

C'mon, Give Me Some Credit

Prepared by K. Sutherland
for
PCCAT

McGill University, Montreal, June 20-22, 2011

“...Canadian Universities have already slid in the direction of becoming credential ‘markets,’ much like large supermarkets where people shop using a list of their needs and wants.” (Coté & Allahar, *Ivory Tower Blues*, 65-66)



So in this context, the student is the shopper and the colourful items on the shelves are credits...

Credit: what is it?

1542: Belief, credence, faith, trust. To give credit to: to believe, put faith in, credit. (*OED*)

Q: How does this definition pertain to the concept of academic credit?

Have we lost “faith” in academic credit?

How does a leap of academic faith (surely an oxymoron!) inform student mobility in the context of academic credit?

Does this notion of “credit” even apply to academic credit?

North American Academic Credit

18th & 19th century: “Students stood comprehensive examinations, which were often oral and public”

(John Harris, “Brief History of American Academic Credit System,” 2002, 1)

“The senior examination was guarded with particular care because the Bachelor of Arts degree was given [to] those who were successful. This examination was a ‘general one, upon all the studies of both the two last years and many of the preceding years,’ or, as the rules ran, it should be ‘rigid, and extend to the whole of collegiate literature.’”

(E.M. Coulter, qtd in “Baccalaureate Requirements,” 1972, 62)

The Comprehensive Examination System

Pros

- wholistic
- consistent
- strong appearance of “standards”
- class attendance optional

Cons

- elitist
- product rather than process- based
- conservative curriculum
- immobile student body

Curricular Reform: The Carnegie Unit and Electives at Harvard

The Carnegie Unit: Introduced in late 19thc as measure of high school progress & completion. Importantly, it is based on student hours of study—120 hours of class time over a year.

The collegiate/ academic credit: Introduced in 1869 by Charles W. Eliot at Harvard with the emergence of elective courses, which could not be assessed through a single comprehensive exam system. These credits were also based on contact hours.

The Student-hour Credit System

Pros

- flexibility of content
- transferability of learning, i.e. student mobility

Cons

- fragmentation of curriculum
- loss of consistency and clear standards

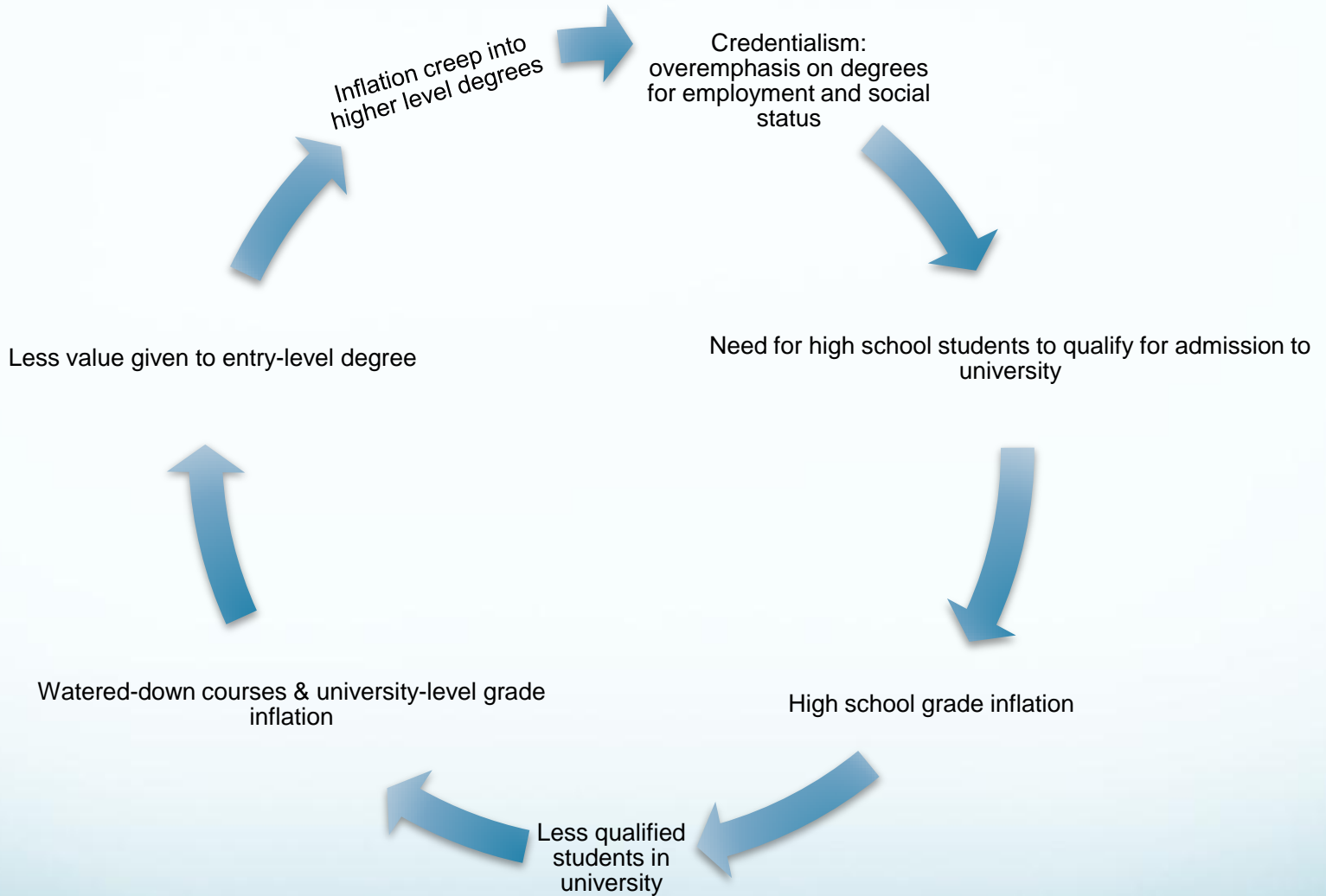
Most complicated consequence: reduction of education to a curricular accounting system, in which credits are quickly monetized.

As with any devalued “currency,” inflation is a concern. In fact, many are worried that credit inflation has already occurred.

“...students have come to universities with higher expectations about the grades to which they feel entitled. This situation has intensified in direct proportion to the increase in enrollments in Canadian universities, as the competition to gain entrance increases. As more and more students with **inflated grades**, but lower levels of academic interest and ability, have entered Canadian universities year after year, many professors have given in by watering down their courses and **inflating grades**.”

Coté & Allahar, *Ivory Tower Blues: A University System in Crisis*, 2007, 19)

A vicious cycle of credit inflation



Some argue that the “credentialism” theory is limited:

“Some components of nearly every degree program flout needs-and-interests categorizations—as proponents of credentialism theory well know. It is the rare doctor who employs organic chemistry in the diagnosis of whooping cough or advanced calculus in the treatment of bone cancer....

Functionalist imageries seem to limited to explain such features of the academic landscape.”

(Frank & Gabler, *Reconstructing the University: Worldwide Shifts in Academia in the 20th Century*, 2006, 11-12)

Indeed, without a credit system, how would we possibly accommodate the ongoing digital transformation of the academy?

In *DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education*, Anya Kamenetz explores concepts like:

- copy-left
- open
- Digital learning as “a process of way-finding, social sense-making” (George Siemens)
- “situated learning” and “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger)
- “educational ecosystems” (Richard Ludlow)

The Earnest Conclusion

It's all about equality and freedom, and this freedom depends on trust: the trust that one institution has in another, to the benefit of students, particularly with regard to standards and academic rigour. The definition of trust?

1200: Confidence in or reliance on some quality or attribute of a person or thing, or the truth of a statement. OED

But wait... remember the definition of credit?

1542: Belief, credence, faith, trust. To give credit to: to believe, put faith in, credit. (OED)

The Cynical Conclusion

Credit: “The credit system makes the university a banking system.”

(John Harris, “Brief History of American Academic Credit System, 2002, 4)

Trust: “The confidence reposed in a person in whom the legal ownership of property is vested to hold or use for the benefit of another; hence, an estate committed to the charge of trustees; also *transf.* a trustee; a body of persons appointed as trustees.” (*OED*)

Final Conclusion

If academics are to behave as trustees of the credits and ultimately educations of their students—which are very valuable, after all—trust in the earnest sense of the word is required.

Bahram Bekhradnia, in writing an analysis of the credit accumulation & transfer system for the Higher Education Policy Institute in the UK, wrote that the best transfer and articulation system in the world is... BCCAT. He also notes that the basis for inter-institutional trust in this system emerges first and last from the articulation committees.

Next steps:

- The establishment of Canada- wide articulation committees, formed of provincial articulation chairs, thus
- The immediate establishment of articulation committees in those provinces that lack them

The establishment of trust in the form of a nation-wide transfer and articulation system will come down to this simple first step: developing trust between individuals who represent their programs and institutions--and who believe that students have a basic right to mobility, both social and geographical.