

University of Toronto Academic Colleague, Council of Ontario Universities (COU)
Report to Academic Board, 31 May 2018
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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 its member institutions, 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 COU Council. The Council is composed of two representatives from each university, the Executive Head and an Academic Colleague of each member university. The full Council meets twice a year and the Academic Colleagues meet separately an additional three or four times per year. An important function of the Academic Colleagues is their membership on COU committees, such as the Quality Council, the Government and Community Relations Committee, the OUAC Advisory Board, or ad-hoc committees on pressing topics, such as the Highly Skilled Workforce Steering Committee. COU also coordinates additional committees, such as the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV) and many others.

As part of our work, Academic Colleagues aim to generate discussion and provide perspectives to complement the views of the Executive Heads. In each of the two full Council meetings, Colleagues propose to discuss a range of viewpoints on an agenda item during the Council meeting. In their separate meetings, the Colleagues prepare for these discussions by inviting presentations of experts sharing their perspectives on the topic at hand. The main topic discussed in both meetings this year were the bilateral Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMA) between universities and the Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD). Specifically, COU Colleagues discussed how the SMAs might affect the work of academic units and faculty members at universities in Ontario. Below, I briefly summarize some of the issues discussed related to this academic year's main topic.

In the Fall Council meeting, Colleagues prepared discussion questions that lead to fruitful debate at Council: The main question was whether government-mandated change, for example those effected by SMAs, might be implemented or resisted in universities, and which role university senates or their equivalents (such as our Academic Board) might play in supporting the communication challenges around SMAs. Examples of such challenges include the push for experiential learning (EL) in MAESD's communication with universities, and the inclusion of EL metrics in future iterations of the SMAs. Sources of conflict within universities may include divergent educational principles (such as skills development as emphasized in MAESD's understanding of experiential learning versus knowledge development as a core responsibilities of universities). Council also discussed the issue that SMA-related change on campuses requires new resources and funding for the implementation of changes, whose success often depends on academic units and single faculty members who need to adopt them; and the issue that competition between departments or faculties on the same campus regarding such resources and definitions might add to conflicts within universities. Council also noted that teaching staff are not hired primarily to serve as change agents, but to teach and conduct research. Individual faculty members may have limited opportunities to enact change, and resource structures to enable change efforts at the level of units and individuals might not (or not yet) be in place at universities.

It was obvious throughout, that COU conversations on the issue of government-mandated change tended to focus on two areas seen by some COU members as challenging: the implementation of EL strategies on campuses in Ontario, and the performance-based metrics used in SMAs. This was a continuation of discussions that have dominated COU ever since work-integrated learning and EL were highlighted by the Premier's Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel Report *Building the Workforce of Tomorrow: A Shared Responsibility*.¹ Over the past two years, COU has responded to the government's agenda through the MAESD Experiential Learning Working Group, the OCAV Task Force on Quality Indicators, and the COU Highly Skilled Workforce Steering Committee, an ad-hoc committee including representatives from many functional areas across Ontario universities. In addition, the government has provided funding in support of expanding experiential learning opportunities (the "Career Ready Fund"); a number of EL projects have benefitted from this new fund at universities in Ontario, including at the University of Toronto. Regarding the performance-based metrics, OCAV approved selective new pilot initiatives in Fall 2017, in order to establish proof of concept, process development, and best practices for the collection of quality metrics for SMAs in a number of areas relating to student experience and quality of teaching and learning. The OCAV Task Force on Quality Indicators proposed a series of exploratory pilot projects to develop an evidentiary base and help the sector make informed decisions about the development and selection of metrics for the third round of Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMA 3) and beyond. This broad piloting is aimed at supporting informed decision-making regarding such system-wide metrics. Universities have launched the pilots in early 2018 and self-evaluations will be completed in 2019. The results of the pilots will be analyzed to develop recommendations for a possible suite of standardized SMA 3 metrics. Metrics agreed to by the sector will be submitted to MAESD in 2019.

In the second part of the academic year, Colleagues decided to further explore the potential impact of SMAs on campuses, specifically, how SMAs might shape some of the ways individual academic departments and faculty members conduct their business and how SMAs might become motors of change on campuses in Ontario. The main discussion question of the spring Council meeting at the University of Windsor was whether individual faculty members and academic departments will have to function differently in a post-SMA world. As described above, the second Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMA 2) between the universities and MAESD introduced a number of performance-based funding metrics into the Ontario university funding formula. This is a new direction in the history of funding Ontario's universities and a clear departure from earlier approaches to university funding. Universities are in the process of determining the short-, mid- and long-term impacts of this change, especially in view of the fact that in the next round of SMAs (SMA 3), funding will be tied to performance in the agreed-upon performance indicators. While it was noted that some of the indicators might be regarded as driving certain changes on campuses, it was also remarked in the meeting that the majority of indicators represent work that faculty members are already motivated to excel in, such as providing an excellent student experience or producing cutting-edge research results. It was also felt that given the upcoming provincial election, the SMAs might indeed provide a framework of short-term stability and reliability, no matter which outcome the elections might have. In sum, the Spring Council meeting did not add much to the already robust discussion of the SMAs at COU, but it helped Academic Colleagues to better understand how performance indicators and the provincial and institutional priorities tied to them might effect change on all levels of Ontario universities.

¹ <https://www.ontario.ca/page/building-workforce-tomorrow-shared-responsibility>