Assessing employer perceptions and expectations of college degree programs

by

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We accept the thesis as conforming to the required standard

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ABSTRACT

Just over 10 years ago, the Ontario government passed legislation that resulted in baccalaureate degree-granting status for provincial community colleges. Since this fundamental shift in college credential delivery, the numbers of programs, students and graduates have continued to grow, and are expected to continue to do so. While employers were not an obvious driver behind this shift, understanding their expectations and perceptions as they pertain to these degree programs and graduates is critical for Ontario colleges and students. This research involved interviews with Greater Toronto Area employers who have hired college degree graduates. The interviews demonstrated that, while there is still a general lack of knowledge about college degrees, employers find value in the programs and essentially envision themselves as partners who can play a greater role in future program development and ongoing review. This includes having an impact on curriculum, graduate expectations, work experience opportunities and identifying skill gaps.
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Research

Slightly more than 10 years ago, the Ontario provincial government authorized the introduction of four-year baccalaureate degree programs at Ontario’s 24 publicly funded colleges with the passing of the Post-secondary Education Choice and Excellence Act, 2000. Prior to that, colleges had been restricted to awarding certificates of up to one year in length, two-year diplomas, three-year advanced diplomas, post-graduate certificates typically one year in duration, and a variety of apprenticeship credentials. This legislative change represented a fundamental shift in academic direction for colleges and post-secondary education in Ontario. To that point, degree granting in Ontario had been solely the bastion of universities.

This decision placed Ontario on the same path as other jurisdictions across Canada and the United States, most notably in Florida, British Columbia and Alberta. Most recently, Saskatchewan’s provincial government passed legislation at the end of October 2012 providing degree-granting authority to non-universities in that province. In looking at the growing prevalence of college degree granting status, Floyd and Walker (2008) equate the change to an evolution as logical as the move to first introduce graduate degrees in the United States and permitting normal schools to become teacher colleges (p. 91), while Skolnik (2012) calls it a natural extension of the work colleges have traditionally done.

The baccalaureate degree has become a necessary credential for hiring and advancement in many of the fields in which colleges have been offering diploma programs. Utilizing the expertise of the college to offer baccalaureate programs
in these fields is a logical and natural extension of its previous work at the diploma level, and thus is fully consistent with the historic mission of the colleges to help students develop the knowledge, skills and traits that they need in order to have successful careers and contribute to creating a more prosperous society.

(Skolnik, 2012, p. 3)

Following the passage of the Post-secondary Education Choice and Excellence Act, 2000, the Ontario government approved a pilot project to allow for up to 24 applied college degree programs across the province. Up to 12 were to be approved in each of two rounds of proposals, following recommendations by the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB) (PEQAB, 2012, para. 2). Subsequently 12 programs were recommended for approval by PEQAB in March 2002, and another 23 in November 2002 after Ontario’s Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities lifted the limit of 12 (PEQAB, 2012, paras. 4, 7).

From that initial pilot project, degree granting authority has grown in Ontario to permit five colleges to offer up to 15 per cent of their programming at the baccalaureate degree level. Four of those colleges are located in the geographic region selected for this research, while all other colleges are restricted to a maximum of five per cent. The numbers of programs, colleges offering degrees, and student interest have all continued to climb. For example, over the five-year period of 2006 to 2010, applicants to college-delivered baccalaureate degree programs in applied areas of studies\(^1\) increased from 19,951 to 29,227, and the number of student confirmations to these college-delivered programs grew from 3,532 to 4,590 (Ontario College Application Services, 2011).

\(^1\) Baccalaureate and degree are employed interchangeably in this paper. Each is meant in these circumstances to represent four-year, degree-level programs of study. Colleges were initially restricted to baccalaureate degrees in applied areas of study.
It is important to note that there appears to be no evidence that employers purposefully led the charge for the development of college degrees. In fact, when Skolnik (2008, p. 139) examined the advocacy question, he found that there was no initial pressure from the business community for this policy change. While there may have been no apparent formal advocacy for the change, it has been suggested that the business community left colleges, and ultimately government, with very little choice but to make the change given that degrees have become “the professional and employment credential of choice” (Marshall, 2008, p. 3). A growing number of professions are requiring a baccalaureate degree, even at the entry level (Colleges Ontario, 2009a; Dougherty & Jacobs, 2006; Floyd & Walker, 2008; Martin & Samels, 2002; Russell, 2010; Skolnik, 2012; Walker, 2001). Laden (2005) notes that in their efforts to ensure students are ready for the marketplace, colleges developed a “wide spectrum of entrepreneurial-transfer and degree-granting partnerships and collaborative skills-based educational programs” (p. 155).

Regardless of the role played by the business community in the legislative changes, there has been very little literature to date that considers Ontario employer perceptions of these relatively new degrees and their expectations for additional programs in the years ahead. Employers are one of the most important stakeholders to consider in the development and delivery of any post-secondary program, be it a degree, diploma, apprenticeship or certificate. Employers are relied upon to offer on-the-job placement opportunities to students, serve in advisory capacities for program development and renewal, and ultimately hire students post-graduation. They are central to successful delivery of any post-secondary program and have high expectations when making job offers: they require graduates with relevant and current skills in order to be successful in the workplace.
This research begins the process of understanding employer expectations with respect to Ontario college degree programs and their graduates.

1.2 Purpose of the Research

Along with the change in legislation to allow for college degrees, the provincial government has stated it has a goal to realize a post-secondary attainment rate in Ontario of 70 per cent (Ontario Ministry of Finance website, 2010). Additionally, applications and confirmations to college degree programs have been on a steady increase. Unless there is a political decision to stop degree granting in colleges, such as that proposed by Drummond (2012, p. 247), these factors suggest college degree development and enrolment will continue to grow in the years ahead.

While colleges consult with industry in the development of all programs and maintain regular contact with employers, there remains little literature to date that considers the expectations and perceptions of employers as these relate to college degree programs and their graduates (Grothe, 2009). Through qualitative discussions, this research considers the broad collective views and understandings of employers in a specific geographic region, the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). This research entailed speaking with employers ranging in size from large international corporations to smaller operations, and covered a wide range of professions, from the fashion industry, to information technology, finance, construction, animation and hospitality. The organizations involved have all hired college degree graduates.

This research will provide colleges with additional support and information in future degree development, particularly for colleges in large urban areas, but also to some extent for
smaller, more rural-based colleges. These understandings support the goal of colleges to offer high-quality, relevant programs that meet both student and employer needs.

1.3 Research Questions

This research project was designed to examine the expectations and perceptions of employers as they relate to college degree programs and their graduates by considering four research questions:

Research Question 1: What perceptions do employers have of college degrees and college degree holders?

Research Question 2: What expectations do employers have of college degrees and college degree holders?

Research Question 3: What skills do employers require of college degree graduates?

Research Question 4: What role can employers play in informing college degree program development?

The findings to these questions were arrived at through conversations that employed a semi-standardized interview methodology. All those interviewed were asked the same set of predetermined questions; however, the semi-standardized format allowed the interviews to unfold so that additional details could be probed depending on the answers to the set questions and as data sorting began to identify common themes in the responses.

1.4 Overview of this Paper:

Chapter 2 of this paper describes the research methodology and rationale for selecting it. Chapter 3 includes a review of relevant literature from Canada and the United States so as to
identify areas of significant investigation, as well as summary findings that may apply to the Ontario context. This includes an examination of the following areas: the college degree introduction experiences of other jurisdictions, the demand for baccalaureate education, perceptions of college degrees and graduate skills.

In Chapter 4, the paper shares a detailed description of the data collected through the interview process, including a thorough review of the data and how they provide answers to the four research questions. Finally, Chapter 5 offers conclusions and lessons of value to Ontario colleges and the broader system in general. It also details recommendations for further study.
2.0 RATIONALE AND DESIGN

2.1 Introduction

Ontario colleges have been delivering baccalaureate degrees for more than 10 years, and conferring this credential on students for six years, with the first cohort graduating in 2006. The numbers of degree programs, students applying to and studying them, and graduates are steadily and consistently increasing. The prevalence of colleges offering degrees is on the rise beyond Ontario as well, with a number of American states and other Canadian provinces also having enacted legislative changes allowing institutions other than universities to offer degrees.

As the number of degree programs continues to grow, there is value in research that identifies the impact these credentials are having on students, colleges and the workplace so as to understand their efficacy. Literature to date has been relatively sparse as it relates to college degrees, particularly in Ontario. One of the key stakeholders for any post-secondary program is the business community. While employers were not a specific driver behind the government’s legislative decision (Skolnik, 2008, p. 139), they have much invested in the delivery of quality degree programs. Businesses host co-op, work placement and internship students, are called upon to offer expertise and guidance with curriculum development and renewal, and ultimately hire graduating students who can demonstrate a current and relevant skill set. There is also evidence that a growing number of professions prefer or require a baccalaureate degree (Colleges Ontario, 2009a; Dougherty & Jacobs, 2006; Floyd & Walker, 2008; Martin & Samels, 2002; Russell, 2010; Skolnik, 2012; Walker, 2001).
This research project was designed to consider the expectations and perceptions of employers as these relate to college degree programs and their graduates, by considering four research questions:

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2.2 Research Design

To identify and examine the perceptions and expectations of employers, qualitative interviews were conducted with managers at 12 business organizations that have hired college degree graduates. Selected employers were all located in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), which, as the country’s most populated urban centre, is a region that is home to many national and international businesses. It is also the location of the five degree-granting colleges that offer a majority of Ontario’s college degree programs. Four of these colleges are among five in all of Ontario that are permitted to offer up to 15 per cent of their programming at the baccalaureate degree level, and use the title of Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning (ITAL) if they choose. Only three have elected to use the ITAL title, two of which are located in the GTA.
None of the five colleges is currently at the 15-per cent threshold, further suggesting degree delivery could expand in the years ahead.

Managers selected for interviews came from organizations ranging in size. Some employed only a small number of personnel, while others were large international corporations. These organizations spanned a range of industries, from fashion, to information technology, finance, construction, animation and hospitality. Eight women and five men were interviewed (one interview was with two employers at the same organization), and in six cases the interviewees’ were the degree graduate’s reporting manager. In the other six instances, those interviewed were from human resources departments and thus able to discuss the organization’s broad experiences with college degree graduates and its general approach to hiring. There were three managers of talent development, two human resources managers, two vice-presidents of human resources, a senior construction manager, a senior manager of financial planning, a chief financial officer, a fashion stylist, a communications manager, and a director of services.

Five of the employers either currently sit on a college program advisory committee (PAC), had previously been part of a PAC or provided employer input into the development of a college degree program. Research interviews were conducted in person whenever possible, and all were recorded to ensure accuracy in transcribing notes for data sorting and review. Employers were contacted initially through a letter of invitation, included as Appendix I, followed by a phone call. Those agreeing to an interview were advised of their right to withdraw from the discussion at any point if they chose, told that neither they nor their employer would be identified in any way, asked permission to record the conversation and provided with other salient details. Each received a background document that included additional details about the
research, and each was asked to sign a consent form confirming all of these rights had been explained. Copies of these forms are included as Appendices II and III.

Employers who were known to have hired degree graduates were selected to ensure all individuals interviewed could speak to experiences working with college degree graduates. Additionally, by selecting a broad range of industries and different sizes of organizations, this study aligns with Dan, Dietz, and Kalof’s (2008) methodology to select “subjects who are typical of the larger population” (p. 153). Employers were identified by contacting career resources and academic personnel at GTA colleges and asking for assistance in either identifying employers who have hired graduates or asking these key college informants to extend the letter of invitation. The Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act was respected in that specific personal information about employers was not shared with the researcher without the colleges first obtaining the employers’ consent to do so.

One of the biggest challenges to the research, as is outlined in greater detail during Chapters 4 and 5, was the ability to locate employers who had hired college degree graduates and were consciously aware of it. A number of employers contacted with letters of invitation were not aware that they had hired college degree graduates and as such declined to take part, while many others were not aware that colleges now offered baccalaureate degrees.

For the purposes of this research, it is important to note that, while there are many examples of collaborative degrees between colleges and universities, primarily in the field of Nursing, these were not considered as part of this research. The purpose of this research was to consider stand-alone college degrees only.
2.3 Research Methodology and Data Collection

The research employed a semi-standardized interview approach, allowing for structured, specific questions, followed by secondary questions that were developed on the basis of details gained through the primary questions. This approach allowed the “conversation” to unfold in a natural manner. Sheppard (2004) captures the advantage to a semi-standardized approach (p. 145):

This approach does not prevent – indeed it generally encourages – the development of themes within those areas through probing questions. These additional questions, not scripted beforehand, emerge out of the interview itself, or the conversation occurring around the predetermined questions or themes.

Table 2.3.1 Research Question and Sources of the Data to answer these questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Interview question numbers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number 1: What perceptions do employers have of college degrees and college degree holders?</td>
<td>1-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number 2: What expectations do employers have of college degrees and college degree holders?</td>
<td>3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number 3: What skills do employers require of college degree graduates?</td>
<td>6, 7, 8, 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number 4: What role can employers play in informing college degree program development?</td>
<td>10, 11, 12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.3.1 identifies the four research questions and the corresponding primary interview questions that contributed to answering each research question. A full list of interview questions and interview guide is included as Appendix IV.
Analysis of the data began as it was collected through the interviews, allowing for further shaping of ensuing interviews (Dan, et al., 2008, p. 94). Two questions, numbers 2 and 4 in Appendix IV, were added to the original structured list after the first two employers interviewed provided answers regarding a general lack of knowledge about college degree programs, and the importance of including effective co-op, work placement and/or internship opportunities within degree programs. Because both of these employers placed an emphasis on these topics in their answers to the original structured questions, and given that the topics supported the research goal of understanding employer perceptions and expectations with regards to college degree programs and graduates, the additional questions were added. Although these additional questions were not asked of the first two employers, both addressed the topics comprehensively, ensuring their experiences could be reported reliably with the responses from the remainder of the employers.

The structured questions were originally selected to focus on:

- Perceptions of Ontario college degrees, where these exist, and any specific experiences employers may have had with these degree holders;
- Preferences, if these exist, for college degree holders over other credentials, and why and in what fields or job categories;
- Expectations employers have, if they have them, regarding specific skills required or preferred with respect to college degree graduates;
- Expectations employers have, if they have them, specifically in reference to graduate leadership skills; and
- Expectations employers might have with respect to ways in which they might help shape college degrees.
2.4 Data Analysis

Collation, review and analysis of the data began early, as the interviews unfolded and full transcriptions of the discussions were completed. The interview notes were examined for patterns, themes and other common identifiers within the context of answering the four research questions. Sheppard (2004) notes that when evaluating themes and issues that emerge through interviews we are not looking at them in “terms of goals set by agencies, legislators or researchers, but in terms of the issues that are important to the participants” (p. 201). He has also argues that this approach to evaluation allows for understanding and the capturing of a range of participant perspectives, rather than predetermining the perspectives available (p. 202). In evaluating the interviews with college degree employers, a number of key words and phrases were identified and used in the sorting, including:

- Degree knowledge;
- Degree perceptions;
- Credential preferences;
- Work placements;
- Student expectations;
- Curriculum relevancy;
- Skills and competencies:
  - Expected
  - Missing
  - Unique
  - Leadership; and
• Employer role in degree development.

2.5 Limitations of the Research

The research interviews provide a broad view of employer perceptions and expectations as these relate to Ontario college degrees. They were conducted with employers representing organizations ranging in size from small to large and covering a broad spectrum of industries. One of the limitations to this research was the small sample size, which would necessitate that the results cannot be concluded with certainty to be representative of all degree employers. While the 12 organizations provided specific degree-focused perspectives, and the qualitative methodology allowed for conversations and broad discussions, a larger sample would be required in order to confirm the findings. This research was intended to be exploratory and provide new insights to colleges primarily located in large urban centres and currently offering degrees or intending to do so. As college degrees become more prevalent and general knowledge increases in Ontario, both qualitative and quantitative methodologies should be useful in further measuring employer expectations and perceptions. As noted in Chapter 5, there still needs to be much greater employer and public awareness of these degrees before a larger scale study can be considered.

A second potential limitation to the study involves the researcher’s employment at a Greater Toronto Area college, albeit a college that is not expected to offer its first degrees until 2014. While the researcher’s employment role does not involve degree development, nor is he in a decision-making position when it comes to the development of his College’s degrees, his employment at a college was identified to all those interviewed, through the letter of invitation
and again prior to the beginning of the interviews. His current position and responsibilities were explained to all those interviewed and they were asked if they had any concerns about the connection. To help address the perception of having a bias toward colleges or college degrees when these were discussed in relation to university credentials, the researcher chose to summarize comments in the aggregate and avoid using specific examples where a particular college was specifically referenced as preferred over a particular university program. Dan, et al. (2008) discuss mitigation of bias in research given that at times bias can be realized unintentionally: “But we work very hard to minimize them as best as we can” (p. 160).

2.6 Conclusion

Understanding employer expectations and perceptions of college degrees is critical to the development and ongoing review of all college programs. Employers work closely with colleges in a number of ways that benefit the organizations and students. As colleges have launched degree-level studies and increasing numbers of students have applied to and graduated from these programs, little research has been completed examining employer perceptions and expectations.

This research project used a qualitative methodology to allow for fulsome discussions about degrees and thus a better understanding of what employers have been experiencing to date and what they may expect moving forward. “The goal of much qualitative research is not to make statements about the larger population but to understand things in-depth and directly from the perspectives of those being studied” (Dan, et al., 2008, pp. 161-162). It was critical to the validity of this research that only employers who have hired degree graduates be interviewed, but
it was also necessary that they could specifically speak about their experiences and provide relevancy to the questions and research. The qualitative interviews also allowed for additional questions as data was sorted and themes emerged. This approach to the research allowed for focused discussions that explored and answered the four research questions.
3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Introduction

The decision to allow Ontario colleges to begin developing and introducing baccalaureate degrees represented a fundamental shift in provincial government policy and, from a pan-Canadian perspective, followed similar decisions in Alberta and British Columbia. Skolnik (2008) notes that different circumstances prompted the change to degree granting status for each province (p. 137) and also states that these differences in conditions “make it impossible to generalize across the country” (2005a, p. 63). The decision in Ontario has resulted in the development of a growing number of college degree programs and supports the provincial government’s desire to achieve a post-secondary attainment rate of 70 per cent (Ontario Ministry of Finance website, 2010).

The change to degree-granting status for colleges in Canada and also the U.S. has not been without heated debate. Some argue it is a logical evolution in the delivery of post-secondary education (Marshall, 2008; Walker, 2001), and Skolnik (2012) writes that college degrees add a different option that is of “considerable value” to students and the economy (p. 3). Conversely, there has been much discussion about whether the change equates to an abandonment of the community college mandate, or mission creep (Dougherty & Jacobs, 2006; Mills, 2003; Russell, 2010; Samels, 2002). “Schools interested in creating bachelor’s programs are praised for the attempt to serve students by new means, but at the same time they are also condemned as status-seekers, stepping out of place in the postsecondary hierarchy” (Hanson, 2009, p. 985). In considering the criticisms of the degrees in Ontario, Laden (2005) notes the
change raised a number of questions, including whether business and industry would view the degrees as equivalent to those conferred by universities, and if college degree graduates would be able to compete in the market with their university colleagues (p. 158). Skolnik (2005a) states that despite college presidents being in general agreement that they will continue to focus on their traditional mission, “The baccalaureate may unleash forces that will reshape the college in the image of the university” (p. 66).

This research project examines four research questions by considering the perceptions and expectations toward college degrees of Greater Toronto Area employers who have hired college degree graduates. Given the relative early days of college degree programming, literature in this field is sparse (Grothe, 2009). Yet the perspectives of employers are important to the development and ongoing delivery of any college program (diploma or degree).

Through the lens of employers, this literature review will focus on the following areas: the experiences of other jurisdictions with college degree introduction, the demand for baccalaureate education, perceptions of college degrees, and graduate skills.

3.2 College Degree Introduction Experiences

For slightly more than 15 years, the opportunities for pursuing a baccalaureate degree have been growing thanks to legislation in a number of Canadian provinces and American states that have allowed for degree introduction at community colleges. British Columbia was the first jurisdiction in North America to introduce the change (Skolnik, 2012, p. 10), followed by the Alberta government allowing degree granting at colleges and institutes, whereas it had previously been the sole purview of universities. In Ontario, the provincial government
authorized the introduction of four-year degrees at Ontario’s 24 publicly funded colleges with the passing of the Post-secondary Education Choice and Excellence Act, 2000. Looking at the national perspective, 48 institutions with a college mandate were offering as many as 311 bachelor’s degrees across Canada, as of January 2011 (Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2011, p. 25).

In the U.S., one of the most aggressive ventures into degree granting is in Florida, where community colleges award more baccalaureates than anywhere else in the U.S. (Floyd, Garcia Falconetti & Hrabak, 2008, p. 86; Floyd & Walker, 2008, p. 111). A number of other states have also introduced legislation to allow degrees at community colleges, including Utah, Texas, Nevada and Arkansas (Hanson, 2009). Given the relative early days of college degree granting, properly measuring and assessing the impact of this policy change is still under review. There has only been a relatively small number of graduating classes, and there has not been enough time to establish baseline or comparative data (Floyd & Walker, 2008, p. 108). This last point is amplified in Ontario where classes have been graduating for only six years.

Although employers are already invested in degree programs through partnerships, work opportunities and in many cases curriculum review and development, their role in the introduction of college degrees to the Ontario system attracts some measure of debate. While there is no evidence to suggest that employers led the charge for college degrees (Skolnik, 2008, p. 139), a growing number of professions are demanding a degree at the entry level (Colleges Ontario, 2009a; Floyd & Walker, 2008; Jacobs & Dougherty, 2006; Martin & Samels, 2002; Russell, 2010; Skolnik, 2012; Walker, 2001). Regardless of the role played by the business
community, it is important that colleges understand employer expectations and perceptions toward degree development.
3.3 Demand for Baccalaureate Education

Ontario’s Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities announced in 2008 that it expected demand for new undergraduate spaces to grow by between 53,000 and 86,000 by 2021 (Colleges Ontario, 2009a, p. 1). Marshall (2004, p. 5) notes that since the early 1990s, the increase in demand for undergraduate degrees is the greatest since the post-war baby boom of the 1960s. Largely because of this growing challenge, Colleges Ontario (2009a) asserts that the government should “work with colleges to expand the colleges’ role in offering career-related baccalaureate degrees. With government support, Ontario’s colleges could provide space for tens of thousands of students in high-quality, career-oriented baccalaureate programs over the coming decade and beyond” (p. 5). The report also notes that student demand is especially strong in major Ontario urban centres (p. 9). One of the groups most affected by the decision, 18- to 29-year-olds, is also expected to continue to grow in the years ahead (Marshall, 2008, p. 4).

As this growth in demand continues, increasing consideration will be given to how to meet it. Skolnik (2005b) suggests that demand must be met in an “economical way” and that it can be realized through “modification of some existing community colleges” (para. 61). He adds that these could take the form of polytechnics, university-colleges and colleges serving a junior college function. In a review of the Ontario post-secondary education system, Rae (2005, p. 15) supported the then recent degree-granting status of colleges, noting that while some universities were resistant to the change, it was important to have a system that evolves. More recently, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities held a system-wide series of consultations in the
This growth in demand must also be considered in the context of the increasing numbers of professions demanding a baccalaureate degree. It is expected this trend will eventually lead to more pressure on colleges to offer additional degree programs to meet demand (Floyd & Walker, 2008). In the U.S., many states are already working to increase the number of degree graduates, believing it will give them a competitive edge in attracting business (Dougherty & Jacobs, 2006). Marshall (2008) notes that a number of industries and professional groups have recently changed requirements and now require a degree for certification or entry to practice in the profession, and that many of the college system stakeholders, such as parents, students and employers are beginning to question their workplace prospects in the absence of a degree (p. 3).

Miner (2012) considers the opportunity for businesses to benefit from this growth when it comes to meeting personnel needs (p. 35). He suggests businesses should be working more closely to establish partnerships with universities and colleges so that in the event there is a contraction of labour supply, these collaborations will place organizations at a competitive advantage.

One of the more common themes in the literature regarding the demand for college degrees is that they provide greater access to degree-level education for under-represented students (Colleges Ontario, 2009a and 2010b; Dougherty & Jacobs, 2006; Eaton, 2005; Hanson, 2009; Skolnik, 2005b; Walker, 2001). Specifically, colleges have historically been the primary destination for students who are not immediately admissible to university, first-generation post-secondary students, members of minority groups, those with financial challenges, and new
Canadians, among others. Additionally, Colleges Ontario (2010a) references studies in Canada and the U.S. that found colleges consistently succeed when reaching out to students reluctant or unable to attend university.

Moreover, the community college, because of its history of serving the socio-economically disadvantaged populace, can open the door to even greater numbers of people. In this global economy, the baccalaureate degree is necessary for entry into many well-paying jobs of business and industry. (Walker, 2001, p. 18)

Dougherty and Jacobs (2006) have identified examples of the workforce and community colleges coming together to provide education that would lead to degree opportunities for low-income workers and thus help overcome financial barriers (p. 59). This includes Northern Virginia Community College’s work with medical providers to provide basic adult education that feeds graduates into allied health degree programs.

There are a number of factors that suggest the demand for college degree development will continue to increase in the years ahead, as will the number of students applying to these programs. These include increasing goals for post-secondary attainment rates, cost-efficiencies achieved through non-traditional delivery, and the need to provide greater access to degrees for under-represented groups. For businesses, there will also be new opportunities to partner with post-secondary institutions and have greater influence on program development and delivery. As degree development and demand continue to grow, it will be critical for these programs to meet the needs of not only students, but the workplace as well.
3.4 Perceptions of College Degrees

Given the relative early days of college degree granting in both Canada and the United States, perceptions continue to be formed about the value of the programs and what they offer to graduates. As demand for degrees increases, colleges must address or identify where their degree programs fit within the post-secondary spectrum and how they are perceived by employers. Marshall (2008) notes there is confusion about college degrees in terms of whether they prepare students for further study or not (p. 2), while Grothe (2009) writes that there has generally been very little effort to understand employer and graduate perceptions (p. 5). Floyd and Walker (2008) urge accrediting agencies to recognize the value of these degrees and measure them fairly.

Broadly speaking, there is a general consensus that degree-level education offered by universities in Canada has significant value for the individual and the society. However, in contrast, there is a more limited awareness and understanding of college degrees, and what awareness and understanding does exist may well vary from province to province (Marshall, 2004, p. 11). In relation to the introduction of university-colleges in British Columbia, Marshall (2004) writes, “the existence of degree-granting institutions that were not in the traditional university model (they are government funded and legislated under the Colleges Act), caused some discomfort in the area of degree recognition” (p. 10).

Experiences in other jurisdictions have provided governments with reason to further the opportunities for degree-granting colleges. In Florida, a decade of experimenting with college degree granting was followed by the establishment of a new college system (Colleges Ontario, 2009a, p. 12). The success of the experiment came at a time of significant unmet demand for
degree programs in general and particularly in areas of high demand (Bemmel, Bryan, & Floyd, 2008; Colleges Ontario, 2009a). Colleges Ontario (2009a) notes that a 2008 external review of community college degree granting found that

The expansion of the community college mission to include a baccalaureate degree option paves the way for specific populations served by these institutions to access further education in a cost-effective manner to meet the needs of today’s workforce and to more readily compete in an increasingly globalized market. (p. 13)

Prior to launch, all Ontario college degree programs endure rigorous review by the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB), an independent agency appointed by the government. Skolnik (2005b) notes that PEQAB program review panels are typically made up of senior and accomplished university professors and that “these reviews have mostly been extremely positive, especially in regard to the degree-worthiness of the curriculum” (para. 37). In British Columbia, proposed new degrees are reviewed by a Degree Quality Assessment Board, while in Alberta, degrees are reviewed by the Campus Alberta Quality Council (Colleges Ontario, 2009a, pp. 13-15).

It is still early days in the evaluation and measurement of college degree programs, particularly in Ontario, although the experiences of other jurisdictions offer some guidance. It will be important in the coming years to continue to pursue greater understanding of employer expectations and perceptions as these pertain to college degrees and their graduates.
3.5 Graduate Skills

The first cohort of Ontario college degree graduates began to leave school six years ago, with those pursuing employment finding themselves in unique situations. As the first Ontario college degree graduates, they were presenting a credential not familiar to employers and thus, along with selling themselves as the right candidate for the job, it can be argued that many may have had to spend time discussing the validity, value and origin of their degrees.

Because employers were not direct champions of the legislative change allowing colleges to offer degrees (Skolnik, 2008, p. 139), understanding the expectations of employers as these pertain to graduate skills will be beneficial in the future development of programs. In looking at existing literature, Jacob (2006) writes about the importance of community colleges placing emphasis on the personal development of students, along with fostering leadership and civic-mindedness capacities. In reviewing other desirable skills for employers, Hernández-March, Leguey, and Martin del Peso (2009) find that university graduates with solid theoretical and practical knowledge in their fields are in demand, along with those having competencies in languages, computer skills, and the ability to work in teams. Grubb (1996) shares a long list of employer skill demands, including computer applications and programs, writing, math, motivation, initiative, judgement, appropriate attitude and communication skills. He also addresses apparent contradictions, noting some employers “place emphasis on job experience and then criticize educators for an apparent lack of communication skills, while others counter that some employees have the theoretical training but lack experience” (p. 28).

Grubb (1996) notes that often one of the most important factors for employers in making a hiring decision is the quality of equipment students have access to while in school. They want
to know if it is up-to-date and comparable to their own organization’s equipment. Finally, he writes that professions that typically have not required degrees for employment may bring “varying (and unclear) skill demands, poorly articulated career ladders, great variation in the sources of skill training, highly informal personnel practices, and cyclical variation in hiring, making it difficult for students and providers alike to prepare for employment” (p. 198). He contrasts that with regulated occupations, such as health, where there are common skill standards and education that are accepted by employers in hiring decisions.

In considering general experiences to date, Marshall (2004) writes that graduates of at least some college degree programs across the country are increasingly gaining respect in the workplace and a credible and recognized place in the post-secondary spectrum (p. 11). Colleges are also recognized for the applied nature of their programs (Walker, 2001; Bramwell, 2009) and the job-readiness of their graduates. This is particularly important given the increasing demand for degree-level credentials by all manner of employers (Colleges Ontario, 2009a; Dougherty & Jacobs 2006; Floyd & Walker, 2008; Martin & Samels, 2002; Russell, 2010; Skolnik, 2012; Walker, 2001). “A very compelling reason for the community college baccalaureate degree lies in the fact that community colleges can provide the skilled workforce necessary to keep our nation competitive in a global economy” (Walker, 2001, p. 22).

Bramwell (2009) discusses the “substantial returns to the ‘creative economy’” (p. 17) provided by colleges. “In fact, it is possible that colleges may make an even greater contribution than universities in some creative class occupations because they produce highly educated graduates with four year bachelor’s degrees who have both theoretical and applied knowledge of new, industry-specific technologies” (p. 17). Ryan (2006) considers collaborations between
universities and corporations to deliver customized degree programs, examining specific expectations of employers in these corporate degrees, and providing a window into what types of skills employers may look for in college degree-level graduates.

Skolnik (2005b) notes the greater hands-on learning of a college degree versus a university program. He adds that graduates of these types of workforce-oriented programs will be valuable to industry and in demand by employers (para. 33). In considering the desire of governments to see degree programs developed with an occupational focus he writes, “College programs place more emphasis on applied and experiential learning than on the use of academic pedagogy” (Skolnik, 2012, p. 2).

There is a wide-range of skills and competencies sought by employers, all of which are influenced by industry, government requirements, geography and many other factors. It is important that colleges work closely with employers in degree development and ongoing program review to ensure programs are meeting real needs.

3.6 Conclusion

Government priorities, changing employer expectations and student demand will all fuel increased development and delivery of college baccalaureate degrees in the coming years in Ontario. This growth will bring additional opportunities for businesses and colleges to work closer together. However, given the relative early days of college degree granting, there is still much to be learned about employer perceptions and expectations as these relate to baccalaureate programs and their graduates, ranging from the specific skills expected of graduates, to a general lack of understanding about college degree programs and expectations as they pertain to in-
program work opportunities. These issues will all be considered in more detail over the coming two chapters and will provide additional issues to consider for colleges as they develop and deliver baccalaureate programs in the years ahead. The remaining chapters will also look at the roles employers can play and their perception that they are partners in degree development and delivery.
PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF COLLEGE DEGREES

4.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

Given provincial government post-secondary growth targets and growing student demand for degree programs, it is expected that Ontario colleges will continue to develop new baccalaureate degrees in the years ahead. There is also an increasing demand by employers for degree-level graduates (Colleges Ontario, 2009a; Floyd & Walker, 2008; Martin & Samels, 2002; Russell, 2010; Skolnik, 2012; Walker, 2001), with Jacobs and Dougherty (2006) noting that the college degree is considered reflective of “a worker's motivation to complete an important milestone and as a marker of that person's capacity to benefit from additional training on the job” (p. 56). It will be increasingly important, therefore, that colleges develop degrees with significant consideration for input from employers if they are to launch programs that meet workplace expectations and needs. Employers are key participants in degree program development and ongoing curriculum review; they interact in a variety of ways with students, and generally have a vested interest in finding quality graduates to fill their personnel needs. Skolnik (2005a) notes that Ontario and Alberta have gone further than any other jurisdiction in North America in developing and implementing degrees that cater to industry needs (p. 68).

This research examines employer perceptions and expectations of college degree programs and graduates to date, through discussions with employers who have hired college degree graduates. The work is framed around four research questions:

Research Question 1: What perceptions do employers have of college degrees and college degree holders?
Research Question 2: What expectations do employers have of college degrees and college degree holders?

Research Question 3: What skills do employers require of college degree graduates?

Research Question 4: What role can employers play in informing college degree program development?

The research engaged employers at 12 Greater Toronto Area organizations, with each connected by the fact it had hired a college degree graduate. Interviews with these employers provided broad new information that colleges may consider not only in new degree development, but also in review and renewal of existing degree programs. The employers shared their experiences and perceptions through a semi-standardized interview approach, which allowed for a list of structured, specific questions, followed by secondary questions that further probed answers to the original questions.

The emerging themes and common understandings within the four research questions are examined in greater length in the coming pages.

4.2 Research Question 1: What Perceptions do Employers have of College Degrees and College Degree Holders?

4.2.1 Introduction

When considering the question of current employer perceptions as they pertain to college degrees and degree holders, two issues were consistently identified through review of data from
the interviews: (a) a lack of general understanding and knowledge of college degrees, and (b) opinions or preferences about college degrees and other credentials.

In the first case, despite employing college degree graduates, most of the employers interviewed generally knew little about college degree programs beyond stating they have an applied nature. They also had little understanding of the background for the legislative change that allowed for college degree granting or roughly when college degrees were first introduced. Despite not understanding the context for the change, all seemed to genuinely welcome the degrees and what these might bring to their organizations in terms of graduates with skills in specific disciplines. Interestingly, they also questioned why colleges or the system as a whole have not expended more time and energy on raising awareness of the programs given the investment in degree development. In the second case, employers did not generally favour a college degree credential over any other credential, although they typically felt a degree of any kind would be a preference for hiring.

4.2.2 Understanding and Knowledge of Ontario College Degrees

The employer participants for these interviews were selected because they were confirmed as having hired Ontario college degree graduates over the past few years. This qualification was used to ensure employers would have some basis and experience to draw from in order to share their perceptions and expectations of college degree programs and graduates.

Despite this common background for selection, one of the most consistent themes to come out of the interviews was a general agreement that there was little knowledge of Ontario college degrees and graduates. Those interviewed had first-hand experiences to share because
their degree-holder employees were college graduates, and in five cases the employers were members of college program advisory committees at the time of the interview or had previously been in that role. A few admitted their knowledge was limited to knowing simply that an employee had a college degree credential, and in one case, an employer was not aware she had hired a college degree graduate until contacted by the researcher. “The word’s not out there that college[s offer] degrees,” stated one employer, who also noted if she were to receive a resume from a college graduate, she would think his or her credential was “a diploma for sure.”

When asked to think beyond their own experiences, none of those interviewed believed hiring managers at organizations in general had a good level of knowledge or understanding about college degrees. One questioned why colleges, or the system itself, had not done more to advertise this fundamental shift in credential granting.

I believe that people don’t know a lot about degrees. What the colleges should do is promote the fact it’s not your grandfather’s college any more. I think when you look at what traditionally colleges were, people thought you couldn’t go to university so you go to college. It was viewed as being, if you weren’t first-string, you could go to a college and learn a trade and get a job. It’s very, very different now. The whole applied thing is the important part of it. University will teach you how to think, whereas I think the programs now are more specific in the college. They’re teaching you how to think, but they’re also getting you ready to go into a certain industry. That’s a good thing.

The employers generally felt that increasing knowledge of the degrees could only help build awareness of and validity for the programs. That, in turn, would generate increased interest and
partnerships with businesses and broader communities, and ultimately support student efforts in finding employment after graduation.

When considering perceptions of Ontario college degrees, employers interviewed for this study generally viewed these credentials as representative first and foremost of applied learning. They believed graduates bring hands-on skills and real experience from their studies, versus what they referred to as the “theoretical” nature of university programs. Skolnik (2005b) captures the difference between the two in citing the example of Edison College and Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU), two U.S. institutions that enjoyed an excellent partnership in terms of student transfer. In taking that partnership one step further, the university transferred two baccalaureate programs to the college, noting that with a heavy emphasis on workforce skills in these programs “there would be a better fit at Edison College” (para. 38).

Employers also expressed throughout the interviews that they understood colleges have smaller class sizes, and because programs are taught by professors who have generally spent years working in industry before entering the classroom, students gain key technical skills in their training. They also referenced that many of the programs are in niche and specialized areas, versus the more general training in many university degree programs. Employers believed these so-called specialized areas were a distinct advantage for students when they graduate and pursue employment.

### 4.2.3 Credential Preference

Employers interviewed for this study were almost unanimous in that they did not favour a college degree credential over any other credential, although there were a number who felt a
degree of any kind was a preference over a diploma or certificate. As well, the employers agreed that educational credentials were not always a key priority in hiring decisions; rather they were among a series of factors that also included institutional fit, skills and experience: “Educational background is going to be important, but at the end of the day it’s going to be can you do what we need you to do?”

When asked to consider the education component independently from other hiring factors and if they had a preference for a college degree over any other type of post-secondary credential, there was almost an even split among those with a preference for hiring degree graduates, be they from a college or university, and those with no preference at all beyond some form of post-secondary credential. In the first case, employers rationalized that the extra years of study through a degree program versus a diploma or otherwise resulted in a different level of maturity.

It is just the comprehension of higher-level concepts that is sometimes missing. I think with the degree level you get the practice in analysing, in understanding and comprehending these other concepts. The degree-level students have a better understanding of the concepts than those who studied at the diploma level.

In four separate cases, employers expressed a stronger affinity for college degree programs over those offered by universities, with the exception being professional programs such as engineering. This preference stemmed from what they viewed as more opportunities in college programs for applied learning, and the inclusion of co-op, work placement and internships. They believed that these “work opportunities” allowed students to get critical real-world experience, and often they invited students back to participate in multiple placements and
eventually hired them permanently. The employers viewed these opportunities as advantageous to the organizations and the students.

4.3 Research Question 2: What expectations do employers have of college degrees and college degree holders?

4.3.1 Introduction

One of the most consistent themes to emerge from the employer interviews was the desire to see college programs that include effective and flexible co-op, work placement and internship opportunities. From the very first interview there were strong opinions about the importance of work opportunities and how they should be structured as part of degree programs. That is why a specific co-op question was added, following the second employer interview, to the original list of research questions. This additional question allowed for more focused discussion with employers about why they believed degree program work opportunities are important in preparing students for employment.

In considering this research question, two other themes emerged from the interviews. The first was a desire to see curriculum that was relevant to a fast-changing world. Some employers believed continuous review and greater employer involvement in that process could strengthen program validity and currency. The other area of attention related to establishing clear post-graduation expectations for students so that they would know what to expect when they are employed.
4.3.2 Co-op, Work Placement and Internship Opportunities

The employers described great value to welcoming co-op, work placement and internship students to their organizations. Whether it was for the winter or fall semesters, or as summer students, all employers shared passionately that work opportunities benefited both students and organizations. The students gained real-world experience on the job and had an opportunity to display their skill level, competencies and long-term potential. “With co-op, we can see if they are hard-working, driven and a good fit,” noted one employer. In the case of another employer, the organization has annually welcomed upwards of 100 students. This has allowed that employer to challenge and foster talent, and generally tap into a wealth of future personnel. In many cases, an excellent initial work placement experience for both the student and the organization led to other co-op opportunities, a full-time job post-graduation, or both.

Many employers expressed pride in being able to hire as many of their co-op students as possible, adding they worked hard at creating good experiences. However, they also shared a desire for a greater say in how placements are structured, including the length of time on site and flexibility in what is considered compensation for paid internships. In the first instance, it was noted shorter durations were much more difficult to accommodate in terms of being effective for students and businesses.

With some of the other schools, placements are seven weeks, or three days a week rather than four or five days and the managers look at that and say by the time I get them trained for what they need to do, they are leaving.

A contradiction in the work experience discussions was related to the ideal length of the work experience. The suggested ideal timing ranged from four to eight months, to a year or longer.
One employer noted placement at the end of a program would be preferred because if a student were to be offered permanent employment, he or she could accept the job offer and still meet his or her academic requirements. Given the disparity in answers, it seemed the ideal length of time was dependent upon industry and organizational needs rather than any other specific factor. However, even in some cases within the same industry, answers varied, suggesting colleges do and will continue to have a tough challenge in satisfying all needs in the area of work opportunities.

4.3.3 Setting Clear Expectations for Students

A number of the employers addressed general expectations of post-secondary students in terms of their work prospects post-graduation. Colleges were viewed as doing a better job than universities in preparing students for the realities of the workplace. A number of employers felt that university students arrived with expectations that they would be immediately placed in management roles and assume senior responsibilities without first having learned about an organization and its culture.

The college students are more able to apply what they’ve learned in a work environment. I think their education sets them up for more realistic expectations about what the workforce is going to be. Some of the students from the university, they want the president’s role right away.

Employers said college students understood their roles well and looked for ways to contribute within them. One employer shared that the quality of students he hired from a Toronto college consistently outperformed those from a Toronto university primarily because
they had realistic expectations about their roles. Still, the employers felt that having a greater opportunity to address workplace expectations within the curriculum would provide college students with another advantage in their post-graduation employment search.

4.3.4 Relevant Curriculum

In his review of the post-secondary structure in Ontario, Skolnik (2005b) acknowledges that college degree programs are “highly differentiated” from those offered at universities and that they meet strict approval standards (para. 37). The need for programs and curricula that are relevant to today’s ever-changing workplace was a priority for the employers interviewed for this research. While they said they liked the applied nature of college degree programs and the specific concentrations of study, many noted that industry and the business world were advancing at a rapid pace, more so in some industries than others. They saw themselves as resources the colleges should be utilizing in additional ways to remain current.

The employers also viewed themselves as conduits between the classroom and employment. Many discussed the need to create more opportunities for students to interact, network and gain experience working with industry, long before the completion of their studies. Examples were shared of colleges that offered bid and estimating competitions through the construction industry so students gained experiences in areas they would face post-graduation. Another asked how curriculum could be enhanced to consider global perspectives and the increasing number of international students.

Some felt there was room for colleges to incorporate more regulatory considerations and government legislation into learning, primarily within industries most affected by it, such as
finance and construction. These employers felt that too often the regulatory or legal foundation was non-existent in new employees and that put them at a decided disadvantage. A number of employers discussed the need to better prepare students for entering the job market. Resume preparation, interviewing skills, and marketing oneself to employers were suggested as key opportunities for students to grow. They believed that students often had the skills to match job requirements, but failed to translate that to an interview that earned them a job.

Finally, two employers suggested colleges have a significant opportunity to engage learners who traditionally have not had an avenue to pursue a credential within the post-secondary system. These are men and women who are well into their careers and have no credential, not even at the certificate level. They believed if colleges could find ways to deliver more programs on a part-time or online basis, there would be a large market of people who would pursue a college credential. They equated this to individuals pursuing an MBA or other graduate credential in a part-time or online format.

4.4 Research Question 3: What Skills do Employers Require of College Degree Graduates?

4.4.1 Introduction

By far, the interview questions related to skills and competencies generated the most thought and discussion amongst employers, with a wide-range of perceptions offered with respect to what specific skills are expected in a college degree graduate, what specific skills are currently perceived as missing and what specific skills are unique to the college degree holder.
Additionally, the discussions considered whether leadership skills are sought when hiring new graduates. The data were reviewed and shared from those four perspectives.

### 4.4.2 Expected Skills

When employers were asked to consider what skills and competencies college degree graduates required in order to do their jobs effectively, there were a range of answers and perspectives beyond the clear requirement for technical knowledge in a specific industry. Expected knowledge or preferred skills ranged from a customer service orientation, through to analytical skills, creative capacity, innovative thinking, project management knowledge, problem-solving, computer skills (including a general understanding of social media), emotional intelligence, and good judgement.

Employers put their strongest emphasis on effective communication skills, from basic literacy and grammar, to demonstrating a high comfort level with interpersonal dealings and the ability to present effectively to different audiences. Others noted strong writing skills were a must for preparing detailed reports that are not only read by colleagues, but by partners and customers.

Professionalism and communication … appropriate communication. There seems to be an absence of awareness of what is appropriate and what is not appropriate, so I think professionalism and professional communication is key because with texting and all of the technology, even in their communications with employers, it has lost that level of professionalism. It is pretty basic, but it is important.
This desire for greater emphasis on strong communication skills could pose particular challenges for colleges as the number of international students continues to grow, primarily driven by the provincial government’s stated desire in 2010 to increase international enrolment by 50 per cent (Ontario Office of the Premier website, 2010) across Ontario. In addition to addressing this need in the current state as identified by employers, colleges would have to consider curriculum and the related services required as they pertain to supporting the many international students whose first language is not English.

**4.4.3 Missing Skills**

As much as employers said they expected good communication skills, they also felt strongly that these were generally missing in today’s graduates. There was concern about a lack of basic grammar and simple writing abilities, as well as the capacity of graduates to interact and share appropriately within a team and work with external partners. They also believed there was a general need for enhanced professionalism on the job. For example, one employer told a story of being asked to speak to a college class about her industry and arriving to find another speaker presenting before her. She recalled sitting and observing a class that largely ignored the speaker as students focused on their phones, computers and anything else available to them. She remembered thinking that not one of the students would make it in her organization as the use of communication devices is not allowed during meetings, nor on job sites due to safety reasons. Employers generally did not believe students had a good grasp of the professional expectations of the job. Beyond communication, there were no significant areas of general consensus in terms of missing skills.
4.4.4 Unique Skills

The hands-on, applied nature of instruction and learning were overwhelmingly referenced by employers when asked to consider the skills they would describe as unique to college degree programs. They contrasted this to the university system and what they viewed as a very theoretical approach to learning.

I would say the ability of college students to take theory and apply it to real-life situations is unique. That comes from the way they are instructed or taught. The university is about theory. A university teaches you how to think, the whole thought process, but I think the college program teaches you how to apply this. You think, but you also apply it to everyday situations.

Marshall (2008) touches on the “coming together” of the strengths of the college and university systems in students and employers “looking for a new kind of “undergraduate education” (p. 9). He notes that they want “a post-secondary education that combines the college instructional quality, community and industry integration response, open access, advisory groups, and work experience with the university scholarly environment and collegial governance” (p. 9).

A number of the employers suggested that one of the primary reasons for the hands-on approach typical of college programs is that they were generally taught by professors who were either currently working in industry or did so for years before entering the classroom. Conversely, they felt university professors generally had a thorough academic background, but little or no significant professional experience. They believed this hands-on approach helps foster greater adaptive and judgement skills in college graduates, along with a more practical
approach to problem-solving. They added that finding ways to incorporate these analytical skills provided students with a truly unique skill set.

4.4.5 Leadership Skills

None of the employers interviewed identified the specific practice of looking for leadership skills when hiring new graduates. Rather, they said that because these students were generally entering the workforce for the first time, they were not entering management positions right away. However, they agreed that it would be ideal to see latent leadership skills within new hires, noting it would provide these employees with an advantage when they were ready to pursue leadership opportunities.

I think what you are looking for there is raw talent, so again, confidence. Their ability to speak up, engagement, team skills and being able to work with groups. I think coming in that’s the foundation and they can grow into leadership positions.

In terms of specific leadership skills, employers suggested an understanding of the business side of operations would be beneficial, as would maturity, an analytical nature, critical-thinking, emotional intelligence, motivation, effective communication, confidence, project management and an ability to work independently and multi-task.

Although the employers admitted they generally did not look at new hires as potential leaders, one added that his organization should reconsider this approach given that within a few years many of these new employees would be pursuing advanced opportunities. By changing the focus and developing some of these leadership qualities earlier, it would help with succession and personnel planning, he reasoned. Jacob (2006) writes that students with access to leadership
training are more understanding of leadership, held more ethical views and “are likely to commit to making changes in society since the institutions in which they were trained inculcated in them this commitment” (p. 6). Jacob adds that leadership skills also make graduates more appealing globally, which helps their marketability.

4.5 Research Question 4: What Role can Employers Play in Informing College Degree Program Development?

As colleges continue to develop new degree programs in the years ahead, it can be reasonably assumed that general awareness and understanding amongst employers will increase. As that awareness increases, there will be greater interest in and opportunities for employers to be involved in degree development and review.

Throughout the interviews, employers clearly stated that they believed their role in future degree development should start with the germination of a program and include offering early initial input with respect to what skills and training are essential. They described opportunities to serve in mentorship roles to students, to host industry-specific student competitions, and to welcome students into co-op, work placements and internships. In the case of mentorship, they believed this can be achieved through formal programs and informal networks, but that the key would be to bring students into regular contact with employers, long before they are graduating and looking for employment. They also felt students had a responsibility to do a better job of pursuing networking opportunities and obtaining program-related work experience through summer employment and part-time jobs.
Employers also said they wanted to regularly influence program offerings through advisory boards or in other capacities as programs are reviewed and assessed.

If you have a good advisory board with people who are active in the industry, they’ll keep the current trends up there. I’m sure people who are in academia all the time are reading about the industry, but reading about it and actually working and living in it are two very different things.

More than anything, there was a strong sense throughout the interviews that organizations saw themselves as playing an active role in post-secondary program development and delivery and, to a degree, viewed themselves as partners in graduating students with up-to-date, relevant skills. This discussion item was unique in that interviewees moved beyond their individual experiences and spoke on behalf of employers as a whole. As one noted, “The customer is the employer. Go and ask: what do you need?”

4.6 Conclusion

The interviews demonstrated a passion from employers for finding quality employees who can help their organizations grow. To that end, these employers clearly saw themselves as partners who were willing to work with post-secondary education providers to develop and help maintain the relevancy of degree programs, while also demonstrating a desire to strengthen relationships with students in general. They were not looking for a specific institution or credential in their hiring decisions, although a degree was often preferred. Instead they wanted opportunities to connect with students as they searched for graduates who have the practical skills and experience needed to do the job, who were well-rounded, and who would fit within
their institutional culture and had a clear understanding of what was expected of them.

Employers were adamant they had a role to play in post-secondary program delivery and were willing to work at strengthening existing or forging new college-industry partnerships.
5.0 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

It has been just over 10 years since Ontario colleges received their legislative mandate to begin offering baccalaureate degrees. In the intervening years, much has changed across the post-secondary landscape in Ontario, including a provincial government objective to raise the Ontario post-secondary attainment rate to 70 per cent and a growing segment of the workplace that values degrees as the minimum hiring standard for employees. Additionally, the provincial Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities held a series of consultations across Ontario in the summer of 2012 following the release of a discussion paper aimed at strengthening the college and university system through quality, innovation and productivity enhancements. All of these factors, and others, will conspire in the years ahead to have a further impact on degree delivery in the college system as colleges continue to develop and introduce this credential in a broad range of disciplines.

The research interviews provided an opportunity for broad discussion with employers about perceptions and expectations as these pertained to college degree programs, the students, and the graduates. These interviews provided perspectives on the views of employers, lessons for Ontario colleges to consider in degree development, as well as recommendations for future study.
5.2 Lessons for Ontario Colleges

5.2.1 Raising Awareness of College Degrees

Employers were consistent in their feelings that individual colleges and the system in general are not doing a good job of promoting the offering of Ontario college degrees. The reality is that many of those interviewed for this research had knowledge of the degrees strictly because they have graduates on staff. Five had also been involved in initial program development or had active relationships with a college program, including participation on program advisory committees. However, the birth of college degrees and the credential growth in this area were generally not understood.

Employers wondered why colleges were not doing more to promote that they have grown beyond the traditional diploma and certificate-granting role and why the system itself was not doing more to raise awareness among employers and the general public. They genuinely believed that the degrees are a competitive advantage for colleges given that the employers’ own experiences to date have been that college programs are generally market-oriented and designed to meet industry needs. They believed the quality of graduates is at least on par with university degree graduates, or perhaps slightly more preferred as a result of the more hands-on nature of college learning. Laden (2005) writes that some colleges believe the provincial government could have played a more significant role in marketing the new degree programs as they were launched, given it was legislative change that made the programs possible (p. 169).

As colleges develop new programs in the years ahead and grow enrolment in existing programs, they may want to consider how these degrees will be marketed and promoted not only
to industry, but also to the general public. Skolnik (2008) notes the difficulty in gauging employer reception to the introduction of a new credential, adding that in the case of degrees, “Colleges are more in the position of promoting a new product to their business clients than subordinating themselves to the demands of those clients” (p. 147). Colleges must consider how they can get to a position where organizations see the resume of a college graduate and look to see if he or she has a diploma, certificate or degree credential?

Broadening general interest and knowledge of degrees may be beyond the resources of individual colleges. Rather, it may require a specific campaign by Colleges Ontario, the provincial advocacy body, as they have done in the past. Regardless of the approach, this is an issue the system should consider, given the time and financial resources that are committed to college degrees.

5.2.2 Establishing Effective In-Program Work Opportunities

Employers have welcomed opportunities for students to come into their organizations and gain real-world experience through co-op, work placements and internship programs. By all accounts, they viewed these placements as opportunities to gauge the skills and organizational fit of potential employees. For many, these placements have led to significant numbers of new employees each year and the students have made valuable contributions during their time in these placements.

As much as employers saw the value in these placements, they also stressed that these terms have to fit into their organizational operations. They raised a number of questions about the structure of placements, in particular their duration. Placements that fall only on certain days
of the week, or for only a few weeks in total, were widely considered to be the least effective and, in many cases, not helpful. Employers believed strongly that placements need to be several months in duration before they can provide students with quality experiences, significant responsibilities and substantive opportunities. One of the challenges for colleges is that the ideal length seems to vary from employer to employer, although four months was the minimum recommended.

As colleges develop new degree programs, there may be considerable value in greater discussion and exploration about placements with employers at the early development stage. There may even be an opportunity for the college system to come together to more broadly research work opportunities and their effectiveness. A desire to better understand where employers see gaps and how placement opportunities can be better managed would clearly benefit employers, students and ultimately the colleges. This is true for both diploma and degree programs.

5.2.3 More Actively Engage Employers in the Process

Colleges already partner with and engage employers in many different ways, from program advisory committees, to job fairs, placements and other opportunities. However, over the course of these interviews, it became clear that employers felt there is more they could be doing in terms of helping colleges realize relevant and current curriculum and also strengthen connections between students and the workplace. In the case of curriculum and program content, employers acknowledged that colleges do a good job of pursuing industry input in the
development of programs, but suggested that college program advisory committees aside, there just is not sufficient industry input into regular program review.

A number of employers felt strongly that there are many opportunities to increase student access to employers. They suggested a mentorship structure that would see employers volunteer time to be available as resources to students at any point in their studies. The notion was that the students could tap into the expertise and knowledge of leaders in their chosen field, and use those resources to augment in-classroom experiences. Others saw opportunities for employers to help colleges establish competitions or projects that mirror workplace responsibilities. These competitions would be judged and reviewed by industry leaders, offering students an opportunity to showcase their skills and make industry connections. Finally, they questioned how more general networking opportunities could be developed for students. By creating new opportunities for students to network and demonstrate skills to employers, from the beginning of a program through to its conclusion, colleges help students develop contacts and opportunities that will assist with the post-graduation job search.

Employers essentially saw themselves as significant partners in the delivery of post-secondary education. They understood and respected that the colleges are the delivery agent of these programs, but also stated they can increasingly partner in a way that benefits all involved. By doing so, they believed they can provide colleges with new expertise and resources, which in turn strengthens program quality, which then sharpens student skill level, and ultimately better prepares graduates to find employment and contribute immediately on the job. As they move forward in the years ahead with new program development and program review, colleges may
find benefits and savings by considering and exploring ways to further engage their industry partners.

5.3 Recommendations for Future Study

5.3.1 A Larger and More Diverse Cohort of Employers for Future Studies

The employer interviews for this research provided a sampling of views and perceptions as they pertain to college degree programs and graduates. Given the size of the sample (12), geographic location, and purposive selection method, these interviews cannot be seen to be representative of the population of degree employers. However, when considering some of the key lessons and emerging issues, it can be argued that there are specific areas of focus that Ontario colleges should consider in future degree development, degree evolution, and consent renewals, that will enhance the overall quality of new programs.

A survey that examines employer perceptions and experiences through a much larger and randomly selected stratified sample would be an obvious benefit for colleges and the system as new degrees are developed in the years ahead. This research may be more ideally suited to individual colleges where they can easily access their employer database and contact greater numbers of employers who have hired their graduates. One of the challenges of this research project was finding employers who had hired college degree graduates, given the relatively few graduating classes to date and the issues surrounding the release by colleges of employer information. Colleges have a number of potential avenues to consider in accessing degree employers in larger numbers, including targeted outreach to alumni, program advisory committee membership, and employers that take part in the provincial government-mandated
annual key performance indicator surveys. They may also want to consider working with one or more partner colleges in order to expand the sample size across different geographical areas, by college enrolment or by size of organization.

5.3.2 Urban Versus Rural Employer Needs

The focus of this research was on employers located in the Greater Toronto Area, so chosen because it is the country’s most populated urban centre, a region that is home to many national and international businesses and five degree-granting colleges offering a majority of Ontario’s college degree programs. With this focus, this research will provide the greatest benefit to Ontario colleges located in large urban settings, although it may also provide general perspective to colleges located in high-density areas in other parts of Canada.

While these findings may provide some valuable insights to smaller colleges in more remote communities, future research could consider whether employer perceptions and expectations are different between large cities and smaller communities, as well as urban and rural settings. In these latter locations, colleges engage with different sets of employers (large scale, resource industries for example), and the findings may not be as relevant to them as to those in larger, urban settings, given that the needs and expectations of urban employers will likely differ in significant ways. Rae (2005) notes that northern and rural colleges face unique challenges in serving their communities (p. 46).
5.3.3 Knowing About and Understanding College Degree Programs

Clearly one of the strongest themes to come out of the interviews was the overwhelming belief that there is simply a general lack of understanding and knowledge about college degrees among employers. While those interviewed demonstrated an understanding of degrees, primarily because they had hired graduates, they confirmed that hiring managers in general have very little knowledge of the changes in college missions that were made possible through legislation. They argued that a college-educated job applicant would most likely be labelled a diploma student and wondered when colleges and the system will begin to market and communicate broader information about the degree product. They also suggested that, given the considerable resources employed to develop, launch and maintain these programs, colleges should place a stronger focus on making them known to the general public and, hence, successful.

In the next few years it will be valuable to examine and benchmark employer knowledge and understanding of college degrees through both quantitative and qualitative research methods. This will allow colleges and the system to track the evolution of industry and the public’s awareness of college degree programming, as well as measure the success of specific strategies.

5.3.4 Degree recognition in the university system

While many college degree students are pursuing their programs to position themselves for employment post-graduation, for some the baccalaureate degree is not the terminus in their post-secondary journey. Students interested in pursuing graduate credentials should consider whether universities will recognize their college degrees for admission into graduate programs.
Skolnik, (2005a) writes that eligibility for baccalaureate graduates into master’s programs varies among provinces, and added, graduate schools outside Ontario will likely recognize the college degree credential before Ontario universities do. Floyd and Walker (2008) stress that college programs cannot be regarded as “a second-class degree” and that students enrolling in college degree programs should understand how their studies will be applied toward graduate education.

Examining the extent to which universities, inside and outside Ontario, recognize Ontario college baccalaureates specifically by direct admission to graduate schools will provide a good window for evaluating the extent to which these degrees are generally viewed as strong academic credentials. Further, these results will likely differ by type of program and even by Ontario institution, thereby creating a tremendous opportunity to understand how new credentials take hold, where, by whom, how, and the speed at which this does or does not occur.

5.4 Conclusion

The literature review demonstrated that there has been little research to date in the area of employer perceptions and expectations as they pertain to Ontario college degree programs and graduates. Therefore, this research is a starting point for examining formative views, which are critical to colleges when considering and developing new programs. This research shows that employers view themselves as valuable partners with the colleges – allies who can help strengthen programs and ultimately enhance the learning experience. It also provides specific lessons for colleges to consider when engaging in future degree development and ongoing program and content renewal.
It is important to emphasize that this research is the start of what has the potential to be a very robust area of study, and as a result, one that is of considerable value to colleges. As new programs are developed and increasing numbers of students pursue college degrees, there is great value to colleges in accessing greater insights and perspectives from employers. There is an opportunity to better understand the true impact these programs are having on students and ultimately their preparation for the workplace. There are also opportunities to consider different cohorts, be they based on population size, geography or other factors. As well, there is an opportunity to better understand college programs in general, and more specifically how these degree programs are broadly perceived in qualitative terms and for credit recognition by universities.

The legislative change that allows colleges to offer degree programs has created a fundamental shift in college credential delivery. Given colleges have invested significant resources into the development of degrees, and as these are increasingly becoming a routine part of business for some colleges, there is substantial importance in better understanding the perspectives that employers have about these graduates.
PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF COLLEGE DEGREES

References:


Colleges Ontario. (2009a, August).Expanding degree opportunities to meet the needs of the new economy. Toronto, ON: Colleges Ontario.


Appendix I

Introductory e-mail to potential employer interviewees
(To be sent as an introductory message and then a phone call will follow.)

Dear Dr./Mr./Ms.,

I am contacting you today as a first step in requesting your organization’s assistance with a research project I am pursuing as part of my Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies program at Royal Roads University (Victoria, B.C.). I am researching employer perceptions and expectations as they pertain to Ontario college degree programs and their graduates. This is an area of study that is relatively new given degree granting status was awarded to Ontario colleges less than 10 years ago.

I understand your organization has hired college degree graduates over the past few years and I would truly appreciate an opportunity to speak with someone in your organization about your experiences to date so that I could ask you a series of questions that relate to your perceptions and expectations of college degree programs. I am contacting senior human resources leaders at organizations across the Greater Toronto Area, as it is a region that is home to many national and international businesses and also five degree-granting colleges.

I expect the discussion will take approximately 45 minutes, it would be recorded by digital device with your permission, and neither you nor your organization would be identified in any way through my published findings. You also have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time and in such a case, any information provided up that point would be destroyed and not included in the research results. The answers you provide in the interview, along with those from other organizations will be compiled and used to generate data and report findings in an aggregate manner. At your request, I would be happy to share a copy of my final report, which will also be archived in the Royal Roads library. Because transparency is vital to any valid research, I must disclose that I am an employee at Durham College. However, my role does not involve degree program development or delivery.

Thank you very much for considering my request. Your assistance would be greatly appreciated. I will follow up with you by phone in the coming days to gauge your interest and would be happy to discuss any questions you may have or clarify any of the details outlined above. If you have any questions about the interviews or my research in general, please contact me. If you would like to verify the authenticity of the research or discuss some other component of it, please contact Dr. Wendy Schissel, Royal Roads University Program Head, MA in Interdisciplinary Studies.

I look forward to speaking with you!

Tony Doyle
Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies student
Royal Roads University
Appendix II

**Background/introduction to the employer interviews**  
(To be sent by e-mail to those being interviewed two days prior to scheduled interview.)

Dear Dr./Mr./Ms.,

Thank you again for agreeing to meet with me on XXX, 2012 at XX p/a.m.to be interviewed for a research project I am pursuing as part of my Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies program at Royal Roads University (Victoria, B.C.). I truly appreciate that you are committing time in your schedule to meet with me as it will support my research, which is designed to gain an understanding about employer perceptions and expectations as they pertain to Ontario college degree programs and their graduates. I expect the interview will take approximately 60 minutes, it will be recorded, with your agreement, by digital device and I would like to remind you again that neither you nor your employer will be identified in any way and that you have the right to withdraw at any time. Any information provided up to the point of withdrawal will be destroyed and not included in the research results.

Insert organization name here has been selected as it has hired college graduates. I am conducting 12 interviews with employers located across the Greater Toronto Area. The answers you provide in the interview, along with those from other organizations will be compiled and used to generate data and report findings in an aggregate manner. Because transparency is vital to any valid research, I must disclose to you that I am an employee at Durham College. However, my role does not involve degree program development or delivery.

Attached, please find a consent form that I would ask you to fill out and return to me in advance of our discussion. This form is an important step in my research as it demonstrates that all information was obtained in a free and informed manner from those I interview. It also ensures that I’ve instructed you on your right to withdraw at any point from our interview.

Thank you again for agreeing to speak with me. If you have any questions about the interviews or my research in general, please contact me. If you would like to verify the authenticity of the research or discuss some other component of it, please contact Dr. Wendy Schissel, Royal Roads University Program Head, MA in Interdisciplinary Studies.

I look forward to speaking with you!

Tony Doyle  
Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies student  
Royal Roads University
Appendix III

Consent Form – Interview with Tony Doyle in support of his research:
Assessing employer perceptions and expectations of college degree programs

By signing and dating the bottom of this form and returning it to Tony Doyle, you are providing your free and informed consent that you understand the focus of his graduate studies research project, the expectations asked of you by participating in an interview and how his research results will be used.

This research is designed to gain an understanding of employer perceptions and expectations as they pertain to Ontario college degree programs and their graduates. Interviews are being conducted with senior leaders at organizations in the Greater Toronto Area. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes, will be recorded, with your agreement, by digital device to ensure accuracy, and questions will relate to your organization’s knowledge and experiences of working with college degree graduates, skill expectations of college degree graduates and how your organization can inform future degree development. You have the right to withdraw from the interview at any point. Any information provided up to the point of withdrawal will not be included in the research results.

None of the information collected will be reported in a way that will identify you or your employer. All information shared with him will be stored securely – with coding used to ensure you or your organization are not specifically identified in his files – for a period of three years and then destroyed. Because transparency is vital to any valid research, it must be disclosed that Tony Doyle is an employee at Durham College. However, his role does not involve degree program development or delivery.

Tony Doyle is pursuing this research as part of his Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies program at Royal Roads University (Victoria, B.C.). If you have any questions about the interview or his research in general, please contact him. If you would like to verify the authenticity of the research or discuss some other component of it, please contact Dr. Wendy Schissel, Royal Roads University Program Head, MA in Interdisciplinary Studies.

I have read the above stated information and provide my consent to be interviewed by Tony Doyle for his research project in a format that includes recording of our conversation and for him to use any data or information from our conversation in his research results, with the understanding it will not in any way identify me or my employer.

__________________________             ____________ _________________
Name (printed)                                     Organization

_________________________ _________________________ _____
Signature Date
Appendix IV

Interview Guide

Opening statement

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today for my research. Today I will be speaking with you about your organization’s experiences with hiring graduates from four-year Ontario college programs of study leading to bachelor degrees, or baccalaureates. These programs are the subject of my study.

Do you have any questions about my research, the introductory e-mail I recently sent you or how the answers to your questions today will be used in my research?

I’d like to remind you again that none of the information collected will be reported in a way that will identify you or your organization specifically. If you have any concerns about the interview or questions you can withdraw at any time and the information gathered to that point will be destroyed and not used in the data gathering. If you would like to speak with someone from Royal Roads about this interview or my research, I will provide you with the name and contact details of my department head.

Thank you again for agreeing to speak with me today. Do you have any questions before we begin?

I’ll now begin the questions.

Questions

The following questions will be asked of all those interviewed, however using a semi-standardized format will provide the ability to have the conversation unfold so that additional details can be probed depending on answers to the predetermined questions.

1. Please share your knowledge of and experiences with Ontario college degree programs.
2. Do you think there is generally a good understanding by employers about college degree programs?
3. Would your organization hire a college degree graduate in the future?
4. Please share your experiences with co-op, work placement or internship students.
5. If all other skills are equal, would your organization have a preference for hiring a college graduate over a graduate with a different post-secondary credential?
6. Please share the skills and competencies that you would expect of a college degree graduate.
7. Please share any skills or competencies that you feel are currently missing in college degree graduates.
8. What skills and competencies would you consider to be unique to a college degree graduate?
9. What type of leadership skills, if any, do you expect in college degree graduates?
10. How can colleges develop degree programs so that they are more relevant to employers?
11. Where should colleges focus their training and education to better prepare degree graduates for the marketplace?
12. What role can employers play in degree development?

Concluding remarks

Thank you very much for speaking with me today. Your insights and experiences are valuable to me in my research of employer expectations and perceptions of college degrees and graduates. If you would like to receive a copy of my final research, please let me know in writing and I will provide one to you within 30 days of approval of my project by Royal Roads University.

Do you have any final questions about today’s interview or my research?

Thank you again.