

# Breaking Binaries

## The Brookfield Sustainability Institute: Positioning Polytechnics as a Thought Leadership Strategic Bureau

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### Abstract

Throughout the years there has always been a tension between the classification of Colleges with respect to Universities. In the Ontario College system there is an added complexity with a number of Colleges being named Polytechnic Institutions. At George Brown College we have created a thought leadership agency that is called the Brookfield Sustainability Institute. It is a place where global thinking and research is being applied to help solve climate change and build sustainable communities for the future.

**Polytechnic institutions and the offerings of this nature of education** have been continuously developing, evolving and increasing in popularity amongst post-secondary options over the last decade. This increase in recognition of polytechnic institutions can be attributed to its distinctive approach to education, which complements the needs and demands of Canada in the twenty-first century. “As the postsecondary world evolves, the gray zone between universities and colleges grows. The advent of transfer programs has created bridges and symbiotic relationships between the two...the classic typology of universities and colleges no longer captures the complexity of higher education” (Doern, 2008). With the presence of transformative factors such as increased technological progress, the restructuring of the employment sector and its requirements, and an aging population unequipped to work within the parameters of the labour market, there is ample demand for a workforce trained with a polytechnic education (Polytechnics Canada, 2023). As employers’ criteria for employees and the demands of the workforce change, educators must reconsider how credentials are issued, validated, and recognized (Polytechnics Canada, 2023).

As a result of considerable uncertainty regarding the official meaning and purpose of a polytechnic institution, one must familiarize themselves with existing definitions in order to grasp the emergence and importance of this type of educational institution. Polytechnics Canada defines a polytechnic institution as “an institution of higher education providing technical, applied, hands-on learning; offering applied degrees, diplomas, certificates and apprenticeship training; fueling business innovation with applied research expertise” (Polytechnics Canada, 2023). Polytechnic institutions

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\***Essays** The primary purpose of an essay is to advance a new idea, summarize a development, or initiate or engage in discussion. The subject matter is of general scholarly interest.

are neither a college nor a university. As distinct entities, polytechnics provide their students with unique learning opportunities through their industry-aligned teaching and learning, as well as their integration of real-world work experiences and opportunities throughout the learning process (Polytechnics Canada, 2023). Not only does this approach to education allow students to find relevance in their studies, it provides students with an opportunity to work alongside and foster connections with employers in their respective fields and reinforces problem-solving skills relevant to present-day issues. In other words, polytechnics foster highly employable graduates readily prepared to contribute to the workforce and utilize developed skills that are in demand.

A comprehensive understanding of the development of polytechnic institutions in Canada requires a look into its historical context. In popular discourse, Canada's higher education system is generally regarded as a binary structure distinguishing educational institutions as either universities or colleges (Doern, 2008).

In order to continue to evolve and address industry needs, polytechnic institutions are in critical need of recognition and distinction from the preconceived notions of the Canadian population surrounding higher education. Dismantling the university-college dichotomy and highlighting the importance of diversity between the offerings of different institutions is essential in demonstrating the growing need for the education offered by polytechnics. Not to mention, obtaining domestic and international recognition and designation helps to attract new opportunities for collaboration amongst institutions and provide new possibilities for students.

Polytechnic institutions are positioned to lead change in the education, labour, and economic sectors of our society. With industry-focused programming, hands-on and work-integrated learning, applied research programs and opportunities, and flexibility in delivery and learning styles, polytechnics have the ability to successfully cater to the needs of an ever-changing workforce.

A very distinctive differentiator for polytechnic educational institutions is the creation of thought leadership entities. Thought leadership can be defined as a strategy that positions a person or organization as an authority in their field by providing unique insights, original research, and expert opinions on industry trends and issues (Digital Marketing Institute, 2019). With the creation of the Brookfield Sustainability Institute at George Brown College, we have successfully created an agency for thought leadership that

transcends the local market and allows the college to interact globally.

The Brookfield Sustainability Institute (BSI) was launched at George Brown College to address the growing need to identify, understand and address problems that are arising from accelerating climate change. The Institute develops practical applied solutions that can minimize and reverse the impact of climate change on our planet by focusing on sustainable and smart communities. The Institute will ultimately be located on the top floor of George Brown's new, net-zero carbon, tall wood building.

The BSI will be focused on developing applied research projects for sustainable and smart communities that are environmentally, socially, culturally and financially viable. The Institute will foster interdisciplinary collaboration through ideating, prototyping and sharing applied solutions with communities, industry and governments.

The BSI will focus on the intersection of two key trends that are shaping the future of our communities and wider communities worldwide. One trend involves combating climate change by creating net-zero carbon cities and the other trend involves understanding the ethical use of digital technology in our society.

In order to achieve the goals of the Institute, twenty-five scholars/affiliates locally and internationally will act as research fellows and project co-sponsors. They will bring their own organizations' staff, time and in-kind resources to the projects. Their involvement in the Institute would position them as thought leaders in applied sustainable solutions. They would contribute to and benefit from the Institute's work in showcasing and circulating those ideas, lifting their reputation in the community and enabling them to work with students as another dimension of the work-integrated learning promise. The Institute will employ and activate a number of varied types of knowledge dissemination formats with corresponding expertise in related publishing and symposium activity. Key research observatories will be created, and access by the global group of students, faculty, industry and government will be made available.

Climate change is not a problem that governments can solve alone. It is going to take thought leadership agencies like the BSI to foster collaboration across disciplines and sectors in order to find innovative and sustainable solutions. The Brookfield Sustainability Institute brings together knowledge and expertise from diverse experts to share best practices

and promising practices from a global perspective. BSI, under the umbrella of polytechnic education, is leading the way and will serve as a beacon of knowledge for all post-secondary institutions. Solutions will be realized that will ultimately be prototyped and tested with municipal and private sector partners. With BSI, polytechnic educational institutions have just entered a new era of thought leadership on a global scale.

## Note on Contributors

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