

## **Council of Ontario Universities – Academic Colleague Report**

### **Reporting period: May 2021 – April 2022**

At the end of the last reporting year, I was nominated by the Academic Colleagues to serve as Co-Chair for a two-year term. It was, therefore, my great pleasure to serve in this capacity along with Co-Chair, Professor Douglas Ivison, from Lakehead University. 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 (including from President Steve Orsini) and to prepare topics for discussion at Council meetings. 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, there was a strong desire to continue our previous discussion on Anti-Black racism and specifically, strategies to increase Black representation among faculty. I was able to share some of the forward thinking initiatives at U of T, including the Provost's Postdoctoral Fellowship Program and the Diversity in Academic Hiring Fund. There was further discussion on support for these faculty once they arrive at our universities to support their continued success. The idea of cohort hiring was seen as a means to increase diversity as well as provide a community of support for new hires. The Colleagues invited Professor and Associate Vice-President Equity and Inclusion, Arig al Shaibah, from McMaster University to speak to her experience with cohort hiring and to share lessons learned. She described an initiative that saw collaboration among 6 Faculties working together on a cohort hiring search that aimed to achieve two hires in each Faculty. A central committee was responsible for reviewing applications and selecting a long list as well as short list of candidates which was then passed on to the specific department to continue the process. This broad recruitment yielded a high number of eligible applicants (n=461) and was viewed as complementary to existing practices. More hires than originally planned resulted from this deep pool of applicants. As part of this process, there were discussions of "inclusive excellence" with acknowledgement that this requires an equity lens and use of a more expansive evaluation of merit. The Colleagues look forward to revisiting the idea of expanding the evaluation of merit at a future meeting.

In the August meeting, Colleagues generated a list of potential topics of discussion for the October Council meeting. This list was shared with Executive Heads via Steve Orsini. The impetus for this list stemmed in part from the sense that at times COU's advocacy for Ontario universities was built around the universities as economic entities. The Colleagues viewed this as but one of many important aspects of the universities. Topics included: The role of universities in society (with focus on societal impact that cannot easily be measured, including role of humanities and fine arts in developing engaged citizens, for example), Student perspectives on the university experience, Teaching Stream Faculty (U of T was considered a

model in this regard), Expanding the evaluation of merit, following up on cohort hiring project at McMaster, Supporting mental health (students, staff and faculty) and building resilience (with acknowledgement of tensions that sometimes occur with certain accommodation situations having the potential to contradict ideas around resilience and others facilitating resilience), and lastly, Accessibility for students who are underrepresented at university.

The role of universities in society, including describing the importance of the humanities was discussed in the October meetings. Professor Sean Corner, Associate Dean (Academic), Faculty of Humanities at McMaster University joined the Colleagues to deliver a presentation. He spoke of the personal, social and economic value of the study of Humanities and described a new programme, Integrated Rehabilitation and Humanities and the importance of problematization in the Humanities and how this is enormously useful in the workplace and in producing well-rounded human beings. At the October Council meeting, Colleagues used three examples to emphasize the important role that universities play in society: 1) response to pandemic, 2) response to climate change and 3) response to systemic racism and TRC Calls to Action. Related to point 3) and in an effort to affect systemic change, I introduced the following idea to Colleagues and presented the proposal on behalf of the Colleagues that the current Degree Level Expectations for undergraduate and graduate programmes be amended (either with a new DLE or explicit modifications to existing DLEs) to reflect current and historical efforts to include knowledges related to Indigenous histories, the historic and current impact of colonization and oppression of marginalized individuals, problematization, scientific racism and the application of anti-oppressive and inclusive pedagogies to foster inclusive excellence and socially responsible professional practices. (wording here only to share the spirit of the proposal) Furthermore, there was emphasis that as is the case with the current DLEs, the creative and innovative ways in which individual programmes address the newly proposed DLEs is best left to the divisions who can consider these in the broader context of their unique curricula and degree and/or professional accreditation requirements. There was acknowledgement that some universities, like U of T and Trent etc., have already made great strides related to curricular change in this regard in some of their departments (Lakehead U – all programmes). That said, modifying the DLEs would help to solidify enduring change in this regard. The idea was well-received and is being considered by COU EDI Reference Group.

Colleagues unanimously decided on the topic of decolonization and learning about Indigenous initiatives at the December meeting. Professor and Vice-Provost of Indigenous Initiatives from Lakehead University, Denise Baxter, joined us to deliver a presentation at our meeting. Professor Baxter described the Indigenous Content Requirement (ICR:18 hours) that exists at Lakehead and the process by which this came to fruition in 2014. A focus group of Indigenous Councilors and Elders has since played a key role linking the ICR with the Principles of Reconciliation and feel that there is still more that must be done. Librarians supported this initiative by generating a list of key resources.

At the February meeting, the Academic Colleagues welcomed Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Victoria Barham, from the University of Ottawa. Prof Barham spoke about considering equity when designing experiential education opportunities since often these experiences tend to advantage students who are not socioeconomically challenged. She described a proposal in her Faculty to bring community into the classroom rather than vice versa. This took place in large first and second year courses for which classrooms were paired with a community organization that has a chronic problem. The students are tasked with developing innovative solutions and in so doing are acquiring knowledge and skills to meet community demands. Only a small commitment is required from the partners and the goal is not that students solve the problem but rather, learn to think through real problems. Another programme, Walls to Bridges, for upper year students sees an entire class going into a community (a prison) with Ottawa U students and prisoners learning together in the same courses.

In April, Colleagues wanted to return to the topic of decolonization in the academy with the hopes of learning new strategies. Professor Sheila Côte Meek, Vice-President of Equity, People and Culture at York University delivered an informative presentation to the Colleagues. Professor Côte Meek emphasized the need to have a deep understanding of how colonization impacts spaces like the academy and understanding the issues have always been about the land and resources as well a specific ideology rooted in racism that reduced Indigenous Peoples to inferior status. She reminded us that the impacts of colonization affect Indigenous Peoples' access and participation today. Education was one of the tools used to advance colonization and is still a site of violence. She further acknowledged Black students having expressed similar trauma. She recommended divesting power and control, providing meaningful opportunities for engagement, building relationships based on mutual respect and understanding, increasing representation and facilitating policy changes to ensure equity and inclusivity as some important approaches for decolonizing the academy.

Finally, this year, the Colleagues had greater interaction with Steve Orsini, which helped connect our conversations with COU's advocacy for Ontario universities. Colleagues commented that while in past years there were times when the role and significance of the work of the Colleagues was not clear, this year there was greater clarity and sense of the Colleagues having made meaningful contributions to COU. This was attributed to both greater interaction with Steve Orsini and some tangible proposals put forth by the Colleagues. I feel very privileged to have worked with this amazing group of highly engaged and inspiring Colleagues over the past year and look forward to continuing my role as Co-Chair and collaboratively building on our work related to shared concerns and opportunities across the post-secondary sector next year.

Prepared by: Co-Chair of Academic Colleagues from U of T: Professor Catherine Amara

18 May, 2022