regarding the latter, it should be noted that in many states concern about controlling costs has been given added fuel by the perception that the state higher education system has been overexpanded and has become unnecessarily complex. The perception of overexpansion is rare in Canada (except perhaps in Nova Scotia) because of the historically more stringent control of and cautious approach to establishing new institutions. Thus, rather than needing an intermediary body to undertake strong planning initiatives, policy developments in higher education in the past two decades have been characterized by one of the authors as consisting of modest modifications within a framework of relatively stable structures [12].

Another factor that has had some influence on the development of coordination boards in the United States is federal funding of higher education. Not only was the expansion of U.S. higher education in the 1960s greatly abetted by federal funding, but the requirements for state administration of federal funds provided the impetus for the creation of a few state boards and the strengthening of others. Congress provided funds to assist states in the establishing of coordinating boards and stipulated certain conditions that these boards must meet [8, p. 105]. In Canada, as noted earlier, federal government transfers to the provinces for higher education are in the form of unconditional grants, and targeting funds for intermediary bodies or stipulating conditions which they must meet would have been considered an unacceptable intrusion into provincial jurisdiction.

A further motive for the establishment of consolidated governing and coordinating boards in the United States has been suspicion of public sector enterprise and the consequent interest in having a watchdog to ensure that public funds are used efficiently. With the greater acceptance
of the legitimacy of the public sector in Canada, lay governing boards of individual institutions were deemed sufficient to protect the public interest, and the creation of provincial level watchdogs was not seen as necessary. Even today, the vast efforts that state governments and higher education agencies put into outcome assessment and performance indicators are not paralleled in Canada. Of course, this difference in external assessment of institutional performance reflects not only differences in attitudes toward public sector enterprise, but also differences in the structures of the two systems. The American approach is to allow relatively free entry into degree level education and to encourage competition and then to put emphasis upon grading the products. The Canadian approach is to control strictly the establishment of institutions and to restrain competition, and then to assume that those that are allowed to operate will likely produce products of acceptable quality. As well, such policing of quality as is done in Canada is carried out cooperatively by institutions themselves, a practice that works effectively in a society that, as Lipset puts it, “eschews conflict and competition,” and where it is far more common for enterprises in nearly all sectors to operate in an oligarchical manner than in the United States.

With its far smaller number of universities, more elitist and statist-collectivist and less pluralist traditions, Canada has had less need for intermediaries to mediate among conflicting interests in higher education than has been the case in the United States. Neatby argues that for the first half of the twentieth century government intervention in universities in Canada was unnecessary because there were similar views on both sides regarding the social order, the universities’ place in it, the universities’ function, and the way universities could best achieve their objectives [19, pp. 34–35]. Universities were doing what was expected of them and with only modest demands on provincial treasuries. In this context, it is not surprising that, as Arnold Naimark, president of the University of Manitoba, notes, there is a record of substantial achievement in Canada in shaping higher education through cooperation between governments and universities [18, p. 44].

The United States, being a more fractious society with greater diversity among its universities and much less of a consensus regarding their role and functioning, had a much greater need for some arrangements to mediate among conflicting interests and to impose order and direction on the sometimes wildly proliferating systems. Not surprisingly, intermediary bodies generally developed earlier and more extensively in the United States than in Canada, where expansion of higher education and increase in its costs ultimately gave rise to a perceived need for some type of coordinating body, but only in some provinces.
In the context of the factors outlined in the paragraphs immediately above, however, it is important to introduce a qualification that applies not only to a discussion of higher education intermediary bodies, but should be applied to Lipset's analysis as well. That is to note that there is considerable diversity among both American states and Canadian provinces as well as between these two groups of entities. Some American states have a smaller and more homogeneous population and fewer universities than some Canadian provinces, Wyoming compared to Ontario for example. Thus, some American states, like Vermont or Nebraska, have had no more pressing needs for intermediary bodies than Newfoundland or Saskatchewan and much less than Ontario or Quebec, and accordingly, those states do not have consolidated governing boards or coordinating boards (but they do have planning agencies). In spite of such exceptions, however, the broad generalizations about differences between the two countries in regard to the motivation for intermediary bodies still seem to fit.

The comments above pertain to the role and functions of intermediary bodies and the forces that have led to their establishment. Ideally, in an investigation of this sort, one would like to be able to say something about the comparative effectiveness of approaches to state/provincial coordination of higher education in Canada and the United States. However, evaluation of the operation of intermediaries is notoriously problematic. In considering this issue, Sibley cites Berdahl's remark that "we cannot find any objective canons of proof by which to evaluate the contributions of such agencies" [20, p. 155], and he adds that "given the recondite nature of that process, one cannot pretend to know" [p. 152]. Also, given the differences in systems structures, environments, and goals between Canada and the United States, it would be difficult to find common criteria for comparing the effectiveness of intermediaries in the two countries. What might be more to the point, because intermediaries are not universal in Canada, would be to compare the policy-making process between provinces that have an intermediary with that in provinces that do not have such a body. The single Canadian study that has done this involved a comparison between British Columbia and Alberta over a period in which the former had an intermediary and the latter did not. The authors' qualified conclusion was that the existence of the intermediary did not make much difference in the policy process or in the relation between universities and government [28, pp. 86–88]. This conclusion supports the notion that the key relationships in public higher education are those between institutions and relevant government officials, and the most useful function that an intermediary can play is to facilitate these relationships.
Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research

Our analysis suggests that a number of institutional and cultural differences between Canada and the United States help to explain why higher education coordinating/governing bodies are more prevalent and generally more powerful in the United States than in Canada; the greater suspicion of public sector enterprise in the United States; the greater tolerance of oligarchical behaviour in Canada; the stronger independent role of legislatures and legislators and the tradition of a more open political process in the United States; the more fractious nature of American than Canadian society; the larger and more complex and diversified higher education systems in the United States (which some observers now feel are overextended) than in Canada; and possibly the greater respect for academic freedom held by Canadian than by American governments. Insofar as this case study relates differences in the nature of higher education coordination between the two countries to relevant institutional and cultural differences, it serves to rationalize these observed differences.

One of the major differences observed between the two countries is that higher education boards have played a major role in system-level planning and assessment in the United States, whereas in Canada planning and assessment has been neither a significant activity for intermediaries in those provinces that have them nor a rationale for establishing them in other provinces. At first glance, it seems paradoxical that this planning function would be so much less entrenched in the more statist, collectivist of the two societies. The explanation of this seeming paradox lies in several of the factors, outlined by Lipset and noted in the previous paragraph, which also explain differences in the extent of institutionalization of formal coordination structures. The most important of these are probably the differing attitudes toward public sector enterprise and public monopoly, and the differing values placed upon order and competition in the development of the respective systems.

The interest in state-level planning for and assessment of public universities in the United States is to some extent a reflection of the suspicion that public enterprise evokes in a society wherein private enterprise is thought to be the natural state of affairs. In contrast, within Canada’s more statist, collectivist traditions, public enterprise — even where it has a monopoly, as is the case in the field of university-level education — is considered appropriate in many fields and does not have to justify itself. Given the Canadian penchant for order and disdain for competition, most provinces created university systems in which there were substantially fewer universities per capita, substantially less differentiation by
function, programs, standards, or size, and substantially less interinstitu-
tional competition than in the United States. In fact, it would not be far
off the mark to describe each university in most provinces as a regional
public utility. Canada, thus, has not had nearly the extent of need for
planning to deal with the wasteful consequences of duplication and
overzealous competition as has the United States. Finally, it might be
noted that the other side of statist-collectivism is an elitism in which lead-
ers in many sectors are given more discretion in making decisions on be-
half of society as a whole. Within higher education this characteristic of
Canadian society has been manifested in the practice of vesting the
members of the governing boards of individual institutions — some of
which are self-perpetuating elites — with responsibility for planning and
accountability. Given the above considerations, it is not so surprising
that statist-collectivism in Canada has spawned considerably less develop-
ment of system-level planning and assessment of public higher educa-
tion than has developed in the United States with its more anti-statist,
individualist traditions.

This comparative case study suggests that some widely held notions
about the structure of higher education systems are open to question.
The suggestion that some form of intermediary body is necessary in
order to protect institutional autonomy appears to be contradicted by
the experience of universities in those Canadian provinces where no
such body exists. The suggestion that a strong intermediary body with
executive authority will somehow isolate the universities from legitimate
government/political influence, implied in some Canadian studies, is
contradicted by the experience of a number of American states. The
study suggests also that some of the functions that intermediary bodies
perform can be carried out as effectively — subject to the difficulties in-
herent in judging effectiveness in this realm of public administration —
and sensitively, in other ways, particularly through informal communi-
cations among key system actors and collective decision making among
institutional representatives. The latter approaches are probably more
likely to yield satisfactory outcomes in systems characterized by less di-
versity in regard to institutional size and functional differentiation and in
those in which system growth has been morestringently controlled by
governments.

There is a hint that the need for intermediary bodies may be related to
the number of postsecondary institutions within a jurisdiction because
two of the four Canadian intermediaries are found in the two largest prov-
inces. On the other hand, even the smallest U.S. states — which have
no more universities than several Canadian provinces that do not have
intermediaries — have intermediaries. It would be interesting to exam-
ine the genesis of intermediaries in these states, to see if their establishment responded to documented problems of coordination, reflected the perception of a need for a greater higher education presence in the state political arena, or — in the case of the more recent of the smaller states to establish coordinating boards — was the manifestation of a "bandwagon" effect.

The structure of higher education systems (that is, size-distribution and types of institutions) is quite similar between some Western U.S. states and Canadian provinces, and a comparison of the coordination processes between these states and provinces might help to elucidate the relative influence of structural variables, as opposed to those of differences in national character emphasized by Lipset, on the coordination process. In a special issue of Higher Education, which consisted of case studies of retrenchment in university systems in Canada and the United States, it was found that state/provincial level approaches to dealing with retrenchment in higher education in Washington and British Columbia were more similar to each other than the former were to those in New York or the latter to those in Ontario [26]. It would be interesting to see whether this finding might be generalized to broader questions of coordination in paired comparisons of structurally similar states and provinces.

The approach to comparative analysis employed in this study has provided the authors with a greater appreciation of the differences in the ways in which higher education is coordinated in Canada and the United States and a belief that there would be considerable value in extending this analysis to other topics relevant to higher education in the two nations. There is much that we can learn about ourselves by looking at our neighbors.

References


