Who Decides and Why it Matters: Institutions, Differentiation and Northern Rural Higher Education

by

Laurie-Anne Rancourt

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.
Department of Leadership, Higher, and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

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Department of Leadership, Higher, and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to study the impact of institutional forces on higher education policy processes. The project involved a case study analysis of the alignment between intention and perceived impact, focused specifically on the implementation of higher education differentiation policy within two of Canada’s provincial norths (Northern Alberta and Northern Ontario). These provinces were chosen because they represent two of the largest jurisdictions in Canada by population, and because they have both implemented differentiation policy frameworks within the last decade and a half. The research was undertaken within a theoretical framework that combined elements of new institutionalism (North, 1990; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Thelen, 1999; Peters, 2012; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013; Scott, 2014), strategic reaction theory (Oliver 1991), pragmatism (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000; Duemer & Zebidi, 2009; Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Kaye, 2013), and power (Foucault, 1980; Mills, 2003). Through examination of the ways in which similar policy goals were implemented in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario, it was possible to identify institutional forces that impacted the policy process in each jurisdiction. The central argument of this study was that, in order to improve alignment between policy intentions and policy outcomes, policy makers (political decision makers) and policy implementers (organizational decision makers) must take these institutional forces into account at every stage in the higher education policy process.
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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.................................................................................................................. iii

Table of Contents.................................................................................................................... iii

List of Figures and Tables........................................................................................................ ix

List of Appendices ................................................................................................................... x

Chapter 1 Introduction ............................................................................................................. 1

1.1 Background of the Problem ................................................................................................. 1

1.2 Purpose of the Research ...................................................................................................... 5

1.2.1 Significance of the research .......................................................................................... 6

1.2.2 Personal rationale ......................................................................................................... 8

1.2.3 Research questions ....................................................................................................... 8

1.2.3.2 Organizational response ......................................................................................... 9

1.2.3.3 Who decides and why it matters ............................................................................. 9

1.2.3.4 Lessons Learned ..................................................................................................... 9

1.3 Theoretical Framework ..................................................................................................... 9

1.3.1 New institutional theory ............................................................................................ 10

1.3.2 Strategic reaction theory .............................................................................................. 11

1.3.3 Pragmatism .................................................................................................................. 12

1.3.4 Power .......................................................................................................................... 13

1.4 Scope and Limitations of the Study .................................................................................. 14

1.5 Summary ........................................................................................................................... 16

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature ......................................................................................... 17

2.1 Scope of the Literature Reviewed ...................................................................................... 17

2.2 Themes ............................................................................................................................. 18

2.2.1 Differentiation in higher education .......................................................................... 18

2.2.1.1 Issue of clarity ....................................................................................................... 19
2.2.1.2 Potential policy tensions within higher education jurisdictions ..........21
2.2.1.3 Challenge of isomorphism .........................................................23
2.2.2 Value of new institutionalism to the study of public policy ..................25
2.2.3.1 Nature of the field under study ....................................................27
2.2.3.2 Strategic reaction theory ..............................................................28
2.2.3.3 Importance of power relations .......................................................30
2.2.3.4 Policy implementation: actors and institutions .................................31
2.2.3 Relevance of the northern provincial context in Canada .........................33
2.3 Summary ...............................................................................................35

Chapter 3 Research Design and Methodology ..................................................36
3.1 Research Design .....................................................................................36
3.2 Research Questions ................................................................................38
3.2.1 Organizational response ....................................................................39
3.2.2 Who decides and why it matters ........................................................39
3.2.3 Lessons Learned ................................................................................39
3.3 Site and Participant Selection .................................................................40
3.3.1 Site selection .....................................................................................40
3.3.2 Participant selection ..........................................................................42
3.4 Data Collection and Recording ...............................................................43
3.5 Data Analysis ..........................................................................................44
3.6 Methodological Limitations ....................................................................45
3.7 Ethical Considerations ...........................................................................46
3.8 Summary ..................................................................................................47

Chapter 4 The Differentiation Policy Frameworks .............................................48
4.1 Alberta .....................................................................................................48
4.1.1 Framework vision, principles, and targeted outcomes ............................49
4.1.2 Structure of the Six-Sector Model .......................................................... 51
4.1.3 Comprehensive Community Institutions .............................................. 53

4.2 Ontario ........................................................................................................ 56
4.2.1 Framework vision, priorities, and goals ............................................... 57
4.2.2 Strategic Mandate Agreements .............................................................. 60

4.3 Differences between Alberta and Ontario .............................................. 62
4.3.1 Six-sector vs two-sector model ............................................................. 62
4.3.2 System level approach vs organization level approach ..................... 63

4.4 Context and Outcomes ............................................................................. 66
4.4.1 Contextual themes .............................................................................. 67
4.4.1.1 Mission creep .................................................................................. 67
4.4.1.2 Perceived system confusion ............................................................. 68
4.4.1.3 Unhealthy competition ................................................................. 69
4.4.1.4 Need for cost-containment .............................................................. 70
4.4.2 Intended outcomes ............................................................................. 71
4.4.3 Actual outcomes versus intended outcomes ....................................... 74
4.4.4 Key decision makers and influencers in the policy implementation process .... 75
4.4.4.1 Alberta ......................................................................................... 76
4.4.4.2 Ontario ....................................................................................... 78

4.5 Summary .................................................................................................... 80

Chapter 5 Impacts and Lessons Learned ........................................................... 81
5.1 Differentiation Policy Impact ................................................................. 81
5.1.1 Impact at the organizational level ....................................................... 82
5.1.1.1 Alberta ....................................................................................... 82
5.1.1.2 Ontario ....................................................................................... 85
5.1.2 Impact at the stakeholder level ............................................................ 89
5.1.2.1 Alberta ........................................................................................................... 89
5.1.2.2 Ontario ........................................................................................................ 90
5.2 Organizational response ...................................................................................... 92
  5.2.1 Policy framework and organizational mandate compatibility ...................... 92
  5.2.2 Strategic response .......................................................................................... 93
    5.2.2.1 Acquiescence ......................................................................................... 93
    5.2.2.2 Avoidance ............................................................................................. 95
    5.2.2.3 Manipulation ......................................................................................... 96
5.3 Lessons learned ..................................................................................................... 97
  5.3.1 Northern and Central Rural Alberta ............................................................... 98
    5.3.1.1 Collaboration challenges ....................................................................... 98
    5.3.1.2 Challenges related to the inflexibility of the framework ....................... 99
  5.3.2 Northern Ontario .......................................................................................... 100
    5.3.2.1 Access versus differentiation ................................................................. 100
    5.3.2.2 Lack of articulated differentiation criteria .............................................. 101
  5.3.3 Broad-based lessons learned ......................................................................... 102
    5.3.3.1 Importance of effective communication strategies .............................. 102
    5.3.3.2 Importance of effective regulatory and resource incentives ................ 104
    5.3.3.3 Importance of managing the policy lifecycle ....................................... 105
5.4 Who decides and why it matters ......................................................................... 107
  5.4.1 ‘Unspoken’ institutional forces ...................................................................... 108
    5.4.1.1. ‘The community college’ as an institution ........................................ 108
    5.4.1.2 MTCU perception of colleges ............................................................... 109
    5.4.1.3 Implementer frame of reference in Ontario ........................................ 110
  5.4.2 Institutional forces described by study participants ....................................... 111
5.5 Summary ............................................................................................................... 113
Chapter 6 Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Findings

6.2 Implications for practice

6.2.1 Comprehensive communication

6.2.2 Clearly articulated parameters and intended outcomes

6.2.3 Alignment between desired outcome and approach taken

6.2.4 Appropriate regulatory and resource incentives

6.2.5 Frequent review and feedback

6.3 Potential areas for further study

6.3.1 Parameters and intended outcomes

6.3.2 Normative isomorphism

6.3.2.1 Colleges Ontario

6.3.2.2 Unions

6.3.3 Northern community colleges partnership

6.3.4 Relevance of differentiation to Ontario college sector

6.3.5 Mission creep in Alberta

6.4 Conclusion

References

Appendix 1 – Operational Definitions

Appendix 2 – Participant Recruitment Tools

Appendix 3 – Detailed Responses: Policy Implementer Interview
List of Figures and Tables

Table 1. Complete list of colleges that were initially approached for participation in the study.

Table 2. Organizational characteristics within the Alberta Six Sector Model.

Table 3. Detailed mandate of Alberta colleges targeted by the study.

Table 4. Key elements from the Strategic Mandate Agreements of each Ontario College targeted by the study.
List of Appendices

Appendix 1: Operational Definitions

Appendix 2: Participant Recruitment Tools

Appendix 3: Detailed Policy Implementer Interview Results
Chapter 1
Introduction

According to Douglas North (1990), “institutions are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (p. 3). The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of institutional forces on higher education policy processes. The project involved a case study analysis of the alignment between intention and perceived impact, focused specifically on the implementation of higher education differentiation policy within two of Canada’s provincial norths (Northern Alberta and Northern Ontario). These provinces were chosen because they represent two of the largest jurisdictions in Canada by population, and because they have both implemented differentiation policy frameworks within the last decade and a half. The study was undertaken through the lens of new institutionalism (North, 1990; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Thelen, 1999; Peters, 2012; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013; Scott, 2014), while also drawing from other theoretical frameworks such as strategic reaction theory (Oliver 1991), pragmatism (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000; Duemer & Zebidi, 2009; Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Kaye, 2013), and the Foucauldian theory of power (Foucault, 1980; Mills, 2003).

In this introductory chapter I provide a description of the background of the problem that was addressed by the research, the purpose of the research, the theoretical perspectives that were used to frame the research, and the scope and limitations of the study.

1.1 Background of the Problem

As someone who has held various senior leadership positions within the publicly funded college systems in Northern Ontario and Northern British Columbia, I have had the opportunity to observe first-hand the ways in which broad based policies established by policy makers in large urban centers can create challenges and unintended consequences for northern rural organizations. This observation is one that is supported by research which suggests that Canada’s provincial norths are not generally considered to be influential provincial political constituencies (Wilson and Poelzer, 2005). As a result, policy decisions affecting the lives of people living within Canada’s northern provincial regions are often made far from their influence “in distant provincial capitals” (Wilson and Poelzer, 2005, p. 12). The problem from my perspective is that
when policy decisions are made by individuals who don’t understand the context within which those policies are to be implemented, the chance of alignment between intended and actual outcomes is negatively impacted. In exploring this problem, I have chosen to focus specifically on the study of differentiation policy in higher education because it is currently a topic of significant discussion and debate (and in some cases concern) within my professional circles. It is also a policy that has so far failed to provide tangible evidence that it has achieved the intended outcome of a more differentiated higher education system, at least within Ontario (HEQCO, 2013; Jonker & Hicks, 2016; Kaufman, Jonker & Hicks, 2018).

Based on a review of relevant literature, differentiation appears to be a goal that has come and gone within systems of higher education for decades. In fact, Skolnik (2013) suggests that discussions about differentiation within systems of higher education are almost as old as postsecondary education itself. However, as he and others also point out, while the subject of differentiation has been somewhat of a constant over time, it has also been a subject that can have different meanings and different levels of complexity depending on the context within which it is being considered (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Skolnik, 2013). As Skolnik (2013) explains, “what have varied a lot over time are the specific [organizational] characteristics that are noted – or assumed” in these discussions (pp. 2-3). One of the examples Skolnik (2013) provides to illustrate this point is the political debate on higher education system differentiation that occurred in the nineteenth century in Upper Canada. At that time the characteristic of greatest interest was religious affiliation.

Since then the specific goals of those who push for differentiation within systems of higher education have evolved with the times. In recent decades “the dimensions of differentiation that have been the focus of greatest attention have been: academic standards, mix of programs offered, credentials awarded, and…the balance between teaching and research in an institution” (Skolnik, 2013, p. 2). In some cases, the impetus for greater differentiation has come from the need to manage limited resources. As Bastedo and Gumport (2003) suggest, “particularly in times of resource constraint, mission differentiation has gained momentum in the name of avoiding unnecessary program duplication” (p. 342). Alberta and Ontario, the two jurisdictions of interest to this study, have both been impacted by differentiation policy frameworks over the last twelve years.
In 2007, the Government of Alberta implemented a policy framework entitled *Roles and Mandates Policy Framework for Alberta’s Publicly Funded Advanced Education*. That framework (which remains in effect today) is based on the premise that by more clearly defining the roles and mandates of postsecondary organizations, it is possible to “build a strong foundation that can guide the system and more ably harness people resources and strategic investments” (p. 1). Although the term differentiation does not appear in the title, the framework does state that “differentiated roles combined with a high degree of system collaboration are necessary to achieve excellence” (p. 1). The framework also establishes the Alberta *Six Sector Model*. This model describes six differentiated types of postsecondary organizations and states that the goal is for differentiation to be “largely based on credentials offered, type and intensity of research activity, as well as geographic focus” (p. 9).

In 2013 the Government of Ontario published its *Differentiation Policy for Postsecondary Education* as part of its efforts to mitigate pressure created by a provincial economic downturn, an expected decline in the pace of enrolment growth within the system, and organizational costs which continued to outpace growth in revenues from operating grants and tuition (p. 5). The stated goal of the Ontario policy framework was to create a differentiated system that would build on and help focus the well-established strengths of [organizations], enable them to operate together as complementary parts of a whole, and give students affordable access to the full continuum of vocational and academic educational opportunities that are required to prosper in our contemporary world. (p. 6)

While the policy framework was published in 2013, efforts towards achieving differentiation within the Ontario publicly funded postsecondary system were initiated prior to that time. The work that preceded the publication of the framework was carried out in part through the negotiation of *Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMA)* with each of the publicly funded colleges and universities in Ontario. These SMA were described as the “mechanism through which colleges and universities articulate their unique mandates, strengths, and aspirations” (Government of Ontario, 2013, p. 17).

Looking more closely at the situation in Ontario, we can see that despite the prime objective of the exercise (which was to move the system towards greater differentiation) an expert panel
review of the first round of published SMA concluded that at that time they actually “demonstrate[d] a tendency to greater homogenization of the system…rather than greater [organizational] differentiation” (HEQCO, 2013, p. 11). While the report states that colleges provided more examples of differentiating factors than universities did, it also suggests that overall the SMAs provided little evidence that the system was being driven to a level of differentiation comparable to that in other jurisdictions (p. 11).

Although this is just one example of policy outcomes seeming to differ from policy intentions, arguably it cannot be considered an isolated case. In fact, some public policy theorists suggest that one of the greatest challenges faced by policy-makers is their lack of ability to produce effective policy that achieves desired results (Stone, 2001; Smith & Larimer, 2013). As Stone (2001) describes it, “one of the continuing puzzles in politics is why seemingly popular ideas sometimes have little lasting impact” (p. 158). We have only to consider the amount of time, energy, and tax payer resources that are invested in policy development and implementation (and that are wasted when these efforts do not achieve the desired results) to understand why this can be problematic. As pointed out by Constantinou in 2010, organizations within the Ontario publicly funded higher education sector already struggle to find the resources they need. As he puts it, over time “monies have grown scarcer, thus making competition for resources more challenging” (p. 197). Within this environment, the need to avoid processes that do not achieve desired results becomes a pressing imperative.

While ineffective public policy can potentially lead to many issues and challenges, this study focuses on the problem as it relates specifically to the implementation of higher education differentiation policies in publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario. According to Skolnik (2013), one of the main advantages claimed by proponents of differentiation in higher education systems is that it allows organizations to focus their resources on specific activities, fields, and functions, and in doing so to become more efficient in their execution. However, although this argument may apply when many organizations are operating within one localized region, it starts to become problematic when we consider jurisdictions where a limited number of postsecondary education providers are spread out over large geographic areas (Skolnik, 2013). This is the case for Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and for Northern Ontario, where many small and medium sized communities are spread out over large geographic distances, and where local postsecondary providers play an important
role in matters of economic and social wellbeing. “In rural and small-town places, the provision of basic retail, social, health, education [emphasis added], and infrastructure services provides a crucial foundation for day-to-day activities and maintaining local quality of life and the local economic base” (Halseth & Ryser, 2006, p. 70). In that context, greater differentiation may foster efficiency and productivity at the system level, but it may also impede geographic accessibility for students and limit the other benefits of having local access to a university or college for some communities (Skolnik, 2013).

This fact leads to particular policy implications in higher education jurisdictions such as Alberta and Ontario where there are stated political commitments to postsecondary access. In Alberta, the Roles and Mandates Policy Framework for Alberta’s Publicly Funded Advanced Education System (2007) specifically states that “no qualified Albertan who applies to a program of study will be denied access to a learning opportunity in the province” (p. 5). In Ontario, there has also been a long-standing cross-party commitment to providing a space in higher education for every qualified student who wishes to attend, regardless of where they live (Fallis, 2013).

1.2 Purpose of the Research

Ultimately, the creation and implementation of public policy is the result of a series of decisions that are made by actors who are involved in the policy process (those who create policy, and those who implement policy). Choices about which policy directives are required, and about the ways in which those directives are defined, interpreted, and acted upon, will depend on who is making those decisions (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013; Smith & Larimer, 2013). Policy actors make decisions based on the institutions (or institutional forces) that constitute their frame of reference. In this context institutions are defined as the “more-or-less taken-for-granted repetitive social behaviors that” define what is legitimate and what gives meaning to social exchanges (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008, p. 4). They are essentially “the rules of the game” (North, 1990, p. 3) that influence the decision-making process.

The purpose of this study has been to explore the impact of institutional forces on higher education policy processes. The project involved a case study analysis of the alignment between policy intention and perceived impact, focused specifically on the implementation of higher education differentiation policy within two of Canada’s provincial norths (Norther Alberta and Northern Ontario). Through examination of the ways in which similar policy goals were
implemented in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario, it was possible to identify institutional forces that impacted the policy process in each jurisdiction. The central argument of this study is that, in order to improve alignment between policy intentions and policy outcomes, policy makers (political decision makers) and policy implementers (organizational decision makers) must take these institutional forces into account at every stage in the higher education policy process.

According to Smith and Larimer (2013), “public policy is an aggregation of human decision” (p. 212). But who is deciding what, and at what point in the process? Like Smith and Larimer (2013) I believe that creating and implementing effective policy requires broad knowledge and understanding of human behavior. As such, knowing the answers to these fundamental questions is critical to achieving successful policy outcomes. Policy makers may be responsible for setting policy, but in doing so they are influenced by institutional forces (whether they are aware of it or not). And once a policy decision is made, the way in which it is enacted depends largely on how it is interpreted by those who decide what actions will be taken within the higher education system. These individuals are also influenced by institutions (whether they are aware of it or not). Trowler (2014) refers to this phenomenon as “the situated character of policy reception” which he describes as the context within which “the same policy is received and interpreted differently (…) according to institutional context, history and environment” (p. 30). This aligns with Oliver’s (1991) strategic reaction theory, which suggests that the way in which a policy is received and acted on will depend on the institutional factors that are at play.

1.2.1 Significance of the research

According to the literature, there is a long tradition of research in the area of institutions and their impact on public policy (Atkinson & Coleman, 1992; Lindblom 1959/2010; North, 1990; Peters, 2012; Gaskell, 2013; Hill & Varone, 2017). This work has resulted in a recognition that even within the same political system, the policy process tends to differ from one policy domain to another. As Atkinson and Coleman (1992) explain, studies have shown that “within the same political system, things work differently in agriculture, transportation, monetary policy, and so on” (p. 157). The significance of my thesis lies in its focus on the ways in which the policy process plays out in the domain of higher education in Canada’s provincial norths.
As Lowndes and Roberts (2013) have suggested, the importance of institutions to public policy is often underestimated. According to them, policymakers often underestimate the strength of opposition which can be mobilized around existing institutional configurations and the defensive potential offered by their interconnections within organizations. This interconnectedness is also emphasized by Trowler (2014) who suggests that “there is only a limited distinction between policy-making and policy implementation” (p. 15). Trowler (2014) explains that “policy is also made as it is put into practice because important social processes [emphasis added] necessarily occur as this happens” (p. 15). The issue that arises when this type of interaction is overlooked is that original policy intentions can be unexpectedly overridden by institutional forces during the implementation phase. As Gaskell (2013) puts it, “policy wonks should pay more attention to how policy discussions work at an [organizational] level as, so often, new initiatives fail to have the impact they claim” (p. 411).

The ultimate result can be “poorly designed and poorly executed funding and regulatory interventions by government [which] can cause more harm than good, particularly in [organizations] with long-established conventions” (Clark, Trick, & Van Loon, 2011, p. 1). According to Clark, Trick, and Van Loon (2011), we can “frame the nature of the policy challenge by considering the preferences of (…) faculty, their representatives, and their institutions” (p. 7). I argue that the same can be said about all stakeholders involved in the higher education enterprise. I agree with Stone (2001) who points out that to effectively shape the course of change, “we need to think about what relationships and which forms of interaction are compatible with the outcomes we want and seek to nurture those relationships and interactions” (p. 154). I also agree with Trowler (2014) who suggests that “the character of policy trajectories (…) thus represents an important issue for both researchers and those concerned with the future of higher education” (p. 15).

This study is therefore of significance to higher education policy makers who need to know “which particular interactions and collisions are likely to be politically consequential” (Thelen, 1999, p. 397). It is also important to policy makers and policy implementers who need a good understanding of the agents and actors involved in any policy implementation initiative (Tummers, Vermeeren, Steijn, & Bekkers, 2012).
1.2.2 Personal rationale

Before addressing why this study is important to me on a personal level, I feel it is relevant to clarify my epistemological frame of reference. As Marsh and Smith (2001) explain, “epistemological issues are crucial because they shape what one studies, how one studies it and what conclusions one draws from research” (p. 528). From the perspective of my personal frame of reference, I describe myself as a pragmatist. According to Kaye (2013), pragmatism is “a naturalistic epistemology that views knowledge as the solution to practical problems” (p. 211). I would say that the lens through which I view the world aligns very closely with Allison and Pomeroy’s (2000) statement that “truth is about what works, rather than what is (p.92)”. Like Kaye (2013) I also believe that “every point of view has a purpose and truths are statements that help to carry them out” (p. 210).

As a pragmatist who has held various senior leadership positions within the publicly funded college systems in Ontario and British Columbia, I am interested in finding solutions to some of the policy challenges I have faced and witnessed in my own practice. My interest in the study of higher education policy implications, particularly as they relate to northern and rural publicly funded colleges, stems from my many years of experience working at College Boreal in Ontario and Northern Lights College in British Columbia. Through that experience I had the opportunity to observe first-hand the ways in which broad based policies established by policy makers in large urban centers can create challenges and unintended consequences for rural organizations. I have chosen to focus specifically on the study of differentiation policy in higher education because it is currently a topic of significant discussion and debate (and in some cases concern) within my professional circles.

1.2.3 Research questions

What has been the impact of higher education differentiation policy on publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario? To what extent does that impact align with the intentions of those policy frameworks? These are the main questions that were targeted by this research study.

A series of sub-questions were also asked in order to ensure a comprehensive analysis, and in order to explore related implications for public policy. The sub-questions were concentrated in
three specific areas of interest. These include organizational response to differentiation policy implementation, actors and agency (who decides and why it matters), and lessons learned through differentiation policy framework implementation in the two jurisdictions under study. The specific questions asked for each area of interest are the following:

1.2.3.2 Organizational response
How do senior leaders within the organizations under study view the differentiation policies within their respective jurisdictions?

Do these senior leaders consider the differentiation policy framework in their jurisdiction to be compatible with their organizational mandate?

How have they responded to the implementation of these policy frameworks?

1.2.3.3 Who decides and why it matters
Who decides how policy will be interpreted and implemented? Why does it matter?

What strategies can policy makers and policy implementers employ to ensure better alignment between policy intentions and policy outcomes?

1.2.3.4 Lessons Learned
What can be learned from the experience at these colleges to help inform effective policy development and implementation?

These are the overarching questions that have guided this research. The methodology that was used to answer these questions is outlined in chapter three.

1.3 Theoretical Framework
This study has been informed by a review of several relevant theories. While a detailed discussion of these theories is provided in chapter two, in this section I provide a high level overview of the principle ones which include: new institutional theory (North, 1990; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Thelen, 1999; Peters, 2012; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013; Scott, 2014), strategic reaction theory (Oliver 1991), pragmatism (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000; Duemer & Zebidi, 2009;
1.3.1 New institutional theory

In framing this study, I have made an important distinction between *organizations* and *institutions*. This distinction is based on the perspectives of theorists and authors such as North (1990), Fligstein and McAdam (2012), and Scott (2014). According to North (1990), “organizations (...) are groups of individuals bound by some common purpose to achieve objectives” (p. 5); while “institutions are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (p. 3). Scott (2014) suggests that “institutions provide the rules of the game, whereas organizations act as the players” (p. 182).

From the perspective of Fligstein and McAdam (2012), organizations are defined as “‘objective’ entities in the world, with clear boundaries and legal designations” (p. 64). It is also important to note that organizational sociologists emphasize the extent to which the modern organization itself can sometimes be considered as an “institutionalized form” (Scott, 2014, p. 183).

For the purposes of clarity, I have attempted to make the distinction between *organizations* which I operationally define as entities that exist within a legal and structural framework; and *institutions* which I operationally define as ideologies, value systems, frames of reference, or perspectives on the way things ‘ought to be’. For the purposes of this study ‘the community college’ (in as much as it is considered to be a form of structure for the delivery of a specific type of postsecondary education) would be considered as an institution. Grande Prairie Regional College and Cambrian College on the other hand, would both be examples of organizations. Each exists as a legally incorporated entity which is governed by a Board of Directors and managed by organizational leaders; and each is charged with carrying out the work of ‘the community college’.

These operational definitions align well with North’s (1990) suggestion that which specific organizations come into existence, and how those organizations evolve, are phenomena that are fundamentally influenced by the “institutional framework” that defines them. As Lowndes and Roberts (2013) explain, in this context ‘institution’ is “a multi-faceted term which is used to refer to social phenomena at many different levels” (p. 3). They suggest that “institutions exist in every sphere of our lives” (p. 3). Lowndes and Roberts (2013) also suggest that policymakers
and “[organizational] designers often underestimate the strength of opposition which can be mobilized around the existing institutional configuration and the defensive potentials offered by the density of interconnections between institutional modes” (p. 171).

New institutionalism thus emphasizes the importance of considering institutions and the role they play in the process of organizational design, and by extension the role they play in the public policy process. It emphasizes the pressure that is felt because of the “social, cultural, legal, and political expectations of the organization to act in a particular way” (Austin & Jones, 2016, p. 24). As explained by Peters (2012), new institutionalists contend that traditional approaches to social science studies have been too individualistic and have been directing far too much energy in “directions that would diminish the centrality of political values and collective choice” (p. 25). He suggests that within the new institutional framework institutions take on a critical importance and that “individuals are assumed to gain most of their political values through their membership in institutions, formal or informal” (p. 25). Although Peters (2012) goes on to explain that there are many different views about what new institutional theory is and how it is approached, he also contends that the one point of convergence for many theorists lies in the belief that institutional factors are an appropriate point of departure for social analysis (p. 175).

1.3.2 Strategic reaction theory

In addition to institutional theory, I have also drawn on Oliver’s (1991) strategic reaction theory to help frame this study. Oliver brought together what she describes as the convergent insights of institutional and resource dependence perspectives, to propose a framework that could help predict the strategic reactions that organizations will employ in response to institutional pressures to conformity. In recognizing the importance of institutions to the ways in which organizations evolve over time, I believe that we should also recognize the value of understanding the ways in which this occurs. Oliver’s (1991) strategic reaction theory provides us with a typology of strategic responses that range from acquiescence to manipulation, and that can help shed light on the ways in which organizations conform to or resist institutional rules and expectations. Oliver (1991) suggests that “the scope and conditions under which organizations are willing to conform are bound by organizational skepticism, political self-interest, and organizational control” (p. 159).
An understanding of the ways in which organizations might react to institutional pressures can be useful to policy makers and policy implementers who seek to achieve specific organizational outcomes through the use of policy levers. I agree with Oliver (1997) who maintains that by combining elements of institutional theory and resource-dependence theory, it is possible to “incorporate the social context of resource selection” (p. 698) into the development of effective policy and organizational strategy.

1.3.3 Pragmatism

Which leads me to the pragmatic component of my argument. According to Kaye (2013), pragmatism is “a naturalistic epistemology that views knowledge as the solution to practical problems” (p. 211). From the research paradigm perspective, Anderson and Shattuck (2012) refer to pragmatism as a meta-paradigm given the fact that it can encompass several theories and research methods. As suggested by Duemer and Zebidi (2009), those who subscribe to the pragmatic paradigm “are not committed to only one research method or approach to solve a given problem; they are rather concerned with applying the most appropriate approach [to] better address the problem in a real-world situation” (p. 166).

So, what happens when we consider the field of public policy from the pragmatic perspective? Hill and Varone (2017) suggest that at a very high level, the policy process simply “involves a course of action or a web of decisions” (p. 17). However, they also stress “that it is not easy to generalize about the policy process, inasmuch as different policy issues emerge in different ways in different contexts” (p. 356). In their words, “the art of policy process analysis needs to involve the capacity to see connections, and to compare and contrast” (p. 356). When we consider the specific context of ‘public policy’, we must remember that it involves a purposeful and goal-oriented process, and that generally it is the product of a government-directed course of action in response to pressure about some perceived problem (Smith & Larimer, 2013). In such a context, policymakers need to develop an understanding of the perceived problem and the context within which it is enacted. In order to determine what course of action would be most likely to solve any perceived problem, the pragmatic perspective would suggest the need to apply more than one lens to that analysis.

In order to determine which lenses could effectively be combined in support of this study, I focused on two arguments that were made by Smith and Larimer (2013). These include the
argument that “in practice the problems public policies are called upon to solve rarely have a universally agreed upon, precisely defined, easily measurable, single goal” (p. 104), and the argument that “to make accurate policy prescriptions requires broad knowledge of human behavior” (p. 219). Taken together, these arguments suggest that the policy process is one that is best researched at the intersection of new institutional theory and pragmatism. This aligns with Lowndes and Robert’s (2013) suggestion that “political behaviour and political outcomes are best understood by studying the rules and practices that characterize institutions, and the ways in which actors relate to them (whether they are politicians, public servants, citizens or social movements)” (p. 7).

Although some theorists may argue that new institutionalism and pragmatism are incompatible frameworks, others appear to welcome their emerging intersections (Kraatz & Block, 2008; Scott, 2014). Kraatz and Block (2008) tell us that pragmatism “highlights the continuities between thought and action, and between academic and practical knowledge” (p. 265). They also suggest that “taking pragmatism seriously has the effect of putting scholars and organizational participants on the same side of the fence” (p. 265). For his part, Scott (2014) welcomes “the strengthening of connections between pragmatism and institutional arguments and agree[s] that more attention needs to be given to activities and practices, habits and routines” (p. 70). From the pragmatic perspective, he also suggests that

In a world of words, many of the most important strategies involve choices as to how to frame the situation, how to construct a powerful narrative, how to brand the product. In contested situations, some of the most effective weapons available to contenders involve how to define the actions, the actors, and their intent….Cultural-cognitive elements are amenable to strategic manipulation. They are also subject to deliberative processes under the control of regulative and normative agents. (p. 79)

1.3.4 Power

And so, this brings us to the importance of the Foucauldian concept of power relations and their relevance to this research. As Hill and Verone (2017) tell us, “the study of the policy process has to be directly related to the study of power” (p. 144). In a world such as that described by Scott
(2014), it is important to know which actors are responsible for creating the “powerful narratives” that can influence actions and outcomes. What I find most relevant about the work of Michel Foucault is that his initial studies were not specifically focused on an analysis of power at all. According to Foucault (1980), this is most likely due to the political situation of the time.

When I think back now, I ask myself what else it was that I was talking about, in Madness and Civilization or The Birth of the Clinic, but power? Yet I’m perfectly aware that I scarcely ever used the word and never had such a field of analysis at my disposal. I can say that this was an incapacity linked undoubtedly with the political situation we found ourselves in. (p. 116)

Yet, even though his initial intent was not a conscious one to study power relationships, Foucault’s work provides us with an excellent view of how these very relationships come to exist and how they permeate our everyday lives. By following Foucault’s (1980) example and trying to “locate power at the extreme points of its exercise, where it is always less legal in character” (p. 97), we can examine the impact of the power relationships that exist within institutions, even though this relationship may at times not even be evident to those who are involved. According to Foucault, we exercise power through our very relationship structures whether we are aware of it or not. Foucault (1980) tells us that “power is not (...) a structure or a certain force with which certain people are endowed; it is the name given to a complex strategic relation in a given society” (p. 236). Through the study of ‘genealogies’, which he describes as “a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses [and] domains of objects” (p. 117), Foucault provides us with a valuable frame of reference. Combined with the theories of new institutionalism and pragmatism, this frame of reference can help us evaluate the ways in which power is established within organizations, and the degree to which it can impact the policy process in publicly funded higher education.

1.4 Scope and Limitations of the Study

As described earlier in this introduction, the purpose of this study was to explore the impact of institutions on higher education policy processes. The study was focused through the lenses of new institutionalism (North, 1990; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Thelen, 1999; Peters, 2012; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013; Scott, 2014), strategic reaction theory (Oliver, 1991), pragmatism
and the Foucauldian theory of power relationships (Foucault, 1980; Mills, 2003). It is important to note that the research scope was somewhat narrow given the focus on only one case (higher education differentiation policy) and the way in which it was carried out in two specific jurisdictions (Alberta and Ontario). The scope was further narrowed by the fact that the interview and analysis process only included senior leaders from a small number of postsecondary organizations in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario.

It is also important to note that the pool of potential key informants for the research was relatively small. As outlined in more detail in chapter 3, the intention was to include policy makers such as minister-level politicians and highly ranked ministry officers and bureaucrats who were in position at the time of the development and implementation of the differentiation policy frameworks in Alberta and Ontario. The intent was also to include policy implementers such as presidents and vice-presidents in the colleges that agreed to participate in the study.

From the outset it was recognized that it would likely be difficult to engage relevant key informants at the policy maker level. This was due to the fact that several years have passed since implementation of the differentiation policy frameworks in each jurisdiction, and to the relatively short-term nature of election and other political cycles. The hope was to secure interviews with at least one policy maker in each of the two jurisdictions under study. It was also recognized that it was unlikely that all colleges originally approached would agree to participate in the study, meaning that the sample size at the policy implementer level would also be small.

Ultimately, three policy makers (one in one jurisdiction and two in the other) and twelve college leaders (six in each jurisdiction) engaged in the interview process. This resulted in three colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and three colleges in Northern Ontario participating in the interview phase of the study. Given the small survey sample size and the narrow focus of the research, resulting findings may be generalizable to some extent within other community college jurisdictions in Canada. However, they may not be generalizable to the broader spectrum of higher education organizations that exist within or outside of Canada (such as the university sector, the private higher education sector, or the college sector in jurisdictions outside of Canada).
Another potential limitation to this study relates to the fact that I currently hold an active role as a senior administrator in the Ontario college system, and that I held a previous role as a senior administrator in the British Columbia college system. Because of my current and past experience as a practitioner within the college sector in Northern Canada, there is a potential for bias on my part. To help mitigate for this potential bias, I have engaged in an extensive literature review throughout the research process and I have taken steps to include input from both policy makers and policy implementers in the study.

1.5 Summary

In this chapter I have provided a brief outline of the study, as well as the theoretical foundations that inform and support it. I have presented the background of the problem that was addressed by the research, the purpose of the research, the relevant theories that were used to support the research, and the scope and limitations of the study. In the following chapters I will provide a detailed description of the study methodology and results.

In chapter 2 I will provide a review of the literature that informed the study, and the relevant themes that were identified through that review. In chapter 3 I will describe the research design and methodologies that were used. In chapters 4 and 5 I will describe the differentiation policy frameworks in Alberta (2007) and in Ontario (2013), as well as my research findings from the perspective of impacts and lessons learned. In chapter 6 I will conclude with a discussion of my findings, and suggest potential areas requiring further investigation.
Chapter 2
Review of the Literature

In this chapter I review the literature that was examined in preparation for, and in support of this research project. I begin with a brief outline of the scope of the literature review. I then discuss the themes which provided the lens through which I framed this investigation and analyzed its results, and conclude with a brief chapter summary. From the perspective of relevant themes, I will be focusing on the concept of differentiation as it relates to higher education, the complexity of the field of public policy, the value of new institutionalism to the study of public policy, the importance of power relations, and the relevance of the northern provincial context in Canada.

2.1 Scope of the Literature Reviewed

As discussed in chapter one, this research involved a case study analysis of the impact of institutional forces on higher education policy processes in the context of Canada’s provincial norths. Through an examination of higher education differentiation policies and the ways in which they were enacted across multiple sites, the goal was to identify institutional forces that influence policy makers (political decision makers) and policy implementers (organizational decision makers), and that can have an impact on the results of policy implementation. The overall purpose was to gain insight into potential ways to better align policy intentions with policy outcomes.

In order to provide a robust theoretical foundation for this study, my literature review included a wide variety of relevant resources that spanned several decades and included both scholarly and research-based writing in jurisdictions across Canada, the USA, and Europe. While most available literature was focused on jurisdictions in the United States and Europe, I was able to access several sources that provided insight into the Canadian context. Based on this literature review, I was able to develop an in depth understanding of the concept of differentiation as it relates to higher education, and to identify the themes which provided the lens through which I framed this investigation and analyzed its results.
2.2 Themes

2.2.1 Differentiation in higher education

In its broadest sense, the term differentiation refers to a process by which new entities in a system emerge (van Vught, 2008). Differentiation appears to be a goal that has come and gone within systems of higher education for decades (Skolnik, 2013), and to be a goal that seeks different specific outcomes depending on the context within which it is being considered (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Skolnik, 2013). As Skolnik (2013) points out, the primary variable within the differentiation discussion over time has been “the specific [organizational] characteristics that are noted – or assumed” in these discussions (pp. 2-3). In fact, the push for organizational diversity in postsecondary education has not even always been focused on education or academics. For example, during the debate on postsecondary system differentiation in the second quarter of the nineteenth century in Upper Canada, the primary focus of the discussion was religious affiliation (Skolnik, 2013).

In recent decades “the dimensions of differentiation that have been the focus of greatest attention have been: academic standards, mix of programs offered, credentials awarded, and (…) the balance between teaching and research” (Skolnik, 2013, p. 2). At the same time, the goal of differentiation in higher education appears to be increasingly focused on the need to maintain or increase choice for students, while reducing or containing costs (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Clark, Trick, & Van Loon, 2011). Bastedo and Gumport (2003) point out that, “particularly in times of resource constraint, mission differentiation has gained momentum in the name of avoiding unnecessary program duplication” (p. 342). This was the case in Ontario between 1995 and 2003. During that time, organizational “competition and productivity were recurring themes. Postsecondary [organizations] were encouraged to diversify, specialize, and capture niche markets in either graduate or undergraduate studies” (Shanahan et al., 144). In a study undertaken by Shanahan, Jones, Fisher, and Rubenson (2014), interviewees went so far as to suggest “that policy decisions in PSE have not been situated within a larger societal or system context but, rather, emerge from technocratic considerations and from the need to balance budgets” (p. 168). For their part, Clark, Trick, and Van Loon (2011) suggest that the differentiation process should be regulated by government and be designed to encourage competition among higher education providers within specific jurisdictions. From their
perspective, “[organizational] competition should take place within a framework, set by the government, that ensures provision across the range of higher education needs, secures pathways, controls mission creep, encourages quality assurance, and produces accurate information for student choice” (Clark, Trick, & VanLoon, 2011, p. 56).

Given its long history and the wide-ranging focus of the differentiation dialogue in higher education, the following sub-sections are meant to clarify the theoretical perspective within which I have framed the concept of differentiation for the purposes of this research. This includes discussions about the need for clarity in what can be a confusing literary and policy landscape, about the potential for policy tensions within jurisdictions focused on higher education differentiation, and about the challenge of isomorphism.

2.2.1.1 Issue of clarity

Given the wide variety of institutional characteristics that have dominated discussions about differentiation over time, and given the dozens of possible dimensions of organizational and system diversity that have been catalogued, researchers have struggled to come up with a commonly accepted definition of higher education system differentiation (Skolnik, 2013). According to Birnbaum (1983), this has been an issue for decades. Even as far back as the 1980s, while there appeared to be universal agreement on the desirability of maintaining diversity in higher education, there was also considerable disagreement on how to define diversity in that context, on what the actual level of diversity in the system was at the time, and on whether the level of diversity was increasing or decreasing (Birnbaum, 1983, p. xii). This point of view was echoed by Skolnik (2013) thirty years later in the suggestion that failing to define differentiation in specific terms can easily lead to disagreement about the extent and consequences of differentiation. This can be problematic from a policy perspective. It would also suggest that, in order to reduce the potential for the creation of unintended consequences, differentiation policy frameworks require a high level of precision and clarity.

This issue was raised in 2013 by an expert panel of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) that was charged with reviewing Ontario’s first round of Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMA). In their report, panel members suggested that the SMA process (including its area of focus and areas of emphasis) was generally ambiguous and had evolved over time.
They also suggested that this lack of focus had left room for some organizations to perceive the process as a competition for incremental resources. As such, the content of their SMAs was shaped by what they thought would optimize their success in such a competition. According to the report, this perception was one of many factors that may have led to similarities between organizations that were observed in the final SMA documents (HEQCO, 2013).

Another issue of clarity is one of a more general nature. According to Fisher and Rubenson (2014a), provincial governments in Canada “have a central role in providing direct support to educational institutions as well as in developing legislation for them and ensuring their regulation and coordination”, while the federal government has “no direct role in coordinating PSE in Canada” (p. 14). As a result, different system reforms have been undertaken in different Canadian jurisdictions in recent decades. Marshall (2008) suggests that while the higher education context in Canada was already confusing prior to these reforms, over time it has become even more so because “the Canadian undergraduate market has gone from consisting primarily of public university-delivered credentials” (p. 2) to one in which different types of undergraduate degrees are delivered by different types of organizations. Because these changes have been made in different ways within different provincial jurisdictions, Marshall (2008) describes Canada’s current higher education landscape as one in which there “are no longer clearly defined ‘college’ and ‘university’ sectors with clearly defined rules for governance, funding, faculty roles, or labels” (p. 5).

This is the case to some extent in Alberta where the publicly funded higher education system currently consists of six types of postsecondary organizations: Comprehensive Academic and Research, Baccalaureate and Applied Studies, Polytechnic, Comprehensive Community, Independent Academic, and Specialized Arts and Culture (Government of Alberta, 2007, pp. 9-10). A cursory glance at the mandates of each sector within the model demonstrates that baccalaureate level programming is offered in all six sectors, and that other qualifying parameters (such as primary client interest in career preparation) also apply to most, or all, of the six sectors (pp. 17-20). British Columbia is another Canadian jurisdiction where the traditional binary postsecondary model has been formally replaced with a multi-player model and where the lines between university and college mandates have become blurred. The B.C. Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development website specifically states that their system is
integrated so that colleges and institutes can offer degree programs, and so that different types of institutions can offer a range of education and training options (Government of British Columbia, 2018).

In the case of Alberta, the six-sector model appears to have been developed in order to create a “system configuration based on institutional differentiation” (Government of Alberta, 2007, p. 9). However, while the six-sector model did result in the creation of differentiated categories of postsecondary organizations, it also allows for organizations in more than one category to deliver similar credentials. For example, under the framework degree level programming is offered in all six sectors (or in all six categories of postsecondary organization). Given this fact, it may not be immediately apparent to the layperson where the differentiation lies in practical terms. This observation aligns with Marshall’s (2008) caution that if differentiation strategy implementation is not done properly, there is a danger of worsening what he describes as an already existing “degree recognition issue” (p. 16). As Clark, Trick, and VanLoon (2011) point out, “it is the work done on the ground that ultimately makes a system viable and coherent” (p. 198). If those that are responsible for the work on the ground don’t have a clear understanding of the intended outcomes, then the potential for unintended consequences is increased.

2.2.1.2 Potential policy tensions within higher education jurisdictions

Another element of the differentiation discussion that is relevant to this study is the potential for policy tensions to be created. In some literature on public policy, the issue is referred to as one of policy incoherence (Trowler, 2014; Bleiklie, 2004). Trowler (2014) suggests that incoherence can occur because

The process of ‘encoding’ policy is a complex one in which policy texts are developed as a process of negotiation, compromise and the exercise of power. As a result, these policy texts are usually laden with multiple agendas, attitudes, values and sets of meaning. (p. 25)

Trowler (2014) also suggests that policy incoherence can lead to paradoxes, which in turn can make it difficult for governments to effectively align various policy innovations (p. 26).
From the perspective of differentiation policy, this type of paradox (or policy tension) can be tied to the when and where of higher education delivery. According to Skolnik (2013), one of the main advantages claimed by proponents of differentiation in higher education systems is that it allows them to focus resources on specific activities, fields, and functions, and to become more efficient in their execution. However, Skolnik (2013) also points out that this argument becomes problematic when we consider regions like Northern Ontario where a limited number of postsecondary education organizations are spread out over large geographic areas. As is the case for other northern communities across Canada, in Northern Ontario local publicly funded postsecondary organizations play an important role in matters of economic, social, cultural, and recreational wellbeing (Wilson & Poelzer, 2005; Jepsen & Montgomery, 2009; Pizarro Milian, Davies, & Zarifa, 2016). In that context, greater differentiation may foster efficiency and productivity at the system or the provincial level, but it may also impede geographic accessibility for students and limit the other benefits of having access to a university or college for some communities (Skolnik, 2013).

As a result, the differentiation policy framework has the potential to lead to policy incoherence within Ontario, depending on the way in which it is interpreted and implemented. According to Fallis (2013), the Ontario government has made a special commitment to provide higher education in the north, even though population densities in that region are very low (p. 27). Clark, Trick and VanLoon (2011) suggest that “a fact of political life in Ontario, and in many other jurisdictions, is that voters hold the government accountable for making sure that there is a space in higher education for every qualified student who wants to attend” (p. 104). If the interpretation and implementation of the differentiation policy framework were to lead to a narrowing of the types of programs and credentials that are delivered in norther publicly funded colleges, there would be a risk of the differentiation policy acting in opposition to the policy of access.

This same challenge exists in Alberta where the Roles and Mandates Policy Framework for Alberta’s Publicly Funded Advanced Education System (2007) states that “no qualified Albertan who applies to a program of study will be denied access to a learning opportunity in the province” (p. 5). While the Alberta framework does not specify that qualified Albertans will be able to study in specific geographic regions, it does say that they will not be denied access. If the
differentiation policy resulted in a situation where the only higher education seat available was several hundred miles from a qualified Albertan’s home, and that individual was unable to afford to leave their community to pursue higher education, then arguably their access to that education would effectively be denied.

Based on these examples, there appears to be an inherent tension between the access policies of the two jurisdictions under study, and their differentiation policy frameworks which seek in one way or another to build on and help focus organizational strengths, while avoiding unnecessary duplication. In both jurisdictions the result is the potential for one government policy (differentiation) to unintentionally diminish the ability of some colleges to effectively implement another government policy (access).

2.2.1.3 Challenge of isomorphism

The final element of the higher education differentiation discussion that is relevant to this study is the concept of isomorphism. Isomorphism is a term that is used to describe the tendency of institutions to become more alike. Isomorphism is therefore the opposite of differentiation. Several researchers have developed theories and provided insights into ways in which isomorphism impacts the field of higher education (van Vught, 2008; Doern, 2008; Brennan, 2008).

Van Vught (2008) uses the concept of institutional isomorphism to describe a theoretical framework for the study of resistance to higher education system differentiation. In van Vught’s (2008) interpretation, higher education is a system consisting of individual organizations “in an environment that includes the social, political and economic conditions within which” (p. 158) they collectively need to operate. He suggests that to survive in an environment that often requires competition for scarce resources, higher education organizations need to find ways to adapt to their environment. Van Vught (2008) further suggests that the resulting adaptation process leads to homogenization as organizations react in similar ways to uniform environmental conditions (p. 154).

Doern (2008) for his part uses terms such as “academic drift” and “vocational drift” to describe the processes of isomorphism. Doern’s research is focused on binary systems of higher education
in which there have been historically clear differences between the role of universities, and the role of colleges and polytechnics. He suggests that, over time, colleges and polytechnics have begun to exhibit signs of “academic drift” in their efforts to become “more like universities”; while universities have begun to exhibit signs of “vocational drift” as they seek to attract more business and community-based clienteles, and in doing-so become more “polytechnic-like” (p.5).

In higher education policy environments where the goal is greater differentiation, processes that favor isomorphic tendencies need to be recognized, understood, and mitigated. Brennan (2008) suggests that those who strive for greater differentiation need to avoid making assumptions about how to effect change. He suggests that to avoid the forces of isomorphism it is important to understand “how changes are made to the actual norms and actions in the daily life of the higher education [organizations]” (p. 385). A historical review of higher education system differentiation sheds light on problematic assumptions that have been made in the past. For example, Rutherford and Rabovsky (2014) point to the logic behind higher education policy that has falsely assumed “a simple principal-agent relationship between state governments and public universities” (p. 90). In fact, as many authors point out, accountability arrangements in higher education are much more complex than that, regardless of jurisdiction (Axelrod, 2013; Fallis, 2013; Fumasoli and Huisman, 2013; Rutherford & Rabovsky, 2014). For example, in the United States public colleges and universities are “subject to a spider-web of oversight” which consists of state legislatures, state-level regulatory and coordinating boards, regional accrediting agencies, the federal government, and many other informal stakeholder groups (Rutherford & Rabovsky, 2014, p. 190).

Arguably, the Canadian publicly funded higher education landscape is just as complex. For example, based on their research into the development of publicly funded higher education systems in Canada, Fisher and Rubenson (2014b) suggest that a “complex interplay between political, economic and social forces” (p. 122) has impacted higher education policy development and implementation across Canada, and that as a result different systemic arrangements now exist in each province (p. 104).
2.2.2 Value of new institutionalism to the study of public policy

One of the key theoretical perspectives that can be of value to those searching for effective approaches to public policy making and implementation, is new institutionalism (Oliver, 1991; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013; Scott, 2014; Trowler, 2014; Olsson, 2016). In her work on institutional change and stability, Olsson (2016) describes institutions as “features in societies and political systems which have a formal character, for instance, legislature and organization, and informal features such as norms and networks” (p. 2). Institutionalism as a broad theoretical framework has existed for some time and essentially focuses on “the rules of the game in a society” (North, 1990, p. 3). As Scott (2014) points out, “institutional theory has served as a conceptual framework and research tradition since the middle of the 19th century” (p. xi). Over time, and based on the work of several theorists, institutionalism has evolved and become a complex, confusing, and at times controversial landscape (North, 1990; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Thelen, 1999; Campbell, 2004; Peters, 2012; Scott, 2014). In addition to evolving from what theorists describe as “old institutionalism” to “new institutionalism”, it has also become a theoretical framework that can take many forms. For example, Campbell (2004) suggests that “today there are three major versions of institutional analysis: rational choice, organizational, and historical institutionalism” (pp. 2-3). Peters (2012) suggests that “there are at least six versions of the new institutionalism in current use” (p. 19). While Olsson (2016) tells us that, “since the early 1980s a number of different versions of new institutionalism have developed” (p. 2).

That said, and despite this level of complexity, new institutionalism is also a theoretical framework that is proving to be more and more prevalent in studies relating to the social sciences, to the study of organizations, and to the study of public policy (Campbell, 2004; Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013; Olsson, 2016). As Scott (2014) points out, “institutional theory has not simply grown, but flourished to become the dominate frame guiding organization and management studies” (p. xi). He goes on to describe institutional theory as a vibrant and rapidly growing area in the social sciences, and one that has “transformed the areas of management theory, organization sociology, and institutional economics, and strongly impacted the neighboring areas of political studies of institutions” (p. vii). According to Lowndes and Roberts (2013), one of the strengths of new institutionalism is its
recognition that “informal conventions can be as binding as formal constitutions and can be particularly resistant to change” (p. 3). Of note to this study is the fact that, because of the tendency for these informal conventions to be binding and persistent, they can also be somewhat predictable. As Olsson (2016) describes it, “the structural nature of institutions means that they have some stability over time…” and can therefore “…give some predictability to social and political life” (p. 2).

Finally, as we consider the value of new institutionalism to the study of public policy, it is important to remember that the policy process is not limited to the creation of policy. In considering public policy as a means of bringing about a desired change, Lowndes and Roberts (2013) argue that, through the lens of new institutionalism, “understanding change requires that we focus upon the interaction between institutions, actors and environments” (p. 143) at every level of the policy process. This concept therefore applies as much to the development phase of the public policy process as it does to the implementation and post-implementation phases. This point of view is shared by Trowler (2014), who suggests that policy makers rarely consider the need to remain engaged in the process beyond the point of policy creation. Instead, they tend to think “that once the hard job of policy-making is done they can send out the finished documents and wait for the results” (p. 31). Trowler (2014) argues that policy-makers need to understand the impact that institutional context can have and put in place strategies and approaches to try and mitigate that impact. Otherwise, the result can be “different outcomes in different locales – because each locale is likely to have a different set of forces and contextually contingent factors driving the reception and response to policy” (p. 31). Policy makers must consider the fact that actors within organizations will interpret and respond to policy directives based on the way in which their frame of reference (or their logic) influences their interpretation of a policy directive. As Levin (2017) points out “within the context of a dominant logic or logics, which are deeply embedded in organizations over time, organizational actors are disposed to follow organizational principles and past practices, actions based upon taken-for-granted assumptions and arrangements” (location 445). This point of view is aligned with the one put forward by Musselin and Texeira (2014), who point out that “more attention should be paid to how (…) ideas, theories or representations are appropriated, translated, received and therefore lead to different policies in different settings” (p. 7). Musselin and Texeira (2014) go on to suggest that “the frequent
contrast between expected and actual results” (p. 12) is one of the major issues that needs to be addressed when analyzing policy reforms in higher education.

This need to pay as much attention to the implementation phase of policy development as the development phase itself is echoed by other authors. For example, Barrett (2004) tells us that “implementation should be regarded as an integral and continuing part of the policy process, rather than an administrative follow-on” (p. 253). She further explains that “the political processes by which policy is mediated, negotiated and modified during its formulation continue in the behavior of those involved in its implementation acting to protect or pursue their own values and interests” (p. 253).

2.2.3.1 Nature of the field under study

In considering public policy within systems of higher education through the lens of new institutionalism, I contend we are able to take advantage of the multiple insights that this theoretical framework can make available to us (not only in spite of its level of complexity, but in fact because of that complexity). Public policy is a process that impacts (and is impacted by) the behavior of publicly funded organizations. As Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, and Suddaby (2008) point out, “institutional theory is perhaps the dominant approach to understanding organizations” (p. 2), largely because of its “capacity to contextualize organizational phenoma (…) and its tolerance for theoretical and methodological pluralism (…) which are advantageous to knowledge sharing” (p. 31). For example, while the argument that policymakers should “start with the assumption that interaction is all there is” (Saarinen & Ursin, 2012, p. 151), may seem at odds with the contention that institutions create path-dependencies which can lead to resistance to interaction and change (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013), that is not necessarily the case. As Thelen (2009) suggests, these perspectives are not “necessarily at odds with another, and in many ways, they usefully shed light on different aspects of institutions” (p. 490).

Many anthologies exist on new institutionalism (e.g., Powell & DiMaggio Eds., 1991; Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin & Suddaby Eds., 2008). Each one presents perspectives from various authors regarding the history of institutionalism, the criticisms that have been levied against institutionalism, and the different types of institutionalist approaches that exist within the social sciences. I have chosen to focus on the work of scholars who suggest that the best way forward
lies in an understanding of the linkages and interdependencies between various approaches (Thelen, 2009; Scott, 2010; Peters, 2012), instead of trying to determine which approach is most relevant in and of itself. Like Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, and Suddaby (2008), my goal is to explore insights that the institutional perspective can provide to questions of organizational behavior, and more specifically to the public policy process as it relates to organizational behavior.

### 2.2.3.2 Strategic reaction theory

One scholar who has undertaken work at the intersection of various institutionalist approaches is Christine Oliver (1991). Oliver’s work involved the application of “the convergent insights of institutional and resource dependence perspectives to the prediction of strategic responses to institutional processes” (p. 145). According to Oliver (1991), “the major criticisms of institutional theory have been its assumptions of organizational passivity and its failure to address strategic behavior and the exercise of influence” (p. 173). Through her work she sought to demonstrate that organizations are not passive and powerless entities; and that when institutional theory is combined with resource dependence perspectives, it provides us with the means to predict “a broad range of responses to the institutional environment” (p. 151). Oliver’s (1991) Strategic Reaction Theory identifies a continuum of five strategic reactions that organizations can adopt when faced with institutional pressures. These include varying forms of acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, and manipulation.

An important component of Oliver’s (1991) theory is the suggestion that it is possible to identify predictors of strategic responses. According to Oliver (1991), we should assume that there is a potential “for variation in the resistance, awareness, proactiveness, influence, and self-interest of organizations” (p. 151); and that the way in which organizations respond to external pressures “will depend on why these pressures are being exerted, who is exerting them, what these pressures are, how or by what means they are exerted, and where they occur” (p. 159). For example, Oliver (1991) suggests that “acquiescence is the most probable strategic response to institutional pressures when organizational dependence on the source of these pressures is high” (p. 164). She also suggests on the other hand, that “threats to autonomy are (…) likely to invoke a variety of manipulative strategies” (pp. 166-167). Oliver (1991) contends that
When organizations are not assumed to be invariably passive or active, conforming or resistant, then responses to the institutional environment become cast as behaviours to be predicted rather than theoretically predefined outcomes of institutional processes. (p. 174)

Over the last decade, other theorists have undertaken work that positions organizations (and members of organizations) as active rather than passive participants in organizational processes (Bastedo, 2007; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013; Scott, 2014; Olsson, 2016). For example, Bastedo (2007) contends that the source of demands on publicly funded higher education organizations “is not only political and economic, (…) but also institutional, the result of cognitive theories and preconceptions about the proper role of government in public higher education” (p.300). Yet, he also points out that organizational actors can “engage in strategic action to manipulate these environments and their organizational impact” (Bastedo, 2007, p. 300). Scott (2014) also suggests that “organizations are creatures of their institutional environments, but [that] most modern organizations are constituted as active players, not passive pawns” (Scott, 2014, p. 217). Indeed, through their behaviors, organizations must “adapt not only to technical pressures but also to what they believe society expects of them” (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2008, p. 78). When technical and societal pressures conflict, organizations must actively determine what they consider to be an appropriate response in a given context.

This aligns with Hordern’s (2012) argument that organizations can strategically respond, to varying degrees, when faced with policy directives. He suggests that the extent to which individual organizations are “able to contemplate different responses can depend on reputational position within the sector and the feasibility of maintaining financial stability if policy is not adhered to” (p. 3). Hordern (2012) also suggests that organizational response may “reflect the attitude of institutional leadership toward risk, and the existence of viable alternative strategies” (p. 3). This point of view is supported by the results of a research study undertaken by Sin and Saunders in 2014. They analyzed the responses of England, Portugal, and Denmark to The Bologna Process, a higher education system reform which was officially launched in Europe in 1999. While implementation of the reform was mandatory in some jurisdictions; for England, Portugal, and Denmark, compliance was voluntary. Sin and Saunders concluded that in each of
these three jurisdictions, the decision to comply or not “was influenced by the perceived relevance of the reform, its implications and its alignment with national priority areas, agentic manifestations thus coming to the fore” (p. 531).

2.2.3.3 Importance of power relations

As we consider the impact of institutions on public policy, and the concept that organizations can be strategic in their responses to various institutions, we must also consider the concept of power relationships. This argument has been made by several new institutional researchers and theorists over the years (Brint & Karabel, 1991; Thelen, 1999; Marsh & Smith, 2000; Lawrence, 2008; Scott, 2014; Valimaa & Nokkala, 2014). As Lawrence (2008) explains,

The relationship between power and institutions is an intimate one. Institutions exist to the extent that they are powerful – the extent to which they affect the behaviours, beliefs and opportunities of individuals, groups, organizations and societies….The relationship between power and institutions is also bi-directional (p. 170).

For his part, Scott (2014) argues that within organizations, “values are preserved, and interests are protected only if those holding them possess and retain power” (p. 25). He also suggests that power is not always a top-down or obvious process; that it can exist in unexpected places and that it can “…arise out of the mobilization of subordinate groups as they attempt to advance their own values and interests” (p. 73).

An important factor to keep in mind when it comes to power relationships is that these relationships are not always evident, and that they are “most effective when least observable” (Lukes, 2005, p. 1). As Barrett (2004) explains, policy processes can be significantly impacted by “the power-interest structures and relationships between participating actors and agencies, and the nature of the interactions taking place in the process” (p. 253), even when these structures and relationships are not apparent. This point of view is echoed by Bastedo (2007) who contends that “power and authority play an important mediating role in the capacity to act strategically” (p. 300). As a result, “the very processes of policy implementation are themselves deeply politically dependent, having both a macro and micro political context” (Barrett, 2004, p. 259).
In linking these arguments to the Foucauldian concept of power relations, I suggest that Foucault provides us with a valuable framework which can be combined with the theories of new institutionalism and pragmatism to help us evaluate the ways in which power is established within organizations, and the degree to which it can impact the policy process in publicly funded higher education. By following Foucault’s (1980) example and trying to “locate power at the extreme points of its exercise, where it is always less legal in character” (p. 97), we can examine the impact of the power relationships that exist within institutions, even though these relationships may at times not even be evident to those who are involved. According to Foucault, we exercise power through our very relationship structures whether we are aware of it or not. Foucault (1980) tells us that “power is not (…) a structure or a certain force with which certain people are endowed; it is the name given to a complex strategic relation in a given society” (p. 236). As Lawrence (2008) suggests, “incorporating power is crucial to understanding how institutions operate in society and their relationship to organizations” (p. 171).

2.2.3.4. Policy implementation: actors and institutions

Given the importance of power relationships to the public policy process, I maintain that policymakers and policy implementers can be more effective when they take into consideration the institutions that are at play within systems of higher education, and the actors who are involved. Hill and Varone (2017) go so far as to suggest that “the study of policy process is essentially the study of the exercise of power in the making of policy and therefore cannot disregard underlying questions about the sources and nature of that power” (p. 24). As Bleiklie (2014) suggests, policymakers and policy implementers should “ask what types of actors are active in higher education policy, what type of influence they represent and what the relationships between them are” (p. 49). This applies to every stage of the policy process, from development to implementation.

From the perspective of policy development, it is important to note that “policymakers do not function in a vacuum; [that] they [themselves] are embedded in organizations – legislatures, boards, and agencies – all of which develop influences, practices and habits that help determine policymakers’ behavior” (Bastedo, 2007, p. 295). Even politicians are influenced by institutional actors who can wield significant levels of influence. As Blakeney and Borins (1998) explain, “ultimately, political power in a democracy depends on the approval of the electorate, and a government must always be asking whether its policies and programs are receiving that
approval” (p. 241). As such, the process of determining which policies are required, and what the desired outcomes of those policies are, is significantly impacted by what politicians and political decision makers believe voters want.

In addition, Blakeney and Borins (1998) remind us that a dichotomy exists between elected government and the bureaucracy of government. Politicians are elected, while bureaucrats are appointed and have longevity in their positions. Generally, it is the bureaucrats who have the professional experience and technical knowledge that is relevant to the positions they are appointed to. However, as Alesina and Tabellini (2007) point out, “policies are chosen and implemented by both [emphasis added] elected representatives (politicians) and non-elected bureaucrats” (p. 169). From the perspective of the elected representative “we live in a democracy, not a technocracy [so] if a course of action is technically sound but is not acceptable to the public, then it is a poor course of action” (Blakeney & Borins, 1998, p. 6). Elected representatives decide what is ‘important’ or ‘not important’ based on what they think voters want, and this in turn has an impact on which policies become targeted for development. From the perspective of the non-elected bureaucrat, the power lies in their “ability to manipulate the design of policy alternatives and information about the consequences of alternatives” (Bendor, Taylor, & Van Gaalen, 1987, p. 797). This results in a complex ecosystem where the “boundaries between decision and execution are a grey area and in many cases bureaucrats do much more than executing either de jure or de facto” (Alesina & Tabellini, 2007, p. 169).

Within democratic jurisdictions like Ontario and Alberta, the policy development process is also affected by other actors and institutions. For example, in a context where “political parties compete to win elections”, and where “the government emerges not from the decisive victory of one party over the other but from a compromise between more than one party”, party ideology and political agendas can have an impact on the policy process (Hill & Varone, 2017, p. 179). In addition to the voting constituency, political decision makers can also be impacted by various groups, coalitions and networks. As Jones (2013) explains, “pressure groups have come to play quite an important role in contemporary politics in terms of keeping government informed of the views of group members, as well as shaping and influencing government policy” (p. 101).
From the perspective of policy implementation, the process is impacted by both the bureaucratic organization itself (such as the government ministry responsible for higher education), and by the postsecondary organizations that are responsible for complying with higher education policies (such as publicly funded colleges). My focus is primarily on the impact of institutional forces as they relate to publicly funded colleges. Within that context, Johnson (2014) tells us that the way in which policy plays out largely “depends on the normative conditions of the institutional field, and the norms that inform and legitimate identities, structures, relations and purposes within the academic organization” (p. 109). Johnson (2014) further explains that, because of this fact, actual responses to policy directives can “depend on relative interpretations at the individual and management level, and result in different outcomes” (p. 111) depending on the actors and the context involved. This aligns with Levin’s (2008) suggestion that, although governments “are the creators of public colleges”, when it comes to policy implementation “local contexts are not to be overlooked. Interpretations of legislation and government policy give rise to particular [organizational] behaviors” (p. 76). Based on these factors, it not only becomes important for us to consider the institutions that are at play within ‘the academic organization’, but also to consider those institutions that apply given the geographic and community context within which the academic organization operates.

2.2.3 Relevance of the northern provincial context in Canada

Based on that argument, I believe that it is important for us to consider the relevance of the Canadian northern provincial context to this study as part of this literature review. As Wilson and Poelzer point out (2005), Canada’s provincial norths are not generally considered to be influential provincial political constituencies. Because of their status as “sparsely populated regions within provinces rather than autonomous political entities or regions with significant urban populations” (Wilson & Poelzer, 2005, p. 12), these regions tend to be politically disadvantaged at the provincial and at the federal level. Wilson and Poelzer (2005) also point out that policy decisions affecting the lives of people living within Canada’s northern provincial regions are often made in urban centers or “in distant provincial capitals” (p. 12). Given our previous discussion about the impact that institutions and institutional contexts can have on the policy process, the importance of who is making decisions at the policy development level starts to become clearer when we think of the northern provincial context in this way.
As previously discussed, the northern provincial context is also relevant when we think specifically of differentiation policy frameworks within Canada. According to Skolnik (2013), one of the main advantages claimed by proponents of differentiation in higher education systems is that it allows them to focus resources on specific activities, fields, and functions, and to become more efficient in their execution. However, Skolnik (2013) also points out that this argument becomes problematic when we consider regions like Northern Ontario, where a limited number of postsecondary education organizations tend to be spread out over large geographic areas. As is the case for northern communities across Canada, in Northern Ontario local publicly funded postsecondary organizations play an important role in matters of economic, social, cultural, and recreational wellbeing (Wilson & Poelzer, 2005; Jepsen & Montgomery, 2009; Pizarro Milian et al., 2016). In that context, greater differentiation may foster efficiency and productivity at the system or the provincial level; but it may also impede geographic accessibility for students and limit the other benefits of having access to a university or college for some communities (Skolnik, 2013). As Zarifa, Hango, and Pizarro Milian (2018) point out, in Canada, “the great majority of postsecondary [organizations] are located in the southern regions of the provinces, making commuting considerably more difficult (if not impossible) for northern residents” (p. 278).

In addition to resulting in reduced access for students and communities in the northern provincial context within Canada, differentiation policy frameworks also have the potential to reduce the viability of provincial northern publicly funded higher education organizations themselves. For example, studies have already shown that “proportionately few Ontario students move across regions to attend university and colleges” (Pizarro Milian et al., 2016, p. 25). As Pizarro Milian, Davies, and Zarifa suggest, this could mean that “if differentiation entails having more [organizations] offer more specialized credentials, this policy could be undermined by students who want more general degrees and diplomas and/or are unwilling to travel long distances” (p. 25). If the programs being offered by publicly funded northern colleges are not of interest to local students, and if students from other parts of the province or the country are not willing to travel to those colleges for the programs they do offer, then the likely result will be decreasing enrolments.
2.3 Summary

In this chapter I have outlined the main themes that emerged from my literature review and supported my research. The relevant literature themes included: the concept of differentiation as it relates to higher education, the complexity of public policy and the need for a pragmatic approach, the value of new institutionalism to the study of public policy, the importance of power relations, and the relevance of the northern provincial context in Canada.

Based on this literature review, I argue that institutions have the potential to negatively impact the alignment between policy intention and policy outcomes. I further argue that to effectively mobilize organizational actors in support of their policies, policymakers need to develop a strong understanding of human behavior and the institutions that influence actors within higher education systems (including themselves) (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013). Like Lawrence (2008),

I argue that the time has come for institutional scholars to adopt a more balanced approach to their descriptions of institutional phenomena. Demonstrating both institutional control and the ability of actors to escape that control, and documenting strategies for institutional agency as well as the ways in which other individuals and organizations push back or deflect the impacts of those strategies. (p. 189)

In the next chapter I will outline the research methodology that was used to explore the impact of institutions on higher education policy processes, and to provide insights for both policy makers and policy implementers who require strategies to better align policy intentions with policy outcomes.
Chapter 3
Research Design and Methodology

As previously explained, the purpose of this research was to study the impact of institutional forces on higher education policy processes. The project focused on the alignment between intention and perceived policy impact, specifically as they relate to the implementation of higher education differentiation policy within two of Canada’s provincial norths (Northern Alberta and Northern Ontario). The overall goal was to gain insight into potential ways to better align policy intentions with policy outcomes.

This research was informed by several theoretical perspectives, including new institutionalism (North, 1990; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Thelen, 1999; Peters, 2012; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013; Scott, 2014), strategic reaction theory (Oliver 1991), pragmatism (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000; Duemner & Zebidi, 2009; Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Kaye, 2013), and the Foucauldian theory of power (Foucault, 1980; Mills, 2003).

3.1 Research Design

As Creswell (2014) points out, in planning research “researchers need to think through the philosophical worldview assumptions that they bring to the study, the research design that is related to this worldview, and the specific methods or procedures of research that translate the approach into practice” (p. 5). As outlined in chapter one, from an epistemological perspective I subscribe to the pragmatic paradigm. Creswell (2014) describes the pragmatic paradigm “as a worldview or philosophy [that] arises out of actions, situations, and consequences” (p. 245), and as one that seeks to find solutions to problems. As Allison and Pomeroy (2000) suggest, pragmatists approach their research from the perspective that “the truth is about what works, rather than what is” (p. 92). Given the complex nature and the importance of the subject under investigation, I felt it was important to ensure that this research was solution focused, and that it incorporated relevant methods. In addition, based on the argument that the creation and implementation of public policy is the result of a series of choices and decisions (both on the part of those responsible for making policy, and on the part of organizational leaders who are responsible for implementing those policies), I felt that the most relevant method for this
research would be one that allowed me to explore it from the perspective of individuals who had been directly involved in making those choices and decisions within a defined context.

According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011), case studies can be important sources of research data that “provide unique examples of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories and principles” (p. 289). They suggest that the case study approach can be useful in situations where the research is attempting to capture “the complexity and situatedness of behavior”, and to “contribute to action and intervention” (p. 129). Lincoln and Guba (2013) also suggest that “the case study provides the thick description needed to apprehend, appreciate, and understand the circumstances of the setting, including, most importantly, its physical, social, economic, and cultural elements” (p. 80). For these reasons, I designed a qualitative case-based research study that combined interviews and document analysis to explore the ways in which higher education differentiation policy has played out for publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario.

By using the case-based approach to explore the implementation of one specific policy, and by exploring the ways in which it was implemented in two different Canadian jurisdictions, I was able to compare and contrast that policy’s perceived impact from the perspective of different organizational leaders operating within different jurisdictional contexts. The goal was to examine the policy process from the point of development to the point of implementation, in order to explore the effects of institutional forces on that process. This was achieved through a review of relevant policy texts and government documents within each jurisdiction, and a review of relevant organizational documents for each of the publicly funded colleges targeted by the study. It was also achieved through an interview process that targeted individuals involved in the policy development phase, and individuals involved in the policy interpretation and implementation phase. In order to ensure access to both of these perspectives, care was taken to include participants who had been involved in the creation of the relevant higher education differentiation policy frameworks in Alberta and Ontario. These participants were able to provide insights into the intended impact of those frameworks.
Care was also taken to include participants who played a role in interpreting and implementing the differentiation policy frameworks within each jurisdiction. These included organizational leaders in the publicly funded colleges that had been charged with implementing those policies. To ensure that as many organizational leaders as possible participated in the study, I used a sequential approach to participant identification and selection. In the first phase of the sequential approach I interviewed policy makers in each of the two jurisdictions, and I approached the college presidents in each of the publicly funded colleges for which I was able to secure Research Ethics Board (REB) approval. My intent was to obtain permission from the presidents of at least two colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and two colleges in Northern Ontario, to undertake interviews with senior leadership team members who they considered to be responsible for interpreting and implementing public higher education policy within their organization. It is important to note that each college president was advised that this was a confidential and voluntary process, and that each recommended individual would be given the opportunity to provide informed consent prior to participating in the study. It was also made clear to each college president that they would not be made aware at any time, during or after completion of the study, of which individuals ultimately participated or did not participate in the study.

Based on the results of the policy maker and college president interviews, I undertook the second phase of the sequential study. Phase two included interviews with the additional senior administrative leaders at each college who agreed to participate.

### 3.2 Research Questions

What has been the impact of higher education differentiation policy on publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario? To what extent does that impact align with the intentions of those policy frameworks? These are the main questions that were the focus of this research study.

A series of sub-questions were also asked in order to ensure a comprehensive analysis, and in order to explore related implications for public policy. The sub-questions were concentrated in three specific areas of interest. These include organizational response to differentiation policy implementation, actors and agency (who decides and why it matters), and lessons learned.
through differentiation policy framework implementation in the two jurisdictions under study. The specific questions asked for each area of interest are the following:

3.2.1 Organizational response

How do senior leaders within the organizations under study view the differentiation policies within their respective jurisdictions?

Do these senior leaders consider the differentiation policy framework in their jurisdiction to be compatible with their organizational mandate?

How have they responded to the implementation of these policy frameworks?

3.2.2 Who decides and why it matters

Who decides how policy will be interpreted and implemented? Why does it matter?

What strategies can policy makers and policy implementers employ to ensure better alignment between policy intentions and policy outcomes?

3.2.3 Lessons Learned

What can be learned from the experience at these colleges to help inform effective processes for policy development and implementation?

In order to answer these overarching questions, it was first necessary to understand the differentiation policy frameworks in Alberta and in Ontario, and to consider both the contextual factors that led to the creation of the frameworks, and the intended consequences of the framework. It was also necessary to get a sense of the lived experience and understandings as described by community college leaders who had been charged with implementation of the differentiation policy frameworks in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario.
3.3 Site and Participant Selection

3.3.1 Site selection

The primary focus of this research study was on the implementation of higher education differentiation policy within two of Canada’s provincial norths (Northern Alberta and Northern Ontario). As explained earlier in this chapter, by using the case-based approach to explore the implementation of one specific policy, and by exploring the ways in which it was implemented in two different Canadian jurisdictions, I was able to compare and contrast that policy’s perceived impact from the perspective of different organizational leaders operating within different jurisdictional contexts. I chose to focus on differentiation policy as the case for this study because it is currently a topic of significant discussion, debate (and in some cases concern) within my professional circles. I chose the provinces of Alberta and Ontario as jurisdictions to compare and contrast because they represent two of the largest jurisdictions in Canada by population, and because each of them has implemented a differentiation policy framework sometime in the last decade and a half.

With respect to the definition of Canada’s provincial norths, Coates and Poelzer (2014) suggest that scholars have long argued about the appropriate boundaries. According to Coates and Poelzer (2014), “geographer Louis-Edmond Hamelin devoted a complex and compelling index of ‘nordicity,’ which combined such factors as weather/cold, isolation, fauna, and socio-cultural considerations” (p. 2). For this study, I have opted for a geographical-political definition which is based on the ‘northern’ designations laid out within the Roles and Mandates Framework (Government of Alberta, 2007), and which is based on the description of the ‘Districts of Northern Ontario’ as set by Ontario’s Ministry of Government and Consumer Services (http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/maps/ontario-north.aspx).

In identifying the specific colleges to include in the study, I focused primarily on English language publicly funded colleges that were located in Northern Alberta and Northern Ontario, that were at least 150km away from a provincial capital (or any other municipality with a population greater than 500,000), and that were located within towns or cities with populations of less than 200,000 people. The use of distance as one of the inclusion criteria for site selection was based in part on Frenette’s (2003) suggestion that geographic distance plays an important
role in postsecondary participation rates. According to Frenette (2003), “students who live beyond commuting distance from a college are 37% less likely to attend than those who live closer” (p. 17). In his studies, Frenette defines ‘commuting distance’ as 80km or less.

To increase the chances that at least two colleges in each jurisdiction would ultimately agree to participate in the study, four colleges in Alberta and five colleges in Ontario were initially approached. It is important to note that there are only four publicly funded colleges in Northern Alberta (Grande Prairie Regional College; Keyano College; Norquest College; and Northern Lakes College). Because of its location in Edmonton, Norquest College does not fit the criteria set out for site selection. To be able to include four relevant colleges on the initial Alberta list, it was necessary to include Red Deer College. While it is not considered a northern college, Red Deer is a rural college that meets the criteria for inclusion in this study given its size, and given its distance from the Alberta provincial capital.

Table 1 provides the complete list of colleges that were initially approached for participation in the study, along with the location of their main campus, the population of the town where their main campus is located, and the distance in kilometers between the location of their main campus and the provincial capital.

Table 1. Complete list of colleges that were initially approached for participation in the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Main Campus Location</th>
<th>Population of Main Campus Location</th>
<th>Distance from Main Campus Location to Provincial Capital</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grande Prairie Regional College</td>
<td>Grande Prairie AB</td>
<td>63,166</td>
<td>459.4km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keyano College</td>
<td>Fort McMurray AB</td>
<td>66,573</td>
<td>433.7km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Lakes College</td>
<td>Slave Lake AB</td>
<td>6,651</td>
<td>258.4km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Deer College</td>
<td>Red Deer AB</td>
<td>100,418</td>
<td>153.9km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambrian College</td>
<td>Sudbury ON</td>
<td>161,531</td>
<td>413.7km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadore College</td>
<td>North Bay ON</td>
<td>51,553</td>
<td>360.2km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confederation College</td>
<td>Thunder Bay ON</td>
<td>107,909</td>
<td>1398.2km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern College</td>
<td>Timmins ON</td>
<td>41,788</td>
<td>706.2km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sault College</td>
<td>Sault Ste Marie ON</td>
<td>78,159</td>
<td>702.1km</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3.2 Participant selection

Targeted participants for this study included policy makers who were active at the time that the most recent higher education differentiation policies were implemented in Alberta and in Ontario, and policy implementers who were employed at the relevant publicly funded colleges (listed in Table 1) at the time that this study was undertaken. Samples of all participant recruitment tools are provided in Appendix 2 of this report.

The list of potential participants at the policy maker level consisted of individuals such as ministers, deputy ministers, and highly ranked provincial ministry bureaucrats. The list was created by searching relevant historical ministry documentation in both jurisdictions, and through the phase one interview process. The goal was to include individuals who had relevant decision-making authority, and who were directly involved in the conceptualization and creation of the higher education differentiation policies under study. The objective was to get a sense of what they considered to be the contextual factors that may have led to the creation of these policies, and of what they considered to be the intended outcomes.

The list of potential participants at the policy implementer level consisted of the college presidents from each of the colleges for which REB approval was obtained. As part of the phase one interview, each president was asked to identify potential senior leaders for participation in phase two interviews. The focus was on senior level administrators who each president considered to be responsible for interpreting and implementing public higher education policy within their organization. These could have included vice-presidents or other senior administrative team members. The goal was to gain insight into the lived experience of individuals who are responsible for implementing and ensuring compliance with the higher education differentiation policies in each jurisdiction.

Ultimately, REB approval was secured for 8 publicly funded colleges (4 in Alberta and 4 in Ontario). Email introductions were sent to 24 potential participants. Consent to participate was initially obtained from 18 participants. Subsequently, 5 participants withdrew their consent to participate at various stages of the process. The final participant count was as follows:

- 2 policy makers participated in the study: 1 in Alberta and 1 in Ontario. In both cases participants held roles as either ministers, deputy ministers, or highly ranked...
provincial ministry bureaucrats when the higher education differentiation policies were created in each jurisdiction. Throughout chapters 4, 5, and 6, these participants are identified as Alberta Key Informant (ABKI) and Ontario Key Informant (OKI).

- 6 colleges were included in the study: 3 in Alberta and 3 in Ontario
- 11 policy implementers participated in the study: 5 in Alberta and 6 in Ontario. Throughout chapters 4, 5, and 6, these participants are identified as Alberta 1 to 5 (AB1, AB2, AB3, AB4, and AB5); and Ontario 1 to 6 (ON1, ON2, ON3, ON4, ON5, and ON6).

### 3.4 Data Collection and Recording

For the survey portion of this study, data was collected using a telephone interview process. Initial contact with each potential participant was made via e-mail. Three different email introduction templates were used (see Appendix 2). For each potential participant who responded favorably to the initial email introduction, additional documentation was provided to ensure an effective informed consent process. This documentation included the informed consent form, the interview guide, and a detailed information letter outlining the context and purpose of the research. Three different informed consent forms, and three different interview guides were used. The same detailed information letter was used for all potential participants (see Appendix 2).

During the interview process, policy makers were asked the following questions:

- From your perspective, what were the contextual factors that led to the development of the differentiation policy framework within your jurisdiction?
- From your perspective, what were the intended outcomes of the differentiation policy framework?
- Based on your observations of the way the publicly funded colleges are operating within your jurisdiction, to what extent would you say that the intended outcomes of the differentiation policy framework have been achieved?

While community college leaders were asked the following questions:

- How would you describe your organization’s mandate?
• How would you describe the impact of the differentiation policy framework on your organization?
  o What has changed as a result of the differentiation policy framework?
  o How has the differentiation policy framework impacted operations within your organization?
  o What impact, if any, has the differentiation policy framework had on your organization’s mandate?
  o What improvements, if any, have occurred as a result of the differentiation policy implementation?
  o What challenges, if any, have been created as a result of the differentiation policy implementation?

• How would you describe your organization’s response to the differentiation policy framework that was implemented in your jurisdiction? What do you consider to be the reasons for that response?

• Who do you consider to be the most important stakeholders of your organization? How would you describe the impact of the differentiation policy framework on each of these stakeholders?

• When you think about policy implementation in general within your organization, who would you identify as the key decision makers and influencers involved in the process?

Once informed consent was obtained, interviews were held via telephone. Where explicit consent was provided, telephone interviews were audio recorded. Audio files were transcribed within two to three weeks of each interview. A copy of each transcript was then sent to the relevant participant for review and approval. As each transcript was approved, the audio file was destroyed. In the case of one participant, consent was not obtained to audio record the interview. For that interview hand written notes were taken by the researcher during the interview. The transcript of those notes was then sent to the participant for review and approval.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis for this research project included the study of publicly available government policy documents, organizational mandate letters, and strategic organizational documents for all nine
publicly funded colleges initially targeted by the research (Grande Prairie Regional College, Keyano College, Northern Lakes College, Red Deer College, Cambrian College, Canadore College, Confederation College, Northern College, and Sault College). It also included an in-depth analysis of the interview transcripts for all thirteen study participants who completed the entire interview process. Given the small number of interview transcripts requiring analysis, it was not necessary to use specialized analytic software tools.

As previously stated, in order to answer the overarching questions targeted by this study, it was first necessary to develop an understanding of the differentiation policy frameworks in Alberta and in Ontario. It was also necessary to consider the contextual factors that led to the creation of the frameworks, and the intended consequences of the framework. Finally, it was necessary to get a sense of the lived experience as described by community college leaders who had been charged with implementation of the differentiation policy frameworks in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario.

In order to develop this understanding, I approached the data analysis process from several different angles. I began by undertaking a comparative analysis of interview responses on a question by question basis. Results of my analysis of the policy maker interview responses are included in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 provides an outline of the substantive findings that were the result of my analysis of the policy implementer interview responses. Detailed responses to the policy implementer interview questions are found in Appendix 3 of this report.

In addition to the question by question comparative analysis, I also undertook a broad analysis of the collection of interview responses, and of the results of my document analysis, in order to identify relevant themes. These themes were considered through the lenses of new institutional theory and strategic reaction theory. They ultimately provided the insights I used to answer the overarching research questions in chapters 5 and 6.

### 3.6 Methodological Limitations

One of the methodological limitations of this study is the relatively narrow focus of the research. By using the case study method and limiting the scope of analysis to the publicly funded colleges in only two higher education jurisdictions in Canada, the ability to generalize the results is
somewhat hampered. While it may be possible to generalize the results to some extent within other college jurisdictions in Canada, it may be more difficult to generalize them to the broader spectrum of higher education organizations that exist within or outside of Canada (such as the university sector, the private higher education sector, or the college sector in jurisdictions outside of Canada). That said, given Lincoln and Guba’s (2013) suggestion that “transfer to other contexts (that is, transferability) is a decision that can only be made by a potential user” (p. 79), I will leave it to the reader to make that final determination.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

From the perspective of ethical considerations, it is important to consider the concepts of credibility, validity and reliability in developing any research study. While my direct knowledge and experience of the subject matter, and my professional connections with many other practitioners in the field of higher education in Canada can be considered advantageous from a practical standpoint, they can also present a challenge from the ethical standpoint. One of these challenges is the fact that my high level of familiarity with the field of study can lead to a potential risk of bias. As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) point out this type of risk needs to be addressed through conscious “reflexivity, respondent checks or checks by external reviewers of the data and inferences/conclusions drawn” (p. 295). To help mitigate for this potential bias, I engaged external reviewers who were asked to review the research thesis and provide feedback prior to final submission to my thesis committee.

As part of the research process, I also obtained ethics approval from all relevant research ethics boards prior to undertaking the interview process. These included the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics Board of the University of Toronto, the Nipissing University Research Ethics Board, the Ontario Multi-Site College Research Ethics Board, and the research ethics boards for each of the colleges that was ultimately included in the interview portion of the study. In addition, all interview participants were provided with the opportunity to review and validate their respective interview transcript prior to analysis.
3.8 Summary

As previously outlined, the purpose of this study has been to explore the impact of institutions on higher education policy processes, and to provide insights for both policy makers and policy implementers who require strategies to better align policy intentions with policy outcomes. Through a study of higher education differentiation policies as they have played out from the perspective of publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario, I have attempted to identify institutional forces that influence policy makers (political decision makers) and policy implementers (organizational decision makers), and that can have an impact on the results of policy implementation. The study was undertaken through the lenses of new institutionalism, strategic reaction theory, pragmatism and the Foucauldian theory of power relationships.

This qualitative study combined the use of interviews and document analysis to study the impact of differentiation policies on publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario. The goal was to gain insight from the experience at these colleges to help inform effective processes for future policy development and implementation. The case-study approach was used in order “to portray, analyse and interpret the uniqueness of real individuals and situations, [and to attempt] to catch the complexity and situatedness of behavior” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011.p. 129). In the final chapters of this report I will provide my analysis of the differentiation policy frameworks in each jurisdiction (Chapter 4), my analysis of the impact on northern and rural colleges (Chapter 5), and a discussion of my conclusions (Chapter 6).
Chapter 4
The Differentiation Policy Frameworks

As explained in Chapter 3, before beginning to answer the overarching questions targeted by this research study, it is first necessary to develop an understanding of the differentiation policy frameworks in Alberta and in Ontario. It is also necessary to consider both the contextual factors that led to the creation of these frameworks, and their intended consequences. Finally, it is necessary to get a sense of the lived experience from the perspective of actual outcomes, as described by community college leaders who are responsible for ensuring compliance with these policy frameworks in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario.

In this chapter I begin by describing the higher education differentiation policy frameworks that were implemented in Alberta in 2007, and in Ontario in 2013. I then describe my interpretation of the differences between the Alberta and the Ontario contexts, as well as my interpretation of the contextual themes and the degree to which there is alignment between the intended and the actual outcomes of framework implementation in each jurisdiction. I conclude the chapter with perspectives on the key decision makers and influencers that study participants identified as being relevant to the policy process.

4.1 Alberta

In 2007, the Government of Alberta implemented a policy framework entitled *Roles and Mandates Policy Framework for Alberta’s Publicly Funded Advanced Education*. That framework, which remains in effect today, is based on the premise that by more clearly defining the roles and mandates of postsecondary organizations, it is possible to “build a strong foundation that can guide the system and more ably harness our people resources and strategic investments” (p. 1). Although the term differentiation does not appear in the title, the framework does state that “differentiated roles combined with a high degree of system collaboration are necessary to achieve excellence” (p. 1). The framework also establishes the Alberta *Six Sector Model*, which describes six differentiated types of postsecondary organization, and which states that the goal is for differentiation to be “largely based on credentials offered, type and intensity of research activity, as well as geographic focus” (p. 9).
4.1.1 Framework vision, principles, and targeted outcomes

The vision that is outlined in the *Roles and Mandates Framework* emphasizes the importance of the social, cultural, and economic well-being of Albertans. It is focused on the provision of high-quality and efficient programs that have global recognition, and it speaks to the creation of an advanced education system that is “resilient and responsive to learner and economic needs” (Government of Alberta, 2007, p. 2). The framework document also outlines six principles that guide its development and implementation. These principles call for a framework that is accountable, collaborative, anchored in concepts of global excellence and quality, and responsive. They also call for a framework that ensures seamless transitions and the sustainable and effective use of resources (Government of Alberta, 2007, p. 2).

Of these six principles, the two that I consider most relevant to this research study are that of being responsive, and that of ensuring the effective use of resources. Within the framework, responsiveness is described as a context in which organizational “activities will be more responsive to both large-scale and longer-term provincial trends by linking annual business planning processes to information contained in a provincial Alberta Access Plan and Individual Access Plans provided by each [organization]” (Government of Alberta, 2007, p. 2). The Alberta Access Plan is described as a document that will provide provincial level and regional level data on key variables such as “demographics, high school to post-secondary transition rates, affordability considerations, the strength of the Alberta economy, post-secondary participation rates, existing educational attainment levels, and immigration and inter-provincial migration rates, among others” (p. 12). Individual Access Plans are described as documents that will identify the ways in which individual postsecondary organizations “will meet the Alberta Access Plan’s strategic access objectives” (p. 13). The effective use of resources is described as a context in which “resource allocation will be positioned to ensure long-term system sustainability, cost-effectiveness, and return on investment” (p. 2).

In addition to outlining the Vision and Principles of the framework, the *Roles and Mandates* document also describes system outcomes that are targeted by the framework. The framework document states that 70% of new jobs created in Alberta will require a postsecondary education; and that it is therefore “necessary to ensure that Alberta maintains a high level of access and participation in advanced education” (p. 3). The document also suggests that “increasing access
goes beyond creating physical spaces” (p. 3), and that “developing innovative and flexible learning opportunities holds the potential to increase access and capacity, particularly among diverse learner groups who require new ways to connect to learning opportunities” (p. 3).

Ultimately, the Roles and Mandates Framework targets ten system level outcomes (Government of Alberta, 2007, pp. 3-7):

1. Alberta will have a highly educated society.
2. Communities will engage in learning.
3. Albertans will have strong learning foundations.
4. The system will value and build on skills and knowledge.
5. Organizations will foster regional economic development.
6. The system will respond to economic and social needs.
7. Technology will be leveraged to foster learning and research success.
8. Enhanced access to information will support system improvements.
9. Resources will be effectively allocated.
10. The system will foster world class research and innovation.

Some insight into the ways in which the Alberta government would hope to achieve these outcomes can be found in the suggestion that “currently, Alberta’s advanced education system is not well integrated with its community-based learning system” (p. 3). The suggestion that increased partnerships and collaboration would “provide opportunities for innovative approaches to learning, such as alternative delivery, blending working and learning, and valuing and assessing previously acquired skills and knowledge” (p. 3), also provides such insight. Of additional note is the suggestion that “learners do not follow a linear path through learning and into the world of work” (p. 4), and that “with economic shifts, we need to accommodate working-aged adults returning to learning” (p. 4). From the perspective of sustainable and effective use of resources, statements worth noting include the suggestion that “funding models should provide incentives for collaboration and allow [organizations] to respond to provincial and regional needs” (p. 6); and “it is clear that the development and maintenance of a system based upon [organizational] differentiation within the six sectors will require a different model of funding” (Government of Alberta, 2007, p. 6).
4.1.2 Structure of the Six-Sector Model

As previously mentioned, a significant component of the *Roles and Mandates Policy Framework for Alberta’s Publicly Funded Advanced Education*, was the creation of the Six-Sector Model for organizational categorization. Under this model, each of Alberta’s 26 publicly funded postsecondary organizations is categorized within one of six sectors. These sectors include: *Comprehensive Academic and Research Institutions, Baccalaureate and Applied Studies Institutions, Polytechnical Institutions, Comprehensive Community Institutions, Independent Academic Institutions*, and *Specialized Arts and Culture Institutions*. Collectively, the six sectors and 26 organizations are grouped under an umbrella that the government refers to as Campus Alberta. According to ministry documentation, Campus Alberta is a concept that was created in 2002 to formalize and encourage collaboration and cooperation among the province’s 26 publicly-funded postsecondary organizations (Government of Alberta, 2007).

In Table 2, I have outlined the proposed characteristics for organizations within each sector, using the stated goals of differentiation as outlined in the framework. These stated goals of differentiation include credentials offered, type and intensity of research activity, and geographic focus (Government of Alberta, 2007, p. 9). In reviewing the data provided in Table 2, I was struck by the level of similarity that exists among the characteristics of each sector. For example, degree level programming is offered in all six sectors. In addition, other than the level of geographic focus, there is no easily discernible difference between the high-level characteristics of the *Polytechnical Institution* and the *Comprehensive Community Institution* sectors.
### Table 2. Organizational characteristics within the Alberta Six Sector Model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Primary Credentials Offered</th>
<th>Type of Research Activity</th>
<th>Geographic Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive</td>
<td>Comprehensive baccalaureate &amp; graduate programs.</td>
<td>Comprehensive research function (pure and applied).</td>
<td>Sector is comprised of four organizations. Each has a mandate that is province wide and beyond.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic and Research Institute</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baccalaureate and Applied Studies Institution</td>
<td>Baccalaureate degrees in specified areas, certificate, diploma, and applied degrees.</td>
<td>Applied research and scholarly activity.</td>
<td>Sector is comprised of two organizations. One is mandated to serve Northern Alberta, while the other is mandated to serve Southern Alberta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polytechnical Institution</td>
<td>Apprenticeship, certificate, &amp; diploma programs for technical vocations, some applied &amp; baccalaureate degrees in specified areas.</td>
<td>Applied research and scholarly activity.</td>
<td>Sector is comprised of two organizations. One is mandated to serve Northern Alberta, while the other is mandated to serve Southern Alberta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive Community Institution</td>
<td>Apprenticeship, certificates &amp; diplomas, adult high school completion. Some baccalaureate programming, primarily delivered through collaboration with other degree granting organizations.</td>
<td>Applied research and scholarly activity.</td>
<td>Sector is comprised of eleven organizations. Each is mandated to serve a specific region within Alberta. These regions include: Calgary &amp; region, NW Alberta, NE Alberta, Eastcentral Alberta, SW Alberta, SE Alberta, Edmonton &amp; region, Northcentral Alberta, Westcentral Alberta, Eastcentral Alberta, and Central Alberta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Academic Institution</td>
<td>Limited baccalaureate programs. May offer limited graduate programs in niche areas.</td>
<td>Applied research and scholarly activity.</td>
<td>Sector is comprised of three organizations. Each is mandated to serve a specific region within Alberta. These regions include: Calgary &amp; region, Central Alberta, Edmonton &amp; region.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialized Arts and Culture Institution</td>
<td>Certificate, diploma, applied/baccalaureate, and graduate degrees (specified areas only), non-parchment programs.</td>
<td>Applied research and scholarly activity.</td>
<td>Sector is comprised of two organizations. Each has a mandate that is province wide and beyond.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. This table focuses on the stated differentiation characteristics for each sector within the Six Sector Model, as described in the Roles and Mandates policy framework document (Government of Alberta, 2007, p. 9). Individual organizations do not necessarily deliver all the credentials or activities that are possible within a given sector. For a detailed outline of the specific credentials and characteristics of each individual organization, please see the Proposed Institutional Arrangement under the Six Sector Model on page 17 of the framework document (Government of Alberta, 2007, p. 17).
4.1.3 Comprehensive Community Institutions

From the perspective of this research study, the type of organization within the *Six-Sector Model* that is of most interest is the *Comprehensive Community Institution* (CCI). All four Alberta colleges that were initially targeted for inclusion in the study are members of the CCI sector. As such, they are all members of a sector that is said to recognize “that significant benefits arise from strong linkages between colleges and regional economic drivers, including producing skilled workers in alignment with the needs of the regional market” (Government of Alberta, 2007, p. 5). As outlined in Table 2, CCIs are mandated to provide credentials at the level of apprenticeship, certificate, diploma, academic upgrading, and adult high school completion. At the baccalaureate level, the framework specifies that CCIs are expected to primarily offer collaborative programming. It is important to note however, that the detailed description of the CCI mandate states that these organizations “may [emphasis added] provide university transfer (years one and two) and applied degrees” (p. 9). It also states that, “while the priority for baccalaureate programming will be on collaborative approaches, in some circumstances, degree granting will be considered, subject to Campus Alberta system review” (p. 9). According to the framework document, the broad mandate of the CCIs is to focus on providing access to “learners interested in preparatory, career, & academic programming” (p. 18).

The detailed expectations for each organization within the six-sector model are laid out in an official mandate document that is negotiated with and approved by the Ministry of Advanced Education. Table 3 outlines the high-level details found in the mandate document of each of the four colleges targeted by this study. Not surprisingly, analysis of these mandate documents reveals themes that are common to all four organizations. All four focus on elements of access, collaboration, and community linkages that go well beyond the simple delivery of credentials or educational programming.
Table 3. Detailed mandate of Alberta colleges targeted by the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grande Prairie Regional College</th>
<th>Keyano College</th>
<th>Northern Lakes College</th>
<th>Red Deer College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stewardship region</strong></td>
<td>Northwestern Alberta</td>
<td>Northeastern Alberta</td>
<td>North Central Alberta</td>
<td>Central Alberta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Description of mandate</strong></td>
<td><em>Expanding access</em> [emphasis added] in stewardship region by responding to community and regional demand for both credit and non-credit programming. Encouraging and supporting applied research, innovation and scholarly activities.*</td>
<td><em>Increasing access</em> [emphasis added] to learning opportunities for students in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. Engaging in professional development, scholarly activity and applied research.*</td>
<td><em>Contributes to continuous improvement in the lives of students in rural communities. Provides or facilitates access</em> [emphasis added] to a range of adult learning services and opportunities across the College’s geographic service area. Participates in Applied Research, typically with partner organizations.*</td>
<td><em>Facilitates access</em> [emphasis added] to learning. Provides adult learners with opportunities to attain postsecondary education. Engages in applied research, innovation, and scholarly activities. Adopts an international focus.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Credentials and types of programming offered</strong></td>
<td>Baccalaureate degrees (primarily collaborative) University transfer Diploma Certificate Apprenticeship Pre-employment Adult high-school completion Continuing Education Industry Training/Customized programming</td>
<td>Collaborative degree completion University transfer Diploma Certificate Apprenticeship Academic upgrading Continuing Education Workforce Development Industry Training/Customized programming</td>
<td>Collaborative degree Diploma Certificate Apprenticeship completion Pre-employment Adult basic education Adult high-school completion Workforce Development Cultural Awareness Customized employability programming Continuing Education Industry Training/Customized programming</td>
<td>Applied baccalaureate &amp; baccalaureate degrees (primarily collaborative) Diploma Certificate Apprenticeship Pre-employment Adult upgrading Collaborative degree completion Study abroad Offshore educational services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stated approach</td>
<td>Grande Prairie Regional College</td>
<td>Keyano College</td>
<td>Northern Lakes College</td>
<td>Red Deer College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Portal access</strong></td>
<td>Delivery model that encourages other postsecondary organizations to deliver programming on-site, enabling the establishment of collaborative partnerships [emphasis added].</td>
<td>Collaboration [emphasis added] through involvement with education consortia.</td>
<td>All sites equipped with technology for on-line learning and additional student support. Collaboration [emphasis added] with industry, agencies, community groups, local governments, school divisions, and postsecondary organizations.</td>
<td>Collaboration [emphasis added] with school districts, other postsecondary organizations, adult learning organizations, business and industry, community agencies, and research agencies throughout the region. A variety of educational delivery approaches are used: face-to-face, distributed learning, and blended learning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Linkage with community**

| Helps meet the cultural, recreational, athletic, and conferencing needs of the region in partnership with service area, community and regional stakeholders. | Plays a pivotal role in enhancing sustainability within the region by collaborating with stakeholders to support social, cultural, and economic development initiatives. | Contributes to community development, leadership capacity, and vibrant communities. Plays an important role in the communities by providing facilities, leadership, and activities that contribute to the educational, social, cultural, recreational, and economic development of the region. Sponsors Aboriginal cultural events and offers educational programming from the Native Cultural Arts Museum. | Plays a pivotal role in the community by providing facilities, expertise, leadership, and innovation that assist economic, social, cultural, recreational, athletic, and educational development of Red Deer and its surrounding communities. |

*Note.* Table content pulled directly from each organizational mandate document. These mandate documents were downloaded from each organization’s website on September 13th, 2018. The areas of study that are italicized in the table represent areas that appear to be unique to one of the four organizations.

[http://rdc.ab.ca/about/leadership/rdc-mandate](http://rdc.ab.ca/about/leadership/rdc-mandate)
[http://www.keyano.ca/AboutUs/Governance/MissionMandate](http://www.keyano.ca/AboutUs/Governance/MissionMandate)
[https://www.gprc.ab.ca/about/administration/mandate.html](https://www.gprc.ab.ca/about/administration/mandate.html)
4.2 Ontario

In the last few decades, more than one government in Ontario has been concerned with higher education system differentiation. In the early 1990s, the Progressive Conservative (PC) Party released a caucus agenda that called for postsecondary organizations to “diversify, specialize, and capture niche markets” (Shanahan, Jones, Fisher, & Rubenson, 2014, p. 144). Shortly after taking power in 1995, the Ontario PC government commissioned a review of the Ontario postsecondary education system. The resulting 1996 report called for several system reforms, including reforms linked to “system differentiation” (Shanahan et al., 2014, p. 145).

A decade or so later (in the early 2000s) another Ontario postsecondary system review was undertaken by a newly elected Liberal government. This review, led by former NDP Premier Bob Rae, was informed by a mandate which recognized that the Ontario higher education system “must be integrated, articulated, and differentiated [emphasis added] to meet the diverse learning needs of Ontarians” (Shanahan et al., 2014, p. 152). When it was released in 2005, the resulting report made numerous recommendations under the headings of accessibility, quality, system design [emphasis added], funding, and accountability (Shanahan et al., 2014, p. 153).

A few years prior to the development of the 2013 Differentiation Policy for Postsecondary Education, an indication that the government of the day was focused on the need for differentiation within the publicly funded postsecondary system was provided in a speech to the Canadian Club of Toronto. On May 30th, 2011 John Milloy (who at the time was the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities) spoke of his ministry’s intention “to negotiate individual mandate statements with each of Ontario’s public postsecondary [organizations] and to amend funding formulas to focus resources on what each [organization] did best” (HEQCO, 2013, p. 4).

The concept of differentiation within Ontario’s higher education system was also included in a report that was commissioned by the government of Ontario in 2012. “In February of 2012, the report of the Commission on the Reform of Ontario’s Public Services (…) recommended a series of changes to the Ontario higher education system with [organizational] differentiation as a key theme” (Jones, 2013, p. 111). One of the specific recommendations that was made in that report was that the government of Ontario should “use differentiation to improve PSE quality and achieve financial sustainability” (Drummond, 2012, Postsecondary Education section, para 7).
The report further recommended that by 2012-2013 the government should “establish mandate agreements with universities and colleges that provide more differentiation and minimize duplication, (...) reduce inefficiencies and realize cost savings” (Drummond, 2012, Postsecondary Education section, para 9).

In 2012 the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities of Ontario proceeded with the negotiation of the first set of strategic mandate agreements with each of its publicly funded postsecondary organizations. In 2013 the Government of Ontario published the *Differentiation Policy for Postsecondary Education*, which it described as part of the effort to mitigate pressure created by a provincial economic downturn, an expected decline in the pace of enrolment growth within the system, and organizational costs which continued to outpace growth in revenues from operating grants and tuition (p. 5).

### 4.2.1 Framework vision, priorities, and goals

The vision that is outlined in Ontario’s *Differentiation Policy for Postsecondary Education* emphasizes the importance of putting “students first by providing the best possible learning experience for all qualified learners [emphasis added] in an affordable and financially sustainable way” (Government of Ontario, 2013, p. 7). Along with this vision, the framework document also outlines the government priorities that guided its creation. These priorities include social and economic development, high-quality education experience, financial sustainability and accountability, access for all qualified learners, world-class research and innovation, and collaboration and pathways for students.

From the perspective of intended outcomes, Ontario’s differentiation policy framework describes the goals to be achieved, the components of differentiation that are targeted by the framework, the key directions that are intended to help support the differentiation process, and the approach that is intended to be taken to measure success. The stated goals of the Ontario differentiation policy framework are to

build on and help focus the well-established strengths of [organizations], enable them to operate together as complementary parts of a whole, and give students affordable access to the full continuum of vocational and academic educational opportunities
that are required to prosper in our contemporary world.
(Government of Ontario, 2013, p. 6)

Some insight into the context that led to the identification of these goals is found in the suggestion that at the time the framework was created, Ontario was facing a challenging fiscal environment, enrolment growth at the system level was expected to slow “in the near future”, and operating grant funding was also expected to slow (Government of Ontario, 2013, p. 5). The context (as described in the framework document) was one in which organizational costs were seen to be outpacing revenue growth, and existing cost structures were under pressure. To address these challenges, the Ontario government “opted for differentiation as a primary policy driver for the system” (p. 6).

Within the framework document there is also a suggestion that “over time, the government will align its policies, processes, and funding levers with Ontario’s Differentiation Policy Framework to steer the system in ways that align with provincial priorities while respecting the autonomy and supporting the strength of our [organizations]” (Government of Ontario, 2013, p. 6). Ultimately, the framework outlines six components of differentiation and two key directions that are meant to help support the differentiation process (Government of Ontario, 2013, pp. 9-12).

The components of differentiation are described as:

1. Jobs, innovation, and economic development.
2. Teaching and learning.
3. Student population.
4. Research and graduate education.
5. Program offerings.
6. Organizational collaboration to support student mobility.

Insight into some of the ways in which the Ontario government would hope to achieve these goals can be found in the suggestion that organizations “will focus on areas of educational strength and specialty so that collectively they offer the maximum choice, flexibility, and quality experience to Ontario students” (Government of Ontario, 2013, p. 10). It is also notable that the differentiation component related to research and graduate education specifically calls out universities, and that it makes no mention at all of colleges. “This component highlights the
breadth and depth of research undertaken by Ontario universities, and articulates specific university research strengths” (Government of Ontario, 2013, p. 11).

The two key supporting directions that are outlined in the framework focus on strategic enrolment and financial sustainability. These key directions also provide insight into the ways in which government hopes to achieve the goals of the differentiation policy framework. As was the case with the Alberta framework, the intent is for discussions about future enrolment levels to be informed by system level data. “Discussions about future enrolment levels will be part of the differentiation process and will be informed by system-level ministry enrolment projections, demographics, and recent provincial growth planning decisions that affect capacity, including capital” (Government of Ontario, 2013, p. 12). The stated intent is to work with organizations to manage enrolment growth and to help align organizational planning with provincial priorities. It is intended that, “ultimately, coordinated growth and capacity planning will enhance responsiveness to shifting trends in demand and demographics, further helping to protect the quality of postsecondary education (…) while meeting local access needs” (p. 12). From the perspective of financial sustainability, the policy framework document describes differentiation as a “commitment and action toward ensuring financial sustainability at the [organization] and system level” (p. 12). As part of the framework implementation process, organizations “will be expected to provide measures of financial health (…) and administrative efficiency” (p. 12).

In addition to the measures of financial health and administrative efficiency, the framework speaks to the development and negotiation of organization-specific metrics that will be identified by individual colleges and universities. It also speaks to the use of system-wide metrics that will be identified by the ministry and reported on by individual organizations. For each of the six components of differentiation, the policy framework specifies the existing metrics that will be used to measure progress, and proposes additional metrics that “will be developed, in consultation with the sector” (p. 14). The framework also states that implementation of the differentiation policy framework will involve the negotiation and monitoring of strategic mandate agreements with each of the publicly funded postsecondary organizations in the system.
4.2.2 Strategic Mandate Agreements

Although Ontario’s differentiation policy framework was published in 2013, it should be noted that efforts towards achieving differentiation within the Ontario publicly funded postsecondary system were initiated prior to its publication. This work was carried out in part through the negotiation of Ontario’s first round of Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs) in 2012. It is notable that despite the prime objective of the exercise (which was to move the system towards greater differentiation), an expert panel review of the first round of published SMA concluded that they actually “demonstrated a tendency to greater homogenization of the system…rather than greater [organizational] differentiation” (HEQCO, 2013, p. 11). Although the HEQCO report did state that colleges had tended to provide more examples of differentiating factors than universities did, their findings clearly demonstrated that, overall, the SMAs provided little evidence that the system was being driven to a level of differentiation comparable to that in other jurisdictions (p. 11).

With the implementation of the differentiation policy framework in 2013, SMAs were confirmed as the mechanism through which colleges and universities would continue to articulate their “unique mandates, strengths, and aspirations” (MTCU, 2013, p. 17). Based on the new parameters laid out in the 2013 policy framework, all of Ontario’s publicly funded postsecondary organizations were invited to submit updated SMA documents for consideration and negotiation. This process led to the finalization and publication of what are now considered ‘first-round’ 2014-2017 SMAs. In 2017 the ministry once again engaged in the process of negotiating SMA with each of the publicly funded postsecondary organizations in the system. The result of that process has been the finalization of ‘second-round’ 2017-2020 SMA which are now publicly available.

From the perspective of this research study, the publicly funded higher education organizations that are of most interest include Cambrian College, Canadore College, Confederation College, Northern College, and Sault College. Table 4 outlines my interpretation of key elements from the mandate for each of these organizations as defined in their 2017-2020 SMA. As was the case with the Alberta colleges that were targeted by the study, analysis of Table 4 reveals themes that are common to all five of the organizations. These include elements of access, collaboration, and
### Table 4. Key elements from SMA of each Ontario College targeted by the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of mandate</th>
<th>Cambrian College</th>
<th>Canadore College</th>
<th>Confederation College</th>
<th>Northern College</th>
<th>Sault College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community linkages that go well beyond the simple delivery of credentials or educational services.</td>
<td>Meets the needs of northern communities by providing a comprehensive mix of programs, applied research opportunities and cultural awareness. Supporting at-risk learners to succeed.</td>
<td>Comprehensive ...career-oriented PSE and training... assist individuals in finding/keeping employment... meet the needs of employers and the changing work environment... support the economic and social development of local and diverse communities.</td>
<td>Leader in indigenous education... excels in attracting, supporting and graduating a diverse range of learners, while fostering economic and social development in northwestern Ontario and beyond.</td>
<td>To ensure quality, accessible education through innovative programs, services and partnerships for the benefit of our northern communities.</td>
<td>Will be recognized as the pre-eminent student-centered post-secondary organization in the province... unwavering dedication to giving students the tools to reach their goals... will be a cornerstone of the communities we serve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program areas of strength</td>
<td>Health Technology, Media, Civil, Electronics, Mechanical, Power, Instrumentation, Health Miscellaneous, Geology/Mining, Child and Youth</td>
<td>Aviation, Health, Skilled Trades &amp; Technology, Media Arts, Indigenous Teaching &amp; Learning, Culinary, Recreation, Environmental</td>
<td>Media, Preparatory/Upgrading, Social Services, Native Community Worker, Business Management, Nursing Related, Electronics, Mechanical, Resources, Aviation</td>
<td>Community Planning, Social Services, Health Technology, Mechanical, Electronics</td>
<td>Apprenticeship, Trades &amp; Technology, Animal &amp; Human Health &amp; Wellness Sciences, Welding, Electrocl, Mining, Environmental Technology, Emergency Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linkage with community</td>
<td>Dedicated to promoting the power of community and contributing to a thriving and creative learning community. Work in tandem with industry and community partners to drive socio-economic change and support economic and social development of diverse community, locally and globally.</td>
<td>Engage community, business and industry in new models of cooperation. Major economic driver. Major influence for immigration to the region. Applied research hub focused on economic and social development.</td>
<td>Seeks to support access, success and community prosperity through organizational excellence. Major economic driver. Major influence for immigration to the region. Applied research hub focused on economic and social development.</td>
<td>Instrumental community partner. Brings community engagement into a social innovation framework, involving learners directly within communities. Support the development of a highly skilled workforce with a global perspective and an understanding of an Indigenous worldview whether they choose to live and work in northern Ontario, or beyond.</td>
<td>One of largest employers in community. Major economic driver. Major influence for immigration to the region. Applied research hub focused on economic and social development.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Table content represents high-level excerpts from each organizational 2017-2020 SMA document. Attempts were made to focus on elements that align with those outlined in Table 3. SMA documents were downloaded for analysis on June 5th, 2018. Full SMA documents can be downloaded at [https://www.ontario.ca/page/college-and-university-strategic-mandate-agreements-2017-2020].*
4.3 Differences between Alberta and Ontario

Analysis of the higher education differentiation policy frameworks that were implemented in Alberta (2007) and in Ontario (2013), points to several similarities between the two jurisdictions. For example, both jurisdictions adopted differentiation as a policy driver because they were facing increased cost pressures and increased demands from stakeholders, at the same time as they were facing increasing resource constraints. The broad goals and targeted outcomes of both frameworks are also quite similar. In each of the two jurisdictions the stated goals of the differentiation policy framework are tied to the concepts of increasing access, creating a more responsive system that effectively supports regional and provincial economic development, ensuring system coherence, ensuring the effective allocation of limited resources, and meeting high standards of teaching and learning excellence. That said, there are also some significant differences between the two frameworks.

4.3.1 Six-sector vs two-sector model

From the perspective of this research study, one critical difference between the Alberta differentiation policy framework and the Ontario differentiation policy framework is the way in which each jurisdiction categorizes the organizations that make up its publicly funded postsecondary system. As previously outlined, the 2007 implementation of the Roles and Mandates Framework in Alberta resulted in the creation of a six-sector higher education system comprised of six different types of postsecondary organization. In Ontario on the other hand, the basic structure of the higher education system has not changed significantly since the 1960s. “Since the mid-1960s, Ontario has had a binary system of higher education” (Fallis, 2013, p. 1). This means that the Ontario higher education system is comprised of two sectors: the university sector and the college sector.

Since the mid-1960s, only one slight modification has been made to this organizational categorization. In 2002 the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act formally gave Ontario colleges the authority to award bachelor’s degrees in applied areas of study (Fallis, 2013). Under this legislation, all colleges can engage in an approval process for the development and delivery of degree level programming; and can offer up to 5 percent of their total funded programs at the degree level. Colleges can also apply to “obtain the designation of Institute of
Technology and Advanced Learning (ITAL) which allows them to offer up to 15 percent of their programming in bachelor’s degree programs” (Fallis, 2013, p. 29). Two critical points should be noted here. The first is that even if a college is granted ITAL designation, it remains a member of the Ontario publicly funded college sector and retains the same overall mandate as the other organizations in that sector. The second is that the 2013 differentiation policy framework did not include any changes to the two-sector system model or to the categories of organization that make up each of the two sectors.

4.3.2 System level approach vs organization level approach

Another difference between Alberta and Ontario that I consider relevant to this research study is the way in which the higher education ministry interacts with organizations or groups of organizations within the system. According to Clark, Trick, and Van Loon (2011), “Alberta has for many years thought of higher education as an integrated provincial system and has sought ways to make it function as such” (p. 198). This point of view is supported by responses provided during the interview process. For example, according to ABKI, in developing the Roles and Mandates Framework, the ministry was trying to instill the concept that in Alberta, higher education is the responsibility of “a system working together for the benefit of the learners….What we were hoping through the Roles and Mandates was to create that atmosphere not of a hierarchy of [organizations] but rather a collaborative system of [organizations]”. It is also supported by the wording in the policy framework document, by the ongoing existence of the Campus Alberta umbrella, and by the detailed tables and descriptions within the framework that attempt to describe the distinctions and connections among the six organizational sectors. As outlined in the framework document, the government of Alberta recognizes that “differentiated roles combined with a high degree of system collaboration are necessary to achieve excellence” (Government of Alberta, 2007, p. 1).

In Ontario, publicly funded higher education organizations are differentiated as two groups. They are also consistently dealt with as two distinct groups by government (Fallis, 2013). The suggestion that the publicly funded university and college sectors in Ontario are seen and dealt with as two separate and distinct groups is supported by responses that were provided during the interview process. For example, in speaking of the contextual factors that led to the development and implementation of the differentiation policy framework, OKI stated that, “without
downplaying the colleges, at that point in time they were not as much of a concern as the universities”. OKI also suggested that at the time “it was difficult to get the sense of the actual system”. These comments seem to support those made by other study participants. For example, in discussing challenges that were created as result of the implementation of the differentiation policy framework, ON3 suggested that the higher education ministry in Ontario tends to treat colleges differently than it does universities. “I wouldn’t really call it an overt activity at the ministry level, because from what I’ve observed there’s a lot of subconscious approaches to the colleges which I’m not even sure they’re aware of, and that create challenges for us” (ON3). ON3 went on to provide the example of a ministry organized policy forum in which the focus was almost entirely on the universities and “colleges were mentioned a total of four times only”. From ON3’s perspective, this appears to be a “subconscious limitation” that they consider to be “pervasive in the ministry”.

In addition to the challenge created by the two-sector approach in Ontario, the fact that SMA negotiations occur at the individual organizational level, and that they do not appear to be guided by targeted organizational characteristics such as those outlined in the Alberta six-sector framework, is also problematic. According to the 2013 Report from the Expert Panel to Assess the Strategic Mandate Agreement Submissions, some organizations perceived the initial SMA process as a means of “securing incremental resources, and the content of their SMAs was shaped by what they thought would optimize their success in such a competition” (HEQCO, 2013, p. 5). This localized approach to SMA development tends to result in a “bottom-up” process that is unlikely to yield the high-level system dialogue that might be required for the creation of a “more integrated and collaborative public postsecondary system” (HEQCO, 2013, p. 7). In fact, according to the 2013 HEQCO report, the initial “SMAs provided little evidence that [organizations] were driving the system to a level of differentiation that is comparable to that in other provinces or countries” (HEQCO, 2013, p. 11). According to research undertaken by Shanahan, Jones, Fisher, and Rubenson in 2014, the “lack of a systematic approach to coordination and policy making in postsecondary education, and a lack of coordination at the system level”, appear to be a recurring challenge within the Ontario postsecondary system (p. 196). One of the findings of their research was that “no overarching policy framework or plan and no integrative holistic vision was applied to the policy-making process during the period 1985-2010” (p. 167).
This arguably continues to be the case in Ontario. According to the results of SMA analyses that have more recently been undertaken by HEQCO for the Government of Ontario, their approach is still not yielding significant levels of organizational differentiation, or system-level coherence. For example, a 2016 HEQCO report on university differentiation suggests that, while the 2014-2017 SMAs “reflect a stronger alignment between [organizational] aspiration and the evidence of differentiation, it is critical that the next round of SMAs seize the opportunity to move strongly and boldly towards more differentiated missions and strategic pathways” (Jonker & Hicks, 2016, p. 4). A similar HEQCO report on college differentiation that was released in 2018 also suggests “that the trends revealed in the original analysis continue to hold true, but also that there has been little in the way of significant movement toward greater differentiation in the interim” (Kaufman, Jonker, & Hicks, 2018, p. 5). In addition to the observation that organization level trends appear to have been maintained, it is worth noting that once again the Government of Ontario has commissioned two separate reports for the analysis of the university and college sectors; and that these reports were commissioned two years apart from one another. This suggests to me that the Government of Ontario continues to consider the two sectors as separate and distinct from one another.

In both its 2016 and 2018 reports, HEQCO has recommended that the government adopt a higher-level system approach to the process of differentiation. In 2016, Jonker and Hicks suggested that “differentiation works best when coordinated and supported at the system level, with a central hand guiding the development of differentiation between the participating [organizations]” (p. 10). As these authors point out, an organization “cannot say that it is differentiated (or that it will become differentiated) because of a demonstrable feature set or performance achievement” (p. 10). It can only say that it is differentiated by comparing those feature sets or performance achievements against those of other organizations. This same point of view was put forward by Kaufman, Jonkers, and Hicks in 2018. As these authors point out, “by definition, differentiation is a relational rather than an individualistic assessment; an [organization] can be differentiated only in comparison with others” (p. 5). In both the 2016 and the 2018 reports, HEQCO has proposed that “successful differentiation (…) requires a partnership between the province and the [organizations]” (Jonker & Hicks, 2016,p. 10). HEQCO has also proposed that we should “continue to view the topic of differentiation through a system-wide lens” (Kaufman, Jonker, & Hicks, 2018, p. 4). Ultimately, “differentiation for its
own sake may well result in more interesting [organizational] profiles, but it is most powerful when used as a strategy to help achieve shared provincial objectives” (Kaufman, Jonker, & Hicks, 2018, p. 4).

4.4 Context and Outcomes

As explained in Chapter 2, the theoretical lens that has informed and helped frame this study is based on the argument that alignment between policy intentions and policy outcomes will be impacted by the way in which policy directives are interpreted, and by the decisions and choices that are made by organizational leaders who are charged with implementing them. These, in turn, are impacted by various institutional forces. This aligns with the perspective of Lowndes and Roberts (2013) who suggest that “political behavior and political outcomes are best understood by studying the rules and practices that characterize institutions, and the ways in which actors relate the them (whether they are politicians, public servants, citizens or social movements)” (p. 7). Based on these arguments, I suggest that in order to truly understand the ways in which implementation of the differentiation policy frameworks has played out in Alberta and in Ontario, it is important to go beyond the documentation and to consider the contextual factors that led to the creation of the frameworks in the first place. I also suggest that we must consider the intended outcomes of the frameworks as described by individuals who were involved in their creation; and that we must consider the organizational contexts as described by those who were charged with implementing the frameworks in each of the publicly funded colleges under study.

In this section I present my interpretation of the contextual themes, as well as the intended and perceived outcomes of the differentiation policy frameworks as described by study participants. As explained in chapter 3, study participants included two policy makers (who were either ministers, deputy ministers, or highly ranked provincial ministry bureaucrats at the time that the most recent higher education differentiation policies were implemented in Alberta and in Ontario), and eleven policy implementers who hold senior leadership positions within the organizations targeted by this study.
4.4.1 Contextual themes

Analysis of policy maker participant responses brings to light four key themes that appear common to both Alberta and Ontario. These themes include mission creep, perceived system confusion, unhealthy competition, and the need for cost-containment.

4.4.1.1 Mission creep

The first theme relates to a government level concern about mission creep at the degree granting level. In the Alberta context, this was described as a situation in which several colleges “were pushing very, very hard to become universities” despite a lack of data to justify the need for more universities (ABKI). According to ABKI, higher education policy makers in Alberta had access to a lot of data, and from their perspective the data didn’t demonstrate “that level of demand for degree graduates” (ABKI). In the Ontario context, the theme of mission creep was described as a situation in which universities were “trying to get more and more students, and there was a tremendous amount of competition in the sector” (OKI). According to OKI, the pressure to build more professional schools was growing, universities were racing to develop more satellite campuses, and the growth of graduate programs was accelerating. “All universities wanted to add PhD programs” (OKI). OKI also described a context at the college level that sounded somewhat like the context described by ABKI in Alberta. Although OKI pointed out that in their view “the colleges were not as much of a concern as the universities”, they also referenced concerns about the number of colleges that were looking to increase degree granting capabilities. As OKI put it, senior leaders at the ministry were concerned by the fact that some colleges “wanted to become universities. They were wanting to grow the number of bachelor programs, and increasingly taking on the term polytechnic” (OKI).

This theme is one that is well-documented in the literature on higher education differentiation, and one that appears to be tied to the concept of isomorphism. As outlined in chapter 2, Doern (2008) uses terms such as “academic drift” and “vocational drift” to describe the phenomena of mission creep, and refers to them as processes of isomorphism. In an article entitled Barriers to Differentiation, Pizarro Milian, Davies, & Zarifa (2016) suggest that higher education organizations are prone to the pressures of isomorphism (or mission creep) because they have a tendency to seek legitimacy “according to their institutional environment, that is, the norms of
their field” (p. 26). Campbell (2004) describes this as a “mimetic process” in which organizations “copy the practices of other, apparently successful, organizations in their field” (p. 21). These points of view align well with Marshall’s (2008) suggestion that “the degree has gradually become the professional and employment credential of choice” (p. 3). As described in much of the literature, mission creep could almost be considered as “the academic equivalent of keeping up with the Joneses” (Buller, 2015, p. 57).

4.4.1.2 Perceived system confusion

The second theme relates to the perceived need for improvement from the perspective of students’ (and potential students’) ability to understand and navigate the publicly funded higher education system in each jurisdiction. In the Alberta context, this was reflected in ABKI’s suggestion that there was a need “to help every [organization] understand the role they played” within the higher education system, so they could then better serve students as a cohesive system. In making this comment, ABKI stressed the fact that “at the core it was about the learner” (ABKI). In Ontario, OKI similarly suggested that “when you looked at the entire system, including that interplay between colleges and universities, it was difficult to get the sense of the actual system”. According to OKI, there was a perception at the time that students needed help to “more easily understand the system”.

As was the case with mission creep, this theme also aligns with a concept that came to light through the literature review process for this research study. As outlined in Chapter 2, one of the challenges that has been tied to the goal of differentiation in systems of higher education relates to issues of clarity. As Marshall (2008) explains,

As little as 25 years ago, the typical Canadian post-secondary spectrum consisted of two ends with little in the middle. At one end, there was the traditional university with a combined research and teaching mandate and at the other end, was the traditional technical, career or community college with a focused teaching role. (p. 9)

Over the last few decades there has been a growing recognition that changing demographics, and the changing nature of work, have created increasing demands for access to undergraduate degrees. There have also been increasing demands for a higher education approach “that
combined the best of the college model with the best of the university model” (Marshall, 2008, p. 9). As a result, several jurisdictions across Canada have engaged in system redesign initiatives. In Marshall’s view, the result has been the creation of a confusing landscape of organizations offering various types of undergraduate degree credentials. This perspective aligns well with observations made by Clark, Trick, and Van Loon (2011) in their comparative analysis of the higher education systems in Alberta, British Columbia, and Nova Scotia. They specifically point out that in British Columbia, “consumers – be they students, employers, or other universities – could be forgiven a certain amount of confusion. In short, BC may illustrate that it is possible to over-complicate a higher education system” (p. 205).

4.4.1.3 Unhealthy competition

The third theme relates to the perception that higher education organizations were narrowly focused on the need to increase enrolments at all costs. From OKI’s perspective, one of the results of this phenomenon was that students were being pulled in several different directions, and universities with “outstanding areas of specialization and knowledge, with a long history (…) were then being undercut by another program, sometimes geographically not that far away, who suddenly decided that they too wanted to have a PhD in a particular area”. According to OKI, leadership within the ministry felt that “in the general sense competition is good, but it is important that it be healthy competition rather than ‘cannibalization’. At the time it seemed like the universities were all trying to snatch each other’s students away” (OKI). From the perspective of the Alberta jurisdiction, ABKI suggested that there was a feeling within the ministry that publicly funded higher education organizations within the province were not effectively working together for the benefit of learners. According to ABKI, it was felt at the time that there was a need to create “a collaborative system of [organizations] with everybody having a defined role, a unique sense of the important objectives they needed to meet, both within their community, across the province, and nationally”.

In some ways this theme is related to the theme of mission creep (and the concept of isomorphism) as they are described above. As Fisher and Rubenson (2014c) point out, “a trend towards vocationalism in the university sector has coincided with academic drift in the community college sector, leading to convergences in programming and [organizational] functions across systems as well as to competition for resources, students, and external partners”
This theme is also somewhat related to Campbell’s (2004) suggestion that “organizations adopt whatever practices they believe their institutional environment deems appropriate or legitimate regardless of whether these practices increase organizational efficiency or otherwise reduce costs relative to benefits” (p. 18).

In an environment in which organizations find themselves competing for diminishing resources (Constantinou, 2010), and one in which there is a link between funding levels and enrolment numbers, it is perhaps not surprising that organizations find themselves aggressively competing against one another for potential students, even if the cost benefit ratio of that competitive approach is not justified at the system level. This concept is illustrated in an Ontario example provided by Fallis (2013). As Fallis explains, in the Ontario context government funding is primarily based on enrolments at the level of individual organizations, with no special funding made available to incent collaboration between organizations. In his view, one result of this approach is that “both colleges and universities have not found it in their interest (...) to develop significantly more collaborations, despite the clear indication that government wanted this to happen” (p. 142). Instead, they continue to compete for students and for funding.

4.4.1.4 Need for cost-containment

The fourth and final theme relates to the fiscal pressures that were being felt in both jurisdictions at the time. ABKI referred to this contextual factor as “the reality that the funding pot was only ever going to be so big”. ABKI also referred to the ministry concern that “universities are more expensive”, which meant that continuing to increase the number of universities within the system would ultimately not be sustainable. In Ontario, OKI suggested that one of the contextual factors “that was pushing the dialogue was money because we didn’t have an endless supply”.

Based on the previously described themes of mission creep and unhealthy competition, the concerns that were shared by policy maker participants regarding the need for cost-containment are not surprising. They are also clearly referenced in the higher education differentiation frameworks in both Alberta and Ontario. In the Alberta Roles and Mandates Policy Framework document there is clear articulation of the need to create an effective system that “meets the needs of learners, promotes access, leverages capacity, and allow resources to be effectively allocated to provide outcomes with the greatest value” (p. 1). In the Ontario Differentiation
Policy Framework for Postsecondary Education reference to the need for system effectiveness and cost-containment is even more explicit. The opening section of the policy document describes the Context for Change, and states that “existing cost structures are under pressure”; and that “measures that help to mitigate these pressures are needed in order to ensure the continued sustainability of [the] postsecondary education system” (p. 5).

4.4.2 Intended outcomes

Given the similarities between the contextual factors that were described by ABKI and OKI in their interview responses, it is not surprising that analysis of their responses about intended outcomes also highlighted similarities. In both cases, the primary intended outcomes were described as a more student-centered and cohesive system, and an ability to better manage limited financial resources. According to ABKI, it was hoped that the differentiation policy framework in Alberta would result in stronger organizations within a well-defined system that would itself be strengthened for the learner.

We were trying to make sure, with everybody understanding that we were using one pot of funds to fund each [organization] as best we could, to strengthen them within what their mandate would be. And it was hoped to keep some containment of the cost pressures for [organizations]. (ABKI)

ABKI suggested that, from their perspective, “at the core it was the learner, and then after that it was about keeping the system from outgrowing what it could handle”.

These comments are very similar to those made by OKI in response to the question about intended outcomes in Ontario. According to OKI, through development and implementation of the differentiation policy framework, the government was “trying to help students more easily understand the system [and] trying to rationalize resources the best way possible”.

This really meant putting a stop to some of the ambitions that didn’t make sense, which would have resulted in a growth of professional schools and specialized programs that weren’t at a high level of quality and that were spreading limited resources too thinly. (OKI)
According to OKI, prior to the development of the differentiation policy framework in Ontario, “there really wasn’t a framework that allowed us to easily say no to individual ambitions”. From OKI’s perspective, with the creation of the framework, there would be a greater ability to have organizations focus on “what they did best” and see themselves as part of a larger system. As OKI put it, “quite frankly it was a way to say no to different ambitions and try to push people in a more strategic direction”.

From the perspective of differences between the responses provided by ABKI and OKI, I did note that OKI put added emphasis on something that was not an intended outcome of the differentiation policy framework. According to OKI, part of the push back that was received from some students and members of the public, “was sheer panic because they thought that they would no longer be able to access basic undergraduate programming in every region” (OKI). OKI suggested that “there is very much a geography concept that is important and is part of it. Particularly for the college sector which tends to be more in tune with serving the community and local student”. As OKI put it, the biggest confusion seemed to occur in regions like “Northern Ontario where the tradition is to go to the local university for an undergraduate degree”. In OKI’s words,

People couldn’t get their head around the concept of differentiation because of this tradition, I think. The easiest way to help people get their heads around it was to keep the focus on professional schools. It was easier for people to understand and agree with the fact that we don’t need nineteen or twenty-four medical schools for example. When you spoke in those terms people got it. When it came to the undergraduate experience, it was a more difficult conversation.

From OKI’s perspective, what was intended was the creation of a system where everyone had a “standard bundle of programs so that (...) we would have that minimal experience across the board”. According to OKI, “as you specialize more, the goal was to look at [organizational] strengths (...) find ways to encourage them to focus on what they are good at, and have a system where [organizations] complement one another”. Although in this comment OKI is referencing the need to have a complimentary system made of multiple organizations with different
specializations, I would say that there is a critical nuance between the perspective put forward by OKI and that put forward by ABKI.

ABKI seemed to put significantly more emphasis on the *collection* of, and the *types* of, organizations making up the publicly funded higher education system. According to ABKI one of the intended outcomes of the differentiation policy framework was the creation of an “atmosphere of not a hierarchy of [organizations], but rather a collaborative system (…) with everybody having a defined role, a unique sense of the important objectives they needed to meet”. ABKI felt that there was a need “to help every [organization] understand the role they played, without all the [organizations] believing they had to be a university”. ABKI suggested that, “Alberta was very strong in oil at the time, and the majority of jobs were not degree jobs”. ABKI also suggested that, because of that, there was a need to keep the “college and technical institutes system strong in order to supply our workforce” (ABKI). This goal appears to have extended beyond questions of credentials and programming, and to encompass Alberta’s “research and innovation system for both pure and applied research”. In ABKI’s view, the hope was that “by developing the college, universities and technical institutes systems to their maximum strength, [they] could also strengthen each of those arms of research and strengthen what Alberta had to offer”. According to ABKI, throughout the process of developing the differentiation policy framework, the ministry “worked very closely with the entire system trying to have them identify everybody’s roles so that it was clear that it wasn’t a hierarchy, it was a web, and how it would help everybody get stronger”.

While OKI did reference the need to “look at [organizational] strengths” and to “have a system where [organizations] complement one another”, they also gave the impression that universities were top of mind and of central focus, while in the case of colleges the resulting policy framework and intended outcomes just *happened* to apply. For example, OKI suggested that from their “perspective, and without downplaying the colleges, at that point in time they were not as much of a concern as the universities”. OKI also suggested that “while the focus may have been on universities because of the context, the goal and the concept certainly also applied to colleges”.
As explained in Chapter 3, study participants at the policymaker level were individuals who could have held different roles within government (either as ministers, deputy ministers, or highly ranked bureaucratic levels within government). It is therefore possible that any differences in the perspectives provided by ABKI and OKI are related to the fact that they held different roles within the ministries of higher education in Alberta and Ontario, rather than to actual differences between the two jurisdictions. However, I maintain that this difference in perspectives and emphasis does represent an important distinction that could be influenced by institutions, and that may be linked in some way to the current state of differentiation policy outcomes in Ontario. As Clark, Moran, Skolnik, and Trick (2009) have pointed out, “questions about how to distribute different types of postsecondary and tertiary education programming among [organizations] rarely get asked in Ontario, let alone become the focus of serious analysis” (p. 196). I will focus on this argument in more detail in Chapter 5.

Despite this apparent difference in emphasis or approach, analysis of participant responses to the question about the intended outcomes of the differentiation policy frameworks in Alberta and Ontario suggests that in both jurisdictions the goal was to provide students with access to the best opportunities, while at the same time ensuring the effective use of limited financial resources (ABKI, OKI).

4.4.3 Actual outcomes versus intended outcomes

In addition to the questions about contextual factors and intended outcomes, study participants at the policy maker level were asked about the extent to which they felt the intended outcomes of the differentiation policy frameworks have been achieved. Participant response to this question suggests that there is some sense that implementation of the differentiation policy frameworks has led to improvement. However, there also seems to be a feeling that more work needs to be done.

In answer to the question about achievement of intended outcomes, ABKI responded that in 2009, a couple of years after the implementation of the framework, “Mount Royal and McEwan were allowed to start using the word university in their name”. ABKI also pointed out that in early March 2018 it was announced that Grande Prairie Regional College, Red Deer College, and the Alberta College of Art and Design were all granted approval to move towards becoming
universities. ABKI observed that, based on those facts, “it is obvious that the *Roles and Mandates Framework* hasn’t stopped that push to become something else”. In addition to these examples of ongoing mission creep (or continued response to the pressures of isomorphism), ABKI also observed that “there are several other colleges that have really grasped it and become outstanding colleges based on their mandate as defined within the *Roles and Mandates Framework*”. According ABKI, “that has been very good for them”. In this regard, ABKI provided the specific example of a college that has thrived within the differentiation policy framework and has developed its own “regional culture”, despite the fact that prior to the implementation of the framework that same college had been “trying very hard to become located in an urban centre” (ABKI).

In response to the same question, OKI observed that implementation of the differentiation policy framework appears to have had a positive impact, particularly at the level of the university sector. According to OKI, there has been “a more thoughtful approach to satellite campus” creation over the last few years. Speaking of a new university campus that was announced by the Ontario Liberal Government in April 2018 and was slated for development in the City of Brampton by 2022, OKI stated that “the fact that there was an RFP, the fact that there was involvement of the colleges and the universities, and that they were able to put together that process, is a positive outcome I think” (OKI). OKI also shared the perspective that the Strategic Mandate Agreement (SMA) process appears to be working well and helping to push toward achievement of intended outcomes.

At the time that I was in the ministry there was a feeling that the SMA process would need a long time and perhaps we would have different iterations, but I think that just the fact that we are encouraging [organizations] to think about themselves and how they fit into the broader system is a good thing. (OKI)

### 4.4.4 Key decision makers and influencers in the policy implementation process

As indicated in chapter 3, one of the questions that was asked of study participants in the policy implementer category was who they would identify as key decision makers and influencers in the policy implementation process. Of all the questions asked during the interview process broadly
speaking, this is the one that solicited the most discussion and the widest variety of responses across both jurisdictions.

4.4.4.1 Alberta

For example, AB1 responded to the question from the perspective of a senior leader in a publicly funded postsecondary organization charged with implementing government policy. According to AB1, once a government policy is created, there is limited opportunity to influence its implementation. In AB1’s words, once policy is at the implementation stage,

    That’s where we walk the line….Because by that time it’s over, it’s done and you need to implement to the extent possible. So, you line up with the policy and you deliver it. I don’t agree with everything that is going on, but I am a champion of everything that is going on.

(AB1)

In AB1’s opinion, the point at which it is possible to have influence is really in the development stage. AB1 suggests that their job is primarily to inform policy and then deliver it. “I always tell people that I don’t create social policy….I have no role in the creation of policy, other than to inform it before it happens and deliver it when it does” (AB1).

AB3 also suggested that “policy development and implementation impacting the postsecondary sector rests with the Government”. Like AB1, AB3 shared the view that the greatest opportunity for influence lies in the development phase of the policy process, and that “the hope is always that the final policy aligns with what is actually needed to improve the sector as opposed to weighing heavy on the political statement side”. Notably, despite the stated view that the opportunity for influence is greatest during the development phase, AB3 did provide a specific example of positive change that was tied to the implementation phase of the policy process. In referencing the example, AB3 suggested that “we were successful in this change because of our communities”. AB3 also spoke about the importance of paying close attention to the implementation phase of any policy process, and suggested that one of the main challenges with the Roles and Mandates Framework in Alberta is that this has not happened. According to AB3,
Even as you move forward with the best of intentions, you can’t forget to close the loop. Once you put it out there, you need to loop back to see if the policy is achieving what was desired or expected. That wasn’t done with the *Roles and Mandates Framework*. Many of the ‘rose-coloured glasses’ clauses of the framework haven’t been achieved. We are now ten years later and there was never a review to make sure it was playing out as intended. As I previously stated, when the *Roles and Mandates Framework* was being created, I agreed with the intention that it outlined. Clarifying organizational roles to make the best use of resources in serving our learners is a goal that made sense. However, when the framework was finalized it created issues and constrained our ability to serve learners and achieve our true mandate.

This point of view echoes the one that was expressed by AB4. According to AB4, “when the *Roles and Mandates Framework* came out, the idea behind it was good”. However, AB4 also suggested that the idea behind the framework hasn’t been completely achieved yet. AB4 suggested that this may be because not enough attention was paid to the implementation phase of the framework. AB4 stated for example that there had been some expectation that additional funding would be provided to support organizations in implementing the framework.

But the money never appeared. So, it was very difficult for a lot of [organizations] to fulfill their mandate because they didn’t receive the resources to do it. You find that often times, especially with budgetary considerations. They spend a lot of time doing work up front to figure out what the system should look like….So, with all of these wonderful ideas they did a lot of work with the postsecondary [organizations] to come up with a plan, but they didn’t fund it. Most CCIs do the best they can, but they didn’t get the money to follow through on the plans, or the expectations of the mandate. (AB4)
Like AB1 and AB3, AB5 was another study participant who shared the view that every decision in the higher education sector in Alberta is a political decision. “It’s not about having the best argument. It’s not about having the research. It’s not even about having the best data. It’s simply politics and timing” (AB5). According to AB5, the key decision makers in this process “are always the politicians”, while “the influencers are community, students, business and industry. Those are the real influencers of government”. AB5 further suggested that

The President and the Senior Leadership Team in the [organization] are the least influential when it comes to government. When it is an [organizational] ask, it is perceived as the ambitions of some individual who wants to achieve something. But when you marshal students and faculty, and community and school boards, and school superintendents, and the chamber of commerce, and every single mayor and council in the region…that’s when you become influential.

4.4.4.2 Ontario

The responses from Ontario participants were generally similar in nature to those provided by Alberta participants. According to ON1, “the key decision maker is the ministry”, while “Colleges Ontario” and “the unions are key influencers”. ON2 also felt that from the perspective of key decision makers, “the single biggest one is government”. They further suggested that “time will tell whether or not industry becomes a strong influencer as well”. According to ON2,

What we see is that society is becoming a whole lot more influential of its [organizations]. Society is no longer passive and just willing to accept whatever the [organization] provides….Consumers are becoming a lot more discerning and I would equate industry to being a consumer because of our graduates.

Like ON1 and ON2, ON3 also shared the view that government is the most influential decision maker in the policy process. However, ON3 did make the distinction between the political and bureaucratic levels. According to ON3, “at the government policy level I would hope it would be
the Minister or Deputy Minister level that would have the most influence, but I’m not sure that’s the case. I think it’s more at the bureaucratic level”.

From ON5’s perspective, the key decision makers and influencers will depend on the policy, and for that reason “when you’re developing policy you need to have the people in the room who are going to be the most greatly affected by that policy”. Like AB3 and AB5, ON5 also stressed the importance of paying attention to the implementation phase of the policy process.

I also believe that policy should never be left alone. A policy needs to be monitored to ensure that it is achieving what it was meant to achieve. Depending on the policy you’d have faculty, students or even community involved with the development of that policy, and then it does need to be monitored as it is implemented. (ON5)

In speaking of the need to closely monitor the implementation phase of the policy process, ON5 referenced the differentiation policy process specifically.

It’s not unlike the differentiation piece, where I know at least inherently it really was focused on Southern Ontario and the overlap between [organizations]. There is a need I think to monitor what are the unintended consequences with other [organizations]….I don’t believe that monitoring has been a consideration to date. (ON5)

ON6 also referenced the importance of monitoring the implementation phase of the differentiation policy process. “One of the interesting things about the differentiation policy framework is that, because we’re so diverse at the college level across Canada, we are likely to be impacted in different ways by the things going on around us” (ON6). In emphasizing this point, ON6 referenced a series of questions that they believe need to be considered by ministry as they are developing and implementing any policy framework: “How does it address today, but also tomorrow? How is it monitored to ensure that it is achieving what was intended over time? How are these things impacted by who’s in power at the government and ministry level?”. 
4.5 Summary

Based on the review of the higher education differentiation policy frameworks in Alberta (2007) and Ontario (2013), and the review of relevant organizational documents for the publicly funded colleges that were initially approached for participation in this study, I have presented evidence of differences and similarities between jurisdictions. I have also provided an account of my interpretation of the contextual themes that led to the creation of the policy frameworks in each jurisdiction, and the ways in which these intersect with relevant theoretical components of my theoretical framework. In addition, I have presented my interpretation of the degree of alignment between intended and actual outcomes of framework implementation in each jurisdiction as described by participants through the interview process. I concluded the chapter with a description of the key decision makers and influencers in the public policy process, as described by policy implementation study participants.
Chapter 5
Impacts and Lessons Learned

As described in chapter 2, one of the primary drivers of this study is the argument that various institutional forces come into play within the organizational environment of publicly funded colleges as they analyze, interpret, and implement policy directives that they receive from their provincial ministries. This chapter focuses on the ways in which the higher education differentiation policy frameworks have played out in Alberta and in Ontario, based on the lived experience of organizational leaders charged with implementing those frameworks in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario. Throughout this chapter differentiation policy impacts have been identified based on analysis of the interview responses provided by study participants who fall into the policy implementer category in both jurisdictions. Lessons learned have been identified through analysis of policy maker and policy implementer interview responses, as well as the analysis of relevant literature.

5.1 Differentiation Policy Impact

From the perspective of policy implementers, the questions targeted by this study included the following: What has been the impact of higher education differentiation policy on publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario? How do senior leaders within those organizations view the differentiation policies within their respective jurisdictions? Do they consider them to be compatible with their organizational mandates? How have they responded to the implementation of these policy frameworks?

To help inform these questions, study participants were first asked what they considered their organizational mandate to be. Analysis of participant response to this question revealed significant alignment among respondents. Policy implementers in both Alberta and Ontario tended to focus their responses on the key concepts of student access, industry need, and community development, in one form or another. Based on analysis of the collection of responses to the question of mandate, I would say that ON3’s response effectively sums up the organizational mandate of northern and rural colleges as articulated by participants in both jurisdictions.
Our mandate is threefold. One is to provide postsecondary education to students of a vocational nature. The second is to provide support to the industry in our region. And the third is to provide support to our community. I see these as part of the mandate for any college, but it becomes more pronounced in rural communities because your communities are more tightly knit and generally more dependent on your local college for economic reasons. (ON3)

Keeping this mandate in mind, participants were then asked how they would describe the impact of the differentiation policy framework on their respective organizations, who they consider to be their most important stakeholders, how the differentiation policy framework may have impacted those stakeholders, and how they would describe their organization’s response to the differentiation policy framework.  

5.1.1 Impact at the organizational level

In considering what they would describe as the impact of the differentiation policy framework on their respective organizations, participants were asked to focus on what may have changed as a result of the differentiation policy framework, what impact the framework may have had on their organizational mandate, what improvements may have occurred as a result of the framework, and what challenges may have been created as a result of the framework.

5.1.1.1 Alberta

One view that was shared by more than one participant in Alberta was that, in the early stages of its implementation, the Roles and Mandates Framework had a positive impact on the publicly funded higher education system. According to AB1, “in 2007 that differentiation was critical to end the inter-college competition, to establish jurisdiction, to establish breadth and depth of programming because we were all over the board”. Similarly, AB2 suggested that after the framework was implemented, “for the first several years it was very good. It was good to know

1 Detailed questions and responses to the policy implementer survey are provided in Appendix 3.
what our stewardship region was. It was good to know what our role was”. AB3 also stated that when the *Roles and Mandates Framework* was being created, they “agreed with the intention that it outlined”. In AB3’s view, “clarifying organizational roles to make the best use of resources is a goal that made sense”. This point of view was echoed by AB4 who stated that the framework “resulted in more of an agreement to play nice in the sandbox and ask for permission if [one organization was] wanting to deliver something in someone else’s stewardship region”.

Yet despite this positive beginning, over time the impact was perceived to be less and less favorable. AB1 pointed out that after the first few years of positive impact, “every day after that it diminished in value. And it did by restricting our ability to serve our region”. AB2 suggested that after the first few years the framework “became burdensome”. And AB3 felt that when the framework was finalized it created issues that constrained the ability to serve learners and achieve their organizational mandate. According to AB3, the framework “removed any flexibility to provide all of the programming that the people in our community need….It forced us into partnerships with [organizations] that didn’t really understand our mandate or our communities’ needs”.

Interestingly, AB5 referenced the perception that the framework resulted in a positive impact by clarifying roles and stewardship regions, however, it was to point out that even in the early stages the positive impact was not uniform across the system. According to AB5, if you ask some organizational presidents in the system if the framework had a positive impact they would say yes. However, in AB5’s view, all the framework did was “lock up the market for some people and restrict the ability of others to increase their market shares”. AB5 suggests that this limitation occurs because the framework “limits the ability of some organizations to offer degrees”. While other Alberta participants did not specifically reference the market share concept, they did suggest that they are unable to serve all the potential learners in their communities because of the framework. In AB3’s words,

> We’re not allowed to do certain things because we fall into a specific category (…) and that’s wrong. Why does someone in a rural community not have access to the same things that someone in an urban community does? Why does it matter if the program is offered
out of a small college? I don’t see it as appropriate to have a stratified level of service based on rural versus urban context.

Arguably, if community members are unable to enroll in a program at the local college because that college is unable to offer it, then the local college is losing market share.

Ultimately, analysis of Alberta participant responses points to a general feeling that more constraints than benefits have been created by the implementation of the differentiation policy framework in that jurisdiction. In addition to the early year benefits described above, the only other improvements referenced by respondents were the fact that some organizations in the system “have saved resources by not competing with one another on the same turf” (AB2), and the fact that the framework may have led to the creation of valuable strategic collaborations. For example, AB3 referenced a collaboration that was “community driven and community focused, and [that] came about as a result of the conversations that were initiated with the implementation of the framework” (AB3).

From the perspective of organizational challenges that were created by the differentiation policy framework, participants consistently referenced the feeling that the framework has made it harder for them to achieve their access mandate, primarily because it prohibits them from independently offering baccalaureate degrees. As a result, AB1 suggests that “that people in rural communities end up having less access by geography, less access by limited jurisdiction of scope and breadth, and less access by resources”. From AB3’s perspective, implementation of the differentiation policy framework resulted in the need for Comprehensive Community Institutions (CCIs) to partner with other types of organizations for the delivery of baccalaureate programs. That “forced us into partnerships with [organizations] that didn’t really understand our mandate or our community’s needs” (AB3).

AB1 also spoke of the difficulties that arise because they are forced to rely on other organizations for the delivery of baccalaureate degrees within their region. As AB1 describes it, the problem is that the other organizations “defend that service in their own environment, and they’re reluctant to come to our environment and provide it because it’s more expensive and it requires resources that they may feel need to be invested in other priorities”. AB1 suggests that part of the problem is the fact that “the framework doesn’t enable, or support, or nurture, or
incent the intended behavior. Because it is differentiated and they are focusing on their own local priorities, our priorities sometimes get lost in the shuffle”.

In addition to the differentiation policy framework resulting in a “restriction on the roles and mandate on the type of credential offered” (AB5), AB4 described another challenge that was created due to the geographical boundaries that were defined as part of the framework implementation. According to AB4, because of those boundaries, some colleges had to withdraw from areas they had previously been serving but that now fell outside of their stewardship region. In cases where the new organization responsible for serving that community decided they were unable to do so, the community suddenly found itself without service. “That caused political problems for everyone because if you were in one of those communities, you had service and then you didn’t” (AB4). According to AB4, “the folks who weren’t used to delivering outside of their urban centres had no new money to expand”. AB4 suggested that “after the framework was implemented there was (...) conversation amongst the VPAs about cooperating” to serve those communities. However, “without the money, many CCIIs withdrew into their traditional service regions” (AB4).

5.1.1.2 Ontario

Analysis of responses from Ontario participants points to a general impression on their part that implementation of the differentiation policy framework has had little to no impact on their organizations. Initial responses to the question about impact included comments like: “I really don’t think it has had any impact whatsoever” (ON1); and “I don’t think it has driven a huge amount of change” (ON5).

According to ON1, this lack of obvious impact could be “due to the lack of understanding on the part of the ministry as to what the differentiation policy framework actually means”. From ON1’s perspective, “there hasn’t really been much dialogue about what it means. There really aren’t any ministry people who were there at the time of development of the framework that are still around”. When asked if the differentiation policy framework has created any challenges for their organization, ON1’s response was that “there haven’t been any challenges because there really is no enforcement mechanism related to the differentiation policy framework within the ministry”. ON1 shared the perspective that colleges are aware of and understand their mandates,
and that having a differentiation policy framework in place doesn’t change that. “Our decisions are made based on economics and sound business planning rather than policy or politics. In my view we should be encouraged to offer anything that can be substantiated as being in demand, and that keeps us viable” (ON1). Similar comments were made by ON2, who stated that

The first attempt at developing the first Strategic Mandate Agreement (SMA) was a pretty innocuous experience for everybody. We wrote it and felt that quite honestly the government didn’t have a whole lot of interest in it. They didn’t hold us accountable at all to the things that we said.

This point of view was shared by ON2 who believes that despite the implementation of the differentiation policy framework, colleges are generally “trying to remain true to who [they] are, rooted in the community and continuing to be responsive to the needs of the community”. Interestingly, and despite the initial response that the framework has had no impact, further dialogue with each participant did lead to the identification of impacts. Through that dialogue, participants outlined some challenges that are similar in nature to those identified by Alberta participants, and some that appear unique to the Ontario context. As was the case with the Alberta responses, several Ontario participants described challenges that were related in some way to the community college access mandate, and to the mandate of meeting needs within the local community. ON1 presented this type of challenge as a hypothetical one and described it in the following way:

What I find interesting to consider is the fact that if we were to implement [emphasis added] the differentiation concept, our stakeholders would be negatively impacted because it would mean we would have to get out of the delivery of some programs. If you consider our economic context our focus would probably be on mining and health. But there are employers in our region with needs other than those.

Other Ontario participants referenced this dilemma as a current challenge. According to ON2, “the specific direction of the policy framework (…) precludes growth and innovation in
responding to economic drivers and local need”. A similar point of view was shared by ON3 who stated that a “significant challenge has been the negative impact on the ability to respond to changing economic needs of industry within our region” because it has become more difficult to get new program ideas approved by the ministry. According to ON3, their college has come up with creative and relevant programming ideas, “but there is just no way to get them into your negotiated mandate agreement with the ministry”. In ON3’s words, “I think that that is wrong because it goes against our mandate to serve community, industry and students”. Citing one specific example, ON3 explained that the ministry’s “perspective was that it was just too far removed from what we have in our strategic mandate agreement”.

From the perspective of challenges to the access mandate, ON4 suggested that “the framework makes it challenging to continue to meet our mandate of responding to local demand. To meet local demand you have to offer everything….If we differentiate, then we are actually limiting access to education for (…) individuals”. To better illustrate this challenge, ON4 used the examples of business and nursing programs. According to ON4, “if we don’t offer them, then our students won’t have access to them. They can’t just go someplace else to get access. There is nothing available within a reasonable commute”.

From the perspective of challenges that were unique to Ontario participants and not referenced by Alberta participants, ON5 described an issue of sustainability. According to ON5,

We are all trying to find ways to become more sustainable. Differentiation in programming may be important, but you need to be able to replace what you have in order to be innovative and ensure that programs match whatever is happening in industry. You need to also retire some programs. Communities have a hard time accepting when you retire programs. Unless you are launching something new at the same time you will get push back. If the differentiation framework limits the new programming you can develop and launch, then that negatively affects your ability to maintain your relationship with your community and to remain sustainable. The framework really does limit us in terms of that development piece.
Although they framed it a little differently, ON6 also referenced the challenge of sustainability that has been created by the differentiation policy framework. According to ON6, “we now have additional pressures to get out of some of the things that were helping us bridge those funding gaps. Given some of the unknowns, trying to maintain infrastructure, programming, and program mix is going to be an ongoing challenge for everyone”. ON6 also referenced the sustainability challenge in the following comment: “The direction has not changed because we are still an access college, but we are having to be much more specific and strategic about what we are doing…more focused on ensuring long term sustainability”.

Another challenge that was only mentioned by Ontario participants is one related to differentiation policy framework metrics. According to ON4, “some of the metrics that have been implemented as part of the framework have also created challenges. Metrics that apply in the GTA do not necessarily apply in northern communities”. The specific example provided by ON4 was the metric related to graduate employment. In ON4’s view, “a metric in employment will have different levels of result depending on the community. In Northern Ontario we will never be able to match the employment rates that exist in the GTA”.

From the perspective of improvements, only a few were mentioned by Ontario participants. ON3 suggested that the policy framework “should have eliminated redundancies across the sector, in which case public sector dollars would be more effectively spent”. From ON4’s perspective, implementation of the differentiation policy framework has led to the college developing their “new program ideas more carefully”. ON5 also saw improvement in that, in some instances, the policy framework appears to have “made people think a little beyond themselves, and it has made them think about what their relationships need to be with other [organizations]. I’m not sure that would have occurred without the differentiation framework being put in place” (ON5). ON6 referenced the fact that the differentiation process has made the college “kind of stop and take a closer look at how we plan, how we allocate resources, and where we need to be in terms of longer-term sustainability. According to ON6, “it gets you looking up instead of looking down. Rather than looking fiscal year to fiscal year, it has us looking much farther out….At the senior team level the framework has lifted the horizon we are focusing on”.
5.1.2 Impact at the stakeholder level

In addition to considering the organizational impacts of the differentiation policy frameworks, participants were asked who they considered to be their most important stakeholders and what they felt may have been the impact of the framework on those stakeholders. Given the similarities between participant responses about organizational mandate, it is not surprising that the process of stakeholder identification also revealed similarities across both jurisdictions. Learners or students were mentioned by all study participants as being important stakeholders of their organizations. Four participants specified that learners or students were the most important stakeholder of their organization (AB3; AB5; ON3; ON4). For example, AB5 suggested that “the students are the most important stakeholder because they are the ones that directly benefit from our work”.

Other stakeholders that were referenced in one form or another include employers, industry, and community. For example, according to AB2, the most important stakeholders are “the citizenry of our region. The learners and the employers of our region who employ our graduates. We don’t just produce widgets for employers. We focus on helping our students to be educated critical participating citizens” (AB2). In Ontario, ON1 stated that “potential students, current students, graduates, and local businesses and employers” were the most important stakeholders; and ON6 described the most important stakeholders as “the communities we serve. The industry and everyone in the communities”.

While stakeholder identification revealed distinct similarities between jurisdictions, there were differences in the way participants described the impact of differentiation policy framework implementation on those stakeholders.

5.1.2.1 Alberta

In general, Alberta participants were of the view that differentiation policy framework implementation has had a negative impact on stakeholders. For example, AB1 suggested that stakeholders were “impacted by the framework in a very serious way” because of the limits that the framework puts on their organization in the type of credentials they can offer. In AB1’s view, those limits result in a decreased ability for the organization to provide stakeholders with access to the full suite of programs and services that they need. According to AB1, because of that
stakeholders either bear a financial burden by “paying bigger dollars” to access programs and services somewhere else, or they simply “don’t have access” at all. The ultimate result is that it not only costs more for students, but it also costs more for the region because “employers have to look beyond for their people. They’re bringing them in, so it’s a serious cost” (AB1).

This point of view is echoed by AB2 who suggested that employers within their region “have been impacted because when young people from the region go away for university they don’t come back”. AB3 also suggested that the framework has limited the opportunity for stakeholders “to get the education they want and need. It has limited their access”. Similarly, AB5 suggested that different stakeholders have been impacted in different ways. According to AB5, students’ “ability to complete postsecondary education has been greatly impaired by the differentiation policy framework”, faculty “aspirations have been impaired because of their inability to teach in the higher degree levels”, and “communities themselves have been impaired in terms of their economic, cultural and social growth (...) because they are losing students to the larger centers”.

From the perspective of differing and unique points of view, it was notable that not all Alberta respondents believe that the policy framework has had a negative impact on stakeholders. In AB4’s opinion, differentiation policy framework implementation has only had a limited impact. According to AB4, because of their organization’s ability to make programming available using distance technologies they “already, as part of [their] original mandate, had a community capacity building mandate”. As a result, they feel they have been able to continue to meet community and students needs effectively.

5.1.2.2 Ontario

From the perspective of Ontario respondents, analysis of interview responses points to somewhat of a lack of consensus regarding the impact that the policy framework has had on stakeholders. Participant responses range from perspectives in which implementation of the policy framework has had no impact to date, perspectives in which it has had a positive impact, and perspectives in which it has already had a negative impact.

For example, ON1’s response to the question about impact was: “I really don’t think that there has been one”. Upon further reflection, ON1 suggested that the reason there hasn’t been an
impact is because, in their view, ministry has not “thought through what the differentiation policy means” and “there really is no enforcement mechanism” in place. As a result, ON1’s organization continues to “operate the way [they] need to in order to meet the needs of our communities and to remain viable and sustainable”. However, while they do feel that there has been no impact on stakeholders to date, ON1 did share a concern that “if we were to actually implement the differentiation concept, our stakeholders would be negatively impacted because it would mean we would have to get out of the delivery of some programs”. This point of view appears to be shared by ON4 who suggested that “the policy has the potential [emphasis added] to limit access for students”. According to ON4, their organization has “been able to work around that potential for the time being, but it is still a challenge”. Along this same line of thinking, ON4 suggested that the framework “can also limit access for employers. If an employer needs a program that we are not able to offer because it doesn’t align with our stated areas of strength and growth, then that will be a problem”.

For their part, ON2 suggested that the differentiation policy framework has resulted in positive benefits for stakeholders. In ON2’s view, this positive impact is the result of “the introduction of metrics that hold colleges accountable”. According to ON2, “for students, I would say that the differentiation policy is helping us to bring greater consistency and quality to what we’re doing within our [organization]”. ON2 also spoke to a positive impact on staff. “Within our staff it’s changing our culture….We’ve had to step out of our comfort zone, opening ourselves up to evaluation and measurement”. However, in speaking of these benefits, ON2 did point out that they were not sure they were “directly related to the differentiation policy framework being in place”. ON6 also suggested that implementation of the differentiation policy framework has had some positive impact. According to ON6, “it may have provided more support around articulating our access mandate”. ON6 further suggested that

The SMA process with ministry provided us with the opportunity to help them better understand the needs of our stakeholders. It was a two-way street in that it also helped us better understand ministry’s direction and requirements, so we could ensure we were going in the right direction with our stakeholders.
On the other hand, ON3 suggested that the differentiation policy framework has already had a negative impact on more than one stakeholder group. From the student perspective, ON3 suggested that the framework implementation has negatively impacted access. “That forces many students to leave the area to get access to the postsecondary education they are looking for.” ON3 also suggested that industry was negatively impacted because “of the rapid change in technology” in some sectors. According to ON3, “this results in the need to develop new programming that wasn’t in our original strategic mandate agreement”. ON3 further suggested that, because of the differentiation framework, getting that new programming approved by ministry “becomes very challenging”. In addition to students, ON3 suggested that “the community is the other stakeholder that is affected”. According to ON3,

> There is a heavy reliance on the college to go beyond just the absolute training piece that it provides. They rely on us for community activities, for community supports, and for the economic impacts that spin off our postsecondary activity. If the college faces sustainability issues, then most communities will also be negatively impacted at the economic level. The effect is a little more indirect on the community, but it is still there.

### 5.2 Organizational response

Do organizational leaders in Northern and Central Rural Alberta, and in Northern Ontario, consider the differentiation policy frameworks within their jurisdictions to be compatible with their organizational mandates? How have they responded to the implementation of these policy frameworks?

#### 5.2.1 Policy framework and organizational mandate compatibility

As previously outlined, the organizational mandates described by Alberta and Ontario participants were anchored in concepts of student access, industry need, and community development. Analysis of interview responses from Alberta and Ontario policy implementers suggests that there is a perceived tension between the differentiation policy framework in each jurisdiction, and the student access and industry need components of their organizational mandates. For example, according to AB1 every day after its implementation, the *Roles and*
Mandates Framework “diminished in value” by restricting their organization’s ability to serve their region. Similarly, AB3 described the challenge created by the Roles and Mandates Framework as one in which the framework “created issues and constrained our ability to serve our learners and achieve our mandate”. ON2 made a similar comment about the Ontario differentiation policy framework, specifying that in their view “the specific direction of the policy framework (…) precludes growth and innovation in responding to economic drivers and local need”. ON4 also suggested that “the framework makes it challenging to continue to meet our mandate of responding to local demand. To meet local demand you have to offer everything….If we differentiate, then we are actually limiting access to education for (…) individuals”.

These comments point to a challenge of policy incoherence as described by Bleiklie (2000) and Trowler (2014). They suggest that study participants are feeling pressure to narrow the types of programs and credentials that they offer, which is a process that acts in opposition to the policy of access that exists within their jurisdictions. This aligns with Skolnik’s (2013) suggestion that greater differentiation may foster efficiency and productivity at the system or the provincial level; but it may also impede geographic accessibility for students and limit the other benefits of having access to postsecondary education in some communities. Based on their consistently articulated focus on student and community access to programs and services, I would argue that study participants at the organizational level do not consider the differentiation policy framework to be fully compatible with their organizational mandates.

5.2.2 Strategic response

When asked how they have responded to this challenge, and to the implementation of the differentiation policy framework in general, participant responses varied and included examples of what I would describe as acquiescence, avoidance, and manipulation as they are defined within Oliver’s (1991) Strategic Reaction Theory.

5.2.2.1 Acquiescence

According to Oliver (1991), acquiescence is a form of organizational response to institutional forces that can involve behaviors such as imitation and compliance. Actions that Oliver describes as examples of acquiescence, include the act of “obeying rules and accepting norms” (p. 152). In
my view, the organizational response described by AB1 during the interview process aligns with Oliver’s (1991) definition of acquiescence. According to AB1, once a government policy has been developed and is at the implementation stage, the job of senior leaders in publicly funded organizations is to “line up with the policy and deliver it”, even though they may not entirely agree with it. “I always tell people that I don’t create social policy….I have no role in the creation of policy, other than to inform it before it happens and deliver it when it does” (AB1). These comments align well with Oliver’s (1991) suggestion that compliance is an active and deliberate response in which the organization is consciously and strategically choosing to comply because doing so is likely to result in a range of benefits that can include ongoing access to resources and predictability (pp. 152-153). Another interviewee who provided evidence of acquiescence in the form of compliance is ON3. In ON3’s words, “our response has been accepting of the framework. We have worked within the framework. I think we have managed it as well as can be expected”.

Analysis of the strategic documentation of each organization targeted by this study also suggests a high degree of compliance (or acquiescence) with the differentiation policy frameworks in each jurisdiction. In the case of the publicly funded colleges in Northern and Central Rural Alberta, detailed mandate letters provide evidence that the primary credentials offered, the comprehensiveness of the areas of study, and the geographic focus of each individual organization are well-aligned with those mandated by the framework (see Tables 2 and 3 in Chapter 4 for more details).

In the case of the publicly funded anglophone colleges in Northern Ontario, determining compliance with the differentiation policy framework is a little more challenging given the fact that the Ontario framework does not provide specific differentiation criteria. That said, in their Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMA) all the Northern Ontario organizations targeted by this study provide evidence of efforts to align with the policy framework (see Table 4 in Chapter 4 for more details). In alignment with the policy framework, and in accordance with the template provided by government, each has identified their program areas of strength and expansion, the elements that define their approach to teaching and learning, and the ways in which they connect with their communities.
That said, closer examination of the content within those rubrics highlights more similarity than differentiation. Each of the five SMA use similar high-level language to describe areas of focus. Each SMA also includes themes that relate in some way to the concepts of experiential learning, engagement with community and industry, economic and social development, student or learner support, use of technological solutions or flexible learning modalities to increase access, and indigenous education. Within the rubrics of program areas of strength and program areas of expansion, high level categories are used more frequently than specific program titles. For example, these rubrics include broad categories such as Health, Trades and Technology, and Applied Arts. This use of consistent and high-level language within the SMA documents, combined with specific interview responses that were provided by some study participants, are suggestive of organizational responses that align more closely with Oliver’s (1991) descriptions of avoidance and manipulation.

5.2.2.2 Avoidance

According to Oliver (1991), avoidance is a form of organizational response that can include behaviors such as concealment and buffering (p. 152). In this type of response, organizations give the appearance of compliance, while continuing to engage in activity that they deem to be strategically important even though it may not align with institutional expectations. Pizzaro Milian, Davies, and Zarifa (2016) describe this type of response as ceremonial compliance. According to these authors, ceremonial compliance is a hidden form of inertia in which “organizations appear to respond to external coercive pressures without greatly altering their core practices” (p 28).

Certain interview respondents provided answers that were suggestive of avoidance or ceremonial compliance. For example, ON4 stated “we have continued to do the things we feel are necessary for our stakeholders, but we’re being careful of, and have been adjusting our wording to align with the policy where necessary”. ON2 also suggested that despite the implementation of the differentiation policy framework, colleges are generally “trying to remain true to who we are, rooted in the community and continuing to be responsive to the needs of the community”. In Alberta, AB5 similarly suggested that “you need to be smart enough to watch the provincial and federal landscapes and work your priorities in alignment with the stated objectives of their government”. Other respondents provided answers that were more suggestive of manipulation.
5.2.2.3 Manipulation

According to Oliver (1991), manipulation is a form of organizational response that involves behaviors which attempt to co-opt and influence institutional stakeholders (p. 152). As Oliver (1991) describes it, “manipulation is the most active response to [institutional] pressures because it is intended to actively change or exert power over the content of the expectations themselves or the sources that seek to express or enforce them” (p. 157).

In Ontario, an example of this was provided by ON6 who suggested that their organizational response was to sit at the table and make sure that “there was an understanding of our context”. As part of that work, ON6 suggested that they invested significant time and energy in “trying to replace the differentiation narrative with the destination, demand, and access narrative”, and that as a result, “there were no obvious behavior changes that were required”. This approach aligns with Oliver’s position that “manipulation can be defined as the purposeful and opportunistic attempt to co-opt, influence or control institutional pressures and evaluations [emphasis added]” (p. 157). Rather than engaging in activity that could be deemed as non-compliant with the differentiation policy directive, ON6 and their team engaged in tactics that served to “neutralize institutional opposition and enhance legitimacy” (Oliver, 1991, p. 157). They did so by influencing the narrative that was embedded within their negotiated SMA, in ways that served to align the “definitions and criteria of acceptable practices or performance” (Oliver, 1991, p. 158) with their own values and beliefs about the activity they felt they needed to engage in for their stakeholders.

A similar example was provided by ON5. ON5 suggested that their response to the framework implementation was to strategize with their Board of Governors on the ways in which they could differentiate within what they saw as their mandate and their priorities; and then to include those points in their SMA negotiations. According to ON5, they were then able to engage in a dialogue with government representatives that served to strongly embed criteria within their SMA, that they considered to be aligned with their true mandate. In ON5’s words, the result of that negotiation was that “at the end of the day we found the discussion quite useful, but it didn’t mean that we changed a lot”.
In Alberta, the clearest example of the manipulation response was provided by AB5. According to Oliver (1991), “manipulation involves the active intent to use institutional processes and relations opportunistically to co-opt and neutralize institutional constituents, to shape and redefine institutionalized norms and (...) to control or dominate the source, allocation, or expression of social approval and legitimation” (p. 159). When asked how their organization responded to the implementation of the Roles and Mandates Framework, AB5 stated that they had essentially rejected it, “because it restricted our ability to achieve our mandate”. In describing this rejection, AB5 suggested that for the framework to work for their organization it would have required a significant change (one that the organization had been lobbying government for even prior to the framework being implemented). In AB5’s words:

We asked for this change three times in the last thirty years. The last time was in 2007 when this new framework came out….We failed those three times because we were making an [organizational] ask. So, it was easy for government to say no. This time we marshaled the entire community….When it is an organizational ask it is perceived as the ambitions of some individual who wants to achieve something. But when you marshal students and faculty, and community and school boards, and school superintendents and the chamber of commerce, and every single mayor and council in the region; that is when you become influential.

5.3 Lessons learned

What can be learned from the experience of the colleges targeted by this study to help inform effective processes for policy development and implementation? The most important lessons learned from these organizational experiences relate to the unintended consequences that were described by study participants. Some of these lessons learned vary slightly between the Alberta and Ontario contexts, while others are common to both jurisdictions. In this section I will begin by pointing out the lessons learned that I consider to be specific to each jurisdiction, and then describe those that apply equally to both jurisdictions.
5.3.1 Northern and Central Rural Alberta

As outlined earlier on in this chapter, Alberta participant responses point to a general feeling that more challenges than benefits have been created by the implementation of the differentiation policy framework in that jurisdiction. These challenges were described either as difficulties that arose at the collaboration level, or difficulties that arose because of the inflexibility of the framework.

5.3.1.1 Collaboration challenges

From the perspective of AB1, one of the intended outcomes of the *Roles and Mandates Framework* was the creation of strategic partnerships to support the goal of access to programming in all regions of the province. AB1 described this as the creation of “a partnership environment, whereby if I needed a service, I would call one of my sister [organizations] that was differentiated from us and that had the ability to provide the service”. However, according to AB1 this component of the framework has resulted in significant challenges because of the lack of dedicated resources behind it. In AB1’s words, “the problem is that the framework doesn’t enable or support, or nurture, or incent the intended behavior”. According to AB1, the lack of incentives for collaboration has resulted in potential partners defending “that service in their own environment. They are reluctant to come to our environment and provide it because it is more expensive, and it requires resources that they may feel need to be invested in other priorities”. In illustrating their point, AB1 provided the following example:

> There was a point at which one of our partners was facing a resource challenge. As a result, they made the decision to cancel the face-to-face program they were delivering with us….When the partner pulls the face-to-face option, for many of our students they have just pulled the only option. And while the decision is made by the partner [organization] from another community, we are the face of postsecondary education in our community. So, we end up having to deal with the student and community impact and fall-out.

AB3 also described the partnership component of the *Roles and Mandates Framework* as a significant challenge. According to AB3, when the framework was being created, they “agreed
with the intention that it outlined”. However, AB3 also stated that “when the framework was finalized it actually created issues and constrained our ability to serve our learners and achieve our mandate”. According to AB3, the framework put their organization at a disadvantage, particularly in the sense that it “forced [them] into partnerships with [organizations] that didn’t really understand [their] mandate or [their] communities’ needs”. In their view, the result was that “the whole concept of working as a sector didn’t pan out as intended” (AB3).

5.3.1.2 Challenges related to the inflexibility of the framework

Another challenge that resulted from the differentiation policy framework implementation relates to the inflexibility of the sectors that are outlined in the framework. According to AB3, an organization “should be able to be [what] it needs to be to serve the community and the learners. The inflexibility of the framework significantly limits our ability to do what we need to do to”. This inflexibility “in the long run has impacted the ability of learners to access the postsecondary education they need” (AB3). This point of view is echoed by AB5 who suggests that what the policy framework did “was forbid us from moving in a direction that we needed to move to raise participation rates and increase access and opportunity for people in their own region…particularly with access to degrees”.

The inflexibility of the framework also resulted in another unintended consequence. According to AB4, because of the geographic boundaries that are defined in the framework, some colleges had to withdraw from areas they had previously been serving, but that now fell outside of their stewardship region. In cases where the organization that was newly responsible for a community felt they were unable to serve it, that community suddenly found itself without service. “That caused political problems for everyone because if you were in one of those communities, you had service and then you didn’t” (AB4). According to AB4, “the folks who weren’t used to delivering outside of their urban centres had no new money to expand”. AB4 suggested that “after the framework was implemented there was (…) conversation amongst the VPAs about cooperating” to serve those communities. However, “without the money, many CCIs withdrew into their traditional service regions” (AB4).
5.3.2 Northern Ontario

Based on participant responses and document analysis, it would appear that the most significant challenges created by implementation of the differentiation policy framework in Northern Ontario relate to the perceived tensions between the access and differentiation mandates of colleges, and to the lack of articulated differentiation criteria.

5.3.2.1 Access versus differentiation

According to ON3, one of the challenges that has been created by the differentiation policy framework relates to access for students to postsecondary programming. According to ON3, the framework “forces many students to leave the area to get access to the postsecondary education they are looking for”. ON4 similarly suggested that “the framework makes it challenging to continue to meet our mandate of responding to local demand. To meet local demand you have to offer everything….If we differentiate, then we are actually limiting access to education for (…) individuals”. This need to provide comprehensive programming appears to be one of the main reasons why several study participants referenced the importance of being able to deliver degree level programming within their communities. As Fisher and Rubenson (2014c) point out, “accessibility as a policy theme (…) to some extent, in Ontario overlaps with the trend toward ‘academic drift’ in the system” (p. 298). Because of the social and political pressure to comprehensively meet the needs of their local communities, organizations are subject to isomorphic pressures that push them to want to offer the same credentials as universities (ie: the baccalaureate degree).

Other Ontario study participants described the challenge of access as it relates to the ability to provide relevant programming to meet employer and community needs. According to ON2, “the specific direction of the policy framework (…) precludes growth and innovation in responding to economic drivers and needs”. ON3 frames this challenge as one that is also tied to sustainability. According to ON3,

The challenge goes beyond differentiation and touches on the sustainability question. When we look at some of the things we are involved in that differentiate us, it certainly meets the immediate needs of the economy, but that is the challenge. The challenge is
very, very difficult given the changing needs. And the changes are happening so rapidly in the economy….That to me is the biggest shortfall, in that it does not allow for change and growth.

As previously outlined, ON6 also suggested that implementation of the differentiation policy framework has made ongoing organizational sustainability more challenging for organizations. According to ON6, under the framework there are now “additional pressures to get out of some of the things that were helping us bridge those funding gaps”. The pressure to get out of certain areas of programming and services, and the struggle to remain sustainable, can both have a negative impact on access. In ON6’s view, “the direction has not changed…We are still an access college, but we are having to be much more specific and strategic about what we are doing…more focused on ensuring long term sustainability”.

5.3.2.2 Lack of articulated differentiation criteria

In responding to the questions about the impact that the differentiation policy framework has had, Ontario study participants focused primarily on issues related to programs and credentials. This is evidenced in participant responses that refer to difficulties in meeting the access needs of students, and the access needs of employers and communities (including those in Chapter 4 and those in the previous section). Yet, when OKI was asked about the intended outcomes of the framework, they referenced an element that in their words “somehow kept getting lost”. According to OKI, within the differentiation policy framework “there’s very much a geography concept that is important and is part of it. Particularly for the college sector which tends to be more in tune with serving the community and local student”. OKI also suggested that

Throughout the dialogue there was a sensitivity to the geographic challenges of Northern Ontario. There was a recognition that students from those communities needed to have local access to a suite of programs and that, as a result, there may at times be program offerings in the North that didn’t necessarily check off all the boxes, but still needed to be offered.

However, in my analysis of the differentiation policy framework document (Government of Ontario, 2013) I did not find reference to this concept. In addition, the fact that all of Ontario’s
publicly funded postsecondary organizations fill out the same SMA template (with the same rubrics) could potentially contribute to misinterpretation of expectations and requirements. Particularly in a context where the government process of aligning “its policies, processes, and funding levers with Ontario’s Differentiation Policy Framework to steer the system” appears to be incomplete, and in a context where policy implementers perceive a “lack of understanding on the part of the ministry as to what the differentiation policy framework actually means” (ON1). According to ON1, “there hasn’t really been much dialogue about what it means. There really aren’t any ministry people who were there at the time of development of the framework that are still around”. This perception seems to align with Jones’ (2013) suggestion that “in the long history on this issue in both sectors, there is little evidence that the government of Ontario has a clear picture of what sort of institutional differentiation it would like to facilitate” (p. 113).

5.3.3 Broad-based lessons learned

5.3.3.1 Importance of effective communication strategies

While analysis of overall interview responses points to a general feeling that over time the impact of differentiation policy framework implementation has been a negative one, some study participants did provide examples of positive interactions and positive outcomes. It is important to note that almost all examples describing a positive impact also referenced the value of effective communication in some way. As Milian, Davies, and Zarifa (2016) suggest,

> Successful efforts to promote differentiation will likely need to closely align with consumer wants and also work in concert with prevailing mimetic, normative, and coercive forces that are currently promoting isomorphism. Reforms tend to stick and spark change if they are compatible with existing practices and norms. (p. 31)

For such alignment to exist, policy actors need to have a deep understanding of the context within which organizations operate. This level of understanding can only be developed through strong two-way communication. This argument aligns with Weingarten’s (2013) suggestion that “a positive relationship between government and postsecondary institutions is particularly important in turbulent and economically restrained times because it is precisely in this environment when changes, sometimes significant ones, are most likely to happen” (p. 86). It is
also supported by study participant comments. For example, AB3 suggested that “when implementing policy communication is critical”. ON2 also suggested that “government listening to people with operational experience, and then bringing that operational experience into the creation of policy; that would make for a better world as I see it”.

The following are two examples of positive outcomes that were described by participants and that reference the importance of effective communication:

The regional stewardship component of the mandate led to the creation of Campus Alberta Central….This collaboration is community driven and community focused and it came about as a result of the conversations that were initiated with the implementation of the framework [emphasis added] and has been very successful in serving rural learners. (AB3)

We know that we have to consistently make sure that we’re sharing that message when we’re working on proposals or initiatives with the ministry, knowing that not everyone is going to understand the comparison between the GTA and places like Thunder Bay or Sudbury….The SMA process with Ministry provided us with a concrete opportunity to help Ministry understand better the needs of our stakeholders. It was a two-way street in that it also helped us better understand ministry’s direction and requirements [emphasis added], so we could ensure that we were going in the right direction with our stakeholders. (ON6)

In addition to the importance of relevant and meaningful two-way communication, the need for an intentional focus on communication between policy makers and policy implementers is also underscored when we are dealing with northern and rural communities. As AB1 suggests,

For me to have a meeting with the Minister it needs to be planned a month ahead of time, it’s going to cost me a thousand dollars and travel. [Senior leaders] in urban colleges or universities can often contact the Minister on short notice, get a meeting quickly, and can
have a one-hour meeting done within two hours (including travel to and from the office).

This suggestion aligns with Wilson and Poelzer’s (2005) argument that northern provincial regions in Canada tend to be disadvantaged at both the provincial and federal levels because of their status as “sparsely populated regions within provinces rather than autonomous political entities or regions with significant urban populations” (p. 12). Like AB1, Wilson and Poelzer (2005) suggest that policy decisions affecting people who live within Canada’s northern provincial regions are often made in urban centers or “in distant provincial capitals” (p. 12). In AB1’s words, “quite often decisions are made back in the context of the urban setting, with urban power, and with urban access to decision makers”. When these points are considered alongside Clark, Trick, and Van Loon’s (2011) suggestion that decisions (such as those tied to issues like grant distribution) are not always impartially made; and that “a good university president will therefore be in frequent contact with the departmental officials and, especially, the minister” (p. 198), the challenge becomes clear. Arguably, this concept applies equally to good college presidents. It also underscores the access challenge created by geographic distance that was raised by AB1. Without the intentional creation of alternative and effective communication mechanisms, these challenges can be exacerbated.

5.3.3.2 Importance of effective regulatory and resource incentives

Based on participant input, one of the differentiation policy implementation challenges that was faced in both Alberta and in Ontario could be the result of insufficient regulatory and resource incentives. For example, AB4 suggested that one of the reasons the Roles and Mandates Framework may not have achieved all its intended outcomes, is that the required financial incentives were not put in place to support the policy implementation. In AB4’s words, “when the Roles and Mandates Framework came out, the idea behind it was good (…), but it needed clout. There was no clout in the form of money to enact some of the things that they wanted to see happen”. AB1 also suggested that “the problem is the framework doesn’t (…) incent the intended behaviors”. To illustrate this point, AB1 referenced the requirement for collaborative degree delivery that is embedded within the Roles and Mandates Framework. In AB1’s words,
There are financial issues. The resources required for the delivery of partner programs within our college are held and controlled by the partner [organization] because they are the ones that are funded by the ministry for the program delivery….When we are dependent on a larger [organization] for program delivery in our community we can be to some extent held hostage. If their cost pressures change and they need to levy an extra fee on us, we have no choice but to accept the additional cost.

In Ontario, ON1 suggested that “the Ministry has not thought through what the differentiation policy means from a funding perspective”. They also indicated that they still have questions about the details of the framework. For example, they shared questions such as the following: “When the Ministry created the differentiation policy framework, did they just have domestic students in mind? International students? Is there a difference if we look at all of this from the university perspective”? ON2 also suggested that the Ontario differentiation policy framework lacked the regulatory components that could have influenced behavior. In ON2’s words, “initially when I was fresh, I tried to be cognizant of the differentiation policy framework and to work with Ministry to understand and work within that framework. However, there were no obvious behavior changes that were required”. Ultimately, ON2 questioned whether or differentiation would be more possible if public postsecondary organizations “were well funded”.

These comments and questions appear to align with Clark, Moran, Skolnik, and Trick’s (2009) suggestion that, “there is a scope for adding financial incentives (which could, in principle, be negative as well as positive) to support system objectives” (p. 179). The suggestion here would be that in order to incent the desired behaviors (and by doing so, the desired outcomes) policy makers need to develop an understanding of the contexts within which the policy process will play out, and attempt to create regulatory and resource incentives accordingly.

5.3.3.3 Importance of managing the policy lifecycle

As discussed in Chapter 2, it is important to remember that the policy process is not limited to the creation of policy. In considering public policy as a means of bringing about a desired
change, Lowndes and Roberts (2013) argue that, through the lens of new institutionalism, “understanding change requires that we focus upon the interaction between institutions, actors and environments” (p. 143) at every level of the policy process. This concept applies as much to the development phase of the public policy process as it does to the implementation and post-implementation phases.

This point of view is shared by Trowler (2014), who suggests that policy makers rarely consider the need to remain engaged in the process beyond the point of policy creation. Instead they tend to think “that once the hard job of policy-making is done they can send out the finished documents and wait for the results” (p. 31). Trowler (2014) argues that policy-makers need to understand the impact that institutional context can have, and put in place strategies and approaches to try and mitigate that impact if they want to avoid the creation of different policy outcomes in different environments. A similar argument is put forward by Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2012) who suggest that “organizational responses to environmental pressures or changes [are] fundamentally mediated by managerial interpretations”. They further suggest that the ways in which managers “make sense of their environments shapes the strategic choices made and executed” (p. 182). As Musselin and Texeira (2014) point out, “more attention should be paid to how (…) ideas, theories or representations are appropriated, translated, received and therefore lead to different policies in different settings” (p. 7).

This need to pay as much attention to the implementation phase of policy development as the development phase itself is echoed by other authors. For example, Barrett (2004) tells us that “…implementation should be regarded as an integral and continuing part of the policy process, rather than an administrative follow-on” (p. 253). She further explains that “the political processes by which policy is mediated, negotiated and modified during its formulation continue in the behavior of those involved in its implementation acting to protect or pursue their own values and interests” (p. 253).

Analysis of interview responses suggests that some study participants also feel that review and feedback mechanisms should be incorporated into the policy process. According to AB1,

The people who put the policy in place often disappear. Because of that policies don’t tend to evolve when they really need to. We’re
looking at ten years in this framework now and we’re at the point where it needs to be looked at. Every time a new minister comes in work gets under way to review the policy, and then that person leaves and it gets dropped off the agenda once again.

AB3 also suggested that, “even as you move forward with the best of intentions, you can’t forget to close the loop. Once you put it out there, you need to loop back to see if the policy is achieving what was desired or expected”. And AB5 shared the perspective that one of the missing pieces in the Alberta jurisdiction was a mechanism to ensure that the policy framework continued to be relevant over time. In AB5’s words,

What happens is when you start to create boxes and barriers, you don’t enable growth and innovation and change in [organizations]. Because our college in 2018 is not the college we were in 1998 or 1968. So, we’ve grown, evolved and matured as an [organization].

In Ontario, ON5 suggested “that a policy should never be left alone”. In ON5’s words,

A policy needs to be monitored to ensure that it is achieving what it was meant to achieve….It’s not unlike the differentiation piece, where I know that at least inherently it really was focused on [organizations in] Southern Ontario….There is a need I think to monitor what are the unintended consequences within other [organizations].

5.4 Who decides and why it matters

Who decides how policy will be interpreted, and what actions will be taken in the implementation of policy in higher education? Why does it matter? Based on the literature review, and on the interview and document analysis that I undertook as part of this research, I have identified several actors who are involved in the interpretation and implementation of policy in higher education, and who are influenced by a variety of institutional pressures. The reason it matters, and the reason why it is important for policy actors to understand who the
decision makers are at various stages of the process, is because the way in which policy outcomes play out is influenced by the institutional forces actors are subject to.

This argument aligns well with those put forward by Bastedo (2007) and Trowler (2014). According to Bastedo (2007), “in the case of higher education governance, multiple institutions hold sway, each with its own set of embedded values, interests, and shared norms. Legislators, campus and system administrators, and faculty all have institutionalized sets of values and norms that must be negotiated by policymakers in the higher education field” (p. 304). Trowler (2014) suggests that the intentions of policymakers are not the only factors that will affect policy outcomes (p. 30). He further suggests that “improving higher education provision through policy initiatives is a complex and socially mediated affair” (p. 34). Examples of institutional forces that have an impact during the implementation phase of policy development were provided directly by study participants during the interview process. In addition to outlining those examples, I have provided a description of what I will call ‘unspoken’ institutional forces (which were identified based on a combination of interview response and document analysis).

5.4.1 ‘Unspoken’ institutional forces

Before turning to examples of institutional forces that were referenced more directly by participants through the interview process, I will outline three institutional forces that I have observed through this research study.

5.4.1.1. ‘The community college’ as an institution

The first and most important ‘unspoken’ institutional force is the concept of ‘the community college’. As Levin (2017) points out,

“Community colleges have a long history (...) of subscribing to a set of core principles that shape both processes and structures. These include open access, the provision of comprehensive curriculum, community responsiveness, emphasis upon teaching, focus upon students, and access to further education, training, and employment”. (Location 564)
As already pointed out, policy implementers in both Alberta and Ontario provided very consistent responses when asked what they considered their respective organizational mandates to be. In alignment with Levin’s (2017) description of the core principles that shape the processes and structures of community colleges, those responses focused on the key concepts of student access, industry need, and community development in one form or another. This belief about what the role of a community college ‘should’ be is a strong institutional force that has impacted the way in which the policy process has played out in both jurisdictions.

5.4.1.2 MTCU perception of colleges

The second ‘unspoken’ institutional force that I observed relates to the way in which colleges are perceived by the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU). In order to understand the nature of this ‘unspoken’ institutional force, it is important to note the emphasis on the university sector in OKI’s responses. As pointed out in Chapter 4, several of OKI’s responses to interview questions suggest that publicly funded universities may have been of greater concern to government than publicly funded colleges at the time that the differentiation policy framework was being developed. When asked about the contextual factors that lead to the development of the differentiation policy framework in Ontario, OKI stated directly that “the colleges were not as much of a concern as the universities”. OKI also stated that, “while the focus may have been on the universities because of the context, the goal and the concept certainly also applied to colleges”. This suggests to me that the frame of reference for the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities in Ontario at the time, was primarily focused on the university sector.

An apparent lack of ministry interest in colleges (from the perspective of the differentiation policy framework) was also referenced by more than one study participant at the policy implementer level in Ontario. According to ON1, the fact that the policy framework has so far failed to have an impact on colleges could be related to the fact “there hasn’t really been much dialogue about what it means” (ON1). When specifically asked if the differentiation policy framework has created any challenges for their organization, ON2 suggested that after they wrote their first SMA they actually “felt that quite honestly the government didn’t have a whole lot of interest in it”. For their part, ON3 specifically suggested that the higher education ministry in Ontario tends to treat colleges differently than it does universities. “I wouldn’t really call it an overt activity at the ministry level, because from what I’ve observed there’s a lot of subconscious
approaches to the colleges which I’m not even sure they’re aware of, and that create challenges for us” (ON3). ON3 went on to provide the example of a ministry organized policy forum in which the focus was almost entirely on the universities and “colleges were mentioned a total of four times only”. From ON3’s perspective, this appears to be a “subconscious limitation” that they consider to be “pervasive in the ministry”.

5.4.1.3 Implementer frame of reference in Ontario

The third and final ‘unspoken’ institutional force that I identified relates to the interpretation of the differentiation policy framework in Northern Ontario. As previously explained, despite the initial suggestion that the differentiation policy framework has had little to no impact on their organizations, many Northern Ontario respondents did describe ways in which the framework has constrained their ability to successfully fulfill their access mandate, and their mandate of responding to the needs of local communities. For example, ON3 suggested that a “significant challenge has been the negative impact on the ability to respond to changing economic needs of industry within our region”. Even ON6 (who consistently described the SMA negotiation process as an opportunity to “think more critically about how we meet the needs of our community” and an opportunity “to help the ministry understand better the needs of our stakeholders”) suggested that implementation of the differentiation policy framework has made ongoing organizational sustainability more challenging. According to ON6, under the framework there are now “additional pressures to get out of some of the things that were helping us bridge those funding gaps”. In ON6’s view, “the direction has not changed…We are still an access college, but we are having to be much more specific and strategic about what we are doing…more focused on ensuring long term sustainability”.

However, given the stated impressions that the policy framework has no enforcement mechanisms (ON1), that there has been little dialogue with government about what the framework actually means (ON1), that there has been no impact to organizational operations (ON4), and that government has not shown much interest in the SMA process with colleges (ON2), I do wonder to what extent the negative impacts outlined above are tied to interpretations of what is expected by government within the framework, rather than actual expectations. This would align with Johnson’s (2014) suggestion that actual responses to policy directives can “depend on relative interpretations at the individual and management level, and result in different
outcomes” (p. 111) depending on the actors and the context involved. In their interview responses, OKI did suggest that one of the things that “kept getting missed” as the policy was being developed and implemented, was the fact “there is very much a geography concept that is important and is part of it. Particularly for the college sector which tends to be more in tune with serving the community and local student”. According to OKI, what was intended was the creation of a system where everyone had a “standard bundle of programs so that (…) we would have a minimal experience across the board”. There is an apparent disconnect between this statement and some of the challenges that were described by respondents. This may be an area where further study into the reasons for the disconnect would be of value.

5.4.2 Institutional forces described by study participants

From the perspective of examples of institutional forces that were referenced more directly by study participants, during the interview process AB5 described a situation in which their organization was able to change a policy outcome during the implementation phase of the Roles and Mandates Framework in Alberta. In AB5’s words, they were successful in influencing this change because they leveraged the voice of their community stakeholders in a series of lobbying efforts. According to AB5, when the framework was implemented “what it did was forbid us from moving in a direction that we needed to move to raise participation rates and increase access and opportunity for people in their own region, particularly with access to degrees”. To address this challenge, AB5’s organization attempted to negotiate changes to the framework but was initially unsuccessful. However, once they enlisted the voices of other organizational stakeholders, they were able to achieve a successful outcome. AB5 describes the process in the following way:

We asked for this change three times in the last thirty years. The last time was in 2007 when this new framework came out….We failed those three times because we were making an [organizational] ask. So, it was easy for government to say no. This time we marshaled the entire community….When it is an organizational ask it is perceived as the ambitions of some individual who wants to achieve something. But when you marshal students and faculty, and community and school boards, and school superintendents and the
In this example, AB5 suggests that the ultimate decision maker was the politician, but that that individual’s decision was influenced by a series of other stakeholders. These influencers acted as institutional forces and, in doing so, they had an impact on the eventual policy outcome. As AB5 explains, “the key decision makers are always politicians. But there’s a role to be played by other influencers. These influencers are community, students, business, and industry”. This suggestion aligns with Jones’ (2013) argument that “pressure groups have come to play quite an important role in contemporary politics in terms of keeping government informed of the view of group members, as well as shaping and influencing government policy” (p. 101). It also aligns with Blakeney and Borin’s (1998) suggestion that from the perspective of the politician, “we live in a democracy, not a technocracy [so] if a course of action is technically sound but is not acceptable to the public, then it is a poor course of action” (p. 6).

This example also highlights the importance of the Foucauldian concept of power relations, which describes power not as “a structure or a certain force with which certain people are endowed, […] but rather […] the name given to a complex strategic relation in a given society” (p. 236). It also highlights the importance of power relations as they are described by authors such as Barrett (2004), Lukes (2005), and Bastedo (2007). These authors remind us that power relationships are not always evident, and that they are “most effective when least observable” (Lukes, 2005, p. 1). As Barrett (2004) explains, policy processes can be significantly impacted by “the power-interest structures and relationships between participating actors and agencies, and the nature of the interactions taking place in the process” (p. 253), even when these structures and relationships are not apparent. This point of view is echoed by Bastedo (2007) who contends that “power and authority play an important mediating role in the capacity to act strategically” (p. 300). As a result, “the very processes of policy implementation are themselves deeply politically dependent, having both a macro and micro political context” (Barrett, 2004, p. 259). These points of view align well with AB5’s suggestion that “when you marshal students and faculty, and community and school boards, and school superintendents and the chamber of commerce, and every single mayor and council in the region, that is when you become influential”. 
ON6 is another study participant who described a situation where specific policy actors in Ontario had an impact on the eventual policy outcome. In this example, ON6 refers to government employees who were involved in the process at the bureaucratic level, and who had an influence on policy implementation. According to ON6, in the initial stages of policy implementation, their organization struggled with SMA negotiations because the ministry employees involved in the dialogue did not understand the Northern context. To illustrate, ON6 described a situation in which they needed to explain to government employees that their “learners come from communities where they don’t have access to high school”. In ON6’s view, based on the understanding that these government employees had of the ways in which the education system works, which in turn was based on their Southern Ontario urban context, “most of the ministry people didn’t know that and how important the access agenda was”.

The importance of understanding the institutional context of policy actors becomes even clearer when one considers the fact that ON6 and their team were only successful in convincing ministry about their learner’s needs when they were able to access the support of a senior ministry policy analyst who had prior knowledge of, and experience working with, the North. According to ON6, “it was actually the more senior policy analyst who had that background working with the North who was able to reinforce the message we were trying to get across. The irony of it is that we actually had to sell that message, and it would have been much more difficult without her support”. As Scott (2014) points out, “institutions provide the rules of the game, whereas organizations act as the players. Organizations may well assist in constructing the rules, attempting to devise rules favourable to themselves, and they often attempt to change the rules by political or other means” (p. 182). In this case, ON6 and their team were able to change the rules by leveraging the support of a key political actor at the bureaucratic level.

5.5 Summary

In this chapter I have provided an overview of the results of my document and interview analysis. This analysis has pointed to both similarities and differences between the Alberta and Ontario jurisdictions. It has also shed light on the ways in which the differentiation policy frameworks in Alberta and Ontario have impacted northern and rural publicly funded colleges within those jurisdictions, as well as some of the institutions that may be impacting the higher
education policy process within those jurisdictions. In the following and final chapter, I will describe my observations and conclusions.
Chapter 6
Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to explore the impact of institutional forces on higher education policy processes. The project involved a case study analysis of the alignment between policy intention and perceived impact, focused specifically on the implementation of higher education differentiation policy within two of Canada’s provincial norths (Northern Alberta and Northern Ontario). Through examination of the ways in which similar policy goals were implemented in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario, it was possible to identify institutional forces that impacted the policy process in each jurisdiction.

The design and implementation of this study was informed and supported by a theoretical framework that combined elements of new institutionalism (North, 1990; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Thelen, 1999; Peters, 2012; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013; Scott, 2014), strategic reaction theory (Oliver 1991), pragmatism (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000; Duemer & Zebidi, 2009; Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Kaye, 2013), and the Foucauldian theory of power (Foucault, 1980; Mills, 2003). The theories of new institutionalism and power provided the foundation for the central argument of this study: that in order to improve alignment between policy intentions and policy outcomes, policy makers (political decision makers) and policy implementers (organizational decision makers) must be aware of and take into account the institutional forces that impact every stage in the higher education policy process. Pragmatism and the strategic reaction theory provided the lens through which the study was designed, and through which the results were analyzed and interpreted.

This final chapter provides a detailed description of the study findings, a series of observations that may be of interest to those involved in the higher education policy process, and potential areas for further study.

6.1 Findings

What has been the impact of higher education differentiation policy on publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario? To what extent does that impact align with the intentions of those policy frameworks? These are the main questions that were addressed by this research study. As outlined in Chapter 5, perceptions about the degree to which
differentiation policy framework implementation has impacted northern and rural publicly funded colleges, and the nature of any perceived impacts, varies somewhat between jurisdictions.

Overall input from Alberta participants at the policy implementation level, suggests that in the early years of its implementation the *Roles and Mandates Framework* had limited impact on northern and rural publicly funded colleges in some ways, and positive impact in others. During the interview process, participants generally stated that they understood and supported the original intent of the framework. They also stated that at the time of its development the framework made sense. One policy implementer suggested that implementation of the *Roles and Mandates Framework* initially brought about needed changes through the clear delineation of organizational stewardship regions, and the clarification of organizational roles. However, despite the initial positive impact, Alberta policy implementers also suggested that over time the framework had a negative impact and ultimately made it harder for them to achieve their access mandates. At the policy maker level, the perception in Alberta appears to be that some organizations have embraced the differentiation policy framework in a way that is well aligned with the framework’s intentions (which was described as a success), while others have continued to demonstrate a tendency towards isomorphism through the process of mission creep.

In Ontario, the stated impact of the differentiation policy framework was less consistent among study participants than it was among Alberta participants. From the perspective of the ‘policy maker’ participant in Ontario, implementation of the differentiation policy framework has had somewhat of a positive impact, particularly within the university sector. However, from the perspective of ‘policy implementer’ participants, the perceived impact of the differentiation policy framework on northern and rural publicly funded colleges varies from “none at all”, to slightly positive in some cases, and to somewhat negative in others. As discussed in Chapter 5, it is notable that most ‘policy implementer’ participants in Ontario initially stated that the differentiation policy framework has had little to no impact on their organizations. Yet on further dialogue many of them described ways in which the framework has constrained their ability to successfully fulfill their access mandate, and their mandate of responding to the needs of local communities. Even ON6 (who consistently described the SMA negotiation process as a positive one) suggested that implementation of the differentiation policy framework has in some ways made ongoing organizational sustainability more challenging.
Ultimately, despite the variations and nuances in the perceived impact of higher education differentiation policies on their organizations, one theme that consistently came up in both jurisdictions was the tension between differentiation policies and the access policies that organizational leaders see as foundational to their mandates. As discussed in Chapter 5, this points to a challenge of policy incoherence as described by Bleiklie (2000) and Trowler (2014). It also suggests that study participants at the organizational level do not consider current differentiation policy frameworks to be fully compatible with their organizational mandates. As demonstrated in Chapter 5, the organizational response to this challenge has taken various forms, and has included elements of acquiescence, avoidance, and manipulation as they are defined within Oliver’s (1991) Strategic Reaction Theory.

These interpretations, perceptions, and policy tensions appear to have resulted in a certain amount of gap between the intended outcomes of the differentiation policy frameworks and the actual outcomes in each jurisdiction. In Alberta this gap manifests itself in examples such as the May 2018 announcement that Grande Prairie Regional College, Red Deer College, and the Alberta College of Art and Design, were all granted approval to move towards becoming universities. The outcome in this case is one of ongoing mission creep (or isomorphism) as these three organizations engage in a process of “academic drift” as described by Doern (2008). This has occurred despite the suggestion that one of the intentions of the differentiation policy in that jurisdiction was to clarify organizational roles and to eliminate the push by several organizations to become universities. In Ontario this gap manifests itself in examples such as the suggestion by one study participant that no obvious behavior changes have been required as result of the differentiation policy implementation. It is also evident in the results of a series of reviews undertaken by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO, 2013; Jonker & Hicks, 2016; Kaufman, Jonker & Hicks, 2018). The results of those reviews demonstrate that, overall, there is still little evidence that the Ontario higher education system is being driven to a level of differentiation comparable to that in other jurisdictions.

In higher education systems that struggle to meet increasing demand within a context of decreasing resources, we cannot afford to waste time on processes that do not achieve desired results. This research study has brought to light literature and participant insights that could be
useful to policy makers and policy implementers who require strategies to better align policy intentions with policy outcomes.

6.2 Implications for practice

As Fumasoli and Huisman (2013) point out, policymakers in all jurisdictions need to “take into account the real scope of their policies as well as their unintended outcomes with respect to multiple actors and dynamics at work” (p. 165) if they hope to be successful. This aligns with the suggestion that the design of effective public policy must start with the assumption “that interaction is all there is, and proceed by questioning why some kinds of interactions are more successful in stabilizing and reproducing themselves, as well as coping with resistance” (Saarinen & Ursin, 2012, p. 151). It also aligns with the suggestion that “there is a constellation of factors that determine policy-making in ways that are idiosyncratic, complex and dynamic” (Trilokekar, Shanahan, Axelrod, & Wellen, 2013, p. 35).

Smith and Larimer (2013) suggest that “public policy includes the process of making choices, the actions associated with operationalizing those choices, and the outputs and outcomes produced by those actions” (p. 4). They further suggest that public policy is purposive and goal oriented, and that it is the product of a government-directed course of action in response to pressure about some perceived problem. From a pragmatic perspective, this suggests that policymakers need to frame their understanding of the perceived problem (and the context within which it is enacted) through an interdisciplinary lens prior to attempting to solve it.

Based on my research findings, and drawing from the literature and participant insights, I have outlined a series of implications that could inform efforts to improve the alignment between intended and actual outcomes of the higher education policy process. These include the use of comprehensive communication strategies at all points in the policy process, clearly articulated parameters and intended outcomes, appropriate resource and incentive strategies, and frequent review and feedback mechanisms. Each of these elements is described in more detail in the following paragraphs.
6.2.1 Comprehensive communication

As described in Chapter 5, while analysis of overall interview responses points to a general feeling that over time the impact of differentiation policy framework implementation has been a negative one, some study participants did provide examples of positive interactions and positive outcomes. Notably, almost all examples describing a positive impact also referenced the value of effective communication in some way.

As Pizzaro Milian, Davies, and Zarifa (2016) suggest, outcomes that are targeted by policy reforms tend to be more successful when they are well-aligned with the practices and norms that already exist within organizations. For such alignment to exist, policy actors need to have a deep understanding of the context within which organizations operate. This level of understanding can only be developed through strong two-way communication. Trowler (2014) argues that “important processes occur when the audio signal enters the ear and is processed by the brain, [and] when the policy is received and interpreted locally by those charged with implementing it” (p. 18). He also suggests that “this constructive work is […] tacit as well as explicit, unconscious as well as conscious, [and] sometimes unrecognized even by those involved in doing it” (p. 18).

Based on these arguments, it would appear that engaging in meaningful dialogue in order to clarify policy intentions and expectations is a critical element of the policy process. This suggestion is echoed by study participants who consistently stated that two-way communication between organizations and government had been a crucial component of the process in cases where policy implementation had a positive impact.

One way to ensure more systematic and effective two-way communication, could be through the organization of formal and regular dialogue sessions between policy developers and policy implementers (particularly in communities that are geographically distant from Government). One example of this type of dialogue was provided by ON6 who described positive and helpful working sessions that were held with ministry representatives as their organization was working through the development of their first Strategic Mandate Agreement. Another example was provided by AB1 who described the effective system level communication that has occurred as a result of the creation of Campus Alberta. As a means of improving two-way communication, this type of session could be organized by policy makers at strategic points in the policy process. It could also be targeted as training or working sessions.
This observation aligns somewhat with the suggestion made by Pizzaro Milian, Davies, and Zarifa (2016) that in Ontario “the MTCU could ease the pressure of normative isomorphism on (...) administrators by staging system-wide workshops and seminars about differentiation and its potential benefits” (p. 30). At the very least, such an exercise could help to clarify and align the understanding of what the goals of the differentiation policy framework are and how the regional context may impact those goals. By being intentional in providing proactive opportunities for such a dialogue to occur in all regions of each jurisdiction, and at multiple targeted stages in the policy process, policy actors could potentially alleviate some of the geographic disadvantages faced by northern provincial regions.

6.2.2 Clearly articulated parameters and intended outcomes

The need for clearly articulated parameters and intended outcomes as part of an effective public policy process is a concept that is highlighted by certain authors within the literature (Matland, 1995; Clark, Moran, Skolnik, & Trick, 2009). According to Matland (1995), “the failure to specify what is meant by successful implementation causes considerable confusion” (p. 154) during the public policy process. Clark, Moran, Skolnik, and Trick (2009) suggest that

> It all depends on the government developing a clear view of what it wants postsecondary education in Ontario to do and how it wants the system organized to do it….After that, it is important to recognize that providing systematic policy guidance for postsecondary education is a long-term undertaking that requires development of appropriate capacity, structures, and processes. (p. 203)

This concept of developing clearly articulated parameters and intended outcomes is aligned with the need for a comprehensive communication strategy. However, in my view it also needs to be more targeted and more intently focused on the development of detailed policy documentation.

As outlined in Chapter 2, higher education differentiation is a concept that has been debated in different jurisdictions and different contexts for decades. Skolnik (2013) tells us that, over time, the organizational characteristics that have dominated discussions about differentiation have varied. In that time dozens of possible dimensions of institutional and system diversity have been
catalogued, and researchers have struggled to come up with a commonly accepted definition of higher education system differentiation (Skolnik, 2013). It would appear that even as far back as the 1980s, while there appeared to be universal agreement on the desirability of maintaining diversity in higher education, there was also considerable disagreement on how to define diversity in that context, on what the actual level of diversity in the system was at the time, and on whether the level of diversity was increasing or decreasing (Birnbaum, 1983, p. xii). This point of view was echoed by Skolnik (2013) thirty years later in the suggestion that failing to define differentiation in specific terms can easily lead to disagreement about the extent and consequences of differentiation. My observation would be that this can be problematic from a policy perspective and that, in order to reduce the potential for the creation of unintended consequences, differentiation policy frameworks require a particularly high level of precision and clarity.

Based on my review of the differentiation policy frameworks in Alberta and Ontario, it is not surprising to me that this issue was raised by several Ontario study participants, but was not raised by any Alberta study participants. As described in Chapter 4, one of the significant differences between the Alberta and Ontario differentiation policy frameworks is the level of detail that is provided. This is evident in the way that each jurisdiction categorizes the organizations that make up its publicly funded higher education system. The Alberta framework outlines what it calls the *Six-Sector Model* for organizational categorization (see Table 2, p. 49). The *Six-Sector Model* documentation clearly defines the specific differentiation parameters for each type of organization.

The Ontario framework on the other hand, includes high level information about the components of differentiation that it intends to address, but it does not provide details about the specific ways in which individual organizations (or groups of organizations) are expected to address those components.

### 6.2.3 Alignment between desired outcome and approach taken

As outlined in Chapter 4, the stated goals of the Ontario differentiation policy frameworks speak to the importance of building on and focusing the well-established strengths of organizations, and of *enabling them to operate as complementary parts of a whole* (Government of Ontario,
Yet in Ontario, publicly funded higher education organizations are differentiated as two groups. According to Fallis (2013) this distinction between the two sectors is reinforced by a government that consistently deals with them as two distinct groups (Fallis, 2013). In addition, as described by study participants and supported in the literature, SMA negotiations in Ontario occur at the individual organizational level using a standard template for all publicly funded organizations within the system. As explained in the 2013 review of the SMA process, this localized approach tends to result in a “bottom-up” dialogue that is unlikely to yield the high-level system dialogue that might be required for the development of system-level differentiation outcomes (HEQCO, 2013, p. 7).

This is perhaps an area where the Ontario government can compare its approach to differentiation policy implementation with that of the Alberta government which has, “for many years thought of higher education as an integrated provincial system and has sought ways to make it function as such” (Clark, Trick, & Van Loon, 2011, p. 198). As Kaufman, Jonker, and Hicks (2018) point out, differentiation is by its very nature a comparative concept that requires a coordinated system-level approach in order to be effective. Unless the Ontario government adopts a system-level approach to the negotiation of Strategic Mandate Agreements it is difficult to see how it will be successful in achieving the desired differentiation outcome.

### 6.2.4 Appropriate regulatory and resource incentives

Both the literature that I reviewed, and the responses provided by study participants, suggest that implementing appropriate regulatory and resource incentives could help to improve alignment between intended and actual policy outcomes. For example, Brint, Riddle, and Hanneman (2006) suggest that one way to encourage change through policy is to “find effective ways to encourage [organizations] that are ready for change to achieve their aspirations” (p. 247). In the specific case of higher education differentiation policy, Clark, Moran, Skolnik, and Trick (2009) suggest that “if the government wishes to encourage greater differentiation of [organizations], there will have to be both regulatory measures and financial incentives to overcome the tendency to mission uniformity” (p. 179).

In referencing the effectiveness of public policy in meeting the specific needs of northern provincial regions, Hall and Donald (2009) suggest that “one possible solution is to create
geographically sensitive policies or policies with geographic distinctions and to ensure geographical representation in government [organizations]” (p. 19). While it is true in Canada that all regions have representation in government at the political level (provincially through their local Member of Provincial Parliament or Member of the Legislative Assembly, and federally at the level of their local Member of Parliament), this does not address the need to have regional representation at the policy level within specific ministries or government departments. As ON6 pointed out during the interview process, their experience in negotiating their first SMA went more smoothly because one of the senior bureaucratic leaders in government had at one time lived and worked in the North. As they put it, “it was actually the more senior policy analyst who had that background working with the North who was able to reinforce the message we were trying to get across” (ON6). An exploration of current hiring practices within government departments, and the possibilities of working towards diversity of background from a regional representation perspective is perhaps an area that could benefit from further study.

As outlined in Chapter 5, study participants in both Alberta and Ontario pointed to challenges which resulted from a lack of clear regulatory and financial incentives in support of the differentiation policy frameworks in each jurisdiction. As Clark, Moran, Skolnik, and Trick (2009) point out, “because of potential conflicts of institutional self-interests, there are significant limits to what can be achieved through voluntary cooperation, particularly in regard to some of the big issues like allocation of programs and resources” (p. 170). The suggestion here would be that in order to incent the desired behaviors (and by doing so, the desired outcomes) policy makers need to develop an understanding of the contexts within which the policy process will play out, and attempt to create regulatory and resource incentives accordingly.

6.2.5 Frequent review and feedback

The final implication that I will highlight relates to the incorporation of frequent review and feedback mechanisms at all stages of the policy process. As outlined in Chapter 5, the need for this type of feedback process was raised by more than one study participant. It is also a process that has been identified as important to the public policy process by several authors. As discussed in Chapter 2, Lowndes and Roberts (2013) argue that, through the lens of new institutionalism, “understanding change requires that we focus upon the interaction between institutions, actors and environments” (p. 143) at every level of the policy process. This concept applies as much to
the development phase of the public policy process as it does to the implementation and post-implementation phases.

This point of view is shared by Trowler (2014), who suggests that policy makers rarely consider the need to remain engaged in the process beyond the point of policy creation. According to Trowler (2014), policymakers tend to think “that once the hard job of policy-making is done they can send out the finished documents and wait for the results” (p. 31). He further argues that policy-makers need to understand the impact that institutional context can have and put in place strategies and approaches to try and mitigate that impact. Otherwise, the result can be “different outcomes in different locales – because each locale is likely to have a different set of forces and contextually contingent factors driving the reception and response to policy” (p. 31). This point of view is aligned with the one put forward by Musselin and Texeira (2014), who point out that “more attention should be paid to how (…) ideas, theories or representations are appropriated, translated, received and therefore lead to different policies in different settings” (p. 7). Musselin and Texeira (2014) go on to suggest that “the frequent contrast between expected and actual results” (p. 12) is one of the major issues that needs to be addressed when analyzing policy reforms in higher education.

6.3 Potential areas for further study

One of the observations that I have made through my work on this research project, is that the public policy process is a complex and multi-layered one. As Axelrod (2013) suggests, I have come to understand that “numerous elements affect the development and implementation of policy” (p. 2). Although the scope of this project was limited to a small number of organizations in Alberta and Ontario, and input at the policy maker level was limited to a very small number of individuals, the study has generated interesting findings that lead to the potential for further study. Based on my analysis of comments made by study participants during the interview process, and on my interpretation of the literature, I have identified a few areas of potential interest for further study.

6.3.1 Parameters and intended outcomes

One potential area for further study relates to the need for clearly articulated parameters and intended outcomes of policy frameworks, and to the implementation of appropriate regulatory
and resource incentives as an integral component of policy development and implementation. To what extent do practices such as the use of common templates and parameters for all organizations within a system that is targeted for increased differentiation have an impact on policy outcomes? What types of regulatory regimes and resource allocations could be used to incent desired behaviors on the part of organizations that are targeted by specific policies? What relationship exists between the focus of the policy dialogue and the actual policy outcomes within publicly funded systems of higher education? In what ways can and should funding levers be used to improve alignment between policy intentions and policy outcomes within these systems? In the case of the Alberta differentiation policy framework could incentives such as increased levels and types of funding for collaborative initiatives have helped to diminish the push on the part of some organizations to become independent degree granting organizations?

6.3.2 Normative isomorphism

Another potential area for further study relates to the concept of normative isomorphism. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), normative isomorphism is associated with professionalization. Among the forces that can lead to normative isomorphism, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) refer to professional associations which they suggest can act as a “vehicle for the definition and promulgation of normative rules about organizational and professional behavior” (p. 152). When asked who they would identify as key decision makers and influencers in the policy implementation process, ON1 suggested that “Colleges Ontario” and “the unions are key influencers”.

6.3.2.1 Colleges Ontario

Colleges Ontario is an advocacy organization representing the province’s twenty four colleges of applied arts and technology. In their 2018-2021 strategic plan, one of the stated goals of the organization is to “drive a vision that ensures colleges are post-secondary leaders. Colleges will promote a strengthened system of career-specific post-secondary education with enriched opportunities for domestic and international students to acquire highly specialized qualifications that lead to meaningful employment” (Colleges Ontario, 2018, p. 5). In driving the vision for the Ontario system collectively, is Colleges Ontario (and by extension, are the twenty four colleges) fostering the homogeneity of that system? To what extent does Colleges Ontario act as a
normative agent and in what ways, if any, does this impact the implementation of Ontario’s differentiation policy?

6.3.2.2 Unions

As for the union influence, in the Ontario college system both the support staff and faculty employee groups are members of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU). For each group there is one standardized collective agreement that sets out the same conditions of employment at all twenty four colleges. As set out in legislation (Colleges Collective Bargaining Act, 2008), these collective agreements are bargained centrally by the College Employer Council (acting on behalf of the twenty four college presidents), and OPSEU (acting on behalf of the provincial college support staff union and the provincial college faculty union respectively). Through this process the twenty four colleges are once again working collectively (and with one voice) in seeking to define the college system context. The question once again is whether or not this type of centralized process works to foster homogeneity within the system. To what extent, if any, does the central bargaining process impact differentiation policy implementation?

6.3.3 Northern community colleges partnership

One more area of potential interest for further study relates to the concept of policy incoherence (or policy tensions) and is very specific to the Ontario context. During the interview process one of the Ontario study participants referenced an initiative called the Northern Community Colleges Partnership (NCCP). NCCP is an initiative that is funded by government and that is designed to increase access to programming in Ontario’s provincial north. The observation was made that there is an apparent tension between the access goals of the NCCP (which is funded by government), and the goals of Ontario’s differentiation policy framework. In my view, there would be value in undertaking research to better understand the structure and context of NCCP as it relates to the Ontario differentiation policy framework, and the degree of policy tension or alignment that it represents. Is this really an example of policy incoherence, or is it an example of a differentiated approach to higher education delivery that aligns well with the differentiation policy framework? To what extent does it meet the criteria or the intended outcomes of the Ontario differentiation policy framework from the perspective of government? There would also be value in studying the overall impact of the NCCP and determining if there are any lessons that
can be learned from this initiative to help inform other Canadian provinces that may be struggling to ensure higher education access in the sparsely populated northern regions of their jurisdictions.

6.3.4 Relevance of differentiation to the Ontario college sector

The two final areas that I would like to highlight for potential further study are based on references found in the literature. The first relates to Clark, Moran, Skolnik, and Trick’s (2009) suggestion that

There has been almost no study of whether the effectiveness of Ontario’s college sector (…) could be increased by institutional differentiation. Nor has there been any study identifying the extent to which various colleges have attained strengths in particular areas that could provide a foundation for policies aimed at achieving the benefits of formal [organizational] differentiation. (p. 174)

This suggestion, combined with the suggestion by Ontario study participants that colleges (particularly northern and rural colleges) were never really the focus of the differentiation policy framework in the first place, suggest that further study in this area would be beneficial to the Ontario government as it continues to seek ways to achieve meaningful higher education system differentiation. In order to design a higher education system that effectively meets the complex needs of the province, it is necessary to consider the entire higher education sector as one unit (or system). This argument aligns with Fallis’ (2013) suggestion that “if there is to be change from the patterns of the current system, there will have to be a stronger government vision of the entire system” (p. 264). As recommended by HEQCO in both its 2016 and 2018 reports on the state of higher education differentiation within Ontario, there is a need for government to adopt a higher-level system approach to the process of differentiation (Jonker & Hicks, 2016; Kaufman, Jonker, & Hicks, 2018).

6.3.5 Mission creep in Alberta

The final potential area for further study that I would like to highlight is based on Clark, Trick, and VanLoon’s (2011) suggestion that “Alberta will be a good laboratory for seeing whether
mission creep can be avoided” (p. 199). In making this suggestion, these authors were referencing the recently implemented *Roles and Mandates Framework* and alluding to the fact that neither Grant MacEwan nor Mount Royal University were in the business of delivering graduate degrees at the time, “even though, at Mount Royal, 80 percent of faculty [were] in the teaching and research category” (p. 199). The question in their minds at the time was whether the framework would be successful in slowing or eliminating the challenge of mission creep within Alberta’s publicly funded postsecondary organizations over time. A quick look at the websites of both organizations would suggest that neither offers graduate degrees to this day. This in turn suggests that mission creep has been avoided in that regard. However, it is important to note that Grande Prairie Regional College (GPRC), Red Deer College (RDC), and the Alberta College of Art and Design (ACAD), were all recently granted approval to move towards becoming universities (although there has been little information shared to date about what that may mean from a practical or regulatory perspective). Under the *Roles and Mandates Framework*, both GPRC and RDC are currently categorized as Comprehensive Community Colleges (CCI). There could be value in undertaking in depth research into the current status of all organizations that are included in the Alberta *Roles and Mandate Framework*, including the relevance and impact of the recent changes at GPRC, RDC and ACAD, from a differentiation policy and mission creep perspective.

### 6.4 Conclusion

Ultimately, the creation and implementation of public policy is the result of a series of choices and decisions, both on the part of those responsible for making policy, and on the part of organizational leaders who are responsible for implementing policy. Choices about which policy directives are required, and the ways in which policy directives are defined, interpreted, and acted upon, will depend on *who* is making those choices and decisions. They will also depend on the interactions that occur between those individuals and their environments. These arguments are supported by theorists such as Trowler (2014), who suggests that policy texts are “encoded” through processes of “negotiation, compromise, and the exercise of power. As a result, these policy texts are usually laden with multiple agendas, attitudes, values and sets of meanings” (p. 25).
The results of this study support the argument that institutional forces come into play as policy is articulated in the form of legislative frameworks and directives, and as these frameworks and directives are analyzed, interpreted, and implemented by organizational leaders. Some of the institutional forces that have come to light through this research include norms, values, and beliefs. For example, Campbell (2004) points out that convictions about what constitutes good public policy and good government are factors that influence decision making. According to Campbell (2004), this point of view is shared by organizational theorists who suggest that “a logic of appropriateness may be just as important as a logic of instrumentality” (p. 27) within the organizational context. The examples of ‘unspoken’ institutional forces that I provided in chapter 5 point to the impact of beliefs and values on the public policy process. This includes OKI’s belief that a policy directive that is designed to address challenges within the university sector can also apply to the college sector in Ontario.

Other institutional forces that have come to light are related to the concept of agency and power. These institutional forces are also based on norms, values, and beliefs, but they are brought to bear by specific actors within institutionalized environments. These include institutional actors such as community stakeholders (including student groups, faculty groups, local politicians, and others). Key to the influence that these actors exert on the public policy process are their own beliefs and expectations regarding concepts such as ‘truth’ and ‘legitimacy’, and the relationships they have with various decision makers involved in the public policy process. These beliefs and expectations are in turn influenced by those actors’ membership in institutionalized organizations such as political parties, professions, legislatures, accrediting bodies, bureaucracies and others. Under the influence of these institutional forces, “organizational action becomes a reflection of the perspectives defined by a group of members which comprise the institutional environment….Action is not a choice out of unlimited possibilities but rather among a narrowly defined set of legitimate options” (Wooten & Hoffman, 2008, p. 130). According to Eddy (2013), “community college scholars need to focus on critiques of underlying causes that contribute to organizational outcomes and recognize the sources of power and control” (p.131). Lowndes and Robert (2013) also suggest that “without examining the full range of possibilities for actors’ motivation, the political analyst not only fails to understand the intent of the actors themselves, but also fails to understand the core business of institutionalism – institutions themselves” (p. 13).
According to Clark (2007), researchers sometimes “aim too high and attempt to explain too much”, while practitioners sometimes “aim too low and fall into ad hoc discussions” (p. 319). With this research I have strived to achieve a balance between these two extremes by engaging in work that is founded in strong theoretical foundations and sound research methodology, while at the same time provides practical insights that can help inform effective practice. As a current practitioner within the Canadian higher education system, I have first-hand experience with the frustration of investing time, energy, and resources into policy strategies that fail to adequately achieve desired outcomes. I believe strongly that for policy makers and policy implementers who are attempting to achieve specific goals in systems of higher education, the level of complexity that defines those systems turns the need for sound strategy into a practical imperative. If policies are poorly designed, or even if they are wonderfully designed but they don’t take into consideration the institutional forces that are at play within the organizations that develop, interpret, and implement them, then we are all wasting our time…and at the end of the day, none of us has any time to waste.
References


Appendix 1 – Operational Definitions

**Actor:** Throughout this study, actor is a term that is used to refer to individuals, or groups of individuals who have agency, who either work or study in higher education, and who may try to influence its functioning.

**Institution:** Throughout this study, the term institution refers to “the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (North, 1990, p. 3). Institutions (or institutional forces) are ideologies, value systems, frames of reference, or perspectives on the way things ‘ought to be’. It is important to note that throughout much of the literature, and throughout most of the interviews, authors and participants tended to use the term ‘institution’ to refer to what this study refers to as ‘organizations’. To ensure better clarity I have replaced the term ‘institution’ with the term [organization] in all quotes and references.

**Isomorphism:** Isomorphism is a term that is used to describe the tendency of organizations within higher education to become more alike (vanVught, 2018).

**New institutionalism:** New institutionalism is a framework that began to emerge in the 1970s and that is based on the notion that much of what happens inside organizations has little to do with their objective tasks, and much more to do with the social relationships in which they are embedded (Palmer, Biggart & Dick, 2013).

**Organization:** Organization refers to a group of individuals bound by some common purpose to achieve objectives (North, 1990). An organization is an entity that exist within a legal and structural framework. Throughout this study the term organization is used to specify individual colleges or universities.

**Stakeholder:** In this study I use the term stakeholder to refer to any individual, or group of individuals, who can affect or who are affected by the work or achievements of a ministry, a publicly funded college, or a publicly funded university.
Appendix 2 – Participant Recruitment Tools

A. Phase 1 Email Introduction: College President

Dear President XXXX,

My name is Laurie-Anne Rancourt and I am a PhD student at the University of Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) studying in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education. I am also the Senior Vice-President Academic at Humber College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning. I am currently pursuing my thesis research under the supervision of Dr. Creso Sa.

The main purpose of my research study is to analyze the impact of higher education differentiation policies on publicly funded northern rural colleges in Alberta and Ontario. The title of my study is: **Who Decides and Why it Matters: Institutions, Differentiation and Northern Rural Higher Education**

I am reaching out to you today to request the participation of XXX College in this study. Participation in the study would involve a preliminary interview with you in your role as President of the organization. This initial interview would take approximately 60 minutes and would be conducted by phone.

During this initial interview, you would be requested to identify senior leadership team members within your organization who you consider to be responsible for interpreting and implementing public higher education policy, as well as the academic deans within your college who you consider to have been most impacted by the implementation of differentiation policies within your jurisdiction. You will also be asked to identify key informants who were involved at the policy development level within your jurisdiction at the time of the development and implementation of the differentiation policies targeted by this study2.

Follow-up interviews would then be held with those individuals either by telephone, on-site at your

college, or on-site at a location that is convenient to each participant should they individually consent to participate in the study. It is important to note that participation in this study will remain voluntary for all key informants that you identify and that the identity of all study participants will remain confidential. As such, you will not be made aware at any time, during or after the study, of who has and who has not participated.

I believe that through participation in a study focused on policy implications for northern rural publicly funded colleges, you will have the opportunity to help shed light on some of the ways in which broad based policies established by policy makers in large urban centres may create challenges and unintended consequences for rural organizations; and to help inform potential strategies for mitigating these types of unintended consequences. If you are interested in considering having your college participate in this research study I will provide you with a more detailed information letter along with an informed consent form outlining the details of participation.

If you require additional information prior to determining your level of interest in having your college participate in the study, please let me know.

Respectfully submitted,

Laurie-Anne Rancourt
PhD Student – University of Toronto, OISE
416-949-8076
lrancourt@outlook.com
B. Phase 1 Informed Consent Form: College President

My name is Laurie-Anne Rancourt and I am a PhD student at the University of Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) studying in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education. I am also the Senior Vice-President Academic at Humber College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning. I am currently pursuing my thesis research under the supervision of Dr. Creso Sa.

The main purpose of my research study is to analyze the impact of higher education differentiation policies on publicly funded northern rural colleges in Alberta and Ontario. The title of my study is:

**Who Decides and Why it Matters: Institutions, Differentiation and Northern Rural Higher Education**

Once my research is completed, the resulting thesis will be available to patrons of the University of Toronto, OISE library. Excerpts from the study may also be included in presentations at scholarly conferences, or published within articles written for scholarly journals.

This research is being undertaken using a case study approach focused on publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario. The intent is to include at least two publicly funded colleges in each of the two jurisdictions. In order to achieve that goal I am approaching all four publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta (Grande Prairie Regional College; Keyano College; Northern Lakes College; and Red Deer College), and all five Anglophone publicly funded colleges in Northern Ontario (Cambrian College; Canadore College; Confederation College; Northern College; and Sault College) with the goal of being successful in interviewing/surveying a minimum of two colleges in each jurisdiction.

You are being invited to participate in phase 1 of this research process because you are currently the President of one of the targeted colleges. In consenting to participate in phase 1 of the study, you will be agreeing to (a) include your college as part of the study, and (b) participate personally in an approximately 60 minute telephone interview. The interview itself will be based on the questions outlined in the attached Interview Guide. In providing your informed consent to participate, the following parameters should be kept in mind:

i. As a study participant, you are consenting to have your organization included as one of the colleges in the study;
ii. As a study participant, you will be personally asked to participate in an approximately 60 minute telephone interview;
iii. Prior to commencement of the interview you will be explicitly asked for your permission to have the interview audio-recorded (where consent to audio-record the interview is
provided, audio files will be transcribed as soon as possible and all audio files will be destroyed once the transcription, cleaning and verification processes have been completed);

iv. If you do not agree to have the interview audio-recorded I will take handwritten notes during the interview;

v. During the interview process you should feel free to decline to answer any question or questions that you do not wish to answer. This can be done by simply advising me verbally at the time that the question is asked;

vi. Within one to three weeks post-interview, you will be given the opportunity to review the interview transcript and correct any errors, omissions or misrepresentations;

vii. When reviewing the interview transcript you are also free to request that the entire transcript of the interview be destroyed and to have your organization removed from the study entirely;

viii. As a participant you will be free to withdraw from the study completely without explanation or penalty of any kind at any point during the interview and transcript review processes;

ix. Once the reviewed interview transcript has been analyzed it will no longer be possible to withdraw from the study;

x. Upon completion of the interview and transcript review processes you will receive a $25.00 Chapter’s Gift Certificate as a small token of appreciation for your participation.

This interview will be part of a confidential process. It is important to note however that the study itself involves a relatively small number of participants. It is therefore feasible that the identity of some participants could be inferred once the study is published, despite the confidentiality measures that are put in place. In order to mitigate that risk, all names and other identifying information about participants and their organizations will be systematically changed in interview transcripts, any notes, and within the study itself. In addition, high level generic roles (ie: Senior Leadership rather than President, Vice-President or Dean; Key Informant rather than Minister, Deputy Minister or Program Manager) will be used at all times when identifying specific participants. Fictitious names will be used if it is necessary to point out any particular postsecondary organization within the study.

Should you have any questions or concerns at any point during the process, please feel free to contact me by cell phone at 416-949-8076, or by e-mail at lrancourt@outlook.com. You may also contact my thesis supervisor, Dr. Creso Sa, at 416-978-1206, or by e-mail at c.sa@utoronto.ca.

Thank you in advance for your participation,

Laurie-Anne Rancourt  
Doctoral Candidate  
PhD in Leadership, Higher and Adult Education  
University of Toronto/OISE  
email: lrancourt@outlook.com

Dr. Creso Sa  
Professor  
Centre for the Study of Canadian and International Higher Education  
University of Toronto/OISE  
email: c.sa@utoronto.ca
By signing below, you are indicating that you are willing to have your organization participate in the study, that you are personally willing to participate in the study, that you have received a copy of the Detailed Information Letter, and that you are aware of the conditions outlined above.

Name: __________________________________
Signed: ________________________________ Date: ________________________________

Please initial if you agree to have your interview audio-taped: __________ (Date: _______) 
If you are interested in receiving a summary of the findings on completion of this study, please initial here: __________

Please keep a copy of this form for your records.
C. Phase 1 Interview Guide: College President

The intention of these questions is to gain insight into the ways in which current differentiation policy frameworks have impacted publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario. I will be using semi-structured and open-ended questions to facilitate dialogue with interview participants. In the case of your specific interview, I would like you to focus your responses on the ways in which differentiation policies within your jurisdiction have impacted the college you lead and any related stakeholders.

This interview is expected to take approximately 60 minutes to complete. At any time during the interview process you should feel free to decline to answer any question or questions that you do not wish to answer. This can be done by simply advising me verbally at the time that the question is asked. It is also important to note that this a confidential process. Within the transcripts and notes, and within all documentation and presentation of the research results, names and other identifying information about participants and their organizations will be changed. In addition, every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality of participants. These efforts will include the use of high level generic roles (ie: Senior Leadership rather than President, Vice-President or Dean; Key Informant rather than Minister, Deputy Minister or Program Manager) when identifying specific participants, and fictitious names if it is necessary to point out any particular post-secondary organization.

As we move through the questions, please feel free to request clarification or additional information as required. Please note that I may also ask additional questions and probe some of your responses as we move along.

1. How long have you worked at your current organization?
2. How long have you held the position of President within your organization?
3. What was your role at the time that the differentiation policy came into effect within your jurisdiction (in Alberta 2007, in Ontario 2013)?
4. How would you describe your organization’s mandate?
5. How would you describe the impact of the differentiation policy framework on your organization?
   a. What has changed as a result of the differentiation policy framework?
   b. What impact, if any, has the differentiation policy framework had on your organization’s mandate?
   c. What improvements, if any, have occurred as a result of the differentiation policy implementation?
   d. What challenges, if any, have been created as a result of the differentiation policy implementation?
6. How would you describe your organization’s response to the differentiation policy framework that was implemented in your jurisdiction? What do you consider to be the reasons for that response?
7. Who do you consider to be the most important stakeholders of your organization?
   a. How would you describe the impact of the differentiation policy
framework on each of these stakeholders?

8. When you think about policy development and implementation in general within higher education in your jurisdiction, who would you identify as the key decision makers and influencers involved in the process?

The following questions are intended to help identify potential participants for the phase 2 interview process. Each individual will be approached and have the opportunity to provide informed consent to participate in the study or to refuse to participate in the study. It is important to note that participation in this study will remain voluntary for all key informants that you identify and that the identity of all study participants will remain confidential. As such, you will not be made aware at any time, during or after the study, of who has and who has not participated.

1. Which key informants, if any, who would have been involved at the policy development level at the time that the differentiation policy framework was developed within your jurisdiction, do you feel should be approached for possible participation in the phase 2 interview process? Are you able to provide name and contact information, or forward an introduction e-mail to them on my behalf?

2. Within your organization, which senior leadership team members do you consider to be responsible for interpreting and implementing public higher education policy? Please provide a list of names and e-mail addresses for the senior leaders who you feel should be approached for possible participation in the phase 2 interview process.

3. Please provide a list of Academic Leaders, and other leaders within your organization, who you feel have been impacted by the differentiation policy framework and should be approached for possible participation in the phase 2 interview process.
D. Phase 2 Email Introduction: College Participant

Dear XXXX,

My name is Laurie-Anne Rancourt and I am a PhD student at the University of Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) studying in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education. I am also the Senior Vice-President Academic at Humber College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning. I am currently pursuing my thesis research under the supervision of Dr. Creso Sa. The main purpose of my research study is to analyze the impact of higher education differentiation policies on publicly funded northern rural colleges in Alberta and Ontario. The title of my study is:

**Who Decides and Why it Matters:**
**Institutions, Differentiation and Northern Rural Higher Education**

I am reaching out to you today to request your participation in this study. You have been identified for potential participation in this study because of your role as a senior leader in a publicly funded northern rural college. Participation in the study would involve a face to face interview to be conducted on site at XXXX College, by telephone, or at another location that may be more convenient to you. The expected duration of the interview would be about 60 minutes. It is important to note that participation in this study is completely voluntary and will remain confidential.

I believe that through participation in a study focused on policy implications for northern rural publicly funded colleges, you will have the opportunity to help shed light on some of the ways in which broad based policies established by policy makers in large urban centres may create challenges and unintended consequences for rural organizations; and to help inform potential strategies for mitigating these types of unintended consequences. If you are interested in considering participation in this research study I will provide you with a more detailed information letter along with an informed consent form outlining the details of participation. Let me know if you require additional information prior to determining your level of interest in participating.

Respectfully submitted,

Laurie-Anne
Rancourt
PhD Student – University of Toronto, OISE
416-949-8076
lfrancourt@outlook.com
E. Phase 2 Informed Consent Form: College Participant

My name is Laurie-Anne Rancourt and I am a PhD student at the University of Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) studying in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education. I am also the Senior Vice-President Academic at Humber College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning. I am currently pursuing my thesis research under the supervision of Dr. Creso Sa.

The main purpose of my research study is to analyze the impact of higher education differentiation policies on publicly funded northern rural colleges in Alberta and Ontario. The title of my study is:

Who Decides and Why it Matters: Institutions, Differentiation and Northern Rural Higher Education

Once my research is completed, the resulting thesis will be available to patrons of the University of Toronto, OISE library. Excerpts from the study may also be included in presentations at scholarly conferences; or published within articles written for scholarly journals.

This research is being undertaken using a case study approach focused on publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario. Your College President has agreed to have your college participate in this study. You are being invited to participate in this research process because of your current leadership role at your college.

In consenting to participate you will be agreeing to engage in an approximately 60 minute interview. The interview itself will be based on the questions outlined in the attached Interview Guide. In providing your informed consent to participate, the following parameters should be kept in mind:

i. As a study participant, you will be asked to participate in an approximately 60 minute interview which will take place in person at XXX College, or by telephone, or at another location that may be more convenient for you;

ii. Prior to commencement of the interview you will be explicitly asked for your permission to have the interview audio-recorded (where consent to audio-record the interview is provided, audio files will be transcribed as soon as possible and all audio files will be destroyed once the transcription, cleaning and verification processes have been completed);

iii. If you do not agree to have the interview audio-recorded I will take handwritten notes during the interview;

iv. During the interview process you should feel free to decline to answer any question or questions that you do not wish to answer. This can be done by simply advising me verbally at the time that the question is asked;

v. Within one to three weeks post-interview, you will be given the opportunity to review the interview transcript and correct any errors, omissions or misrepresentations;

vi. When reviewing the interview transcript you are also free to request that the entire transcript of the interview be destroyed and to have your organization removed from the study entirely;

vii. As a participant you will be free to withdraw from the study completely without explanation or penalty of any kind at any point during the interview and transcript review processes; (as previously noted, President XXXX will not be made aware at any time, during or after the
study, of whether you have or have not participated).

viii. Once the reviewed interview transcript has been analyzed it will no longer be possible to withdraw from the study:

ix. Upon completion of the interview and transcript review processes you will receive a $25.00 Chapter’s Gift Certificate as a small token of appreciation for your participation.

This interview will be part of a confidential process. It is important to note however that the study itself involves a relatively small number of participants. It is therefore feasible that the identity of some participants could be inferred once the study is published, despite the confidentiality measures that are put in place. In order to mitigate that risk, all names and other identifying information about participants and their organizations will be systematically changed in interview transcripts, any notes, and within the study itself. In addition, high level generic roles (ie: Senior Leadership rather than President, Vice-President or Dean; Key Informant rather than Minister, Deputy Minister or Program Manager) will be used at all times when identifying specific participants. Fictitious names will be used if it is necessary to point out any particular post-secondary organization within the study.

Should you have any questions or concerns at any point during the process, please feel free to contact me by cell phone at 416-949-8076, or by e-mail at lrancourt@outlook.com. You may also contact my thesis supervisor, Dr. Creso Sa, at 416-978-1206, or by e-mail at c.sa@utoronto.ca. Any ethics concerns related to this research can also be directed to the REB Chair (contact details to be inserted).

Thank you in advance for your participation,

Laurie-Anne Rancourt
Doctoral Candidate
**PhD in Leadership, Higher and Adult Education**
University of Toronto/OISE
email: lrancourt@outlook.com

Dr. Creso Sa
Professor
**Leadership, Higher and Adult Education**
Centre for the Study of Canadian and International Higher Education
University of Toronto/OISE
(416) 978-1206
email: c.sa@utoronto.ca

By signing below, you are indicating that you are willing to have your organization participate in the study, that you are personally willing to participate in the study, that you have received a copy of the Detailed Information Letter, and that you are aware of the conditions outlined above.
Name: ________________________________

Signed: _______________________________  Date: _______________________________

Please initial if you agree to have your interview audio-taped: _________ (Date: _______)

If you are interested in receiving a summary of the findings on completion of this study, please initial here: ________

Please keep a copy of this form for your records.
F. Phase 2 Interview Guide: College Participant

The intention of these questions is to gain insight into the ways in which current differentiation policy frameworks have impacted publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario. I will be using semi-structured and open-ended questions to facilitate dialogue with interview participants. In the case of your specific interview, I would like you to focus your responses on the ways in which differentiation policies within your jurisdiction have impacted your particular college and its stakeholders.

As we move through the questions, please feel free to request clarification or additional information as required. Please note that I may also ask additional questions and probe some of your responses as we move along.

1. How long have you worked at your current organization?
2. How long have held your current position within your organization?
3. What was your role at the time that the differentiation policy came into effect within your jurisdiction (in Alberta 2007, in Ontario 2013)?
4. How would you describe your organization’s mandate?
5. How would you describe the impact of the differentiation policy framework on your organization?
   a. What has changed as a result of the differentiation policy framework?
   b. How has the differentiation policy framework impacted operations within your organization?
   c. What impact, if any, has the differentiation policy framework had on your organization’s mandate?
   d. What improvements, if any, have occurred as a result of the differentiation policy implementation?
   e. What challenges, if any, have been created as a result of the differentiation policy implementation?
6. How would you describe your organization’s response to the differentiation policy framework that was implemented in your jurisdiction? What do you consider to be the reasons for that response?
7. Who do you consider to be the most important stakeholders of your organization?
   a. How would you describe the impact of the differentiation policy framework on each of these stakeholders?
8. When you think about policy implementation in general within your organization, who would you identify as the key decision makers and influencers involved in the process?
G. Phase 2 Email Introduction: Policy Maker

Dear XXXX,

My name is Laurie-Anne Rancourt and I am a PhD student at the University of Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) studying in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education. I am also the Senior Vice-President Academic at Humber College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning. I am currently pursuing my thesis research under the supervision of Dr. Creso Sa. The main purpose of my research study is to analyze the impact of higher education differentiation policies on publicly funded northern rural colleges in Alberta and Ontario. The title of my study is:

Who Decides and Why it Matters:
Institutions, Differentiation and Northern Rural Higher Education

I am reaching out to you today in order to request your participation as a key informant in this study. You have been identified as a potential participant in the study because of your current or past role in policy development within the Canadian higher education system. Participation in the study would involve an interview to be conducted by telephone, or in person at a location that is convenient to you. The expected duration of the interview would be about 30 to 60 minutes. It is important to note that participation in this study is a confidential process.

I believe that through participation in a study focused on policy implications for northern rural publicly funded colleges, you will have the opportunity to help shed light on some of the ways in which broad based policies established by policy makers in large urban centres may create challenges and unintended consequences for rural organizations; and to help inform potential strategies for mitigating these types of unintended consequences. If you are interested in considering participation in this research study I will provide you with a more detailed information letter along with an informed consent form outlining the details of participation.

If you require additional information prior to determining your level of interest in participating, please let me know.

Respectfully submitted,

Laurie-Anne Rancourt
PhD Student – University of Toronto, OISE
416-949-8076
lfrancourt@outlook.com
H. Phase 2 Informed Consent: Policy Maker

My name is Laurie-Anne Rancourt and I am a PhD student at the University of Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) studying in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education. I am also the Senior Vice-President Academic at Humber College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning. I am currently pursuing my thesis research under the supervision of Dr. Creso Sa. The main purpose of my research study is to analyze the impact of higher education differentiation policies on publicly funded northern rural colleges in Alberta and Ontario. The title of my study is:

Who Decides and Why it Matters: Institutions, Differentiation and Northern Rural Higher Education

Once my research is completed, the resulting thesis will be available to patrons of the University of Toronto, OISE library. Excerpts from the study may also be included in presentations at scholarly conferences or published within articles written for scholarly journals.

This research is being undertaken using a case study approach focused on publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario. In addition to including at least two publicly funded colleges in each of the two jurisdictions, the goal is to also include interviews with selected key informants who were involved at the policy development level in each jurisdiction at the time that the differentiation policy framework was implemented in each jurisdiction.³

You are being invited to participate in this research process because of your current or past role in policy development within the Canadian higher education system. In consenting to participate you will be agreeing to engage in an approximately 30 to 60-minute interview. The interview itself will be based on the questions outlined in the attached Interview Guide. In providing your informed consent to participate, the following parameters should be kept in mind:

i. As a study participant, you will be asked to participate in an approximately 60-minute interview which will take place in person at XXX College, or by telephone, or at another location that may be more convenient for you;

ii. Prior to commencement of the interview you will be explicitly asked for your permission to have the interview audio-recorded (where consent to audio-record the interview is provided, audio files will be transcribed as soon as possible and all audio files will be destroyed once the transcription, cleaning and verification processes have been completed);

iii. If you do not agree to have the interview audio-recorded I will take handwritten notes during the interview;

iv. During the interview process you should feel free to decline to answer any question or questions that you do not wish to answer. This can be done by simply advising me verbally at the time that the question is asked;

v. Within one to three weeks post-interview, you will be given the opportunity to review the interview transcript and correct any errors, omissions or misrepresentations;

vi. When reviewing the interview transcript you are also free to request that the entire transcript of the interview be destroyed and to have your organization removed from the study entirely;

vii. As a participant you will be free to withdraw from the study completely without explanation or penalty of any kind at any point during the interview and transcript review processes;

viii. Once the reviewed interview transcript has been analyzed it will no longer be possible to withdraw from the study;

ix. Upon completion of the interview and transcript review processes you will receive a $25.00 Chapter’s Gift Certificate as a small token of appreciation for your participation.

This interview will be part of a confidential process. It is important to note however that the study itself involves a relatively small number of participants. It is therefore feasible that the identity of some participants could be inferred once the study is published, despite the confidentiality measures that are put in place. To mitigate that risk, all names and other identifying information about participants and their organizations will be systematically changed in interview transcripts, any notes, and within the study itself. In addition, high level generic roles (ie: Senior Leadership rather than President, Vice-President or Dean; Key Informant rather than Minister, Deputy Minister or Program Manager) will be used to identify specific participants. Fictitious names will be used if it is necessary to point out any post-secondary organization within the study.

Should you have any questions or concerns at any point during the process, please feel free to contact me by cell phone at 416-949-8076, or by e-mail at lrancourt@outlook.com. You may also contact my thesis supervisor, Dr. Creso Sa, at 416-978-1206, or by e-mail at c.sa@utoronto.ca. Any ethics concerns related to this research can also be directed to the REB Chair (contact details to be inserted).

Thank you in advance for your participation,

Laurie-Anne Rancourt
Doctoral Candidate
PhD in Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
University of Toronto/OISE
email: lrancourt@outlook.com

Dr. Creso Sa, Professor
Centre for the Study of Canadian and International Higher Education
University of Toronto/OISE
(416) 978-1206
email: csa@utoronto.ca

By signing below, you are indicating that you are willing to participate in the study, that you have
received a copy of the Detailed Information Letter, and that you are aware of the conditions outlined above.

Name:

Signed:

Date:

Please initial if you agree to have your interview audio-taped:  (Date:  )

If you are interested in receiving a summary of the findings on completion of this study, please initial here:

Please keep a copy of this form for your records.
I. Phase 2 Interview Guide: Policy Maker

The intention of these questions is to gain insight into the ways in which current differentiation policy frameworks have impacted publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario. I will be using semi-structured and open-ended questions to facilitate dialogue with interview participants. In the case of your specific interview, I would like you to focus your responses on the ways in which the differentiation policy within your jurisdiction was developed.

As we move through the questions, please feel free to request clarification or additional information as required. Please note that I may also ask additional questions and probe some of your responses as we move along.

1. At the time of development of the differentiation policy framework what was your role?
2. From your perspective, what were the contextual factors that led to the development of the differentiation policy framework?
3. From your perspective, what were the intended outcomes of the differentiation policy framework?
4. Based on your observations of the way the publicly funded colleges are operating within your jurisdiction, to what extent would you say that the intended outcomes of the differentiation policy framework have been achieved?
J. Detailed Information Letter

My name is Laurie-Anne Rancourt and I am a PhD student at the University of Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) studying in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education. I am also the Senior Vice-President Academic at Humber College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning. I am currently pursuing my thesis research under the supervision of Dr. Creso Sa. The main purpose of my research study is to analyze the impact of higher education differentiation policies on publicly funded northern rural colleges in Alberta and Ontario. The title of my study is:

**Who Decides and Why it Matters: Institutions, Differentiation and Northern Rural Higher Education**

The goal is to gain insights into potential ways of improving the alignment between policy intentions and policy outcomes. Through a study of higher education differentiation policies and their impact on publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario I will identify ‘distorting filters’ (institutions) that exist between policy makers (political decision makers) and policy implementers (organizational decision makers), and that have an impact on the results of policy implementation.

From the perspective of new institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Thelen, 1999; Peters, 2012; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013; Smith and Larimer, 2013; Scott, 2014), I argue that in order to engage human agency in support of their policies, policymakers need to develop a strong understanding of human behavior and the institutions that influence the actions of the actors within the higher education system (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013). According to Smith and Larimer (2013), “…public policy is an aggregation of human decision…” (p. 212); but who is deciding what, and at what point in the process? I argue that knowing the answers to these fundamental questions is critical to achieving successful policy outcomes. As Smith and Larimer (2013) explain, in order “…to make accurate policy prescriptions requires broad knowledge of human behavior” (p. 219). Policy makers may be responsible for setting policy, but in doing so they are influenced by institutions, whether they are aware of it or not. And once a policy decision is made, the way in which it is enacted is dependent on how it is interpreted by those who decide what actions will be taken within the higher education system.

From the perspective of Oliver’s (1991; 1997) strategic reaction theory, I will also examine the ways in which specific northern rural publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario have been impacted by, and have reacted to the differentiation policies in each
jurisdiction. The goal of this inquiry is to gather insights into the “…strategic behaviours that organizations employ in direct response to the institutional processes that affect them” (Oliver, 1991, p. 145).

Based on the preliminary literature review, I discovered that there has already been a significant amount of research undertaken in the field of policy studies and institutionalism (Lindblom 1959/2010; North, 1990; Peters, 2012). This work has resulted in a recognition that, even within the same political system, policy process tends to differ significantly from one policy domain to another. As Atkinson and Coleman (1992) explain, many studies have shown that “…within the same political system, things work differently in agriculture, transportation, monetary policy, and so on” (p. 157). The significance of this research study lies in its focus on the ways in which policy process plays out specifically in the domain of higher education, paying attention to the impact of the institutions within that domain on the policy process.

As Lowndes and Roberts (2013) have suggested, the importance of institutions to public policy is often underestimated. According to them, policymakers often underestimate the strength of opposition which can be mobilized around existing institutional configurations and the defensive potential offered by their interconnections within organizations. The resulting issue of this type of underestimation is outlined by Clark, Trick and VanLoon (2011) who point out that “…poorly designed and poorly executed funding and regulatory interventions by government can cause more harm than good, particularly in [organizations] with long-established conventions” (p. 1). They go on to suggest that we can “…frame the nature of the policy challenge by considering the preferences of (…) faculty, their representatives, and their institutions” (p. 7). I argue that the same can be said about all stakeholders involved in the higher education enterprise. I agree wholeheartedly with Stone (2001) who points out that, to effectively shape the course of change, “…we need to think about what relationships and which forms of interaction are compatible with the outcomes we want and seek to nurture those relationships and interactions” (p. 154).

This study will therefore be important to higher education policy makers who need to know “…which particular interactions and collisions are likely to be politically consequential” (Thelen, 1999, p. 397); and to both policy makers and policy implementers, who need to have a good understanding of the agents and actors involved in any policy implementation initiative (Tummers, Vermeeren, Steijn, & Bekkers, 2012).

This research is structured within a theoretical framework combining the concepts of strategic
reaction theory, new institutional theory, pragmatism and power. It will be undertaken using a case study approach focused on publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario. The intent is to include at least two publicly funded colleges in each of the two jurisdictions. In order to achieve that goal, I will approach all four publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta (Grande Prairie Regional College; Keyano College; Northern Lakes College; and Red Deer College), and all five Anglophone publicly funded colleges in Northern Ontario (Cambrian College; Canadore College; Confederation College; Northern College; and Sault College) with the goal of being successful in interviewing/surveying a minimum of two colleges in each jurisdiction.

The following are the specific questions that I intend to answer:

- How have current differentiation policy frameworks impacted publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario?
  - To what extent do Presidents, Vice-Presidents, and Senior Administrators within the colleges consider the differentiation policy framework to be compatible with their organizational mandate and mission?
  - How have these colleges conformed to or resisted the differentiation policy framework within their respective jurisdictions?
  - What reasons do Presidents, Vice-Presidents, and Senior Administrators within the colleges give for conformity or resistance to the differentiation policy framework?
  - What factors have facilitated or impeded conformity or resistance to the differentiation policy within their respective jurisdictions?
  - Who do they consider to be decision makers and influencers in the processes of policy development and implementation in higher education?

- What can be learned from this study to inform potential strategies for policy makers and policy implementers when it comes to ensuring better alignment between intension and results?

The study will use a qualitative research approach that will combine the use of survey instruments and document analysis to develop a comparative case study of the impact of differentiation policies on publicly funded colleges in Northern and Rural Central Alberta, and in Northern Ontario.
Appendix 3 – Detailed Responses: Policy Implementer Interview

As presented in Chapter 3, a total of 13 key informants ultimately participated in this research study. These participants included two policy makers (one from Alberta and one from Ontario), and twelve policy implementers (five from Alberta and six from Ontario). A detailed analysis of policy maker interview responses is included in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 provides an outline of the substantive findings that I determined based on my analysis of policy implementer interview responses. This Appendix presents the detailed responses that were provided by study participants who fall into the category of policy implementer.

How would you describe your organization’s mandate?

AB1 Comprehensive and community are the two key words….We provide access where none would exist otherwise.

AB2 Responding to demand and providing access to more than just postsecondary programming.

AB3 Our role is to provide opportunities to people in our communities who want to advance themselves. It is to take them from wherever they are and help them achieve their learning goals without having to leave their community if they choose not to.

AB4 To meet community members needs and provide access (…) to northerners who are not able to access postsecondary in any other way….Our program mix is quite broad and is based on (…) what is needed for employment in the North.

AB5 …we are a comprehensive, regional, teaching institution. Comprehensive describes the breadth of programming, regional describes the market, and teaching describes our focus.

ON1 Our access mandate in a rural college is critical because of our geographic location.

ON2 … being a community focused college….To ensure that the programs we offer are very much reflective of the needs of industry in the immediate locale and in Northern Ontario.

ON3 Our mandate is threefold. One is to provide postsecondary education to students of a vocational nature. The second is to provide support to the industry in our region. And the third is to provide support to our community. I see these as part of the mandate for any college, but it becomes more pronounced in rural communities because your communities are more tightly knit and generally more dependent on your local college for economic reasons.

ON4 … to meet the needs of employers in a changing work environment, to support the economic development of our community. To provide continuous access to flexible and customizable learning.

ON5 To provide access (…) to postsecondary education for people who just can’t leave home….Since I’ve been at this college, access has been the most important goal we’ve had.

ON6 Access and success, community development, and [organizational] excellence.

How would you describe the impact of the differentiation policy framework on your organization?

AB1 I have two views on that. One is the view that I had in 07. And the other view is the view that I have in 2018. In 07 that differentiation was critical to end the inter-college competition, to establish jurisdiction, to establish breadth and depth of programming because we were all over the board. We were competing with ourselves, we were in conflict, we were in a market driven...
education system which meant it was a free for all and it was not fun. It was very, very competitive….When the mandate came in it gave us jurisdiction, both geographically and in terms of breadth and depth of programming. That settled a lot of that. However, every day after that it diminished in value. And it did by restricting our ability to serve our region. I'm starting to believe that, rather than having a stratified service, that's broken down into baccalaureates and polytechnics and so forth, it should be built on institutional capacity and determined on an expressed and bonified demand in the region. I say that because we're not allowed to do certain things because we fall into a specific category, and the institutions in those categories are not allowed to do those things…and that's wrong. Why does someone in a rural community not have access to the same things that someone in an urban community does? Why does it matter if the program is offered out of a small college? I don't see it as appropriate to have a stratified level of service based on a rural versus urban context. What happens here is that people in rural communities end up having less access by geography, less access by limited jurisdiction or scope and breadth, and less access by resources...

AB2 For the first several years very good. It was good to know what our stewardship region was. It was good to know what our role was. After that, it became burdensome in the sense that it did not deal with Continuing Education (which was a challenge). Nobody policed larger urban institutions from encroaching while describing their programming in a slightly different way when it was actually exactly the same as a program we were offering. For example, calling academic upgrading ‘pre-health’. As we began to have more demand from our region for various other types of programming that extended beyond the strict understanding of the framework, it became very burdensome for us and kind of a barrier.

AB3 Answered below.

AB4 The impact was limited I think, because there was an attempt made through the creation of the legislation to reflect back to the system what the system was doing. The only impact I would say that we felt was geographical. There were areas that we served that were removed from our catchment, or our stewardship area, and that were given to other institutions. We have a community learning centre model in place where we have full service campuses. We are a distance deliverer. 99% of our programs are available by distance, or through some form of blended delivery. So, we are able to have small campuses in these small rural communities where students can take any postsecondary program, or any program that we offer. By changing our geographical catchment area, some communities lost out because they were no longer being served by us. Because the other institutions do not have a similar delivery model to ours, they were unable to maintain the level of access to programming. For example, you can’t deliver Early Childhood Education to one student in a remote community if you have a cohort-based face to face delivery model that requires a minimum of twelve students in a cohort to remain viable. Number one, you would flood the employment market in that community if you graduated 12 students at once, and number two, you would never be able to get 12 students in the first place. None of the postsecondary institutions can serve a small cohort in the way that we do. So, I would say that’s probably been our biggest impact.

AB5 In Alberta the Roles and Mandates Framework is tied to the six-sector model which was designed for differentiation. What it did was forbid us from moving in a direction that we needed to move to raise participation rates and increase access and opportunity for people in their own region…particularly with access to degrees. So, our participation rates were half what they were in regions where they have local universities. If you have to transfer to a different institution to get or complete your credential, you may not go at all because of the extra costs associated or because of the distance. Our argument was that participation rates in our region were low because students didn’t have access to the type of programming they needed, primarily degrees. 53% of all graduates in Alberta’s post-secondary system, graduate with a baccalaureate degree. All of a sudden, if you don’t have access to that type of programming, then your region is impoverished and your students don’t have choice the same way they do in
a large urban environment. The differentiation policy in the six-sector model meant a restriction on the roles and mandate on the type of credential we offered. In my view that was the reason for low participation rates. If you don’t have what they want, then they’re either not going to take or go somewhere else. And if they haven’t got the time or the money to go somewhere else, they don’t go to post-secondary...

ON1 I really don’t think it has had any impact whatsoever. I would say that this is due to the lack of understanding on the part of the ministry as to what the differentiation policy framework actually means. The only place it seems to have had any impact at all is around program approvals, but that has been related to SMAs and has been minimal. Because of our mandate, our college needs to maintain a comprehensive profile rather than a differentiated one. The differentiation policy has not changed that as there hasn’t really been much dialogue about what it means. There really aren’t any ministry people who were there at the time of development of the framework that are still around. We are not looking to differentiate ourselves, we’re looking to provide access to the programs that are in demand.

ON2 I think first of all that the framework is compatible in principle with the organizational mandate that I described in answer to the previous question. That’s not to say that it is compatible with the intent and the purposes of colleges structured in Ontario. Colleges have three primary clients: students, industry and the communities in which the campuses exist. And our vision and mission, as I have indicated, reflects that. The differentiation policy framework, in relation to programming, cites as an example breadth of programming, enrolment, credentials offered, along with areas of institutional strength and specialization. Logically, this is the direction that an institution would build upon. The specific direction of the policy framework I think precludes though growth and innovation in responding to economic drivers and local need. So, there’s this belief that I’ve long held that government policy, and government funding, has a steering effect. Chasing the dollars through reaction to government policy can have the effect of drawing you off your mission. Whether or not government establishes policy and creates funding envelopes to achieve its particular ends, and I don’t doubt that they do, but sometimes those ends that they want to achieve are not necessarily congruent with what the institutional mandate is in serving the local community. So, if you’re not careful, it can draw you off mission…off the established path that you’re trying to follow. I think as colleges have been adapting, and continue to adapt to the spirit and intent of the differentiation policy framework, I think that they and we are trying to remain true to who we are, rooted in the community and continuing to be responsive to the needs of the community; but at the same time recognizing that although the suite of programs we are offering is remaining somewhat traditional, they are still serving the needs of our local industry. Because we are in a naturally resource based region, industry needs remain pretty fundamental. They really are looking for trades people, accountants, HR people, business people, social workers, and those types of areas. They’re not into some of the very attractive occupations that colleges are preparing graduates for in Southern Ontario. It’s just a different economy that we’re trying to serve. Some of those programs may appear to be sexy, but they wouldn’t have any relevance here. If we were to offer such programs, even if we were able to attract students, there are just no jobs in those particular fields at this point in the North. So, it’s difficult for us to try and do what government is aspiring to with the differentiation framework when our needs, and the needs of our community needs remain fairly basic. Our need is to serve our community well. Having said that, we are not content to only continue operating the same programs we’ve already offered for a number of years. Our program mix has changed over the last fifty years. Our program mix has changed over the last five years. But as the program mix changes they are becoming tighter specializations within the same traditional fields. For example, technically we have been offering mining programming for over a hundred years. We’ve offered a mining program for our entire 50 years, and that program was actually offered for 60 years prior to that by an organization on which our college was founded when it was created. But we’ve also been
responsive to specializations that the field has asked us to pursue. We’ve created for example a mineral exploration program. Still part of the mining industry, but a tighter niche within that industry. The same thing applies to various vocational occupations within the mining sector. We actually now do train people to be underground miners; we teach people to do diamond drilling separate and apart from mineral exploration. So, all of these niches have arisen, building off of mining, but always in response to what a particular sector has been asking us to do. And that’s true across the breadth of our programming. So as we’ve expanded, new programs have just been specializations really to the core suite of programs we offer.

ON3 From the 30,000 foot level it’s really narrowed the focus. It gets you much more targeted on the area where it’s perceived you should be. That to me is the sum game of differentiation.

ON4 The framework makes it challenging to continue to meet our mandate of responding to local demand. To meet the local demand, you have to offer everything. About 60% of our students come from our local community. If we differentiate, then we are actually limiting access to education for those individuals. If we look at programs like business and nursing, if we don’t offer them, then our students don’t have access to them. They can’t just go someplace else to get that access. There is nothing available within a reasonable commute. The closest community with another postsecondary institution is probably North Bay. But you know what the winters are like here. How feasible could it be for someone to make that commute which is over two hours away? If more money was available and we could create more technologically mediated access, then some of those problems may go away, but they will never go away completely. So it certainly does limit the prospects. On the other hand, I suppose the positive would be that if you have a signature program, and you’re the only one in the north offering it, then you become destinational. So there are positives and negatives to the policy from my perspective.

ON5 I think it has had relatively little impact recently, but I think that in the future the impact will be quite profound. The biggest challenge is that once you’ve been locked into a certain category in the framework, then you essentially get locked into that category and it’s very difficult to move to another circumstance. I suppose my image for the Northern colleges here is that we could work together, perhaps even as a polytechnic, in the future. Any one of us can’t do that, but together I think we can. Some people have described potential ‘hub and spoke’ models. My concern with that model is that is you’re out and you’re a spoke, rather than in the middle as a hub, chances are you’re never going to get the chance to deliver the higher end programming and provide access to people in your region to that programming. My concern is that we get stuck into a certain category. There seems to be a perception that if people want access to the higher end credentials they will move to the areas where those are offered. But that’s often just not possible.

ON6 The initial meetings, before the first SMA was implemented, were more for establishing a footprint with the ministry. It was kind of a two-way street conversation aimed at creating a mutual understanding. The SMA process in Ontario was new. As we were working through this new process, there was a concern about what we were really signing off on. In the long term, what ramifications could it have? Were we going in the right direction to be able to support future generations? We were fortunate that at the time when we were working through this, one of the more senior policy analysts on the ministry’s side had worked in multiple ministries, and she had previously worked in the North. So, she had both an understanding of, and an appreciation for, the North. One of the first questions we were asked by the ministry was, ‘why do you have so many pre programs in your postsecondary line-up?’...referencing pre-health, pre-technology, and those kinds of programs. We said that it was because our learners coming in from the North were underprepared academically, and that in order for them to be able to be successful in the higher-level credentials, we need to build this foundation with them. They need the preparatory programs in order to be successful in the other programs. There was a push from ministry to combine everything and to move them directly into the credentials. We
had to explain to them that these learners come from communities where they don’t have access to high school. Ministry’s response was ‘what do you mean they don’t have access to high school?’. In the majority of the communities, learners have to fly into the larger centre for their high school education. They generally can only access up to grade 9 or 10 within their communities. So, most of the ministry people didn’t know that and how important the access agenda was because of that. It took time to get them to understand the critical need for these stepping stones to help get them ultimately to the labour market. It’s the difference between equity and equality. It was actually the more senior policy analyst who had that background working with the North who was able to reinforce the message we were trying to get a across. The irony of it is that we actually had to sell that message, and it would have been much more difficult without her support. Most of the ministry people were initially of the opinion that we could compress our programming and activity, and in doing so find ways to deliver much more

What has changed as a result of the differentiation policy framework?

AB1 What's happened is this perceived interest in the collaborative model...that if I need a service I should bring it in. At our college our whole philosophy is that we are a portal, so whatever is needed in this region, we'll bring it in. In the old days, before the mandate, if a service was to be offered it was offered by the local college or it wasn't offered at all. So, one of the things the mandate was supposed to do was to create a partnership environment...whereby if I needed a service I would call one of my sister institutions that was differentiated from us that had the ability to provide that service. The problem is that they defend that service in their own environment, and they're reluctant to come to our environment and provide it because it's more expensive and it requires resources that they may feel need to be invested in other priorities. Why would I come from my urban location to take care of 25 students in a rural location? I've got 4000 students of my own that require attention and services. Because of that, the 25 students in the rural community are not necessarily going to be my primary concern. The problem is the framework doesn't enable, or support, or nurture, or incentivize the intended behaviour. Because it's differentiated and they're focusing on their own local priorities, our priorities sometimes get lost in the shuffle. We're asking to be a university and the only reason we want that is to have degree granting so that we can provide the services and programming needed in our community without relying on others who may not understand the urgency and importance of the need.

AB2 A very large demand from the citizens of our stewardship region for the college to become degree granting so we can determine our own destiny and are not dependent on another institution’s programming and funding decisions. Under the operation of the framework, relying on others for our degree programs, we have had programs dropped with three-month’s notice. That created profound problems for us. The programs were a BComm, B.A. Psych. and Computing Science.

AB3 When the Roles and Mandates Framework was being created, I agreed with the intention that it outlined. Clarifying organizational roles to make the best use of resources is a goal that made sense. However, when the framework was finalized it actually created issues and constrained our ability to serve our learners and achieve our mandate. It constrained our ability and removed any flexibility to provide all of the programming that the people in our community need. I find it hard to see what benefits were created as a result of the framework implementation. I feel that it put us at a disadvantage instead of supporting us in achieving our mandate. It forced us into partnerships with institutions that didn’t really understand our mandate or our communities’ needs. The whole concept of working as a sector didn’t, in my opinion, pan out as intended. Given the design there is a feeling of hierarchy and “moving up”
as opposed to a feeling of contributing to a “whole”. It certainly hasn’t improved learners transferring from one Alberta institution to another.

AB4 Beyond that small shift in the geography, I would say that nothing has changed. It didn’t change our program mix at all.

AB5 For a long period of time it restricted the institution’s ability to evolve and grow and change, to become the type of institution it needed to be to meet the needs of students within the region it serves. In that way it was in fact a great impairment to increasing participation rates within the region.

ON1 Nothing has changed. We continue to operate the way we need to in order to meet the needs of our communities and to remain viable and sustainable. I don’t think the ministry has thought through what the differentiation policy means from a funding perspective. Our program decisions continue to be made based on demand rather than based on anything that is mandated by the differentiation policy framework. I think that differentiation plays out in different areas just based on market factors. As we look at programs that others offer, we don’t need a differentiation policy to tell us not to get into them…we only need to look at demand to see that it makes no sense to get into them.

ON2 The approach we took to completing both the first and second SMAs was building off of our strategic plan. We had just completed our first strategic plan as the first SMA was being required. That held true for the second SMA as we have a three-year life to our strategic plans because that’s the time frame that works best for us as opposed to it being longer. So, coincidentally the two exercises have been harmonized. So for us the SMA really does become a living, breathing document because it mirrors our strategic plan. That’s likely not the case for a lot of colleges.

ON3 I can’t say that I’ve noticed any change. But what I have noted is a very narrow-minded focus. I’ll go back to my earlier comment that it curbs the ability to respond to economic needs, but it also curbs creativity. I have come with really wonderfully creative ideas for programming that would be really neat to explore (you may not launch them ultimately), but there’s just no way to get them into your negotiated mandate agreement with ministry. As a result they became really lost causes and I think that that’s wrong because it goes against our mandate to serve community, industry and students. If you’re going to effectively serve those stakeholders you almost have to be looking ahead to that next big thing. You need to be looking at where we’re going, not just where we’re at.

ON4 The first year, when we were looking at new program development we were a little more cautious about aligning with what we had put in our SMA. I’m not sure we’re as cautious now. When I think about the whole concept and process of having to identify the programs we’re going to grow and develop, I get quite frustrated by the old outdate NOC codes that we have to align with. When you look at the need to pick these NOC codes, and we’re looking at program areas that didn’t exist when those NOC codes were created, it causes significant challenges. When we look at some of the new program areas we’re exploring, such as Crime Analytics, and then you look at the whole differentiation policy, policing and the justice sector was not an area of focus for expansion. So, in order to be able to get into the area of Crime analytics programming, we had to start by tying the program to health analytics and analytics in other areas that we had targeted as areas of strength and growth. We’ve had to do that with other potential program areas as well. There are ways to do it, but it does cause challenges. When you identify areas of strength, you don’t even know what will be required in five years. You’re trying to predict the careers of the future in a very limiting framework. So far we’ve been able to work within that system, but is challenging.

ON5 I don’t think it’s driven a huge amount of change. There have been a number of unique partnerships created between colleges, but I don’t think that that was necessarily as a result of the differentiation framework implementation.
ON6  We’ve now just signed off the 2nd SMA, which is now tied to funding. It is also tied to the new corridor funding model in Ontario, which has specific thresholds and tolerances for enrolment. The direction hasn’t changed because we’re still really an access college, but we’re having to be much more specific and strategic about what we’re doing…more focused on ensuring long term sustainability. As we’re doing that, we need to make sure that we remain true to our course, but at the same time make sure that we have the ability to adjust to changing needs and enrolments. For example, one of the things that happened this past year, that required us to make some significant adjustments, was the Bill 148 implementation. There’s differentiation on one end of the spectrum, and at the same time there’s the need to be looking at collaboration and finding ways to deliver more efficiently.

It is difficult to gauge in some ways how much of the changes are related directly to the differentiation framework. The strategic mandate agreement is the tool that has gotten us to think more critically about how we meet the needs of our communities. It has set more the definition of how we will meet our mandate, not what our mandate is. It’s made us kind of stop and take a closer look at how we plan, how we allocate resources, and where we need to be in terms of longer term sustainability. It gets you looking up instead of looking down. Rather than looking fiscal year to fiscal year, it has us looking much further out. It changes the dynamic.

From the operations perspective, at the senior team level the framework has lifted the horizon we’re focusing on. That tends to filter down within the organization. In future SMAs it will probably even have a more direct impact on operations. For now, it has put the lines down on the road.

How has the differentiation policy framework impacted operations within your organization?

AB1  The challenge that arises when we must collaborate with other institutions to meet local needs, is that we are dependent on their prioritization….I'll give you an example with one of them. There was a point at which one of our partners was facing a resource challenge. As a result, they made the decision to cancel the face to face program they were delivering with us. One of the solutions that they offered was for students in our community to do the program online. Well online is not 'the' answer. It's only part of the answer. Studying online is very different from studying in the in-class environment, and not all students are able to thrive in that type of learning environment. So, when the partner pulls the face-to-face option, for many of our students they’ve just pulled the only option….The other challenge with delivering programming in partnership with other institutions relates to curriculum content. The institution that is responsible for the credential is the one that decides what is required from a content perspective. If we request specific content based on our regional need, we are generally told no. We are told that the credential requires a standard content and that there is no flexibility at that level. So, under the Roles and Mandates Framework, even when we are able to ensure the delivery of specific programs within our community, that programming is not flexible to our needs. In addition, there are financial issues. The resources required for the delivery of partner programs within our college are held and controlled by the partner institution because they are the ones that are funded by the ministry for the program delivery. We do much of the work required for program delivery, but that is not always recognized. The student walks across our stage and gets their parchment, but they are technically not our student. We’ve done the work, we’ve taken care of them, we’ve nurtured them, and all of those things…and that connection does not exist inside the other institution. And if we drop the ball, it's not the other institution that is impacted from a reputational perspective, it is ours. The student does not see another institution. They identify with our institution….Another issue is faculty credentialing. We have
faculty that have taught in certain programs for years. We have had occasions where a change was made in the larger institution and we were given 90 days notice that the faculty credential was no longer accepted. That has a profound impact on the student, a profound impact on the program, and a profound impact on the faculty member. In order to be able to effectively manage that type of change, we would need 1, 2 or 3 year’s notice…

AB2 I think that we have been very careful not to do any continuing education or initiate credit activities in another institution’s region. I think we have been very careful to abide by the spirit as well as the law of the Roles and Mandates Framework Document. This approach has resulted some limitations on what we can do in terms of responding to demand within our region.

AB3 Collaborative degrees were required prior to the implementation of the framework and they will always be required as a tool to meet our learners’ needs. The challenge with the framework is that collaborative degrees became the only way we could offer degree programming and that is problematic. More time and resource are devoted to exploration, continued maintenance and relevance.

AB4 No impact on operations. When the roles and mandates framework came out, the idea behind it was good. There was some expectation within the ministry that it would be funded. But the money never appeared. So, it was very difficult for a lot of institutions to fulfill their mandate because they didn’t receive the resources to do it. You find that often times, especially with budgetary considerations; they spend a lot of time doing work up front to figure out what the system should look like. This was a major shift for the ministry in trying to rationalize the postsecondary system in our province. But it needed clout. There was no clout in the form of money to enact some of the things that they wanted to see happen. Regional stewardship is a good example. The CCI’s have a regional stewardship mandate that goes beyond just offering credit and non-credit programming. There is a community capacity building piece to our mandate that isn’t funded. That’s something that we’ve done from the beginning. It’s been our raison d’etre from the start. We were able to develop a model that allows us to do that. We breathe regional stewardship. But for many institutions that was a brand new piece of their mandate. They’d never been involved in doing that kind of outreach and community capacity building. It’s a great idea, but it’s costly and they’re not funded to do it. So, with all of these wonderful ideas they did a lot of work with the postsecondary institutions to come up with a plan, but they didn’t fund it. Most CCIs do the best they can, but they didn’t get the money to follow through on the plans, or on the expectations of the mandate.

AB5 Not answered.

ON1 Not answered.

ON2 Well I would say that the first attempt at developing the first SMA was a pretty innocuous experience for everybody. We wrote it and felt that quite honestly the government didn’t have a whole lot of interest in it. They didn’t hold us accountable at all to the things that we said. It’s evident that there is stronger intent in the second round. That accountability will be very much present in the SMA3 process. And therefore, when we’ve developed and agreed upon metrics, and the true measurement of our outcomes begins to take root in the organization, I think we could see a couple of camps emerging: those who would see it as intrinsically good for the college, and those who would see it as a threat. You get that kind of dichotomy around change. It’s early days yet. I can’t say there’s a strong staff reaction one way or another. I think that there may even be a belief that, to the extent that the college is held accountable in SMA1, that they’ll be held accountable to the same extent in SMA2 and SMA3, and for however long the SMA process is in place. I don’t think that is accurate. I believe that if we remain with the current government, then what they’ve stated will be the process with SMA3 will in fact come to pass. When that happens I think we may see staff become a little more vocal and more pockets of resistance emerging.

ON3 …I would say that the impact has specifically related to the strategic mandate agreement. It has created a higher level of reporting that we didn’t have before. So it certainly has impacted our
institutional research. It has also impacted the way we do new program exploration and development. It has impacted the understanding of deans and associate deans on where we need to go. It has also had an impact at the operational level on our strategic enrolment management work.

ON4 I don’t see any direct impact to operations at this point.
ON5 Not answered.
ON6 Not answered.

What impact, if any, has the differentiation policy framework had on your organization’s mandate?

AB1 The framework made it more difficult to achieve our mandate. We were just burgeoning at that point and ready to move to the next level, and then we were held back. As the framework was being implemented, on a Friday afternoon it had degree granting in our mandate. On Monday morning when it was released, those two words had disappeared from the clause and it became "specific degrees in collaboration", so we had no choice, we could only offer degrees in collaboration with another institution. I think they had said to us we could offer the three-year degree, but we've never embraced the three year degree here.

AB2 It has had some. Because when we wanted to put degree granting as an aspiration in our institutional mandate, several times we were asked to remove it. The decision would be made at the Executive level to include, and then I was asked to remove it. Now, technically, it says that we can offer applied degrees that are requested or required by the region. However, every time we tried to do so, or to include degree granting in our mandate, we were stopped from doing so.

AB3 Answered above.
AB4 No impact on our mandate.
AB5 We lived up to the mandate as it was described by government. That was the challenge as it stopped us from evolving that mandate in the way that we needed to for our region. The impact on our organization was that we weren’t able to achieve everything we could have achieved had we not had the change which was announced last week.

ON1 None. Our mandate is our mandate and we continue to do what we need to do based on sound business planning and decision making.
ON2 I think so. I think the differentiation policy encourages us to step out of our comfort zone and therefore implicitly take on a bit more risk. And I say it’s a risk because the differentiation policy framework now has mechanisms that look at performance outcomes that will be measured and reported publicly. In the next round of SMAs there will be funding attached to them. So that’s taken us out of the comfort of the environment that we’ve typically operated in. We’ve not had those accountabilities to the same extent in the past. So, formerly maybe we were risk averse, and now we have to accept that there will be more risk involved. So, I think the framework is having that earlier stated steering effect that government is intending of the colleges.

ON3 I wouldn’t say that it has changed our mandate, but I would say that it has limited us.
ON4 Not answered.
ON5 It hasn’t changed it at all. The approach that we have taken has involved partnerships after partnerships. But that was ongoing and actually has started prior to the differentiation framework coming into effect. This is true partly because we just have to. We’re not big enough to do the things we’d like to do on our own. So I don’t think it’s actually had a huge effect.
ON6 It’s almost reinforced it.
What improvements, if any, have occurred as a result of the differentiation policy implementation?

AB1 Answered above.

AB2 I think institutions have saved some resources by not competing with one another on the same turf, which is good. It gave CCIs time to truly define themselves. That being said, it’s been difficult for us because we are so far from any degree granting universities.

AB3 The mandate with respect to the regional stewardship requirement led to the creation of a collaboration between our college and another. This collaboration is community driven and community focused and it came about as a result of the conversations that were initiated with the implementation of the framework and has been very successful in serving rural learners.

AB4 There was some clarification for the CCIs around responsibilities. Prior to the framework being implemented there was a lot of co-opetition with the other postsecondary institutions, in the sense that they would be poaching in each other’s regions with respect to credit programming. The framework put a damper on that and resulted in more of an agreement to play nice in the sandbox and ask for permission when they were wanting to deliver something in someone else’s stewardship region. The framework kind of formalized how we were supposed to work together.

AB5 If you speak to different members within the framework, they would have different perspectives. What it did though was create a hierarchy. So, if you were a CARI (Comprehensive Academic Research Institution), you were at the top. You could do anything and everything. Then as you went down to level two you had the baccalaureate institutions like Mount Royal and McEwan who could only offer baccalaureate degrees. And then you went into NAIT and SAIT which were the polytechnics, etc. So as you went down in category a hierarchy developed. What it really did was create a situation where the institutions who could offer everything felt they were better than the other types of institutions. So it felt really hierarchical rather than linear, in the sense that every student should have access to whatever they need to have in their region or in their community. If you were to ask the Presidents of institutions like the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary, they would tell you that they like everything the way that it is. But (...) if you ask those in the rural areas many of them would probably tell you that they are impaired from doing the best work that they can do. I think that what it did was lock up the market for some people. And it restricted the ability of others to increase their market shares. I think it was the view of some of the higher-level institutions that if you give degree granting status to the comprehensive regional teaching institutions, then they would lose some seats. But the research says that everybody gets more seats because in the rural regions we’re under-represented and our participation rates are so low. So, the reality is, and the research tells us at places like Utah Valley University, that they started as a community college of 17,000 students. Brigham Young and Utah State University objected to them becoming a full-fledged university. They did become a comprehensive teaching institution with trades and everything in between, and went from 17,000 students to almost 34,000 students in 9 years. And the other institutions continued to grow as well over that period of time. So, the assumption made is that is somebody wins, then somebody else loses, and that is not correct.

ON1 Respectfully I would say that I don’t think there have been any.

ON2 Yes. To be fair, I think that the introduction of metrics that hold colleges accountable is a good thing. As we manage colleges, I think we should have accountability. Not just to one another, but also to our community. If our role is to serve the needs of our community, then we should be accountable to the community for what we do and how well we do it; for what kind of outcomes we generate, and for what dollar value. We have an accountability to taxpayers. So, I
don’t have an issue with that particular principle. I just have a bit of angst that we get those metrics correct if we’re going to be held accountable.

ON3  Well it should have eliminated redundancies across the sector, in which case the public sector dollars would be more effectively spent. So, I would say that would be the number one benefit. I would be hard pressed to think of a number two and a number three benefit.

ON4  I’m not sure I would say there have been any improvements, but I would say that we develop our new program ideas more carefully.

When I think of the whole differentiation framework, and then I think of the Northern Community Colleges Partnership (NCCP), I feel that there’s a contradiction there. So, here we are talking about differentiation and focusing on areas of strength, and then we have NCCP which is designed to increase access. Some would argue that some of the programs and some of the colleges survive because of NCCP because they don’t have the critical mass to offer programs on their own. But the focus of NCCP is that every college should be able to offer everything. I don’t necessarily believe that every college should offer absolutely everything, but we do need to offer most programs because we’re cutting access if we don’t.

So there’s a big contradiction because we get funding from the government for NCCP, and NCCP is about the opposite of differentiation. NCCP is not about differentiation at all, and yet it’s heavily publicly funded. I think that MAESD realizes that our core mandate is access, and that NCCP supports access. I think the ministry is interested in NCCP because they wanted to explore and test the collaboration part of it.

ON5  I think in a number of instances it’s made people think a little beyond themselves, and it’s made them think about what their relationships need to be with other institutions. I’m not sure that would have occurred without the differentiation framework being put in place.

ON6  Part of it is the accountability, which is the interesting piece. Knowing that someone is going to be looking over your shoulder, you tend to put a little more structure and focus into the planning process. There’s more awareness of the metrics and the monitoring. If you’re tracking in a way that has a negative effect, then you’re going to make an adjustment very quickly.

What challenges, if any, have been created as a result of the differentiation policy framework implementation?

AB1  Answered above.

AB2  I don’t think I would have anything additional to add. I already mentioned the challenges related to the open playing field for CE but not for credit.

AB3  The limitations that the document lays out have disadvantaged our learners. The inflexibility of the sectors, in the long run, has impacted the ability of learners not accessing the post-secondary education they need and/or desire. An institution should be able to be the institution it needs to be in order to serve the community and the learners. The inflexibility of the framework significantly limits our ability to do what we need to do for our communities in assisting them to continue to grow and thrive. One tool, one model, doesn’t serve every community or learners adequately. Degrees are just one more tool we need to have in our toolbox if we are to effectively serve our learners.

AB4  As part of the framework implementation, there was a decision made to put literal boundaries around the service region that a college would offer programming in. So when we withdrew from some of the areas that we had been serving that fell outside of those boundaries, the institutions who were given those areas were given short term money to open new campuses, but the money was clawed back soon after. So, those communities are now without services. That caused political problems for everyone because if you were in one of those communities you had service and then you didn’t. First the community dealt with the switch over to a new
institution, and then that service was withdrawn. I think that initially in 2006 when we started talking about this, there had been an expectation from those bureaucrats in the ministry that money would follow the regional stewardship mandate, and it never really did. So, the folks who weren’t used to delivering outside of their urban centres had no new money to expand. They were expected to provide the services, but the money just disappeared. The expectation was that they would have received money to expand their services, but it didn’t happen. So, that created quite a bit of unhappiness in those small rural communities who lost services.

AB5

Yes, as I’ve said already, it restricted our institution’s ability to grow and evolve in the way that it needed to in order to meet the needs of the community and our learners. So if you had a market for ‘product X’, and 53% of the population wanted ‘product X’, and you don’t have it?...and they have to go 200km in either direction to go and get it?...then the customer is not happy.

ON1

There haven’t been any challenges because there really is no enforcement mechanism related to the differentiation policy framework within the ministry. Our decisions are made based on economics and sound business planning rather than policy or politics. In my view we should be encouraged to offer anything that can be substantiated as being in demand, and that keeps us viable.

ON2

I think the obvious one is that our colleges, and others, have really not focused a whole lot on accountability and performance metrics. So, I think that represents a challenge to begin to think in quantitative terms. I think we’ve been comfortable operating on the quality axis, and we now have to look at the quantification of what we do. We need to have the ability to measure the things we say we’re going to measure. I think it’s pretty challenging getting people to think in that particular dimension when it comes to post-secondary education. But more importantly, I think it will be even more challenging to be able to come up with realistic and reasonable metrics rather than just yardsticks we’ll be able to use to tell the government that we have metrics. It will be important for the metrics to have relevance to what you’re doing...and what you’re doing will differ from college to college. That comes back to my earlier comment. We know who we are. We know the communities that we’re serving. We know the industries that we’re serving. And it’s also true that we know who we’re not. Therefore, there should be enough flexibility for institutional metrics to allow different institutions to differentiate themselves from one another, as opposed to all of us being measure for the same kind of things.

ON3

The significant challenge has been the negative impact on the ability to respond to changing economic needs of industry within our region. As soon as something is a little bit beyond the norm, we’re actually not allowed to do it. I’ll give you an example of that: we don’t teach anything to do with flying at all. We don’t have any aviation related programming. However we are building the emergency services branch of our programming. That is a very important piece of our programming and it is critical to our rural communities. Well, as part of that you do need the ability to provide air support. We have the opportunity to work with some industry partners in our area to do that kind of emergency air-lift related training. We were told by the ministry that we just couldn’t do it. Their perspective was that it was just too far removed from what we have in our strategic mandate agreement. It was very discouraging because the region does need that kind of training. I for one don’t want to see us invest in a flight school or anything of that nature. Still the conversation was very challenging because of the way ministry approached it. They really didn’t seem to have any give or openness to dialogue at all. The second challenge deals with sustainability. We’re all trying to find ways to become more sustainable. Differentiation in programming may be important, but you need to be able to repackage what you have in order to be innovative and ensure that programs match whatever is happening in industry. You need to also retire some programs. Communities have a hard accepting when you retire programs. Unless you’re launching something new at the same time, you will get push back. If the differentiation framework limits the new programming you can develop and launch, then that negatively affects your ability to maintain your relationship with
your community and to remain sustainable. The framework really does limit us in terms of that development piece.

ON4 The new program delivery has been the biggest challenge that has resulted. Some of the metrics that have been implemented as part of the framework have also created challenges. Metrics that apply in the GTA don’t necessarily apply in northern communities. For example, when I look at the growth of the population in the GTA, and I look at the decline of the population in Northern Ontario communities, I believe that a metric in employment will have different levels of result depending on the community. In Northern Ontario we will never be able to match the employment rates that exist in the GTA. So those are the types of challenges that have occurred. As already stated, my main concern with the policy implementation is the limiting of access to emerging fields.

ON5 Not answered.

ON6 I think it’s pretty well universal. Overall colleges are underfunded relative to other organizations. So, you’re always facing that challenge of dealing with declining weighted funding units and defining demographics. We now have additional pressures to get out of some of the things that were helping us bridge those funding gaps. Given some of the unknowns, trying to maintain infrastructure, programming and program mix is going to be an ongoing challenge for everyone. The opportunity is to embrace some of the emerging technologies and become disruptors ourselves.

How would you describe your organization’s response to the differentiation policy framework that was implemented in your jurisdiction? What do you consider to be the reasons for that response?

AB1 The first thing we did was declare ourselves a portal. Because we were narrowed in scope. And because we were narrowed in scope, and the demand was broad in scope, we had to figure out a way to fill that. So, we created the portal which says either we deliver it or we’ll find someone who can. So, what we did is position ourselves as the champion for this region to access anybody from anywhere in the differentiated model. We could access any of those people for this region. Of course, there's a doubled administration, there's a doubled effort, more contracts, and paying twice for services that comes with that. For example, one of the results is that we sometimes end up having to buy curricula from another institution when it's already paid for by tax dollars.

AB2 Not answered.

AB3 When the first draft of the framework came out, it provided the opportunity for us to offer our own degrees. When the final document came out, that capability was removed. We reacted to that by advocating strongly for the ability to offer degrees, but were unsuccessful. So we reacted by continuing to work hard to establish and maintain the degrees that our community needed through collaborative degree partnerships.

AB4 As I said, I don’t think it changed a lot for us or what we were doing. After the framework was implemented there was more conversation amongst the VPAs about cooperating. But as I say, without the money many CCIIs withdrew into their traditional service regions. Without the money to support our efforts to work with others, many CCIIs made the decision to focus on supporting their own service region. Whereas in the past, wherever we were asked to go, we went. We would provide services and programming anywhere in the province. That stopped happening because of the finite resources.

AB5 Well, we rejected it because it restricted our ability to achieve our mandate…which was to ensure that everybody has access and affordability to post-secondary education. So, I fought hard….So, we created a new model three years ago which I brought to the Board, and we just
had success in getting a status change because we were able to martial the community, business, industry, students, and school boards. Everybody got on board with this request and government had no choice but to say yes. So, now they have to figure out what that looks like in the context of their roles and mandates document. My expectation is that our mandate will be changed very shortly to give us the ability to grant our own degrees, which is what they gave us in the announcement last week. So, our response was reject, fight, change in order to enable us to do our job better. And we were successful with that strategy.

ON1  We’re trying to replace the differentiation narrative with the destination, demand and access narrative. Initially when I was fresh, I tried to be cognizant of the differentiation policy framework and to work with Ministry to understand and work within that framework. However, there were no obvious behavior changes that were required. In SMA2 we are going more on the words destination and broadening of programs that we are on differentiation. There is a very interesting correlation that could maybe be explored in further studies: If we were well funded would differentiation be more possible? I believe that funding and geography are the two most critical factors that influence our behavior. International is also an issue. How does differentiation apply to them? When the ministry created the differentiation policy framework, did they have just domestic students in mind? International students? Is there a difference if we look at all of this from the University perspective?

ON2  As we build our annual business plan, this is one of the tools we measure ourselves against to ensure that we are achieving some of the stated outcomes that we’re putting in our SMAs. So, we have internalized our SMA as part of our business process. As our strategic plan and business plans are, so is the SMA a living document for us. We have some comfort at that level because the genesis of our SMA was our strategic plan. It’s not as if we’re doing a collection of different activities and hope that they come together at the end. They are in fact all harmonized at the outset.

ON3  I think that our response overall has been accepting of the framework. We have worked within the framework. I think we’ve managed it as well as could be expected. I think that this has resulted in a bit of resentment at the senior leadership level, especially when it comes to the strategic mandate component of the framework. At the front-line employees are just following through with what has been handed down to them. So, they are not necessarily feeling any resentment to it. At the senior management level there is more of a cynicism about it than there was when I first came.

ON4  We became more cautious around new program ideas that were coming forward. We were also very careful around what program areas we were identifying as strengths. We have continued to do the things we feel are necessary for our stakeholders, but we’re being careful of, and have been adjusting our wording to align with the policy where necessary.

ON5  What’s interesting I think is that as it was being implemented, we brought the idea of differentiation to our Board of Governors and to our internal stakeholders through Academic Council and other groups. In fact, more than anything it more or less confirmed the direction we were taking and the work we were doing. It allowed us to affirm what we saw as our role and to actually embed that into our SMA strongly. So at the end of the day, we found the discussions quite useful, but it didn’t mean that we changed a lot.

ON6  We sat at the table and made sure there was an understanding of our context. Just about any college you go to, the interesting piece is that the majority of people working within them have a passion for what they do, and they often see it as a vocation. More or less, we have been going in this direction of including social innovation and a whole range of other new opportunities to work with our communities in effective ways. Whether the SMA was there or not, we would have done that. The SMA merely acted as a catalyst to get us there in a more focused way.
Who do you consider to be the most important stakeholders of your organization? How would you describe the impact of the differentiation policy framework on each of these stakeholders?

AB1 Our region. The people of our region. I'm looking out the window now...that guy driving down the road, that kid walking in the door, that oil truck driver going by...those are all our number one stakeholders. They're represented through their elected officials, their groups and clubs and associations. They're impacted by the framework in a very serious way. Because of the inability to provide the full service, it's costing them more. It's either costing them in dollars to get their kids where they want them to be, and it doesn't matter if it's degrees, or access to high end physical training to be an athlete, or whatever it is. You're either paying bigger dollars to go do it somewhere else, or you don't have access to it....Employers have to look beyond for their people. They're bringing them in. So, it's a serious cost. We estimate the added cost of leaving for a degree at about 30%. I would say it's double when you start to factor in the cost of living, the travel back and forth and those types of things.

AB2 The citizenry of our region. The learners and the employers of our region who employ our graduates. We don't just produce widgets for employers. We focus also on helping our students to be educated critical participating citizens. For the most part they wouldn't realize that we have this framework in place. They would know that up until this recent announcement our college could not grant degrees. They would know that there were limits on what we could offer, no matter what the demand was. They would know that we had to partner with other Alberta institutions to try and meet their needs. They would know that we do not have an MBA because we are not degree granting and were unable to convince other degree granting institutions to offer an MBA here. Employers within our region have been impacted because when young people from the region go away for university they don't come back. When we are able to provide the needed programming here then there is a far higher chance that employers will have access to those graduates.

AB3 The learners are our most important stakeholders. The people who come in and who are looking for the opportunity to learn. The framework has limited their opportunities to get the education they want and need. It has limited their access...

AB4 Our students and our communities are our stakeholders. Employers would be next because our primary focus is about access, providing PSE access in a way that ensures that our students can take advantage of it. The goal is to ensure that our students don't have to leave their communities to access PSE programming, whether it’s to our programs or somebody else’s. Everything we do, every program we develop, access has to be the number one focus. Is it accessible in rural and isolated communities in a way that maintains high quality? All of our campuses are attached to the Supernet which provided access to high speed Internet in all our campuses, because in small communities there’s oftentimes no broadband, or if there is it’s very expensive. So the only way students can access it is at our campus. That means the only way they can access their training is to come to a campus. The impact on these stakeholders would be limited because we already had a broad range of programs available by distance. We already, as part of our original mandate, had a community capacity building mandate.

AB5 Our students, without question. For the simple reason that everything we did to get the status change will benefit them. They were strong advocates because they were tired of having to leave the community to complete their education. They were tired of spending the extra money, and some of them never came back. So, the community was impoverished by that, their parents weren’t happy, and they weren’t happy. So, the students are the most important stakeholder because they are the ones that directly benefit from our work. And we were letting them down
by not providing the options they needed, and requested, and required for successful lives and careers.

If you broaden the stakeholder group a little bit, we start with students and see that they have been negatively impacted. Their ability to complete their post-secondary education has been greatly impaired by the differentiation policy framework. Secondly, if you look at faculty, their aspirations have been impaired because of their inability to teach in the higher degree levels has been impeded. And then I think that the communities themselves have been impaired in terms of their economic, cultural and social growth, because if you’re losing students to the larger centers and 90% of them don’t come back, then what’s that doing to smaller communities? The communities themselves are realizing that they can’t keep losing students to other communities if we want to have strong non-urban communities. So, the communities themselves were impaired, simply because they were losing a lot of their talent. And they made that very clear, and that’s why they supported us to have the change.

ON1 Potential students, current students and graduates; and local businesses and employers.

ON2 Our communities, our students and our staff. For students I would say that the differentiation policy is helping us to bring greater consistency and quality to what we’re doing within our institution. That would be I think over a period of time best appreciated by students as we’re better equipping them for the workforce and for finding employment. I think communities benefit in a collateral kind of fashion in that as our graduates get absorbed into the community workforce they will help drive the economy, they will be able to help sustain small communities, they will help to bring innovation to the workplace and to the community. So, there is the collateral benefit that I think communities derive. It’s indirect relative to the product that we produce. And within our staff it’s changing our culture. As I indicated before, we’ve had to step out of our comfort zone, opening ourselves up to evaluation and measurement. At our request, more of our programs are now undergoing accreditation. Our program advisory members I think are rising to the challenge in bringing their industry practice to the program advisory committee table and looking to see whether or not some of their quality measures that they have in their workplace have any relevance to what we might be able to do. They’re just paying a whole lot more attention to what we’re doing today. I don’t know that they would say that it’s directly related to the differentiation policy framework being in place. They would see it as a result of a changing internal culture. As a result of policies that we’ve implemented in support of the differentiation policy framework.

ON3 Students are usually the ones that I’ll think of and mention first. Access is very important from a student perspective and I feel that the differentiation framework has had a significant negative effect on access. That forces many students to leave the area to get access to the post-secondary education they are looking for.

Industry is also very much affected because of the rapid change in technology that we see in our mining sector. This results in the need to develop new programming that wasn’t in our original strategic mandate agreement, and that because of differentiation becomes really challenging. There is training that they need that we just don’t have a mandate to do. And I’ll give you an example there. Just as we finished negotiating our strategic mandate agreement, in which we had to identify the programs we would be adding to our complement, three new program needs have been identified by industry. They aren’t in our strategic mandate agreement and so we’re not sure if they will be approved. One of those programs is in the area of blasting design, which would likely be at the graduate certificate level. We will only be able to develop and offer it if we can convince ministry that it aligns with our focus on mining programming.

The community is the other stakeholder that is affected. There is a heavy reliance on the college to go beyond just the absolute training that it provides. They rely on us for community activities, for community supports, and for the economic impacts that spin off of our post-secondary activity. If the college faces sustainability issues then most communities will also be
negatively impacted at the economic development level. The effect is a little more indirect on
the community, but it is still there.

ON4 Certainly, it would be the students, and then secondly our employers.
The policy has the potential to limit access for students. We’ve been able to work around that
potential for the time being, but it is still a challenge. It can also limit access for employers. If
an employer needs a program that we are not able to offer because it doesn’t align with our
stated areas of strength and growth, then that will be a problem.

ON5 The people who live here. The communities that we serve.
If anything, it just affirmed where we were going. Since I’ve been at this college, access has
been the most important goal we’ve had, particularly within our First Nations Communities.
We need a physical presence here to meet those needs. Even if we only have 8 physical
campuses, through our different activities and the use of technology, we actually have a
presence in about 30 different communities.

ON6 The communities we serve. The industry and everyone in the communities.
I think it may have provided more support around articulating our access mandate. We have
developed some unique programming where we really position learners for success. We give
them options and provide them with support. Quite often you will see them go from no wage to
making a wage because of those programs and supports. The SMA process with Ministry
provided us with a concrete opportunity to help ministry understand better the needs of our
stakeholders. It was a two-way street in that it also helped us better understand ministry’s
direction and requirements, so we could ensure that we were going in the right direction with
our stakeholders.

When you think about policy implementation in general within your organization,
who would you identify as the key decision makers and influencers involved in the
process?

AB1 Government policy is pretty consistent across the country. We inform policy and then we
deliver it. I always tell people that I don't create social policy. I inform it and I deliver it.
Period. I have no role in the creation of policy, other than to inform it before it happens and
deliver it once it does. So, when people get frustrated because there's a certain legislation in
place I say it's too late. I'm now working on the next legislation that's coming two years from
now. Because all I can do is inform policy. The ballot box decides on what's important in social
policy, not the college. So, when that happens that has a profound impact on board policy and
on operational policy because quite often decisions are made back in the context of the urban
setting, with urban power, and with urban access to the decision makers. For me to have a
meeting with the Minister it needs to be planned a month ahead of time, it's going to cost me a
thousand dollars and travel. Presidents in urban colleges or universities can often contact the
minister on short notice, get a meeting quickly, and can have a one-hour meeting done within
two hours (including travel to and from the office). So, there's a whole issue of access to
decision makers and of course, you can't fault them for this, they have a bias because every
day they're in that environment. The lion's share of the power is urban. Really our whole
political structure is that way. We're all talking about the urbanization of Canada. When you
get policies handed down to you by government you need to implement to the extent possible.
Because by that time, it's over, it's done and you need to implement to the extent possible. So,
you line up with that policy and you deliver it. I don't agree with everything that's going on, but
I am a champion for everything that goes on. And that confuses people. People sometimes are
surprised that I support certain policies. Well at that point in time, once they are a done deal, I
have to support them. Because I need to consider the big picture. Rural leaders are often out of
sight and out of mind for policy makers. You always have to put your hand up. And when you
do they think you're making too much noise, but you have to or you're not being heard. And I talk to MLAs and my counterparts and mayors and they all say the same thing. That's the challenge of today. That access and visibility is a challenge for us.

**AB2**

All of our policy goes through a really comprehensive and participatory process. The writers of policy could be one of the VPs (academic, administration, etc.) but it could also be an individual from another place within the institution. The policy is written and then, depending on whether it is an administrative or an academic policy, it goes through various consultation processes. This includes the need for it to be posted twice for the college community to have an opportunity to respond. Everybody has input into it and everybody has the opportunity to critique it – whether it is an academic or an administrative policy. The writer of the policy needs to respond to any comments that are received. Eventually, it would get approved either at the Executive level or at Academic Council if it’s an academic policy. I would say that there are times when people don’t want to follow policy and it doesn’t matter what process you have in place. There are times when you have to say this is the policy please abide by it. There are also times when people will want to go back and change it. And this a part of our process. If they really don’t like a policy they can propose a change, but they still have to abide by it until the change is approved. There are always policies that are not fully embraced. For example, our parking policy will never be fully embraced no matter what it is. When a policy affects people directly in a manner that they consider to be adverse they tend to get annoyed. Many of them won’t have looked at the policy before that when they had the chance to provide input. People may not always like our policy process, but they may not like any policy process. On the whole I think it’s gone fairly well.

**AB3**

Policy development and implementation impacting the post-secondary sector in Alberta rests with the Government. The hope is always that the final policy aligns with what is actually needed to improve the sector as opposed to weighing heavy on the political statement side. Influencers… learners….When implementing policy communication is critical. It is important to make sure that stakeholders understand why policy is needed, what it means, and how it should influence actions or operations. Even as you move forward with the best of intentions, you can’t forget to close the loop. Once you put it out there, you need to loop back to see if the policy is achieving what was desired or expected. That wasn’t done with the Roles and Mandates Framework. Many of the ‘rose-coloured glasses’ clauses of the framework haven’t been achieved. We are now ten years later and there was never a review to make sure it way laying out as intended. As I previously stated, when the Roles and Mandates Framework was being created, I agreed with the intention that it outlined. Clarifying organizational roles to make the best use of resources in serving all of our learners is a goal that made sense. However, when the framework was finalized it actually created issues and constrained our ability to serve our learners and achieve our true mandate.

**AB4**

That would trickle down to our operations level. So our deans level and above.

**AB5**

Every decision in our sector is a political decision. It’s not about having the best argument. It’s not about having the research. It’s not even about having the best data. It’s simply politics and timing. So, the key decision makers are always politicians. But there’s a role to be played by other influencers. The influencers are community, students, business and industry. Those are the real influencers of government. So, we asked for this change three times in the last 30 years. The last time was in 2007 when this new framework came out. Based on my research of what happened in the past, we failed those three times because we were making an institutional ask. So, it was easy for government to say no. This time we marshalled the entire community. Wherever any politician went, they heard ‘we want this’…’we need this’…’you must give it to us’. It wasn’t the president and his team telling government what was needed. The President and Senior Leadership in the institution are the least influential when it comes to government. When it is an institutional ask, it is perceived as the ambitions of some individual who wants to achieve something. But when you marshal students and faculty, and community and school
boards, and school superintendents, and the chamber of commerce, and every single mayor and
council in the region...that’s when you become influential. Which politician in their right mind
is going to say no to that? So, the influencers are never the institution...and that’s where
Presidents make their mistake. They think that they are going to in there and do this great
work...but nobody cares. Politicians make the decisions, pure and simple. They make them
based on their best interests. If they think that whole communities are going to be mad at them
if they don’t succumb, then they make that decision. But if it was just the college making the
same request for the third time, they would have absolutely said no. No is a hell of a lot easier
than yes if it is just an institutional ask. Because in saying yes, now they’ve got to figure it out.
Every decision is a political one, so you can do the work, but the work alone will never get you
the answer that you’re looking for, or the result you’re looking for. You’ve got to have the
work. It can stop you if you don’t have it. But you’ve got to have the work, and then you’ve got
to have the political will to make that decision.
From the bureaucratic perspective, they have been resistant the whole time. That’s why I don’t
work through them. That’s why I work through the actual decision makers...the Premier, the
Minister and the MLAs. The bureaucrats don’t do anything until they’re told to by a politician.
They’re not going to tell politicians what to do. They never do that. They say ‘what do you
want us to do’? They don’t like change either....I’ve learnt a lot over the years about how to
actually get things done. Political strategy is strategy 1 in any major initiative you want to move
forward. It means you need to be smart enough to watch the provincial and federal political
landscape and work your priorities in alignment with their stated objectives of their
government. So, if there are twenty major things I want to accomplish at my college, they are
not listed 1 to 20. They’re just there. And if something comes along where the feds say they’re
big in environment, then I bring my environment strategy forward. It’s alignment with what
governments want to do that leads to success. Pushing your agenda when it doesn’t align with
government’s agenda is a waste of time and energy. So, it’s really a very simple formula if
you’re paying attention. I believe that when government brought this framework in, their
intentions they believed were absolutely good, but they had unintended consequences.
Politicians are not necessarily the best at thinking about unintended consequences. And so,
what happens is when you start to create boxes and barriers, you don’t enable growth and
innovation and change in institutions. Because our college in 2018 is not the college we were in
1998 or 1968. So, we’ve grown, evolved and matured as an institution. And so, as we grow and
mature, then our ability to do more becomes more evident. And so, when you create the types
of policies that restrict that ability to grow and evolve, then you’re actually causing your system
significant damage. And the damage is to our students, and their ability to prepare for the jobs
of today and tomorrow.

ON1 I would say that the key decision maker is the Ministry. I would like to think that we and
Colleges Ontario would be key influencers, but I’m not convinced that that is the case. I would
say that unions are key influencers.

ON2 The single biggest one is government. Others include Colleges Ontario, to the extent that the
Committee of Presidents helps to shape that particular agenda. From the perspective of the
Differentiation Policy Framework and the SMA process, there has to be a top-down effort. Not
just the President, but the whole senior leadership team has to be wholly behind this if it’s
going to be seen and valued and respected as good for the organization to be pursuing. I think
time will tell whether or not industry becomes a stronger influencer as well. What we see is that
society is becoming a whole lot more influential of its institutions. Society is no longer passive
and just willing to accept whatever the institution provides. So, I don’t just mean the quality of
education the college provides. I mean also for the quality of health care that a hospital
provides, etc. Consumers are becoming a whole lot more discerning and I would equate
industry to being a consumer because of our graduates. They’re holding us to a higher social
standard. They’re just holding us to higher standards that would have not been present a decade ago. So, is it a result of college differentiation? I wouldn’t think so. I think it is coincidental. Differentiation is being driven by government policy. We know that. But policy has both intended and unintended consequences. And the spirit within which the government has moved this particular policy forward I think is with good intent. But policy makers rarely have operational experience. Very few people within ministry have a teaching background. It’s also true that virtually nobody within MAESD is a product of a college. They are mainly products of university. So, they don’t have a lot of operational experience. That, I think, is somewhat dangerous for senior policy advisors and senior policy makers when they don’t have any appreciation of operations. As a result, they can create well-intended policy that has little relevance and can fall off the rail. And because they often put money behind policy then colleges make every effort to make awkward situations work. But it’s clumsy, and for want of better consultation, and more importantly government listening, to people with operational experience, and then bringing that operational experience into the creation of policy…that would make for a better world as I see it.

ON3 In our organization, the VP Academic is responsible for academic policy, then it would be the VP Admin who would be responsible for other policy areas.

At the government policy level I would hope it would be the Minister or Deputy Minister level that would have the most influence, but I’m not sure that is the case. I think it’s more at the bureaucratic level.

ON4 The senior team. All policy at our college eventually comes to the senior team. The way a policy gets implemented would depend on the type of policy. For our internal policies they all are initially vetted by our Academic Advisory Committee, which is made of representatives from across the college (such as union members, faculty, etc.). After that they go to the senior team for approval.

ON5 It depends on the policy I think. I think that when you’re developing policy you need to have the people in the room who are going to be the most greatly affected by that policy. You need to walk through the pros and cons; and discuss with them what the issues are that the policy is trying to address, in order to be able to clearly define it. It’s also important to clearly define what the outcomes are meant to be.

I also believe that a policy should never be left alone. A policy needs to be monitored to ensure that it is achieving what it was meant to achieve. Depending on the policy, you’d have faculty, students or even community members involved with the development of that policy, and then it does need to be monitored as it is implemented. It’s not unlike the differentiation piece, where I know that at least inherently it really was focused on Southern Ontario and the overlap between institutions. There is a need I think to monitor what are the unintended consequences within other institutions. I don’t think we can answer that completely yet, but I believe it needs to be monitored. I don’t believe it that monitoring has been a consideration to date. I do wonder about potential funding to drive the process. I do wonder if the Ministry would be open to funding multi-institutional initiatives that could help drive the goals of differentiation.

ON6 I’m a firm believer in shared vision and shared values and value systems. The direction you go in needs to be based on those things. In establishing the strategic direction of the college, there was an engagement process that included all of the stakeholders in addition to the communities we serve and in addition to the board. Given the feedback from our stakeholders, we were able to develop a direction that had solid buy-in. That consultation and engagement ensured that we did not go off on a tangent. The senior team articulated the direction, but they did so based on the input, and through an iterative review process. One of the interesting things about the differentiation policy framework is that, because we’re so diverse at the college level across Canada, we are likely to be impacted in different ways by things going on around us. For example, consideration of the ways in which the Indigenous piece will impact direction. As an example, within Ontario the Indigenous Institutes are now
funded. How does the policy framework address that? How does it address things that are happening at the national and international level…such as the recent UN declaration on sustainability? How does it address today, but also tomorrow? How is it monitored to ensure that it is achieving what was intended over time? How are these things impacted by who’s in power at the government and ministry level?