

## **Not Just Another Listserv**

The Contribution of ACCC Affinity Groups to  
Knowledge Exchange, Sectoral Initiatives and Innovation

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the ways in which national networks using electronic information and communication technology develop (or fail to develop) into effective communities of learning and of practice, in which knowledge, resources and innovations among colleagues are exchanged across institutional or provincial boundaries. The author discusses why such networks are now viewed as key sources of innovation and adaptability in the corporate world, and examines their application to the voluntary-community sector in the three-year Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) experiment of creating “affinity groups” – national voluntary networks of college administrators, staff, faculty and students in the same discipline or sharing a common concern in the education field. The paper presents lessons learned regarding the type of informal leadership required and conditions for the sustainability of these “communities of practice,” as a means of keeping ahead and providing much-needed informal leadership in today’s information-overloaded organizations – and society. Noting that the concept of minimum (or essential) specifications may be useful in allowing maximum flexibility, the author concludes that sector councils and colleges should not set their sights on “national curriculum” and the “standardization of everything,” but rather on agreeing to essential core competencies and standards, while continuing to encourage diversity.

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## **Preface**

The following study is a revised version of a major paper submitted in December 2002 as the final assignment for the Master of Management for National Voluntary Sector Leaders under the McGill-McConnell Program in the McGill University Faculty of Management. The program was based on the most recent knowledge about leadership for not-for-profit national associations, and included the sharing of experience among some forty leaders of organizations in the Canadian voluntary sector in each of the program's three cohorts. All assignments were required to be very practical in nature, and relevant both to one's own organization and to the voluntary sector in general.

The McGill-McConnell Program was made possible by the J. W. McConnell Family Foundation, while my particular course of studies was funded in part by the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC). To both these organizations I am most grateful.

I am also deeply grateful to the first editor of this paper, and lifelong friend and partner, Suzanne Taschereau, without whose encouragement, patience and support I could not have completed this second Masters later on in life whilst still working full throttle.

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*Knowledge is experience. Everything else is just information.*

ALBERT EINSTEIN

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## Introduction

This paper is about new ways of sharing experience and knowledge among colleagues who have traditionally not worked together, or even met one another. It is about electronic information networks in colleges<sup>1</sup> that develop (or fail to develop) into communities of learning and of practice through the sharing of contextualized knowledge and common values and goals. It is also about the growing value of informal leaders and informal networks in an era of such rapid change that traditional institutions which have served us well must now look for alternative ways of adjusting more rapidly to change. And it is about educational institutions becoming more innovative and more responsive to the differing learning needs of their increasingly diverse learners, or in the words of Terry O’Banion, becoming “learning colleges.”<sup>2</sup> Ultimately it concerns the fundamental values colleges have had from their creation of making education and training more accessible and relevant to learners and to the needs of the rapidly changing labour market and employers.

The growth of the Internet in the late 1980s and early 1990s made it possible for people with a shared “affinity” – such as an area of interest or a professional responsibility – to develop networks where they could connect rapidly via a standard mailing list server or “listserv.” In Canada’s colleges, people were suddenly able to connect with remote colleagues, make new contacts and share ideas or resources in fast, ongoing discussions across traditional institutional and provincial boundaries. Once the listservs became established, it became possible to consider undertaking national learning initiatives.

This paper examines and assesses the three-year Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC)<sup>3</sup> experiment of creating numerous “affinity groups”: national networks

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<sup>1</sup> The word “college” is used generically throughout this paper to encompass the slightly differing realities of community colleges, institutes of technology, colleges of applied arts and sciences, CEGEPs, university colleges and specialized institutes.

<sup>2</sup> See Terry O’Banion, *A Learning College for the 21st Century* (Phoenix, AZ, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> The ACCC is the voluntary national association of the 150 colleges and institutes across Canada. It acts as the national and international voice for those colleges. Its 55-person Secretariat is based in Ottawa. For information on line about the ACCC, see <http://www.accc.ca>.

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of college administrators, staff, faculty and students who administer, teach or study in the same domain or discipline. Ever since 1999, the ACCC Secretariat has encouraged the creation and development of affinity groups as a service to its members. There are currently nearly 50 such groups in existence,<sup>4</sup> with over 2,500 participants among the 150 ACCC institutional members. A few similar networks of deans of Transportation, Technology, Business and Allied Health have existed over the past decade, and have inspired other sectors to think about developing their own networks. For the purposes of this study, all such network groups, old or new, will be referred to as “affinity groups.”

The same period also saw the creation and development of many new national sectoral councils or sectoral initiatives, in which national associations of employers and employees came together in a council which would look after the national dimensions of human resources (HR) in their respective sectors.<sup>5</sup> Funded in part by Human Resource Development Canada (HRDC), these councils develop pan-Canadian approaches to labour market and HR planning and learning. They are therefore generally keen on finding ways to help the college system interact with them in a more coordinated manner. Affinity groups seemed to be the ideal response to that need.

Accordingly this study seeks to answer the following questions:

- Have affinity groups fulfilled expectations? If so, how – or if not, why not?
- What conditions could make affinity groups more effective and relevant?
- How might the ACCC National Secretariat support affinity groups in the most effective manner?
- What is the affinity group leader’s role?
- A “wicked question”: Can you have anything truly national in the Canadian education and training domain?<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For a current list of Affinity Groups, see <http://www.accc.ca/networking>.

<sup>5</sup> For a current list of Sector Councils, see <http://www.councils.org>.

<sup>6</sup> “Wicked questions” are questions that few people dare to ask, but which often reveal people’s true interests at stake in a given issue. See Brenda Zimmerman et al., *Edgework* (Irving, TX, 1998).

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## Methodology

Having determined the questions to be examined, it was important first to search the existing literature on networks and their underlying values and outcomes to discover who else was facing the same challenges and what lessons had been drawn from their experiences which could perhaps illuminate our own. As the McGill-McConnell Program was about new kinds of leadership, I also looked at some of the most recent literature on the changing roles of leaders, and in particular the growing role of informal leaders of networks such as the affinity groups. Next I conducted empirical research, using four main sources of information or knowledge:

1. An e-mail questionnaire sent to 134 randomly selected participants in 34 of the ACCC Affinity Groups that had been in existence for at least six months
2. In-depth interviews with nine of the 51 respondents who were playing informal leadership roles within their respective affinity groups
3. ACCC-sponsored Sectoral Case Studies on college-sector council collaboration<sup>7</sup>
4. My own experience with numerous joint meetings and projects between college affinity groups and sectoral councils and other national sectoral initiatives.

The structure of this paper reflects the methodology presented. Section 1 reviews some of the most recent literature on knowledge, learning, innovation, informal leadership and other existing networks (mainly in the United States and Australia) and its relevance to the knowledge-sharing and common practice of the ACCC Affinity Groups. Section 2 will situate the study in its current Canadian context by presenting a brief synopsis of the national learning challenges faced at present by community colleges in Canada. Section 3 presents the main results and lessons drawn from the empirical research, in seven thematic points. The paper concludes with some reflections on the deeper added value of such networks or affinity groups.

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<sup>7</sup> Available on line at [http://www.accc.ca/english/Publications/studies\\_reports\\_papers.cfm](http://www.accc.ca/english/Publications/studies_reports_papers.cfm). All studies were written jointly by council and college representatives, and published by the ACCC and the Alliance of Sector Councils.

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It is hoped that the lessons learned and recommendations arrived at through this applied research will provide a source of knowledge and experience for the participants of such networks and help them decide how to function more effectively nationally in order to better meet the lifelong learning needs of Canadians. It is also hoped that other national membership associations will find useful lessons for their own efforts at increasing national sharing of knowledge and voluntary coordination of initiatives from their membership base.

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# 1

## Literature Review

### The Social Dimension of Knowledge, Learning and Innovation

We often think of learning and knowing as entirely individual acts, by which each person selects and integrates bits of information into his or her unique framework or world view. However, it can be argued, and has been argued, that social dimensions supply the most crucial factors of knowledge and learning. This paper will review some of the most recent literature that supports this view.

A number of American scholars, practitioners and consultants we will look at below have been converging recently around the proposition that *knowledge* is not the same as *information* and cannot be disseminated in the same way. Their conclusions are based on extensive work with a number of large American corporations, government departments and nonprofit organizations, and their works are regularly featured in the *Harvard Business Review*, the publications of the Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management<sup>8</sup> and the *MIT Sloan Management Review*.

That we are now in a knowledge-based economy is a commonly accepted view. John Seely Brown, Chief Scientist of Xerox Corporation, Director of its Palo Alto Research Centre and co-founder of the Institute for Research on Learning posits a new law for this economy:

In a time when both the rate of change and the growth of knowledge keep accelerating, the more people you have who can learn more in a shorter time, the more competitive you will be.<sup>9</sup>

Seely Brown advises firms, including his own, to transform themselves so as to engage the full force of the firm in the creation and dissemination of knowledge and innovation. But he also points out that disseminating knowledge and encouraging innovation are not

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<sup>8</sup> Now the Leader to Leader Institute [2005].

<sup>9</sup> John Seely Brown, "Sustaining the Ecology of Knowledge," *Leader to Leader* 12 (Spring 1999), 37.

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only a matter of sending information on a listserv, as many believed in the heady days of the early Internet revolution. He argues that “this process is largely social; it depends on the credibility and standing of an idea’s champions.” Furthermore, the successful creation, transmission and adoption of knowledge depends on “the adoption of shared beliefs” and a “shared understanding of purpose.”<sup>10</sup> We are far from the transmission of impersonal bits of data via a listserv.

In a book co-authored with Paul Duguid, Seely Brown argues convincingly on the basis of dozens of case studies that knowledge cannot really be captured in databases and circulated impersonally via the Web. It resides in people, in overt and tacit forms, and requires a community of learning or practice to be truly shared and adapted to each and every new situation that presents itself. Without our knowing the person or the context in which the knowledge has arisen, it ceases to be knowledge that can be applied usefully. “Information . . . is on its own not enough to produce actionable knowledge. Practice too is required. And for practice, it’s best to look to a community of practitioners.”<sup>11</sup>

The corollary is that learning is a social process, which begins in our early years through contact with a family and friends and continues throughout our life – whether in a classroom, a workplace or perhaps an Internet chat group. Learning is also about who the learner is (identity), what is important to him or her at that point in time (motivation to learn) and who he or she is attempting to become (personal or professional objective). The learner will not entrust such crucial aspects of his or her being to just anyone who passes by. Hence communities of respected peers or colleagues are often the most useful sources of new learning and knowledge. One has only to think of how important peer-reviewed publications in respected journals are to the entire scientific community.

Richard McDermott is another practitioner and corporate consultant who has focused a great deal of his research and practice on the social nature of knowledge and learning in order to understand how best to nurture the development of innovation in the workplace – a crucial determinant of organizational survival. In his essay “Why Information Technology Inspired but Cannot Deliver Knowledge Management,” McDermott writes:

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>11</sup> John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, *The Social Life of Information* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 135.

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Knowledge is an affair of experience and of community, and hence the sharing of knowledge requires a combination of human and information systems. . . . Sharing knowledge involves guiding someone through our thinking or using our insights to help them see their situation better. . . . Professionals do not just cut and paste from best practices, but they use their past experiences and knowledge to inform their analysis of the data and information.<sup>12</sup>

The sharing of knowledge is therefore much more complicated than we may perhaps have thought initially. To go one step further to the creation of innovative solutions is a matter of a creative mind opening up to new ideas and experiences (preferably received from trusted others), which the learner then figuratively plays around with until a new idea or configuration appears and takes shape:

The innovator will allow different views of the challenge or reality lead to different perspectives and allow the frameworks of perspectives to seep into each other, to generate new ideas and solutions. And to generate new ideas among a group you need to understand how the others conceptualized their solution or system more than all the details of the system. Once you can do so then you can let the process of new thinking influence your own.<sup>13</sup>

What then are the implications for this sharing of knowledge, according to McDermott?

Rather than identifying information needs and tools, we identify the community that cares about a topic and then enhance their ability to think together, stay in touch with each other, share ideas with each other, and connect with other communities. Ironically, to leverage knowledge we need to focus on the community that owns it and the people who use it, not the knowledge itself.<sup>14</sup>

If we are interested in rapid and effective learning, knowledge exchange and innovation via networks or affinity groups, then we should be looking at such issues as nurturing and supporting communities of learning and practice, including helping them to focus on their priority issues, rather than simply setting up listservs and expecting them to develop on their own.

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<sup>12</sup> Richard McDermott, "Why Information Technology Inspired but Cannot Deliver Knowledge Management," in Eric Lesser et al. (eds.), *Knowledge and Communities* (London, 2000), 23–25.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

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McDermott also argues that formal organizations should actively support their more informal networks of learning as they come to realize the contributions such networks are making to the crucial aspect of the organization's competitiveness, namely creative people exchanging knowledge rapidly and applying it effectively in new and innovative ways. Finally, McDermott identifies four types of challenges that organizations must face if they are to be successful in their knowledge-creation and learning efforts:

1. The technical challenge to design human and information systems that not only make information available, but help community members think together;
2. The social challenge to develop communities that share knowledge and still maintain enough diversity of thought to encourage thinking rather than sophisticated copying;
3. The management challenge to create an environment that truly values sharing knowledge;
4. The personal challenge to be open to the ideas of others, willing to share ideas, and maintain a thirst for new knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

To be able to meet those challenges will require new types of leadership. In her influential book, *Leadership and the New Science*, Margaret Wheatley argues convincingly that the complexity and interconnectedness of our reality require that we adopt a corresponding leadership style; her thinking is inspired by the holistic sciences of quantum physics and biology rather than by the Newtonian paradigm of linear or mechanical approaches that was mirrored in the industrial production process of earlier times. In a complex interconnected age, she argues, leadership is much more about facilitating the creation of partnerships, relationships and networks than about the development of linear five-year management plans which never come to be. More and more people now play informal leadership roles which are not associated with formal positions and organizational charts but with the creativity, relevancy and timeliness of their ideas spread through influential informal networks.<sup>16</sup> At this point in time, "the issue is no longer control, but dynamic connectedness."<sup>17</sup> and the main leadership challenge is

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>16</sup> See also Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point* (Boston, 2000) on how the right idea sent by a respected person to an influential network can rapidly "tip the balance" and start an influential trend.

<sup>17</sup> Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science* (New York, 1999), 25.

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being able to facilitate processes that respect diversity while being able to arrive at a congruence of vision and purpose. Then you can let the individuals use their creativity and experience to implement the vision and overall objectives in their specific area of expertise. She proposes that the notion of “critical mass,” a useful concept in classical physics, should now be replaced by “critical connectedness,” an essential concept in quantum physics.

The source of continuing relevance, dynamism and survival for an organization thus becomes a continuous flow of useful information, which can be rapidly assessed, processed and adapted to the changing reality. And the more diverse the information or knowledge is, the better for the organization, as the information will thus convey a more complete vision of a complex reality which can no longer be apprehended by any one person or organization.<sup>18</sup> Continuous feedback on initiatives is also important to allow for continuous adjustment of action in light of new information and the changing reality now being “co-created” with others.

In this context, the role of the informal facilitator, moderator or leader of a network group becomes extremely important. The group leader needs to know how to listen to others, how to connect people to each other, how to facilitate participatory group processes to arrive at common views of the future and how to elicit and act upon feedback and criticism. Significant rewards await such a volunteer leader – not least of all a sense of connectedness, of contributing to commonly held values and visions. In a concluding image, Wheatley argues that “meaningful information” or “knowledge” in Seely Brown’s language, is the most important commodity these days: “Meaningful information lights up a network and moves through it like a windswept brushfire.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See also Margaret Wheatley, “Innovation Means Relying on Everyone’s Creativity,” *Leader to Leader* 20 (Spring 2001).

<sup>19</sup> Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*, 144.

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## Networks and Communities of Practice

Based on some of the same findings as outlined above in the context of his long consultancy work with cross-divisional internal learning and innovation networks within IBM, Apple, Shell, the World Bank, McKinsey and others, Etienne C. Wenger decided to call these new networks “communities of practice,” and proceeded to analyze their characteristic features, effectiveness, conditions for success and their place within modern organizational structures and cultures. His initial book on this subject, *Communities of Practice* (1998), and his subsequent work with Richard McDermott and William M. Snyder, has influenced research and debates in the US academic and corporate world.

Like Wheatley and Seely Brown, Wenger begins by emphasizing the social and practical nature of knowledge. He then defines “communities of practice” as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion for a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.”<sup>20</sup> He goes on to explain that the idea for the concept came from his study of the history of craft guilds in the Middle Ages, with their apprentice-journeyman relationships – effective communities of knowledge sharing or learning embedded within, and focused on, the practice of a trade or profession.

According to Wenger, what differentiates an information network from a more valuable community of practice is that the participants are mutually involved in an ongoing manner, so that they develop a joint vision and come to share a common repertoire of useful resources and shared experiences. While it is possible have useful networks of information exchange, to leverage the maximum knowledge and innovation out of such groups they must take some minimum common decisions on their role, on common values and issues and on their scope of intervention, while still functioning informally.

Communities of practice differ from work teams within an organization because they are not set up by the organization itself; they are fully voluntary, and they focus not on a

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<sup>20</sup> Etienne C. Wenger, Richard McDermott and William M. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Boston, 2002), 4.

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product or service but rather on an exchange of knowledge and experience between a group of people sharing a similar affinity.

The main benefits of communities of practice found by the corporations studied are that they

- help drive strategy
- start new lines of business
- solve problems quickly
- transfer best practices
- develop professional skills
- help companies recruit and retain talent<sup>21</sup>

It is hardly surprising that this organizational form is attracting interest in corporate America.

A specific link was also found to exist between participation in networks or communities of practice and the capacity to generate innovative solutions. Wenger and his colleagues cite many examples of the increased creativity of employees when they are part of a community of practice beyond the divisional or team boundaries of large corporations. Bell Labs found that their best performers were consistently those scientists who were members of strong networks. Studies of the software development industry concluded that “there is an increased creativity and effectiveness for programmers when they are part of internal and external communities of practice compared to when they are not.”<sup>22</sup>

Shell estimates that its communities of practice saved the company between \$2 and \$5 million and increased revenue by more than \$13 million in one year. The World Bank now places funding at the disposal of its many communities of practice in order to become more of a knowledge organization.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Etienne C. Wenger and William M. Snyder, “Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier,” *Harvard Business Review* (January–February 2000), 140–141.

<sup>22</sup> Wenger et al., *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, 235n., 238n.

<sup>23</sup> Wenger and Snyder, “Communities of Practice,” 145.

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According to Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline*, the seminal work on learning organizations, “We’re finding again and again that the guiding principle is that significant innovations must be diffused through informal, self-organizing networks, through horizontal communities of practice. How you strengthen these communities is the key to how you disseminate innovation and maintain innovators.”<sup>24</sup>

The enthusiasm for this new management trend is clear:

Leading knowledge organizations are increasingly likely to view communities of practice not merely as useful auxiliary structures, but as foundational structures on which to build an organization...Communities of Practice are the new frontier.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, Wenger and his colleagues caution that these communities are not a social panacea; in the wrong hands or under the wrong influence, they can become just as constraining and limiting as more formal organizations. Nor can they replace the formal organization, which must continue to exist so as to receive the communities’ useful concepts and transform these into marketable products and services. Nonetheless communities of practice are one of the best new organizational forms for managing knowledge and stimulating innovation, as a necessary complement to the more formal structures.

## **Education and Nonprofit Sectors**

Most of the examples in the studies mentioned above come from corporate America, and from knowledge networks that straddle divisional and local boundaries within single organizations (albeit mostly large, multinational ones). But what about the education and nonprofit sectors? The literature on affinity groups and communities of practice in these sectors is not so extensive. Two cases, however, – one on an international network for conservation in the environment, the other on the technical and vocational training sector in Australia – are worth examining briefly.

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in R. Zemke, “Why Organizations Still Aren’t Learning,” *Training* 36, no. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Wenger et al., 21.

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Frances Westley, Professor of Management at McGill University, has studied the case of the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group (CBSG), an international network linked to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).<sup>26</sup> It has grown from fourteen members in 1984 to 653 currently from 150 countries, and has only three staff members to support the network and its actions internationally. But it has been able to exchange high-quality information and to mobilize 5,000 people around the world to successfully save over 20 endangered species.

The most highly valued characteristics of the CBSG by its membership are (in the words of its Futures Search Report) “the exchange and sharing of information, with free dissemination of products and data” and “its ability to facilitate mutual-problem solving by people with diverse interests.”<sup>27</sup> One of the key factors in its remaining a network for so long is that the small staff in the Minneapolis office can only act as catalysts and advisers, not as official executives.

Westley asked why CBSG survived for so long in the face of such a huge challenge? From her study she identified five main motivators for participant involvement and network survival:

1. The cause connects with participants’ core values and emotions.
2. There is immense satisfaction from working with others in the network to the point that it now acts as an important reference group for members.
3. Participation in the CBSG is seen as making a real difference and provides a sense of accomplishment that gives added purpose and meaning to their own lives.
4. CBSG provided an opportunity to do something in spite of the old organizational structures they also belonged to, a forum where action is more important than custom, and where communication is more important than hierarchy.
5. There was a sense of duty and responsibility to act on their moral values.

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<sup>26</sup> Frances Westley, “Not on our Watch: The Biodiversity Crisis Global Collaboration Response,” in *Organizational Dimensions of Global Change*, ed. David Cooperrider and Jane Dutton (Thousand Oaks, CA, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

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Westley concludes that “CBSG indeed represents a global social innovation”<sup>28</sup> and that it provides people with new ways of becoming involved and making a difference on concerns that they feel strongly about. She further argues that traditional organizations require allegiance or loyalty and some subservience to the greater organizational good, while networks are loose, with no hierarchy or obligation beyond what the participants choose to contribute. This allows and encourages individual creativity and innovativeness. But she also notes that these networks do require a new type of informal leadership – cross-culturally sensitive and adept at conflict management, process design and facilitation.

Finally, Westley underlines “the need to do more research around the affinity between the network form and the type of social problem.”<sup>29</sup> This study takes up the challenge by asking: How appropriate is the affinity group as a model for the type of national educational and learning challenges we face?

A recent experiment with Communities of Practice in the technical training system of Australia provides us with a first and only study found on its application in the college domain by John Mitchell.<sup>30</sup> It is useful to note that Mitchell recently presented his findings at the Second World Conference of Colleges and Polytechnics held in Australia in March of 2002. Mitchell and Susan Young argue that communities of practice are reshaping partnerships in the Australian vocational education and training system. They explain that the communities of practice were recently established in response to a need to rapidly implement the new National Training Framework in Australia which required: “new forms of partnership arrangements and new forms of communication to meet the challenges of the recently-established industry-led, demand-driven training system.”<sup>31</sup>

Sixteen communities of practice were established in 2001 by a national reform secretariat to bring together employers, government personnel involved and training providers, including many of the Australian colleges, around the challenge of implementing the new

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>30</sup> John Mitchell, *The Potential for Communities of Practice to Underpin the National Training Framework* (Melbourne, April 2002).

<sup>31</sup> John Mitchell and Susan Young, “Communities of Practice Reshaping Training Partnerships in Australian Vocational Education and Training” (Melbourne, 2002), 1.

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reform. The networks were indeed designed to be very focused on one objective from the beginning – which is not the usual network creation process. The bringing together of employers, employee associations, civil servants (nationally and at the state level) together with the training providers is worth following, however, as an interesting experiment in sectoral initiatives, especially in view of the roles ACCC Affinity Groups play in their own national sectoral initiative.

Having analyzed the overall preliminary results of the Australian groups and having presented case studies of communities of practice in the tourism and the wine industries, Mitchell and Young conclude that communities of practice are “a viable means for fostering the development of relationships between VET (Vocational Education and Training) providers and industry clients, for the benefit of industry . . . [and] have the potential to accelerate, intensify, enrich and enhance the implementation of the national training system.”<sup>32</sup> These groups also contributed toward the development of partnerships among training providers such as colleges in many different states.

In the larger study, Mitchell makes specific recommendations to the Australian college system regarding the viability and sustainability of these communities:

From the College, there needs to be recognition of the value of the forum as a knowledge management and problem-solving tool, a valuable professional development activity and a potential source of innovation. There also needs to be some financial support to sustain the community.<sup>33</sup>

In order to survive, communities of practice must also continue to be of direct relevance to local challenges as well as national objectives. For the group to function on a regular basis, they must identify its “convener” or main “driver”; they must also identify the limitations of the communities of practice, lest they become too dependent on one individual convenor or coordinator, or else grow so large that members start to feel disconnected or marginalized. It is better to subdivide the group or create more manageable sub-committees to retain that sense of community.

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<sup>32</sup> Mitchell and Young, 10.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

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Mitchell and Young also conclude that communities of practice in a country as vast and diverse as Australia need some face-to-face meetings in order to be functional.<sup>34</sup> Otherwise a sense of “disconnectedness” develops and the sense of identification remains too superficial to be fully productive. This conclusion has provided a useful insight to explore in our own empirical study.

Finally, they suggest that the new kinds of partnerships developed between colleges and employers via these communities had the potential to place Australia’s VET system at the leading edge of the vocational and technical training systems worldwide.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 6–7.

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## 2

### **Affinity Groups in the Canadian Context**

Before examining the results of the empirical study on the ACCC Affinity Groups, it is important to understand the context in which these groups operate and to which they respond, both at the national policy level and as a network of colleges.

At the national level, the federal government in 2002 released its long-awaited Innovation Strategy in two papers: one, entitled *Achieving Excellence*, about “investing in people, knowledge and opportunity”; and the other, concerning “skills and learning for Canadians,” entitled *Knowledge Matters*. The Innovation Strategy’s overall objective is stated succinctly as exploring “what Canada must do to ensure equality of opportunity and economic innovation in a knowledge-based economy and society.”<sup>35</sup> As these are germane to the issues explored in this paper, a quick review of the main proposed national objectives is in order, including the potential implications or involvement of colleges in their realization.

The objectives that the Government of Canada is proposing are to:

- increase the proportion of Canadians who have some post-secondary education from 39 to 50 percent over the next decade
- double the number of apprentices completing a certification program over the next decade, especially in light of the already existing shortage of people in skilled trades
- make it possible for all high school graduates to access post-secondary education, if they so desire
- have businesses and employers in general increase by one-third their annual investment in training per employee within five years

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<sup>35</sup> Both these papers and other documentation on Canada’s Innovation Strategy are available at the Web site of the National Summit on Innovation and Learning: <http://www.innovationstrategy.gc.ca>.

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- increase the number of Canadian adults who access lifelong learning opportunities by 1 million in all sectors and segments of society within five years
  - reduce the number of adults with low literacy skills by 25 percent over the next decade<sup>36</sup>

Because of the college system's reach into 900 Canadian communities large and small, its close ties with employers and its unique expertise in apprenticeships, essential employability skills training and recognition of learning, the Government of Canada expects that the college system will be a key partner in the realization of these ambitious goals.

Although the actual additional learning will take place locally and will require provincial funding increases, what are the national dimensions of the learning challenge to which colleges are being called upon to respond?

1. They are being asked to facilitate the mobility of Canadians by improving national recognition of learning. This requires the establishment of equivalencies between programs and certifications, transferability protocols between institutions and the guarantee of common quality professional standards.
2. They are being asked to increase essential employability skills such as literacy, teamwork, self-managed learning and information-communication skills for all Canadians and especially for aboriginal learners; but these are more difficult than technical skills to train for, and will need a concerted effort and systematic exchange of experiences and results if a significant leap is to be attained in the time needed.
3. Increasing the amount of distance and e-learning which is available to Canadians is seen as important. This again requires more coordination among consortia of colleges and universities now coming together, and an increasing ease of recognition of these types of learning by other institutions nationally.
4. Increasing the number and scope of National Sectoral Councils is seen as an important vehicle for attaining the objective of significantly upgrading the skills

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<sup>36</sup> See *Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians* (Ottawa, 2002).

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of the existing workforce. This has required, and will require, colleges to develop their own national sectoral networks to be able to interact with the equivalent employer sectoral councils. This will allow them to act in a more coordinated fashion to meet national goals and accreditation norms set by the sector councils.

5. Last but not least, colleges are being asked to develop an integrated and more transparent approach to the recognition of foreign credentials and work experience so as to facilitate the integration of increasing numbers of skilled immigrants being recruited to Canada in order to meet shortages. This again requires national agreements, data banks and dialogue on what foreign credentials equate to in Canada.

As we can see, the national aspects to these challenges are significant, and will require Canada's colleges to collaborate with each other on national efforts more than ever before.

Within the "Achieving Excellence" component of Canada's Innovation Strategy, there are two key objectives that will involve colleges:

- increasing the amount of Applied Research and Innovation that goes on within Canadian colleges, as there is significant untapped potential and as Canada's application rate of research is very low compared to international standards
- increasing Canadian college capacity to transfer those new technologies and innovations to Canadian companies (this applies especially to small and medium-sized businesses, which employ the largest proportion of Canadian workers, but which sometimes have more difficulty integrating new technologies into their workplaces)

While neither effort requires greater national coordination, they do still require a significant increase in the amount of exchanges of experiences, new knowledge and policies, if the college system itself is to be more of a learning and innovative network.

The ACCC has already started to respond to many of these national challenges through a series of dialogues, working groups, position papers and planning sessions within the college system and then with its government, private sector and voluntary sector partners.

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A first National Symposium between Colleges and Sectoral Councils/Initiatives was held in the winter of 2001 to stimulate greater exchanges and collaboration on joint national efforts.

The first National Symposium between sixty college CEOs and forty senior government ministers, deputy-ministers and directors-general, along with the national leaders from business, union and voluntary sector associations was held over two days in September 2001, during which the participants explored “avenues for building productive partnerships among governments, colleges and institutions to approach Canada’s skills, learning and innovation challenges with a greater sense of common purpose.”

A reading of the full twenty-five-page report highlights the scope of the coordinated national response desired now by the colleges themselves and their key partners in government, business, unions and the voluntary sector.

### **Other Voices**

What do more disinterested voices have to say about the national challenges facing colleges? Two of the most prolific and influential authors on the Canadian Community College movement to date are Paul Gallagher and John Dennison, who have separately or jointly co-authored histories of the creation and development of community colleges and have published well-researched essays on trends and challenges facing these colleges in their more recent history.

In one of his major works, *Challenge and Opportunity: Canada’s Community Colleges at the Crossroads* (1995), Dennison identifies some of the major factors that are pushing change in the college system: a society focused on knowledge and human resources as the chief source of competitiveness, pressure from students for greater access, national recognition of learning and transferability of credentials, greater relevancy to the world of work and pressure for more collaboration between colleges and universities, government, private sector and NGOs.<sup>37</sup> Dennison concludes that “if there is a general theme which has emerged in the numerous studies of colleges in every region of the country, it is a call

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<sup>37</sup> John Dennison (ed.), *Challenge and Opportunity* (UBC Press, 1995), 121ff.

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for a more responsive, more coordinated, and better articulated system of public post-secondary education.”<sup>38</sup>

In an article in the same book, Paul Gallagher goes even further in arguing for a more coordinated national effort on the part of colleges: “The new environment within which community colleges now work suggests that traditional levels and kinds of . . . collaboration will not be sufficient. . . . In a globally interdependent world, it is imperative that our colleges think and act in even more collaborative ways.”<sup>39</sup> Gallagher also advocates even closer collaboration between colleges and national councils:

“It would now be prudent for [colleges] to collaborate fully with initiatives to develop nation-wide training standards and to design programs and activities that increase the employment mobility of their graduates.”<sup>40</sup>

In his opening speech to the aforementioned first National Symposium of Colleges and National Sector Councils and Initiatives, Gallagher called for a transition from an era of “polite partnership” between college and employer associations to one of active, coordinated and “comfortable cohabitation.”<sup>41</sup>

Dr. Terry O’Banion, the leading American author on community college issues, has argued that the main challenge to the community college systems in the United States and Canada is to become true “learning colleges” that can more rapidly adapt to the requirements of their learners in the Information Age.<sup>42</sup>

If all organizations in the corporate sector must become more innovative and must truly transform into organizations promoting continuous learning for their employees, then surely the knowledge institutions which are responsible for preparing their learners to be

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 94

<sup>39</sup> Paul Gallagher, “Promise Fulfilled, Promise Pending,” in Dennison, 263ff.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 263–64.

<sup>41</sup> “Sector Councils and Community Colleges Need to Move into an Era of ‘Comfortable Cohabitation,’” *TASC Connections* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2001).

<sup>42</sup> Terry O’Banion, *A Learning College for the 21st Century* (Phoenix, AZ, 1997). A number of O’Banion’s articles are available at the Web sites of the American Association of Community Colleges (<http://www.aaac.nche.edu>) and the League for Innovation in the Community College (<http://www.league.org>).

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productive future employees and for upgrading the existing workforce must be even more in a continuous learning and innovative mode to be able to remain responsive and relevant to the changing learner. “If the concept of the learning college cannot come to full fruition in the community college, the community college we know today may cease to exist, and the community college we dream of for the future may never come to be.”<sup>43</sup>

It is apparent, both from the objectives proposed by the Canadian Government in the area of skills, learning and innovation and from the analysis of influential authors on the Canadian college system, that Canada’s colleges need to make a major leap forward, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in their learning and innovation capacity. To do so, establishing and expanding national partnerships among themselves, and with other national partners, is essential. Can affinity groups contribute to that leap and how much can they do so? Such is the question at the centre of the empirical study carried out among Affinity Group participants.

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<sup>43</sup> O’Banion, xvi.

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## Findings of the Empirical Study

The empirical study results presented in this section of the paper are principally those garnered from a questionnaire sent out to 134 randomly selected participants in 34 of the ACCC Affinity Groups that have been in existence for more than six months, and then from more in-depth phone interviews carried out with nine of those respondents who are playing some type of informal leadership role within their respective group. Examples from previous case studies on college-sector council collaborations and the author's own experience with many of these groups are also included as more detailed examples of points raised in the questionnaire and interviews.

The term "affinity group" was coined by ACCC when it proceeded to create a larger number of these groups, but it is employed in this study as the generic name that also includes the already-existing networks of deans of Technology, Allied Health, Business and Transportation.

Overall, 51 college participants from 26 different affinity groups responded to the e-mail questionnaire. This represents a 38-percent return rate and covers over 80 percent of the affinity groups surveyed. There is at least one return from each of the Canada's provinces and territories. The breakdown of replies by ACCC region of the country is as follows:

British Columbia/Yukon	10
Alberta/Northwest Territories	8
Saskatchewan/Manitoba/Nunavut	11
Ontario	10
Quebec	3
Atlantic	9

One-third of the respondents work at colleges serving rural or remote regions.

In summary, the sample is confidently felt to be a representative one for the purposes of this study. In any case, the questionnaire was not designed primarily to be a quantitative

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evaluation, but rather was intended to elicit reflections and suggestions concerning a relatively recent phenomenon within the community college system.

The responses are presented in this paper around seven different themes that relate directly to the issues we have been exploring so far. A number of direct quotes from the questionnaires and interviews have been included in italics to allow respondents to have more of their views stated in their own words.

### **Motivation for Joining Affinity Groups**

When asked what motivated them to join an Affinity Group, the respondents were looking for a vehicle to network, to exchange ideas or resources and to access nationally produced information. Close to half the respondents were also interested in working collaboratively with other colleges on challenges such as transferability and recognition of learning beyond traditional provincial borders and national accreditation of college programs by employers.

While these expectations were mostly met, the unanticipated academic program benefits of participating in the affinity groups that were judged to be most useful were:

- access to national labour market information to validate or inform changes in curricula
- opportunity to become involved in national sectoral learning initiatives they were not aware of beforehand
- access to training modules and entire courses they were given or bought from sectoral councils and other colleges

The Health Care and Allied Health<sup>44</sup> sectors offer a telling example of this growing national dimension for occupations and for learning. Professional associations of registered nurses, licensed practical nurses and various types of medical technologists had to recently undertake an exercise to agree upon national equivalencies that would

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<sup>44</sup> Allied Health includes the non-nursing programs in the various medical technologies. See <http://www.caahp.ca>.

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facilitate the rapid evaluation and recognition of all certified personnel arriving from other provinces as part of the Federal-Provincial Agreement on Internal Trade. To do so, they require the collaboration of colleges from across Canada who are preparing the future professionals or upgrading the existing ones in the field. The Canadian Association of Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) therefore organized and partially funded the first national meeting of the majority of college LPN educators in order to encourage them to work collaboratively at the national level to compare and equate the various provincial curricula.

The ACCC supported the holding of that first meeting and then set up an Affinity Group for LPN educators, which now numbers 175 participants. The group has now gone on to select a national coordinating committee and form three thematic sub-committees, including an important curriculum committee, and is planning to set up a national association of LPN educators in Fall 2002 to coincide with a national meeting of LPN Registrars. Their expectations for their own Affinity Group have thus grown significantly over the past year.

The Canadian Association of Allied Health Programs (CAAHP) has existed for some time to “advance Allied Health education through cooperation and collaboration with colleagues across the nation and with other professional organizations.” To this effect, they submitted a brief to the Romanow Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada and are now in the process of organizing a first national conference in 2003. Once again, the expectations of this existing Affinity Group are expanding into the realm of advocacy and to participation in national conferences. As one participant in the Allied Health Affinity Group who represented her network at a national committee of the Canadian Medical Association explained, “I now definitely feel more connected to national colleagues. This experience has opened doors that were not previously available to me and which has been very fulfilling personally and professionally.”

### **Rapid Learning and Innovation**

The empirical study confirms that participants see the Affinity Groups as new and sometimes very effective vehicles (a) for rapidly gaining access to valuable resources and experience; (b) for learning from respected colleagues how to do their own jobs more

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effectively within their respective organizations; and (c) for the forming of relationships that encourage them to take risks and to innovate in their own institution or province.

A majority of respondents to the questionnaire and interviews talked about accessing new information and knowledge that they could accept and apply more readily because it was coming from a respected group of colleagues, even though some had not yet met face to face. One active member confided that it was sometimes much easier to learn and to propose new initiatives based on interaction with colleagues outside of one's own institution and province: "It depersonalizes the issues when you are part of a national network proposing changes rather than just yourself in your own institution or province."

As two informal leaders of these groups explained, participation in these networks, and similar provincial ones, had also been an important way for them to learn their new jobs or responsibilities much more rapidly than if they had not had the advice and resources from their colleagues across Canada doing the same job. One said, "I am very aware of the synergies and creativity that are encouraged by networks of colleagues who share the same concerns. It is an excellent way of learning a new job quickly." Said another leader, "I relied heavily on networks of colleagues during my entire career to be successful and so I viewed the creation of such a national network to be important for me and for others."

The use of these networks to learn new responsibilities when hired or promoted is a very relevant finding when one considers that close to 50% of current college staff and faculty are already between 50 and 65 years old and are already starting to retire in significant numbers, necessitating a large number of promotions and hirings in the coming years. Taking part in such affinity groups could be one element of an orientation and accelerated job-training strategy.

Two examples of affinity groups making good use of that social network of colleagues to learn comfortably, consider innovations at home and begin to act more cohesively at the national level are the College Presidents' Network (CPN) and the more recently created network of vice-presidents. In the case of the presidents, the week-long National Executive Leadership Institute held every two years by the ACCC for college CEOs, and alternate years for Chairs of College Boards, has allowed many of them to learn significant aspects of their complex jobs from wise peers, to develop kinships with

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trustworthy colleagues they can call upon and to become more proactive with their peers on the national scene. However, participants say that they are missing a more ongoing networking vehicle, which the College President Network (CPN) is not designed to provide.

In the case of the vice-presidents, who had been meeting for three hours once a year at the ACCC Annual Conference for some years, an Affinity Group was created at the request of a group of VPs who wanted to start an exchange on common challenges with their colleagues in an ongoing manner. A call was sent out to the ACCC contact person in each member college, and the result was that over 150 vice-presidents eventually signed up to this virtual group. A few activists within the group started sending out questions to the group on such current topics as Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) of college success tied to provincial funding, copyright issues related to use of the Internet for distance education, and applied research experiences and policies.

In most cases, the senders received a good number of responses that they were able to summarize for their own institution as crucial input for their own new policies. The savings in time and money from using the listserv and the wisdom of respected colleagues to learn and innovate was significant according to many. Most then returned the favour by redistributing their summaries and new policies back to the entire network.

According to one respondent, “The exchanges helped enormously. One example was the introduction of Web-based registration at our college. I asked for help and received a large number of responses, which I could use in a discussion paper on the issue at our institution and which I then shared back with my peers through the network.”

Another said: “I obtained very valuable help from the VP Affinity Group on four different topics over the past year: Applied Degrees, Professional Development for Faculty, Applied Research Policies and Learner-support Software. It literally saved me hours and days of work.”

As one practical participant also noted, if she is facing a new issue it is highly likely that someone in the network from another province/territory has already faced that same challenge, made the initial mistakes and has some lessons and even resources to offer her:

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“We really don’t have the time or resources anymore to be reinventing the wheel thirteen different times.”

The diversity of experiences and views was also much appreciated by many. The thirteen provincial and territorial college systems have common values and goals but have evolved quite differently over the years, so that an exchange of opinions and resources leads to quite a diversity of responses. As we have seen in the literature review and know from our own practice, diversity is a key ingredient for innovation. Innovation often arises in the heat of contrasting opinions and experiences being examined and confronted with an open mind. When one learns mostly in one’s immediate, familiar environment, there is a danger of not being aware of, or open to, other differing perspectives which would complete, complement or sometimes contradict one’s own perspective. A complex reality can only be grasped through multiple differing viewpoints, as we saw in our discussion of Margaret Wheatley in section 1. Affinity groups, according to participants, provide a diversity of experience and knowledge, which stimulates innovation and inspires new program offerings desired by learners. They also contribute to the colleges remaining relevant and competitive.

One of the best examples is the current issue of colleges being able to offer Applied Bachelor Degrees in their provinces. Many participants recalled that their affinity group and national meetings of vice-presidents or deans had allowed them to learn rapidly about this relatively new phenomenon from those in Alberta and B.C. who had experience with applied degrees. They were then able to propose new variants in their own province or territory, or submit innovative winning proposals to new provincial mechanisms for approval of applied degrees, as in Ontario.<sup>45</sup>

Ironically, a B.C. college respondent who did not yet have approval to confer applied degrees in his college used the experiences from other provinces, including Ontario, to design his own proposal. It was perhaps easier to learn from outside of B.C. on this issue than from the institutions they would be competing against to gain approval within B.C.

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<sup>45</sup> For more information on the recent Ontario College Applied Degree initiative see the Ontario Ministry of Education news release “New Applied Degree Programs at Ontario Colleges” (March 27, 2002) on line at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/nr/02.03/bg0327.html>.

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The Director General of a Quebec CEGEP also recounted how the network contacts and subsequent visits to other colleges in the West during national meetings had totally transformed his vision of what a college could be. Quebec colleges are much more regimented by provincial government legislation than elsewhere he explained, so seeing how a college manages to obtain over 50 percent of its revenues from non-Ministry of Education sources, such as contract training with business, other ministries and adult education offerings was a true “revelation.” It has led to some basic questioning of the system in Quebec among his colleagues.

Conversely, the Technology Transfer Centres for 23 industrial sectors housed within the colleges in Quebec are the envy of the rest of Canada.<sup>46</sup> College presidents and vice-presidents there are learning about how these dynamic Centres serve large companies but mostly small to medium-sized enterprises, providing advice, new technology adaptation and some training. Some VPs were inspired to develop proposals adapted to their own communities for their own provincial/territorial governments or to federal government agencies.

In summary, affinity groups are generally found to be an effective vehicle to both respond to the national dimension of college challenges and to stimulate collective capacity to learn and innovate much more rapidly and more economically than before.

The existence of a group of trusted colleagues whose suggestions, successes and failures are not mere information but rather a fund of highly valuable knowledge which can be rapidly adapted to one’s own reality seems to be an important facilitator for that knowledge exchange. The social dimension of knowledge, learning and innovation we saw in the literature seems to be confirmed by the responses. The following section reaffirms that conclusion.

### **Face-to-face Meetings, Development of Trust and Common Values**

In this world of technology-mediated communications and learning, it is perhaps counter-cultural, but perhaps not counter-intuitive, to hear network participants speak of the need

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<sup>46</sup> More information on these centres is available on line at <http://www.reseautranstech.qc.ca>.

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for regular face-to-face meetings if the networks are to become more than listservs for information exchange. According to the large majority of respondents and informal leaders of such groups, this is inescapable if the group desires to move to national action and networking with other national sectoral councils of employers and employees.

If we reflect upon the long history of provincialism in the education and training sector in Canada along with what is being affirmed by the literature about the crucial social nature of learning, this desire or affirmation is not very surprising. Face-to-face national meetings allow the development of a sense of trust, the transformation of peers who share your job title into true colleagues.

The actual meetings, each held at a different location around the country, provide other crucial benefits according to respondents. They develop the beginning of a shared group history of professional and social events that plays a role in cementing the group sense and commitment. They also allow each region to host the group and highlight their own particular realities and achievements, which affirms the uniqueness and specific identity and contribution of each college or region to the national group. It provides a concrete understanding of the diversity that is so crucial to successful adaptation of “best practices” elsewhere, as we have seen in the literature. As one participant from the New Brunswick explained, “I am proud to bring the particular experiences and lessons from our bilingual, well-connected and distinctive province to the national scene as well.”

Respondents explained that well-run face-to-face meetings were also felt to be helpful to the groups in increasing motivation to use the listserv after the meetings, in fostering a greater openness to change, in lessening the sense of professional isolation and in feeling part of a significant national movement with agreed-to goals and action plans, all of which confirm Frances Westley’s observations about the value of such networks for a growing number of professionals.

It must be noted that seventeen respondents (35%) indicated that their group had never met face-to-face nationally but that they would very much like to. Those who had met were often warmly enthusiastic:

“Without the trust and understanding that comes from these face-to-face meetings, the positive movement towards common national core curriculum would not likely have commenced.”

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“Face-to-face provides much more give and take and exchange of ideas. It changes the dynamic significantly since the credibility of the person is being evaluated face to face. Sometimes it is easy to portray something electronically but it is different under the crucible of face to face exchanges.”

“We all gained an appreciation and acceptance of regional, aboriginal and francophone differences and needs.”

In coming face to face with new peers, there is also an underlying process of evaluating to what extent the group participants (at least those who come to the meetings) actually share common values. There is a significant body of literature on leadership and management today that has shown that the vast majority of human beings still make their decisions on the basis of clear values<sup>47</sup>. Yet increasing diversity of value beliefs and the proclaimed secularism of education have perhaps discouraged us from admitting to that or to being open to discussing such values openly. Some analysts would say that we become handicapped as we are denying a basic tenet of our action and are avoiding open discussion of differing values even though such discussion is the only way to arrive at mutually agreeable common guidelines for collective action.

The creation and development of some affinity groups appear to be closely related to an identification and sharing of common values. For example, as colleges were created on the principle of making education accessible for all, there is a growing concern with maintaining that accessibility in the face of severe funding cutbacks, and in spite of the introduction of provincial government Key Performance Indicators, which reward speed of completion, instead of helping individual learners to move forward at their own pace (perhaps overcoming significant learning difficulties). This is one of the topics of discussion for the Vice Presidents’ Network.

Another common challenge preventing greater access is the problem of weakness in basic literacy, numeracy and social skills essential for any workplace, which, as one college president put it, “prevents a significant number of Canadians from even getting to the bottom stair of the lifelong learning escalator.” An Affinity Group on Curriculum Development is now spending most of its time on developing and implementing a

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<sup>47</sup> See Frederick B. Bird and James A. Waters, “The Moral Muteness of Managers,” *California Management Review* 32, no. 1 (Fall 1989): 73–88.

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national initiative to research and exchange best practices on integration of the teaching of Essential Employability Skills into technical college curricula. It has just obtained Federal funding from HRDC to carry out that research and innovative practices exchange more thoroughly. Such training does not usually bring in large revenues to a college, but it is viewed as an essential part of their mandate.<sup>48</sup>

This concern with the values of the college system is also reflected in an active search for better ways of including, welcoming and retaining aboriginal students who are growing in number. The recent creation of an ACCC Affinity Group on Aboriginal Issues and the rapid subscription of over one hundred college staff, mostly aboriginal themselves, to this group is testimony to the important nature of this issue of values and national future.

Respondents evoked the importance of sensing that there were enough common values to be able to work with the others. They felt that this was best done through face-to-face meetings on a regular basis. As one active group participant said, “We do share common values of quality service to our students, in spite of funding cuts and bureaucracy, and we are all in the same boat, which can make for a very strong group.”

It is perhaps advisable to articulate those common values that underpin the specific group and the overall college movement more openly, particularly in a time of major changes.

The Fisheries Affinity Group offers a concrete example of the importance of meeting face-to-face. Divided by most of the Canadian landmass, the fifteen colleges from five different maritime provinces who are involved in training for this sector in transition had never met their colleagues from the other coast and rarely, if at all, within their own respective coastal regions.

When the Canadian Council of Professional Fish Harvesters<sup>49</sup> launched a national effort to upgrade the fish harvesters’ knowledge and skills, they invited, with the help of the

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<sup>48</sup> For more information on Essential Employability Skills, see the HRDC Essential Skills site at <http://www15.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/english/es.asp>; also the Conference Board of Canada Employability Skills site at <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/education/pdf/esp2000.pdf>.

<sup>49</sup> For more information on the fish harvesters’ national professionalization efforts, see the CCPFH Web site at <http://www.ccpfh-ccpp.org/eng/facceueil.html>.

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ACCC and its newly created Fisheries Affinity Group, all the colleges to meet in Ottawa with them to discuss their role in the national effort.

At these meetings the colleges heard from fish harvesters that there were significant fears about how difficult and costly a Prior-Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) process (designed to identify skills and areas of competence) would be, and that they felt that there were too few fish harvesters employed by some colleges to teach them. The result was a sense of alienation, preventing them from pursuing lifelong learning at colleges. Colleges exchanged among themselves best practices and experiences regarding these legitimate fears and how one successful college had met those challenges. A crucial understanding of the concrete realities and feelings of the client and of each other was reached at that meeting, facilitating further progress on a national scale.

Subsequent meetings have led to an overall MOU of common action between the ACCC and the CCPFH, as well as an MOU between B.C. colleges and the B.C. Association of fish harvesters to work on joint core curriculum, on a streamlined Recognition of Learning process and the training of fish harvesters as trainers themselves. As one participant said, “It is due to the Affinity Group and national meetings that we are now participating with other colleges and councils in the development of a common Commercial Fisheries program curriculum.”

In conclusion, it can be argued that the geographical vastness and regional distinctiveness which are so much a part of the Canadian reality mean that building the requisite trust beyond our institutional and provincial boundaries will require regular face-to-face meetings complemented by technology-mediated communications in between meetings, as we have seen in the Australian case as well. It is also at those meetings that a dialogue on common values and priorities can truly happen, facilitating the consolidation of the network. The major blockage identified by respondents to the holding of such meetings is the securing of enough funding to ensure that more remote and less well-funded colleges are not prevented from reaping the results of attending such meetings.

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## **Ongoing Dialogue: Roles, Objectives and Priorities**

From the experience of numerous network groups and the comments of a majority of respondents, it becomes clear that to be effective nationally requires the Affinity Group to clarify its roles, objectives and priority actions.

There is a clear desire to have an identified and enthusiastic moderator or facilitator for the group in order to stimulate discussion online and to prepare national meetings. Some non-active group participants are clearly very frustrated by the lack of such a moderator in their group, but excuse themselves from playing that role due to lack of time. Others feel that the key step that allowed them to become more effective was to select a coordinating committee or executive that takes on responsibilities and reports back to the membership at biannual meetings. A number feel that only with a part-time paid executive-director or secretary will the group be able to attain its full potential, while a few warn against losing the value and flexibility of an informal structure by becoming too organized. Still others suggest that larger groups will become effective if they can occasionally work together as sub-groups on specific topics, so that members e-mail inboxes are not clogged with exchanges that are not of relevance to the rest of the group.

The common denominator is that there is a desire to transform informal information exchange networks into more active affinity groups once the group, or at least an active core of the group, has agreed that there is a shared, important national agenda for them to deal with. Wenger's notion of "community of practice" is useful here. Such a community focuses on the generic professional practice that allows individual members to exchange productively in an ongoing manner and to encourage innovation in their domain of interest, often within one corporation. In our case, a "community of practice" would also include common practice at the national level, which a network might decide to take on in a more organized and yet still generally informal manner. This would allow us to distinguish between a developing community of practice, such as the Vice Presidents' Network, and an actual registered organization, such as CAMPE (deans of Transportation), which has a formal executive, a paid executive director and national projects which it undertakes and reports on to funders. Both types are also distinct from some affinity groups, which are informal networks of information exchange. We shall return to these distinctions in our conclusion.

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Whatever the nature of the network, the list of specific recommendations contained in the appended Questionnaire Results are a testimony to the practical nature of college participants in affinity groups. They want the groups to be more organized, more regularly corresponding, more practical, more effective and more responsive to what the members feel are the priorities.

The history of one of the best-organized affinity groups, that of the Canadian Association of Motive Power Educators (CAMPE), is highly instructive in this regard. CAMPE was set up in the early 1990s to better respond to the training needs of the important Automotive Industry. A number of large employers in the sector had voiced concerns in a sector study, according to one of the CAMPE founders, “that colleges were not responsive enough to industry’s needs. The industry did not want to have to deal with all colleges involved in automotive training individually.”

CAMPE included some eight colleges at first, and has now grown to include 23 colleges and two *Centres de formation professionnelle* from the province of Quebec. It has an executive of five members, and holds two full membership meetings annually and two executive meetings at other times. To better carry out its mandate, it recently raised membership fees in order to hire a part-time executive director. More recently, it has expanded to include the Aviation, Rail, Bus and Truck sub-sectors, and has set up CAMPE committees for each. It has also won two small national contracts in the energy efficiency area, which will generate some much-needed revenues.

The case study on CAMPE and its relationship with Canadian Automotive Repair and Service Council (CARS), which was produced by one writer from each organization and published by the ACCC,<sup>50</sup> illustrates the numerous accomplishments that can be achieved by such organizations along with the hard lessons learnt along the way. These include the setting of national training standards and an accreditation process of college programs by industry, the generation of added revenues and large industry donations to colleges, and the “most important” accomplishment of establishing “an information conduit enabling the automobile industry and the education sector to work together to develop and implement feasible solutions to the technical and labour market challenges.”

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<sup>50</sup> CAMPE-CARS-LMG, “How can 29 colleges, institutes and school boards collaborate nationally?” (ACCC, 2001). Available on line at <http://www.accc.ca/ftp/pubs/studies/CAMPE.pdf>.

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Yet for all its successes, some find the informal exchanges of experiences and practices still to be the most rewarding part of their membership. One member complained that “there are too many provincial jurisdictions to have common solutions,” while another active member said that the group is still not business-like enough to survive: “CAMPE must decide if it is just a network of old boys sharing war stories or an entrepreneurial group that responds to industry’s needs.”

CAMPE is also still struggling with how to fund its meetings and activities with smaller colleges, where the cost can become prohibitive.

Differences as to what should be the primary role for such groups may thus continue even after the groups have become better organized. This perhaps reflects the continuing diversity of expectations and needs that different colleges and representatives bring to the table. The overarching issue is that for such national networks or groups, agreement on common priorities and how best to organize requires an ongoing dialogue that should not be avoided and that should be revisited regularly.

The bottom line for very practically-focused and overworked college staff is that the network, in order to survive and flourish, must at all times be providing real added value to its participants, whatever they decide that should be. For this to be possible, all agree that there needs to be a good level of agreement on values, objectives, organizational roles and priorities: “We have to define the key hot issues of the day for the network to be relevant to most. It has to have a positive impact on one’s college, their programs and their students ultimately to be worth the investment of precious time . . . setting up a coordinating committee and defining clear but rotating roles is key.”

### **Working Productively with National Sector Councils and Sectoral Initiatives**

Among the unexpected benefits from taking part in an Affinity Group, participants mentioned the access to labour market information, core competencies, training modules and other career information products which were produced or distributed by the relevant national sectoral council or initiative, as well as the opportunity to meet with the council nationally in some cases.

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Although a few networks of private training colleges serving the automotive or steel sectors had been collaborating with their counterpart sectoral council for quite some time, most councils did not have an equivalent coordinated body of colleges providing such education and training in their respective fields. This was the case for many that had been created more recently under a federal government initiative to promote the creation of sectoral councils in a larger number of sectors.<sup>51</sup>

Since sectoral councils are concerned above all with the state of the human resources in their sector, and as most of those sectors hire a majority of new employees from colleges and often use their continuing education departments for upgrading of their existing staff, it made sense to them to have a counterpart body encompassing all college departments providing training for their sector. As the CEO of one sector council said publicly at that time, “If we have to continue to try to deal with 13 different provincial systems and 60 different individual colleges to work on a national program, then we will be tempted to do the training ourselves or to go to one or two national private college networks instead to save our precious time.”

The survey questionnaire and interviews conducted with the organized affinity groups reveal that interacting with sector councils and sectoral initiatives is a role that most feel to be an important one for their group. This interaction is highly appreciated for its added value to curriculum validation and adjustment, for keeping everyone up to date on where the sector is heading with regard to employment trends, new jobs, required skills and other HR issues, for correlating provincial course content to national standards and expectations and for the new training business that it has occasionally brought to colleges. It has also served to increase the commitment towards and actual integration of Essential Employability Skills into technical curriculum. Most sectoral studies now indicate that those skills are in most demand and the weakest among existing employees and recent graduates.

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<sup>51</sup> There are currently 26 sectoral councils, five new ones in the process of being created and at least ten other sectoral initiatives, which may not create formal councils but undertake similar national HR initiatives. A list of councils and examples of their activities are available at the Web site of the Alliance of Sector Councils (TASC): <http://www.councils.org>.

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In summary, participants felt that their affinity group's interaction with sector councils provided them with a "broader national perspective on labour trends and occupational standards informing curriculum." Here are some participants' comments:

"We use this information extensively as part of the needs assessment process for particular sectors. It has been very useful if not essential."

"The information often validates local or provincial trends. Often it provides part of the rationale for changes/evolution to our programs and services and how we deliver our programs."

"We've picked up the Information Technology Professional (ITP) Program from the Software Human Resource Council and are starting to have some success in offering it locally."

"The national labour market information helped indicate to us that we needed to shift from the highly technical forestry training we have been doing to much broader training under the umbrella title of Environmental Studies."

### **The Steel Sector Council**

In the previous section we saw the impressive results achieved by the collaboration between the automotive sector and its equivalent college network of providers under CAMPE. In this section we will examine the Steel sector, which has one of the oldest of the sector councils as well as the experience of several years' joint work with various training colleges. The Canadian Steel Trade and Employment Congress (CSTEC) is the name of the council and the Steel Affinity Group is made up of fifteen colleges from across Canada. A case study commissioned by the ACCC, "How To Collaborate through the Ups and Downs in Our Economy" deals with the history and lessons from their joint collaboration.<sup>52</sup>

The study talks about the need to have both "a common goal and challenge" as well as the "WIIFMs" (What's in it for me?) for both the industry and the college in order to make the partnership work. Interestingly, they provide the example of the period when there

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<sup>52</sup> George Nakitsas and Francine Bergeron, "How To Collaborate through the Ups and Downs in Our Economy" (ACCC, 2001). Available on line at <http://www.acc.ca/ftp/pubs/studies/Steel.pdf>.

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was a serious downturn in the steel industry and thousands of steel workers had to be prepared for employment in other sectors. CSTECC and the colleges collaborated to develop specific HRDC-funded retraining programs for these workers, which allowed the industry and unions to create a smoother transition and “little by little, the college/Cégep system became the primary provider of training for laid-off workers.”

In the light of their experiences together, CSTECC and the colleges have entered into a national articulation agreement and an accreditation program in order to facilitate mobility and recognition of learning and to guarantee consistent quality of training across Canada. They have also collaborated on international technical assistance contracts in Chile, Cuba, Egypt and Brazil.

These successes were not achieved without facing a number of challenges. For example, according to the study, “there were limited linkages among the colleges/cégeps themselves. When CSTECC first attempted to bring the colleges/cégeps together, it didn’t know where to begin.” More seriously, “neither side understood the other’s issues.”<sup>53</sup> The need to have the participating colleges form some kind of network group was evident as was the necessity to create a common platform to engage in regular dialogue and joint planning on how to better meet the human resource or labour manpower challenges of this sector. Even today the authors agree that one of the difficulties that still needs to be addressed is “the need to talk to each other more frequently and establish closer, more durable relationships.”<sup>54</sup>

In addition, each side of the partnership must truly recognize and respect the other partner’s core competence. The council of employers and employees are the ones who can identify the competencies required by the industry at this point in time and who should monitor and accredit the college programs against national standards, while the college faculty are the ones who can best translate those requirements into lively and relevant curricula and programs. When the councils start to get into the development and distribution of training modules or services on their own, or when the colleges arrive at the table with pre-designed course offerings unadapted to a changing reality, the trust will be broken and the partnership will be on shaky ground.

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<sup>53</sup> Nakitsas and Bergeron, 11.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

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## **A Crucial Role to Play**

Recent sectoral initiatives in the mining, nursing and voluntary sectors mirror these lessons and requirements for finding better ways of employers, employees and colleges working at the national level to ensure relevance, recognition of learning and mobility and accessibility to learning in Canada's publicly-funded post-secondary educational institutions. These lessons are felt to apply not only to traditional industrial sectors but also equally to the human services sectors.

Some respondents fear that colleges will thus be heading towards uniform curricula, and that this could mean a loss of local responsiveness and undermine the provincial control that now assures a richness based on diversity, as discussed earlier. Others indicated that it is possible to act in cooperation with sector councils nationally without losing their uniqueness and diversity. We shall examine this important conundrum in the concluding remarks.

In summary, the affinity groups are felt to have a definite and crucial role to play in interacting in an ongoing manner with their corresponding national associations or councils of employers/employees to respond to the rapidly changing education and training requirements of each sector.

## **The Role of Technology in Support of Group Objectives**

The underlying premise when the Internet-based networks or affinity groups were set up at the ACCC three years ago was that today's new communications technologies would allow the creation of many new national affinity networks, which would resemble the existing networks in the automotive or steel industries. In fact this has not proven to be the case.

Setting up an Internet-based network group has not automatically led to a dynamic interchange and sharing of resources. The main complaint or unmet expectation of respondents was the lack of "traffic" – exchanges and networking within their virtual group. Three respondents said they were not sure that the group was still in existence, and one had forgotten that he was part of such a group – an indication of how little an impression it had made on their daily working lives. The listservs helped to transmit

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valuable information from ACCC to most participants but they did not automatically become true multi-directional communication channels.

An active participant in the Tourism network explained it succinctly: “The intensely provincial (in both senses of the word) nature of post-secondary college education in Canada mitigates against ‘electronic bonding’ among academics – anything that facilitates face to face exchanges is beneficial.” In fact the same could be said for non-academics, as we saw in our review of the literature. An active, vibrant network requires informal leaders or moderators willing to initiate and stimulate discussions at the beginning. It also requires some face-to-face meetings of at least a significant minority of active participants and some overall agreement on the group’s priority issues and objectives, which are best arrived at in person. Internet technology allows us to more easily follow up between meetings and more broadly share important information than the fax did; still, it is not a determining factor in the development of a lively network group.

The National Council of Deans of Technology (NCDOT), which brings together deans who must keep abreast of technological changes as part of their jobs, is one example of how a network can use technology to support (though not to create) the social dynamic and life of an effective network. Created about a decade ago to facilitate exchanges among deans of technology, the NCDOT started to use its own listserv well before the ACCC listservs were created, but the prime mode of exchange occurred during the meetings themselves, which happened twice yearly in different parts of the country. The elected volunteer chairperson, later aided by the executive assistant of another institute’s Dean who became secretary to the group, are the ones who most animated the listserv with meeting minutes, proposed agendas and queries on which topics should be a priority for the next meeting.

In the past couple of years they have now added to their meetings specific roundtables on common “hot issues” such as the relevancy of how we teach the technologies, or how to attract and retain more young Canadians (young women in particular) to study in the sciences and technological disciplines, or the requirements of applied degrees and its effect on faculty. The listserv is now being used by more participants to research some of those issues, prepare the sessions and remind others of follow-up tasks they agreed to take on. Its use has evolved concurrently with the evolving needs of the group itself.

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The more recently recruited deans at the NCDOT are pushing for more learning at meetings and more follow-up between meetings on national issues of advocacy or applied research. They would like the ACCC, the chairperson and the executive to be more proactive in seeking funding to implement relevant national initiatives such as media promotion of technological careers, or in finding other national partners in business and government to work with on common national issues. Those challenges will likely require greater use of technology in support of the commonly determined new priorities for the group.

It is very important to choose technologies that are appropriate to the nature, existing dynamic and priorities of each specific group. For example a number of respondents suggested that their group now needs to have a common place to work on joint documents, store messages and shared resources, while avoiding e-mail overload. The ACCC should therefore perhaps be looking at the adoption of Web-based platforms instead of solely traditional e-mail listserv technology to support the needs of those groups who are at the stage of working more as a “community of practice.” Such technology should also make it simpler technically to set up and work as a temporary sub-group on specific themes within larger affinity groups who need to work in smaller sub-committees to remain relevant.

### **The Crucial Role of Informal Leaders in Affinity Groups**

As we have seen, access to a listserv does not a network make. From the experiences of existing successful groups, it is clear that the role of leadership has been crucial. In almost all cases, the transformation of an emerging network into a more organized network or community of practice has been the result of leadership exercised by one or two committed individuals, or by a strong coordinating committee. But what kind of leadership are we talking about?

We saw in our review of the literature that Affinity Group leadership is informal, and that it requires certain kinds of specific competencies, which could be summarized as facilitative rather than authoritative.<sup>55</sup> From the interviews with nine such respondents

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<sup>55</sup> See pp. 11, 17, *supra*.

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who play such an informal leadership role, certain common traits emerge. They are all motivated by some deeply held values or objectives, which they feel are crucial to the learners and the faculty in all colleges. Greater accessibility, quality training or mobility for all learners; providing better employability skill training to needy learners; a more prominent place on college agendas for professional development and HR issues – all these, and more, are values and objectives that are deeply held and easily enunciated by the individuals in question. But they also take the initiative to send out the first messages to others, to call a first face-to-face meeting of an interested group across provincial boundaries and often to cover the initial costs of the group's activities from within their own college budget.

But why bother to act nationally, when you could more simply work to improve your own college? From the interviews, I would suggest that such leaders have already arrived at three important conclusions:

1. College leaders must themselves be continuously learning so as to be fully effective at their own jobs.
2. It will be of significant value to their own colleges to exchange more with colleagues across the country.
3. There is something of overarching value to all colleges and to all learners which can only be done collaboratively at the national level.

Whenever these motivations are present, they have stimulated a network group to become more organized or systematic, as has been the case with the NCDOT, CAMPE or more recently, the Vice Presidents' Network. When such informal leaders have not come forward, the affinity groups have not come alive; they feature very low traffic (which participants complain about), or they remain at the still useful level of exchanging some experiences and resources electronically, and at occasional meetings.

The degree of consciousness of the need to act on the national and international playing fields on the part of the informal leaders determines whether and at what rate an information exchange network transforms itself into a national community of practice. But even where this occurs, there may still be debates among participants on whether the

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group should act nationally on common issues or should remain as a very useful, more informal information and resource exchange network, a debate which is currently going on in three affinity groups.

It would appear that many of the younger (or new) informal leaders, when starting to taking part in their affinity groups, are much more interested in the possibilities of common action on advocacy and partnership issues at the national level. As one interviewee explained, “There is a sense that the older college leaders are happy that we have come this far as a network whereas many of us newer arrivals look at where we could be and how much more present we need to be nationally.”

There is a feeling on the part of some that more rotation of leadership roles has to occur with new faces being encouraged to emerge and take the leadership from the veterans. There are also complaints voiced that some of the more organized groups become too conservative and not diverse enough in their membership, leadership and vision. As one participant put it, “The way we organize ourselves is less like a movement to provide Canadians with broad access to quality education and more like a traditional, orthodox institution. We need to re-become innovators and challengers.”

Whatever role an affinity group decides to take on, the informal leaders need to listen very closely to the changing and diverse interests of the group’s membership. Some suggested regular surveys of what the burning issues are to ensure ongoing relevancy and the creation of sub-groups on particular issues to stay smaller, relevant and to spread the leadership responsibilities to a broader group of people. If the leadership fails to listen, members simply drop out or no longer attend.

Such leaders also need to know how to facilitate participatory dialogue processes with many different participants. Because there is no vertical authority structure to make ultimate decisions, the ability to reach consensus based on fruitful dialogue, without grinding down into indecision and inactivity, is a crucial skill, which is not given to or acquired by all.

Another informal leadership skill useful to highlight is the ability to represent such a network group at the national level. With no official representation structure, the representative must usually be willing to operate in a very open and consultative manner,

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advising participants of the issues to be discussed beforehand and reporting back to all members after such meetings so that all are benefiting from the individual's presence. Some have complained that representing the Affinity Group ends up solely benefiting the individual and his or her college.

With such added responsibilities and no real free time at their regular jobs, the informal leaders must be able to see concrete added value from their contributions. The opportunity to meet and learn from new colleagues, to make a difference nationally and to operate in a more open context free from bureaucracy seem to be some of the most appreciated benefits. As Westley suggests in her article, this kind of context may be one that corresponds best to this type of leader anyway: "Maybe it is not only the form (a network) that makes them effective, but also that the form provides a better vehicle than does hierarchy for a growing and highly effective part of the population."<sup>56</sup>

Identifying a few key informal leaders for a proposed affinity group would appear to be one of the most important tasks that a convenor or national secretariat staff can accomplish.

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<sup>56</sup> F. Westley, 113

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## 4

### Reflections on Added Value at Differing Levels

Both the empirical study of Affinity Group participants<sup>57</sup> and many of the authors discussed in this paper<sup>58</sup> present lists of concrete recommendations regarding how to improve the functioning of network groups, lists which are very useful to examine and evaluate in terms of their relevance to one's own group. The purpose of this conclusion will be to step back a bit from these specific recommendations in order to analyze what is the added value of such affinity groups for the individual, the network itself, their institution, their national association, the country in which they are located and finally for nascent international affinity networks.

In our present era, the *individual* is faced with the daily challenge of keeping up to date and being selective amidst growing mountains of information, which come at him or her from all media – and especially the electronic media. Without keeping up to date in a knowledge-based society and economy, the person and his employer risk missing out on new trends, opportunities or ideas that could increase the satisfaction of their students or reduce costs. And yet to keep up to date with everything is not possible: one reaches a point of saturation and overload, which becomes counterproductive.<sup>59</sup>

We have seen through this paper that effective affinity groups, or network groups of whatever name, can play a valuable role in providing individuals with information that is commented on and contextualized by respected peers so that it can be more rapidly turned into useful knowledge for one's own practice. It is a mechanism to accelerate learning and especially applicable learning.

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<sup>57</sup> See the list of recommendations summarized in Appendix II, Question 12, and in the Case Study on CAMPE-CARS collaboration.

<sup>58</sup> For further discussion, see Wenger's seven principles (*Nurturing Communities of Practice*, ch. 3) and McDermott's table of "ten critical success factors" in Mitchell, *Potential for Communities of Practice* (2000); also Mitchell, ch.10, 11, 12.

<sup>59</sup> See Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self* (New York 2000).

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One could posit that just as certain organizational forms evolved and grew in order to protect tradespeople and exploited workers – guilds in the Middle Ages and trade unions of the Industrial era – so perhaps well-functioning affinity groups are one of the organizational forms which have arisen to protect Information age professionals from information overload and burnout. As Westley has argued, the community of peers provides an informal and yet very powerful reference group for growing numbers of professionals.

We have also seen that there is a growing demand on individuals to become ever more innovative in meeting often conflicting demands for greater access to quality learning with fewer dollars, for example, or for rapid adaptation of technology in order to remain competitive. Quiet time for reflection and the ability to play around with competing ideas and frameworks that give rise to innovations are in very short supply these days. It would appear from the studies that network groupings can provide just such a nurturing environment of peers meeting away from the office or the classroom, facilitating debate around diverse ideas that can engender the creative or innovative process.

Learned Societies of university faculty and researchers have long played such a role and we have seen how large corporations are now employing “communities of practice” to that effect. It is perhaps time to create and make use of something analogous within the college and other nonprofit or community sectors. As one Affinity Group participant explained, she wants to be able to “access the brain power of individuals across Canada to assist in problem solving.” Certainly none of us can afford to work in isolation, “reinventing the wheel” while the rest of the world passes us by.

The added value which comes to the *network* from starting to act more as a “community of practice” on the provincial or national stages can be summarized as that of acquiring a voice and a say in the provincial and national decisions which affect one’s discipline or domain. Provincial and national policies or initiatives affect not only one’s institution in general, but also one’s own department and discipline in very particular ways. To act only at the general institutional level would be limiting oneself to one avenue of influence and joint action, rather than being able to advocate not only for colleges, but for the market value of particular college business programs or for the importance of homecare worker training to serious health reform.

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It is true that not all networks want to become active at the national level, and it is here that the distinctions Wenger and Seely Brown make may be useful in helping affinity groups define exactly what each wants to be as a group. From my experience with close to fifty such affinity groups, I would suggest that there are generally three levels of activity useful to distinguish:

1. Some affinity groups act mainly as *networks of information exchange*, facilitating individuals being able to circulate information and ask questions of the other members.
2. Some affinity groups decide to also act as *communities of practice* to develop a common list of national initiatives and positions they advocate for, but still informally.
3. Some affinity groups decide to transform themselves into *formal associations of peers* in specific sectors with membership fees, executive elections and fiscal accountabilities.

There is no magic rule which says that one form is better than the other, but the experiences we have reviewed do teach us that each group must regularly discuss which of these roles it wants to take on, and whether it is organized in such a manner as to be able to do so effectively.

The crucial role of informal leaders in the development of affinity groups and in the collective determination of which level they should operate at has been examined in this study. However it warrants more research on the specific competencies required for such new types of leadership roles. One of the most interesting competencies mentioned for participants and informal leaders is the ability to find ways for the group “to think together” in creative ways while celebrating and maintaining the diversity of views that is so essential to creativity and competitiveness.

For the *formal institutions* where affinity group participants work, the active involvement of their employees in knowledge networks of peers should be seen as a valued complement to their official roles and positions. As we have seen, it can keep employees informed, current, learning continuously, innovating and supported socially in times of

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great change. If we refer back to Seely Brown's new Law for the Knowledge Society that "the more people you have who can learn more in a shorter time, the more competitive you will be" and add Terry O'Banion's advice to all colleges to become truly "learning colleges of the 21st century," then the contribution of affinity groups to a learning culture in general and to concrete cost-saving and learner-centered innovations cannot be neglected.

The challenge for the formal institutions is to concretely support their staff in their involvement in such network groups and to find ways of more efficiently applying the relevant ideas generated to their specific institutional reality, as the Australian study recommended. For example, the college network in the state of Tasmania in Australia now allots a budget each year to allow its deans or faculty to attend national affinity meetings and encourages them to report back to their institutions on the innovations elsewhere which might be applied in Tasmania.

The *national associations* of colleges, or whatever membership constituency is concerned, are also challenged to function in new ways that encourage the creation and sustaining of effective knowledge or affinity networks. For some this means moving away from a project implementation ethos to a clear member-service focus where the added value is the national perspective, the national advocacy and the national knowledge edge that the association brings to each of its members. The ACCC took this path overtly under the leadership of its new CEO over the past four years and it is what led to the assigning of Secretariat resources to the creation and support of the numerous affinity groups now in existence.

We have discussed earlier in this paper the key importance of social interaction in creating a functional network or community of practice. The process comes together when emerging informal leaders are identified, when the group finds the resources to meet face-to-face to work out its priority values and objectives, and when the group "starts to think together."

In light of this finding, and reflecting upon the past three years of activity sponsored by the ACCC, it could be said that too much attention was devoted to creating the Affinity Groups and recruiting large numbers of participants, and not enough to identifying the informal leaders among the members who could make things start to happen. Not enough

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energy was channelled into facilitating the coming together of coordination committees, and the groups as a whole, in national meetings that would allow the group dynamic to begin in earnest. Precedence was given to the identification and distribution of information from the Secretariat to the group participants, with a corresponding lack of priority given to developing a community that could act upon that information more effectively and turn it into useful knowledge.

On the other hand, all the studies point to the important role national associations have in publicizing and convening groups together for the first time, in providing them with the technical, financial and logistical means to get the groups functioning and in providing ongoing knowledge support by linking them up to useful knowledge from other similar affinity groups and national partners. These are roles that the ACCC did take on with visible results to show in some sectors, as we have seen in this study.

It should also be noted that affinity groups or networks are a powerful new tool for national associations to reach out to their membership directly, beyond the much smaller number of activists present on national boards and committees. A number of respondents noted that they were, for the very first time, aware of what their national association was doing for them and capable of getting more involved if they so desired. Affinity groups could therefore be seen as one of the new channels for the further democratization of knowledge and of membership-based associations in large or diverse countries.

In terms of better tapping the knowledge of those groups, the American Association of Community Colleges, for example, has an “Affiliated Council” made up of six elected representatives from their major affinity groups, who sit on their national board as advisors to the Association. This is one way of bringing the valuable wisdom of such knowledge groups more into the mainstream association governance.<sup>60</sup>

At the *national level* we have seen in Australia and here in Canada how affinity groups or communities of practice can be effective new vehicles for engaging in national sectoral labour market or human resource initiatives at a time when countries are searching for new ways to significantly increase relevant skills and learning for their populations and to

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<sup>60</sup> For more information on line concerning AACCC Board governance and Affiliated Council activity, see <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Template.cfm?Section=AboutAACCC>.

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stimulate greater amounts of innovation in all sectors. The examples cited of significant achievements in the automotive and steel sectors illustrate the enormous potential of national networks of employers and employees working in close collaboration and partnership with networks of college faculty teaching and training for those sectors. And yet there remains some reticence or fear that such national action will lead to a reduction of all curriculum to the lowest common denominator and to a loss of diversity and local/provincial control.

A new concept of “minimum specifications” for dealing with complex realities, which was examined during the McGill-McConnell Program, may be of some use here.<sup>61</sup> In our context, I would rather use the term “Essential Specifications” to denote the essential components, or specifications, which are needed to act, but which then allow the maximum amount of flexibility and diversity in implementation.

In the case of the complex reality we are presently concerned with, I would argue that, at the national level, the essential specifications are the agreed-upon core competencies (knowledge, skills and attitudes) that are defined by employers and employees in any sector as being *essential and common wherever one works across Canada*. In addition ten to fifty percent of these core competencies will vary from one locality or province to the next, depending on the sector, and may even be regulated provincially. Finally, there should be the distinctive pedagogy which each institution and faculty member bring to the transmission of that set of skills, knowledge and attitudes and which should remain rich and diverse. The challenge is in learning to be able to operate at differing levels simultaneously and in the determining of what is essential, true value-added and hence best done at each level of our activity.

I would further posit that the very decentralization of our federal system can now provide us with the best of both worlds, if we are wise. Canadian decentralization has ensured local control and relevancy. But the national and international levels of activity and the requirements for consistency of quality and recognition of learning are upon us for good. As one college administrator quipped, “the community part of the college has now expanded to include the national and even the international community.”

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<sup>61</sup> See Zimmerman et al., *Edgeward* (Irving, TX 1998).

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Rather than having a national ministry of education or labour imposing national norms as is the case in most countries, the Canadian Government has undertaken to support sector-led and sector-managed HR initiatives. These have shown already to have the potential to become very responsive, rapid and collaborative mechanisms for effective labour market adjustment that ultimately greatly benefits the individual learner trying to figure out what to study.

Sector councils and colleges should therefore *not* set their sights on “national curriculum” and the “standardization of everything,” but rather on agreeing to common essential core competencies and standards, while encouraging the diversity that makes us so vibrant. In this manner we might even be able to talk about national initiatives in the Canadian education and training domain without unleashing a political crisis, in answer to our initial “wicked question.” This approach has the added value of freeing up staff time from what is standard for the more challenging tasks of adapting creatively to new trends, as one affinity group participant wisely observed.

Such national sectoral initiatives and partnerships, as we have seen in the Gallagher and Dennison studies, conclude that they are now essential if colleges wish to meet the needs of their more mobile learners. Such collaborations are the national equivalent and complement to the local Program Advisory Committee<sup>62</sup> or to certain Provincial joint manpower committees.

Affinity groups can provide a new organizational forum, which can act as the natural counterpart to national sectoral councils of employers and employees in ensuring a much quicker and effective adjustment of what is being taught to what is required from the learner in the ever-changing world of work. With the appropriate use of the Internet by sector councils to conduct rapid surveys of employers and quick distribution of the findings to colleges across the country, we perhaps are starting to have a labour market information mechanism that corresponds more adequately to the speed of the changes that we face constantly.

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<sup>62</sup> Each college program is required to have a Program Advisory Committee made up of local employers of their graduates, which examines twice yearly the relevancy of the curriculum and makes recommendations for adjustments and new program offerings.

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*Internationally*, as Westley's study has shown, affinity networks or groups also have significant potential to innovate and to act effectively on certain common international challenges. With the existence of international federations or unions of various associations, including the recently-created World Federation of Colleges and Polytechnics, it would be worth exploring the use of international affinity groups on a few specific and very focused issues of common concern to see if they can both provide effective channels for the sharing of inspiring practices and the undertaking of some common action. With both the Australian and the British technical and vocational systems experimenting with sectoral councils and communities of practice,<sup>63</sup> there is some common language and initial groups to begin working with. There are perhaps experiences from other international federations that could be referenced regarding their use of international affinity or network groups.

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<sup>63</sup> We have seen the Australian references earlier. For information on the British sectoral skill councils initiative and its Canadian connection, see "United Kingdom Creates New Sector Skills Councils," *TASC Connections* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2002).

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## 5

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Faced with a rapidly evolving, more interconnected and complex reality, we have seen in this paper that colleges can benefit from the use of national affinity groups in order to exchange inspiring practices and useful resources or tips among colleagues across the country, to keep up to date on national labour market and human resources trends in their discipline and to influence national policy and practice on issues of common concern. They can allow participants to learn rapidly and remain innovative and relevant in their response to the varying needs of Canadian learners.

However, it is also clear from this study that we need to learn and experiment more about how to make such affinity groups or communities of practice more effective in fully realizing their potential. The following are the conclusions and recommendations emanating from the survey of current participants and informal leaders undertaken in this study:

1. Affinity groups cannot avoid the issue and challenge of finding the right kind of leadership, which corresponds to the organizational format of the network they have created. This often means identifying a “facilitator” or “moderator” and perhaps even a coordinating committee to move things forward, even if they are still functioning in an informal mode. Those roles may, and probably should, rotate regularly; but there needs to be some level of moderation, encouragement and minimal organization for the group to attain its full potential. The challenge is to select and nurture a “facilitative” type of moderation and an informal style of leadership, avoiding traditional definitions and roles of positional or formal leadership. It would be best to openly discuss the type of leadership or facilitation that is required by each group to avoid those pitfalls.
2. While maintaining an informal organizational format, participants feel that there needs to be some form of ongoing Secretariat support, whether paid or volunteer. Ironically many participants feel that, given the paucity of time and resources everyone faces, the network must not place huge demands upon them to make it

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valuable and worth belonging to. This does not mean that they are unwilling to contribute as much as they can; but they are reluctant to spend those rare resources on ongoing Secretariat support roles such as maintaining the group's listserv or Web site, providing some fixed reference point to query at any point in time or initiating and preparing face-to-face meetings and national initiatives with counterpart national sectoral councils. Moreover, accepting such a role often entails finding the ongoing sources of financing to pay for it or finding dedicated volunteers to provide the needed support. The major challenge is to avoid having the Secretariat becoming a quasi-executive for the group, but rather keeping its focus on facilitating the network to become more inclusive, more active, more connected and more effective.

3. Even though affinity groups are fundamentally iterative modes of organization, they still do need a clear articulation of their fundamental objective as a group (Are they a network, a community of practice or an incipient formal organization?<sup>64</sup>) and what their current priorities should be. This may seem contradictory at first, but participants affirm that in a world of info-saturation and resource cutbacks, they need to be reassured that if they are investing their precious time it will be for returns which are priorities for them and their organization. Better interacting with national sectoral councils and initiatives seems to be one of the major motivating factors to many. Ultimately, everyone also knows that they can opt out of the network at any time if no longer satisfied or motivated. Keeping the network together therefore depends not on any organizational, financial or philosophical imperative, but rather on the network meeting the needs of individual participants at any point in time. Affinity groups should therefore ensure that they undertake a full and periodic dialogue on their objectives and added value to participants in order to remain relevant.
4. Occasional face-to-face meetings of a good number of the participants, be they regional sub-groupings or national meetings with a good number of participants present, are seen to be essential to the transformation of a loose network of information exchange into a more valuable knowledge network or community of practice. In almost all cases, when the groups have managed to meet face-to-face

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<sup>64</sup> See p. 54 *supra*.

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they go on to become more relevant and lively in their functioning. The technology of the virtual seems to require the “touch” of physical presence and interaction in order to be used to its fullest in the intervening periods of time. The ongoing challenge in a country like Canada, or in an international context, is how participants from far-flung places can access the resources needed for these necessary occasional meetings. This is especially true for those coming from more remote regions or smaller organizations. Special measures need to be considered to avoid the concentration of informal power and relevance in major cities or larger institutions.

5. In the particular bilingual and bicultural Canadian situation, there are additional challenges and sensitivities to be dealt with if one truly wants to have a “national” affinity group and dialogue. Having to function entirely in English or always using interpretation machines is a serious impediment to the full participation of Canadians who speak French as their main, and perhaps only, language. A policy of encouraging participants to post messages in their mother tongue and then calling upon the recipients to use their high-school French or English, with the help of a dictionary to decipher the message, was adopted and agreed to but has not really been used by any group. Francophone participants surveyed felt that because constant translation was not realistic for a more informal network, it was necessary to identify bilingual francophones who could act as bridges between the mainly English-speaking network and the equivalent French-speaking network, if such exists, as often is the case. In addition, the particular high-touch and mainly oral cultures of our Aboriginal founding nations also need to be taken into account for such networks to become truly “national.” The size of the survey did not allow us to elaborate recommendations on this important issue, but it needs to be explored, especially as an ACCC Aboriginal Affinity Group is just getting going.
6. For the creativity and innovation which can emanate from affinity groups to be fully brought into play, the formal leadership of the home institutions to which the network participants belong need to be made aware of the value of such groups for their own colleges and for the national college movement. As the literature has shown, networks are not the best vehicle for implementation of new policies and programs. They can rapidly invent and articulate such policies and programs, but

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the implementation of any new initiative or significant change remains in the hands of local formal institutions and governance structures. If the formal leadership, being college board chairs, presidents and vice-presidents, are not aware of the existence of affinity groups, nor of their significant potential contributions to innovation, change, knowledge transfer and interaction with national associations of employers and employees, then much of the creativity of such network groups may encounter solid walls of resistance. Participants therefore recommended that the existence and value of affinity groups for colleges and the college movement needed to be more clearly articulated and discussed at the ACCC Board, as well as with college presidents and vice-presidents.

7. In terms of technological support, whereas the ubiquitous e-mail-based listservs of network participants are definite requisites for networks of participants spread out across Canada or the world, they are by no means the ultimate technological support tools. Participants would like the ACCC to move towards a more Web-based platform, within which a group could have access to its own internal web site for posting, downloading and working together on common documents, and through which the group could archive threaded discussions on the priority topics they have identified. Rather than add to the overload of e-messages in one's inbox, having a group site that can be accessed from anywhere at any hour is much preferred by participants and is felt to encourage more interaction than relying on the "pushing" of information out from a secretariat to the network participants.
8. A final recommendation would be to experiment with the participation of representatives of employers and employee sector councils within some of the affinity groups. As we saw in Australia, their communities of practice included a broad range of partners from governments, employers, unions and colleges. Some participants, and some sector councils, would like to expand the notion of Affinity Group to include the full community of practice in the sector, as opposed to solely the educators, arguing that the network needs to reflect the various partners involved in the common endeavour of producing more relevant, accessible and recognized learning. Would such a group become even more creative and relevant because of its more diverse membership or would it lose the trust and degree of

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affinity required, becoming instead a communication tool for joint projects? Similarly, it would be interesting to experiment with international networks of college administrators, faculty or students with a similar affinity and potential common practice to see if the value of national networks expands or becomes diluted in such a broader context. A lot more experimentation and research will be needed in order to propose any conclusions or recommendations on these questions.

In summary, we have seen the creation of a new organizational form, the knowledge network, which seems to meet some of the new needs, challenges and heightened pace of our age. Preliminary indications are quite positive in terms of the potential contributions and added value of such affinity groups or networks, but we are still in the very early stages. As Einstein seemed to imply in our opening quote, let us hope that we develop the wisdom to make use of this new organizational form to reduce the growing information overload and replace it by the sharing of knowledge that is readily applicable to our daily experience and relevant to our communities.

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