

Council of Ontario Universities – Academic Colleague Report

Reporting period: May 2020 – April 2021

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Over the course of the reporting period, Academic Colleagues met regularly to address a number of current topics relevant to Ontario universities, receive updates from COU, prepare topics for discussion at Council meetings and to welcome and receive updates from the new COU president, Mr. Steve Orsini. On several occasions, invited scholars joined a portion of our meetings to present some of their work on the topic selected by the Academic Colleagues as a focus for the meeting.

Over the summer, student mental health was a key topic of discussion, with anecdotal information from faculty as well as survey data (including published results) being shared, demonstrating high numbers and percentages of students experiencing anxiety and/or depression related to their academic work and study-life balance as main factors as well as other stress-related factors including, finances, mental health concerns and relationships. The social isolation related to the pandemic has exacerbated the feelings of loneliness and mental health challenges of students. Colleagues discussed the importance of facilitating student connections with faculty and their peers, and also discussed supports available to universities through the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health.

Anti-Black racism was the major focus of the Colleagues at the end of summer and through the early fall and was raised as a topic at the Council meeting. The importance of recognizing the political, economic and social conditions that have led to our current situation was discussed. There was a rich and open exchange of, at times, devastating information related to representation of Black and Indigenous students, staff and faculty on our campuses as well as discriminatory practices, (observed, experienced, and shared by others) that particularly disadvantage and oppress Black and Indigenous Peoples. Colleagues shared some hopeful experiences of ongoing work at all levels (personal, departmental, divisional and university at large) to address these issues with full recognition that despite being important, these efforts are insufficient. For example, there was recognition of conscious efforts to change/bolster teaching content and practices (specifically related to Black and Indigenous knowledges) that facilitate anti-oppression and inclusivity. Additionally, there was discussion of working groups and task forces focused on addressing the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action and/or Anti-Black racism and there was acknowledgement of documented strategic approaches related more broadly to “equity, diversity and inclusion” at the institutional level of various universities. Acknowledgement of how Anti-Black racism might get lost under the umbrella of “diversity” initiatives was raised. The University of Toronto stands out in this regard by naming Anti-Black

racism as a specific focus for the work of an institutional task force. This has allowed not only practices and policies related to Anti-Black racism to be addressed, but importantly has facilitated a more nuanced focus on cultural change.

Ideas stemming from self-examination and reflection on our role and contributions within university systems led to the observation that our own group of Colleagues has minimal representation from Black and Indigenous faculty (I was the only Colleague who self-identifies as Black) and this caused us to share the very different processes for selection of the Academic Colleagues across our universities and ideas as to how we could contribute to greater representation moving forward.

Late fall, the Colleagues discussed the role of universities in combatting misinformation. Frustration was expressed with misinformation consumed by the public through various media. The role of the government in contributing to this was considered along with the sense of reluctance to critique the government because of the potential impact on already precarious funding. Colleagues discussed three relevant topics for the post-secondary sector: 1) the importance rigorous standards for developing critical thinking in students so that they are able to evaluate information, 2) being transparent about the limits of knowledge, emphasizing that (scientific) knowledge is still evolving, and 3) given that sometimes the lengthy time for peer review does not align with the immediacy of contemporary topics, dissemination of research through public discourse, Op-Eds, and other media becomes all the more important. Regarding the latter topic, Colleagues suggested that greater support (e.g., training, webinars, written resources) should be made available to faculty to help with speaking with journalists, learning how to write an op-ed etc. Some resources were shared among colleagues, including a site specifically geared towards supporting informed opinions of female academics.

During this period the Colleagues also shared experiences of performing their teaching and research responsibilities in different pandemic-related environments (i.e., orange, red, grey zones). Student concerns related to being overwhelmed with increased numbers of assessments were unanimous across institutions. On a positive note, many of the Colleagues reported their own experiences and those of colleagues at their institutions of having greater interaction with a greater number of students, particularly noting increased attendance during office hours. The cumulative impact on workload (related to pivoting on-line, increased student accommodations, having to be prepared to potential deliver in multiple formats and/or not knowing in time for adequate preparation what will be expected) on the mental well-being of faculty was discussed. Colleagues shared experiences of colleagues at their institutions who are struggling with their health, breaking down during meetings (this included administrators), and not being able to fulfill tasks leading to greater stress. There was a sense that while university administrators across institutions have stated recognition of the tremendous efforts put forth by faculty, that the extent to which working during the pandemic has taken a toll on faculty is not fully appreciated.

Over the winter term, the focus of discussion shifted to on-line learning, lessons learned and teaching and learning after pandemic restrictions lift. This topic was also presented to Council. Some challenges discussed concerning the on-line environment included: 1) ensuring equitable access to technology and equitable and inclusive spaces, 2) maintaining a sense of community inside and outside the class space and 3) tailoring the on-line experience to meet the desired learning outcomes while maintaining academic integrity. Many colleagues agreed that some form of on-line learning (bi-modal, dual offering, hyflex) will persist after social distancing restrictions lift and therefore consideration of impact to students' mental health need to be considered. Additionally, it was recognized that instructors would benefit from formal support in on-line teaching and learning. In this regard, the University of Toronto seemed very well positioned with many departments/divisions having invested in such instructor support while this wasn't the case (or at least not to the same extent) at all other institutions.

Related to teaching during the pandemic, was the tension between the need for increased flexibility in providing students with accommodations (e.g., extensions on term work) for various COVID-related reasons and our potential role (existent during non-pandemic times) in helping students build coping strategies and resilience. With slow returns to campus being discussed, tensions between continuing best on-line practices with information on increased sense of loneliness and mental health challenges being expressed by many students were considered. The idea that the novelty of on-line learning had worn off, leaving some students struggling with engagement was expressed. Colleagues recommended that these ideas along with the recognition that there has been unequal impact of COVID-19, particularly among marginalized students and communities, need to be carefully considered during recovery plans for universities, so that these inequities are not further exacerbated.

Lastly, one of the co-chairs for the Academic Colleagues, (Professor Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, Trent University) finished her term at the beginning of April and I was delighted and honoured to be nominated and subsequently selected as the new co-chair for the Colleagues for a two-year appointment and have already started working with fellow co-chair, Professor Douglas Ivison from Lakehead University. I have thoroughly enjoyed engaging with the Academic Colleagues on pressing issues in the post-secondary sector and look forward to my leadership role over the coming year.

10 May, 2021