

**University of Toronto Academic Colleague, Council of Ontario Universities (COU)**  
**Report to Academic Board, 21 May 2019**  
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The Council of Ontario Universities (COU) has as its mission to provide “a forum for Ontario’s [publicly-funded] universities to collaborate and advocate in support of their shared mission to the benefit and prosperity of students, communities and the province of Ontario.” Its membership includes the Executive Head of each institution (President Gertler) and an Academic Colleague from among the professoriate. COU fosters inter-institutional dialogue; liaises with governments on policies and decisions effecting post-secondary education; coordinates provincial services like the Ontario Universities’ Application Centre, Quality Assurance, and Scholars Portal; and strikes ad-hoc committees as necessary to engage with pressing issues for the sector. COU hosts two meetings of its entire membership twice per year (once in the fall; once in the spring). Academic Colleagues have additional meetings, gathering approximately once every 6-8 weeks.

During 2018-19, Academic Colleagues devoted significant attention to the issue of Freedom of Expression. Meetings are structured such that an invited expert opens the session with an in-depth presentation to ensure colleagues are building an informed and accurate understanding of the issues. This does not mean that all invited speakers are of the same opinion, rather colleagues are presented with complementary perspectives on an issue. Ample time for discussion is provided, with colleagues learning from peers at other institutions, from a range of disciplines, geographies and student demographics. The Freedom of Expression presenters for 2018-19 included: James Turk (Ryerson U), Denise O’Neil Green (Ryerson U), and Jamie Cameron (Osgoode Hall Law School, York U), as well as two Student Union leaders from McMaster University, Ikram Farah and Stephanie Bertolo. It is worth noting that the University of Toronto features into these discussions at COU in various ways: as one of the earliest universities to have a clear statement on free speech, as an institution with a need for practises and strategies to enact its values supporting free speech, and as an organization with expertise on the issues. Archana Sridhar, for example, moderated a panel on the topic of free speech for the COU Board Chairs Conference.

Understanding, more so than action, was our purpose in examining Freedom of Expression. Academic Colleagues identified a clear need to disambiguate “Academic Freedom” from “Freedom of Expression,” and further to understand how the latter is limited in who can invoke it, the centrality of peer review conducted with integrity to maintain it, and the distinctive qualities of university employment compared with other categories of employment. Academic colleagues were not unanimous nor united in their trust in current legal systems and policies; not everyone agreed the current system achieved the correct balance between freedom of expression and freedom from harassment. Academic Colleagues were jointly interested in how institutions could foster individuals’ sense of responsibility for their utterances, not simply a freedom to speak. Protest on campus, and finding a productive balance between the right to protest and the right to hear a speaker likewise was widely discussed. Academic Colleagues took very seriously the challenges of freedom expression within the classroom, and noted instructors’

limited training in techniques and strategies to combat prejudiced speech in the classroom in ways that could ideally create “teachable moments.” OCADU appeared to be making strong inroads into training with administrators regarding inclusion, diversity, and bias.

Standing committees of COU, as well as policy analysts from COU, also report on their activities at our meetings, again with opportunity for questions and discussion.

In the second half of the year, Academic Colleagues increasingly felt it necessary to discuss budget and policy decisions announced by the Ontario government. In anticipation of the revised Strategic Mandate Agreement (SMA3), our last two meetings of the year were focused on learning outcome assessment strategies as developed and piloted at Queen’s University and Ryerson University. Academic Colleagues raised significant doubts about: the pragmatic and ethical challenges of the data collection required for the government’s proposed model; the underlying values at the heart of the metrics; the degree to which “self-competition” will be actualized (compared to inter-university competition); and the ability of the data to show causal relationships. Critically, Academic Colleagues flagged a concern that the new metrics stand to create divisive internal competition within universities.

As University of Toronto adopts strategies and mechanisms to interact with the metrics expected in SMA3, we can show leadership by proactively working against internal competition and by interacting with SMA3 architects in ways that consider the contexts, characters and challenges of our peer institutions across the province.