

**University of Toronto Academic Colleague, Council of Ontario Universities (COU)
Report to the Academic Board, May 30, 2016**

Markus Stock

For Academic Board members not familiar with the Council of Ontario Universities (COU), I start my report with some brief background information on the organization. The COU consists of the twenty-one publicly funded universities in Ontario. The mandate of the COU includes facilitating discussion between member institutions, advocating on behalf of members and working with provincial and federal governments on policies affecting universities. The COU also supports and coordinates services for members, including the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC), Quality Assurance (through a body called the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance, or Quality Council), the Inter-University Transit System (IUTS) and Scholars Portal. The COU is governed by an executive body, the Council. The Council is composed of two representatives from each university, the Executive Heads of member universities and the Academic Colleagues. The full Council meets twice a year and the Academic Colleagues meet separately an additional three times per year. An important function of the Academic Colleagues is their membership on COU committees, task forces and working groups, such as the Quality Council, the Government and Community Relations Committee or the OUAC Advisory Board.

As part of our work, Academic Colleagues aim to generate discussion and provide perspectives to complement the views of the Executive Heads. One of the challenges has been to ensure Colleagues' discussions are relevant to the most pressing issues in the Province and that the appropriate format exists for Colleagues to express their views to Executive Heads during the full Council meetings. In each of the two full Council meetings, Colleagues are selected to present a range of viewpoints on an agenda topic during the Council meeting. The main topic discussed this year was experiential learning. Below I briefly summarize some of the issues discussed related to experiential learning.

This academic year, COU Colleagues discussed the universities' priorities on experiential learning opportunities. Experiential learning has been a formal part of university curricula for more than a generation, with well-established programs representing a broad range of subject areas. It is a subject of pedagogical research and serves as a focus for professional organizations and accreditation structures. A variety of labels have been used to identify experiential education, including cooperative, practicum, field-based and laboratory activities, as well as internship and service learning opportunities. Commonly, experiential education is regarded as transformative and bridge-building. Experiential learning opportunities are well established on Ontario university campuses; however, programs and initiatives are also growing and expanding. This is also evident in the recent Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMA) between the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) and each of the Ontario universities. The benefits of experiential learning are well established: experiential learning opportunities provide links between curriculum and issues in communities and workplaces; experiences in internships and service learning help students build skills and practice problem solving. It was noted that experiential learning opportunities can also be important in recruiting students into university programs and retaining them to graduation. Colleagues also discussed that experiential learning opportunities can be useful in bridging university education and lifelong learning. A shift toward experiential learning also signals changes in faculty roles and pedagogical strategies, institutional priorities, and town/gown relationships.

Key items discussed by the Colleagues were the many positive outcomes for experiential learning, but also that there are many opportunity costs. It is important for the universities to develop a sustainability strategy as they engage in expanding experiential learning, particularly in light of the complexity of tasks

and activities, risks, resource allocations, and required infrastructure. Opportunities for collaboration with communities and institutions are numerous; partnerships with industry should be enhanced so that universities can leverage their experience and knowledge. Universities also need a way to record success in experiential learning activities. It will be important to develop metrics that can be used to measure program success and student learning outcomes. In sum, highlighting experiential learning activities may help counter the media narrative that students are not prepared to secure jobs, and they may help showcase university innovations. Academic Colleagues also discussed the importance of engaging faculty members in experiential learning in meaningful ways, and the need that universities support such faculty engagement and validate it. If experiential learning is to be expanded at Ontario universities, then faculty members will need to invest time in such initiatives, and they should be acknowledged for it.

There was no shortage of other topics for discussion due to various MTCU policy initiatives. Other issues discussed included questions around provincial funding and differentiation of university mandates, especially in light of the recent University Funding Model Reform Consultation Report. COU also announced the Future Further initiative and launched the Ontario University Aboriginal Student Resource Portal, which provides information on supports and services to Aboriginal students interested in or already attending an Ontario university. Looking forward, it is likely that aboriginal education will remain an important topic to discuss at COU, being a high priority for universities and the provincial as well as federal governments.