

# Council of Ontario Universities – Academic Colleague Report

Reporting period: May 2022 – April 2023

This year, I had the pleasure of serving my second and final year as Co-Chair of the Academic Colleagues along with Professor Kim Hellemans, from Carleton University. Over the course of the reporting period, Academic Colleagues met regularly (every two months for a 2.5 h evening meeting followed by a 3h meeting the following morning) to address a number of current topics relevant to Ontario universities, to 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.

The topic of our May meeting followed from the discussion at the April Council meeting on decolonization in universities, including modifications to curricula, supporting success of Indigenous scholars and re-conceptualizing governance. For this May meeting, our guest speaker was Dr. Candace Brunette-Debassige, a Mushkego iskwew (Cree woman) with Cree and French ancestry from Peetabeck (Treaty 9 Territory), and coming to us from Western University's Faculty of Education. Dr. Brunette-Debassige advanced our discussions on the topic of Decolonizing Academia by sharing perspectives on the strong role that universities have played in colonialism through omission of Indigenous Peoples, their languages and knowledges and through perpetuation of myths about Indigenous Peoples. Her comments about the need to decolonize first, and that this is a process to which we can all contribute, along with the recognition that not everyone has expertise and experience to Indigenize universities, sparked an enthusiastic and fulsome conversation amongst the Colleagues who shared various initiatives within their departments and across their institutions, including some of the challenges. Colleagues discussed the potential for universities to advocate for change with Government by directing the priorities of the Tri-Council Funding Agencies. Colleagues also welcomed Steve Orsini to the meeting, who described some of the working groups at COU and discussed matters including institutional autonomy, college degree granting expansion, provincial budget and highlighting the need to advocate for universities' role in research leading to knowledge expansion and mobilization.

At our August meeting, we were joined by Dr. Lynn Lavallée, an Anishinaabe citizen of the Métis Nation of Ontario and a professor and strategic lead, Indigenous Resurgence within the Faculty of Community Services School of Social Work at Toronto Metropolitan University. Professor Lavallée presented on the topic of *Indigenizing research? Perpetuating harms and creating opportunities for tokenism*. Dr. Lavallée shared her experiences advancing Indigenous peoples and knowledges in the community and academy and brought to our attention the reluctance for some people to engage with their Indigenous backgrounds out of concern for being connected to individuals who have falsely claimed Indigenous ancestry. Further, Dr. Lavallée shared some of the difficulties with trying to pass on Indigenous knowledges through a western academic model, including the need to consider advertising for and hiring traditional Knowledge Keepers, who may not be PhD scholars, into tenure track/teaching

stream to help Indigenize curricula since these are the people with the knowledge we are seeking. In the post-presentation discussion, Colleagues shared their own observations regarding the complexities of verifying Indigenous identities within institutions. Colleagues also shared their experiences trying to promote the role of Indigenous education on campuses. I was able to enthusiastically share about the Council of Indigenous Initiatives Elders' Circle at U of T, including its role in supporting the development of collaborations with Indigenous Communities and divisions within the University and consultation on other Indigenous initiatives. In response to a question posed about hiring Indigenous Knowledge Keepers who could teach much needed content in our programmes into permanent positions at universities, Dr. Lavallée described a fascinating (because it was unconventional for university practice) approach developed after consultation with Elders in the Community not affiliated with TMU. The approach was to invite short-listed candidates to a full day interview. Because the main criteria was being recognized (by Indigenous Community/ies) as being traditional Knowledge Keepers (with or without PhD), it was necessary to hear from Indigenous community members about the individuals' expertise/experiences in this regard. As a result, each candidate was invited to bring Indigenous community members, Elders or people who could speak to their relationship with those from whom they had learned and/or trained. Ceremonies were performed, stories were shared and each interview was several hours long (whole day). This thorough process led to the hiring of multiple Knowledge Keepers into tenure track/teaching stream positions from the same search.

On our second day of meetings, the Colleagues were joined by Steve Orsini who provided an update on the sector's COVID-19 planning for the fall, working to build the case for the sector's financial sustainability and efforts to promote institutional autonomy and good governance. Steve also shared recent advocacy activities, including COU's participation at the annual conference hosted by the Association of Municipalities for Ontario that showcased the role of university and municipality partnerships to combat climate change.

In October, the Colleagues discussed the current state of course delivery across our institutions, including challenges and triumphs. We discussed how the past couple of years have resulted in a welcomed review and revision of pedagogical practices, exposing many to new and creative possibilities to advance teaching and the student experience moving forward. It was clear from our multi-disciplinary group of Colleagues and differences in institutional demographics that there will not be a one size fits all approach. That said, there was shared passion about the tremendous opportunity this moment presents for a student-centered approach in advancing the academic missions of our institutions. In this regard, some key themes emerged: accessibility, student mental health and engagement, faculty support needed to encourage optimal modes of delivery, and resources required to create an optimal teaching environment. All of this was with a view to ensuring students are well-positioned to maximize their potential after graduation and throughout their lives, thus highlighting the value of the university sector. Steve Orsini joined the Colleagues once again to provide an update on issues currently being addressed by COU including, advocacy for the value of universities, their research innovation and community impact and the need for resources and financial sustainability.

Dr. Kim Clark, Professor of Sociocultural Anthropology and Assistant Dean of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & Decolonization, Faculty of Social Science, Western University spoke to the Colleagues at our

December meeting on the topic: How disabled university students' insights can help us advance student success in general. Dr. Clark shared some of her research findings highlighting the voices of disabled student participants via survey and/or interview demonstrating how simple steps such as having flexible deadlines, providing information in multiple formats and providing slides/notes in advance of class can all enhance access. Importantly, during our discussion, the necessity of engagement from senior leadership in advancing accessibility at an institutional level was expressed. Colleagues also discussed the possible tension between offering assessments in different modes or formats and supporting students' achievement of learning outcomes, the potentially unique requirements for graduate student accommodations, institutional policies (and their impact) regarding medical notes, and absences (missed assignments/exams) across our universities.

At the Colleagues' February meeting, we were delighted to welcome Prof Benoit-Antoine Bacon, President and Vice-Chancellor of Carleton University, to speak on the topic of mental health and wellness in the university context. It was noted at a previous meeting that the health and well-being of faculty and staff are often overlooked due to the necessary focus on students. Dr. Bacon humbly and openly shared his personal mental health journey, highlighting the importance of distinguishing being functional from being well and thriving as a framework for considering goals for our work to support mental health and wellness among all university members. Three key messages emerged: 1) those who are suffering are not alone, 2) everyone deserves help, and 3) healing is always possible. Furthermore, Dr. Bacon shared the perspective that faculty members' own healing and acknowledgement of inner fears positions us to better support our students. An engaging discussion took place after Dr. Bacon's remarks. Before turning to the topic of our students, Colleagues discussed ways in which we might normalize or create a more supportive culture for faculty to share when they are struggling with their own mental health. Colleagues then discussed institutional, divisional and individual approaches and strategies for helping students in crisis while recognizing the important boundaries of faculty members' expertise and the challenge (sometimes) of being compassionate within the limits of policies, practices and professional expectations. Colleagues shared information about related practices at their respective institutions. I proudly shared the remarkable same-day counselling appointment services and Supportive Leaves Policy offered by the University. Colleagues were impressed with these major advancements in student support and it was also acknowledged that some of the smaller universities are really struggling with resources to help students. Support numbers and links available to students (e.g., Good2Talk, Centred for Innovation in Campus Mental Health) were shared. It was difficult to hear the struggles of some other universities in terms of their capacity to provide support and I hope that the sharing of information and strategies among universities and advocacy and resources provided by COU can make student access to supports more equitable across the sector.

At our most recent meetings in April, we were joined by Dr. Isabel Pederson, Director of the Digital Life Institute and Professor in the Faculty of Social Science at Ontario Tech University, who spoke on the topic of generative artificial intelligence. Dr. Pederson's talk explored the ways in which AI can be leveraged to support the work of students, staff and faculty, how it might impact measures of student performance (assessment) and how it might support more equitable classrooms. I was struck by an analogy she shared that hundreds of years ago, drawing was used to document history and experiences

was the standard (before writing). We have lost the emphasis on drawing as a necessary skill (except for those going into professions requiring this or for pleasure), and have expanded ways to demonstrate critical thinking through writing etc. AI might be thought of as presenting an opportunity for change and advancement. The Colleagues had a rich discussion of potential opportunities that AI presents. In the spirit of equity and decolonization, Dr. Pederson posed the question, “What if students could write their assignments in their first language?” Certainly, there are limits and discussions regarding ethics and many other topics (e.g., vulnerability to bias, propagation of factually incorrect information, failure to consistently cite sources, lack of originality, contributions to academic misconduct, dependency on AI and skill degradation, intellectual property issues and job loss) followed, but there seemed to be broad support for recognizing AI is here to stay and to creatively thinking about opportunities to advance the work of the universities. An immediate first step of ensuring AI literacy across stakeholders, especially students was discussed.

Finally, the Colleagues enjoyed their interaction with Steve Orsini, which helped connect our conversations with COU’s advocacy for Ontario universities. Colleagues also enjoyed the engagement with the Executive Heads during our Council meetings in response to topics raised by our group. 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 continued participation as we collaboratively build on our work related to shared concerns and opportunities across the post-secondary sector next year.

**Prepared by:**

**Co-Chair of Academic Colleagues and University of Toronto representative: Professor Catherine Amara**

**10 May, 2023**