2. Canadian Encouragement of Higher Educational Participation: An Empirical Assessment*

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Virtually every paper comparing Canada and the United States includes a comparison of rates of higher educational participation and an explanation of the differences. The Canadian rate of attendance at institutions of post-secondary education is alleged to be "low" and the "orthodox" explanation of this is held to involve the elitism and widespread "conservatism" of Canadian culture (Lipset, 1963, 1968; Porter, 1965, 1967, 1970, 1971).

In the present paper, we take issue with the assertion that the Canadian rate is low, and with the oft-repeated explanation that this is a consequence of a lower evaluation of the importance of education by Canadians. We are at last able to confront such assertions about this dysfunction of the alleged Canadian value system with evidence gathered with this argument specifically in mind. This paper is based on analysis of a large survey completed in late 1973 by approximately 1000 college students in attendance at six carefully matched universities in Canada and the United States. Using this direct data, rather than more of the kind of indirect indicators that have been the staple of such approaches, we have been able to confront these assertions with evidence gathered specifically in mind.

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theses and antitheses thus far, we can begin to test the orthodox "cultural" explanation of differential rates of attendance at institutions of higher education.

We are willing to grant at the outset that the Canadian participation rate for 18–24 year olds is lower than that for Americans. Our quarrel here is not with such data but with inferences made from it concerning the relative evaluation of higher education. Those who posit a lower Canadian evaluation of higher education seem to make hasty inferences to it from rather flimsy indirect indicators. While such an error is by no means rare in the sociological literature, it is one we have been extensively warned against – perhaps most recently by Charles Valentine (1968) and William Ryan (1970).

To the extent that census data are valid, they give us the statistical shape of a demographic reality. This statistical pattern is a surface phenomenon that may have a wide variety of cultural designs for living underlying it (Valentine, 1968: 6).

Differences in the rate of participation in higher education do exist and are sociologically problematic. Inferences from such differences in participation to differences in evaluation are even more problematic.

The Canadian rate of higher educational participation is not particularly "low" in international comparative terms. The American rate is by far the outlier on any such distribution, and this can be seen in Lipset's 1956 data and remains true today (Lipset, 1963: 297, Chorafas, 1968; Pike, 1970). Thus to explain the "low" Canadian rate as a product of conservatism makes less sense to explain the American rate as a product of affluence and "liberalism". Neither explanation takes us very far, though there may be elements of truth in both. The more important question concerns the relationship between the participation rate and the "absorptive capacity" of the labour market. Seen in this light, Canadian/American differentials become far more understandable (Lockhart, 1975; Harvey, 1974; Berg, 1970).

Porter and Lipset use participation as an indicator of commitment to higher education. It is a most indirect indicator. As noted by several authors (Truman, 1970; Lockhart, 1975) if one chooses to examine different indirect indicators of commitment to higher education, one may get a picture quite different from Lipset's and Porter's – indeed diametrically opposed to their view that Canadians exhibit relatively little interest in and commitment to the development of higher education in their country.

Thus, for example, the percentage of the national income spent on higher education in Canada as compared to other countries had risen quickly through the 1960's such that by the end of the decade Canada was spending more money (as a percentage of national income) on higher education than the U.S., Great Britain, the Soviet Union or Japan. And even if one sums public and private expenditures on higher education, Canada still leads the world (Truman, 1970). Such data appears inconsistent with a "lower commitment" to higher education.

1 Lipset, 1963, 1968; Porter, 1967, 1970; Truman, 1970, for example, all are forced to make inferences to values and culture from rates of behavior that may have little relationship to those values. All of these authors are sensitive to this problem of internal validity. All of them preface their remarks with statements referring to the speculative nature of their assertions and the paucity of data available on which to base more firmly their analysis.