

Education bias alive and well

By JEFF ZABUDSKY

Last Updated: 10th February 2009, 2:16am

One of the things I've fought against through my entire career as a college administrator has been a view that universities should always be the preferred post-secondary destination over other options such as colleges, polytechnic institutions and apprenticeship programs.

Happily, I've seen this view change over time.

At least I thought that view was changing, until I read the 2009 federal budget that was presented two weeks ago.

This document includes a striking example of a pro-university bias that continues to prevail among our federal policy makers. I'll get to the example in a moment but it's helpful to understand just how far community colleges have come. There are more than 150 post-secondary institutions in Canada that can be broadly clustered into the category of community college. There has been a common mission to offer career-focused, applied education that prepares people for jobs that sustain local communities and drive economic growth.

While this core mandate remains the same, colleges have also evolved to meet new types of demands, and as a result, they've seen exponential increases in student enrolment. Some of these positive changes have included the establishment of joint degrees and diplomas with universities, the delivery of college degrees, growing international student participation, partnerships in applied research with industry, and successful private fundraising campaigns driven by increasingly active college alumni.

All of these changes have contributed to the evolving view, especially by parents, that colleges provide an education that is different from, but on par with, universities.

So with all the progress that has been made by our colleges, imagine my surprise upon reviewing the 2009 federal budget.

The good news was the announcement of a \$2-billion infrastructure fund to help renew the badly deteriorating buildings in Canada's colleges and universities and to build new post-secondary capacity. As always though, the bad news is in the small print, where it states that universities are to receive 70% of this funding and colleges will receive just 30%.

Simply put, this makes no sense.

From a straight infrastructure standpoint, there are more colleges than universities in Canada. In terms of labour requirements, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business reports that in areas of skills shortages, college grads are required ahead of university grads by a ratio of six to one. As for economic need, universities already have preferred access to millions of dollars in direct infrastructure funding through the Canadian Foundation for Innovation. Finally, splitting the kitty 70% to 30% fails to view our post-secondary sector as an interconnected system.

I don't begrudge my peers in our universities a significant share of this funding -- their needs are every bit as pressing as those of our colleges. But it strikes me that our system has taken a step backward when our federal government arbitrarily carves up this funding on the basis of outdated perceptions of the value of colleges versus universities.

Copyright © 2009 Winnipeg Sun All Rights Reserved