

Council of Ontario Universities – Academic Colleague Report

Reporting period: May 2023 – April 2024

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, share updates from our respective universities, receive updates from COU (including from President Steve Orsini) and to prepare topics for discussion at Council meetings. On several occasions, invited guests 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 resonated with many of the Academic Colleagues stemming from conversations about the impact of COVID on current university students. Dr. Tracy Vaillancourt, Professor and Tier 1 Canada Research Chair, Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa discussed her research on supporting COVID-era university students. She highlighted the mental health continuum, the increase in depression and other mental health disorders resulting from the pandemic and associated lockdown and school closures and discussed the learning loss experienced by students. The discussion helped to contextualize how the pandemic has affected student mental health and well-being, providing the foundation for a fulsome conversation amongst the Colleagues who expressed concern and shared perspectives on current student preparation for university and strategies to help support students develop expected knowledge, skills and competencies for their studies while mitigating psychological stress. On the second day of meetings, Colleagues were joined by David Trick (David Trick and Associates Inc.), who presented on the relationships between universities, publicly funded colleges and private postsecondary institutions. He shared the observation that universities and colleges compete over credentials, share of government funding, tuition flexibility, economic contribution (which sector does more for innovation and productivity?) and workforce (whose students are better prepared for the future?). He finished the discussion by suggesting there is opportunity for universities and colleges to work together to agree on common/complementary positions on matters where their interests align (e.g., publicly supported universities and colleges all contribute to innovation and economic growth). Regarding the information sharing part of our meeting, many Colleagues briefly discussed budgetary challenges, development associated with policies and practices related to artificial intelligence and student self-reported absences. Several colleagues were interested to hear about the University of Toronto's Absence Declaration Tool and its integration with ACORN.

At our August meeting, we were joined by Dr. Liliane Dionne (Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa) who delivered a presentation on the well-being of international students. Using a design-thinking approach. Feedback from international students included the need for a diversity of spaces on campus, desire for more beauty and art on campus, and more opportunities

to socialize, study outdoors and improve their second-language skills. Graduating BEd students who interviewed the international students, created prototypes of a campus to better foster the well-being of international students. Colleagues, some of whom were themselves once international students, reflected on how they might contribute to improving the well-being of international students. It was noted that COU has an International Education Working Group. Discussion from colleagues included the role of international faculty serving as mentors for international students, greater integration among domestic and international students, and ensuring adequate and feasible housing for international students. During the information sharing portion of our morning meeting, Colleagues shared updates on topics including budgetary challenges (a recurring topic across universities, with the intensity amplified compared to prior years), turnover and recruitment of senior administrators and safety and emergency measures on campus (sparked by incident at Waterloo in which a gender studies instructor was violently attacked). Another interesting (to me because I was not aware of this) topic was raised related to use of the term “white paper”. I used this term in reference to a document with this name and this started a conversation about a movement away from use of this term because of its association with racial politics, specifically as concerns First Nations peoples because of the white paper (1969) Statement of Government of Canada on Indian Policy. We had a collegial discussion on the topic, including preferred alternative names for such documents (position paper, proposal paper etc. that have been considered elsewhere). While we did not spend much time on the topic, I include it here since I know the term “white paper” is still used at the University and wonder if there might be consideration of related consultation with Indigenous community (including Elders’ Circle) at the University of Toronto. I do not know how widespread such discussions are but know that they are happening elsewhere (e.g., Windsor U, UBC Okanagan). During the morning meeting, COU President, Steve Orsini provided an update on COU’s activities in support of the Ontario government’s Blue-Ribbon Panel. He also shared a preview of his presentation on housing soon to be shared at the Association of Municipalities for Ontario Conference.

In October, the Colleagues discussed what campuses can do to create a safe and inclusive environment for all students and particularly LGBTQ2S+ members. Jen McMillen, Vice-Provost Students from Toronto Metropolitan University, joined the Colleagues to share her presentation entitled “Mitigating Anti-LGBTQ2S+ Movements and Navigating Diversity to Make Campuses Safer for All Students”. Drawing on her career in student affairs, human rights and policy development, she shared observations and reflections on strategies for mitigating anti-LGBTQ2+ with the goal of establishing safer environments for students on campuses. She highlighted the importance of recognizing intersectionality and understanding that unlike race, which is often shared by family, queer kids are often the only one in their family and might not have role models or support. In response to Colleagues asking what can campuses do, Jen replied that students appreciate and benefit from seeing ‘out’ leaders, successful ‘out’ people reflecting strength and value and not a deficit model. Ensuring students see themselves in the curriculum is important, and use of non-gendered pronouns (e.g., they) in every situation is a way to normalize that we have forced binary pronouns. Other suggestions included, removing barriers for name changes, stop collecting gender information, consider what medical procedures for Trans students are included in benefits, allow for different housing options (same sex/gender,

different gender, all gender co-housing) and develop a plan (including the possibility of organizing) to counter misinformation and emboldened hate speech. Colleagues continued this important discussion, recognizing that people who do not feel safe in university spaces will be more likely to leave and that the places with greatest diversity tend to be places where people thrive. Related to curricula, we also discussed the need to teach and make space for dissenting opinion and to support instructors in managing such experiences in the classroom. Instructors modelling how to manage such conflicts will not only serve as an example for students, but help to promote the values of the university and counter the perception of indifference that silence or avoidance can signal. Further, we know that “communication skills” is a degree level expectation and perhaps there could be a more nuanced and intentional approach incorporating an equity lens across curricula to include the skill of learning to contribute to respectful discourse that does not demean or denigrate people on the basis of their identity (gender, sexuality, racial, religious, cultural etc.) and to respectfully share informed opinion as part of the written and oral communication. During the information sharing, many Colleagues discussed the fact that their institutions are running a deficit and the major concern about budgetary challenges. A number of Colleagues also mentioned expansion of experiential education and links to benefits on student mental health. Colleagues’ conversation at the Council meeting addressed the question posed by Executive Heads about whether or not universities should issue statements (referring to recent statements or lack thereof surrounding Hamas-Israel war and anti-LGTBQ2S+ protests). While there is an argument for universities not making statements, the general sense among Colleagues was that statements help make members of university communities feel safer and provide a sense of belonging and the importance universities place on this. During the morning meeting, Steve Orsini provided an update on the Blue-Ribbon Panel, saying their report has been delayed and that there has been recognition that sector is not financially sustainable and therefore, the government needs to step up.

Dr. James Turk, Director, Centre for Free Expression at Toronto Metropolitan University spoke to the Colleagues at our December meeting on issues surrounding academic freedom and freedom of speech on campus. Dr. Turk began by referring to statements from Stanford University (about the institution generally refraining from taking positions on complex political or global matters that extend beyond the operations of the university), The University of Chicago (neutrality of the university arises out of obligation to cherish diversity of viewpoints etc.) and The University of Toronto Anti-Semitism Report (that stated the University should stay out of political positioning). An engaged discussion ensued, in which the following points were raised by Jim: It was recommended that universities begin by reviewing and discussing the Kalven Report out of the University of Chicago; universities are facing increasing pressure to make statements and take positions on geopolitical issues; university administration may wish to avoid taking positions where possible because Presidents and academic leaders are not permitted to make statements that would speak on behalf of the entire university or department; debate and positions are best left to individual academics and students; the rights of free speech and academic freedom are fundamental to core values of academic inquiry. However, such rights

come with responsibilities and must take place in an environment free from discrimination or harassment; universities are guided by the Criminal Code, which sanctions on any form of hate speech, as well as Ontario's Human Rights Code. According to Dr. Turk, a big part of the problem is that people (public, faculty, students) have expectations of the universities to respond in some way. The practice of universities commenting on things has created this expectation. The suggestion presented was that universities' role should facilitate their ability to defend faculty who speak out. So, not to be neutral but to decide who should be speaking (i.e., academic staff and not the university). During the information sharing, Colleagues continued to discuss budget constraints and the resulting consequences including cuts to staff (requiring administrators picking up this work), programmes amalgamating, and programmes being cut. Some Colleagues also reported on sustainability efforts (I proudly described the Landmark Project), new appointments in their senior administration and continued turnover. Finally, there was talk of rising geopolitical tensions and the implications for safe campuses and student mental health. Steve Orsini spoke to the Colleagues during the morning meeting to briefly provide an update on the work that COU is undertaking to obtain a timely response the government on the implementation of the Blue-Ribbon Panel report (recommendations on increasing tuition and operating funding). COU has also published an Efficiencies Update in response to government's request for greater efficiencies across universities.

At the Colleague's February meeting we were delighted to welcome students Vivian Chiem (President of Ontario University Student Alliance (OUSA) and Malika Dhanani (Executive Director, OUSA). OUSA advocates to the provincial government for affordability, accessibility, quality and accountability of post-secondary education in Ontario. Four advocacy priorities for 2023-2024 were discussed: 1) housing and transit (potential for regional advocacy regarding issues of housing and transit in the post-secondary space), 2) mental health (consideration in policy papers of international students as they face additional barriers when trying to access mental health services. It was suggested that there be a comprehensive focus on student wellness versus individual issues), 3) food insecurity (They might ask government for aid or there may be other means to help such as partnership with grocery stores growing gardens. There was discussion on various barriers that institutions face concerning food security), 4) sector sustainability (there was discussion on the impacts of operating grants versus tuition increases on the sector). It was suggested by Colleagues that there could be increased information sharing between faculty and student groups. For information sharing, Colleagues discussed the international student cap and its impacts, increasing fiscal pressures due to budgetary constraints; creation of new programmes, hiring of faculty and staff, presidential searches and mental health on campus. The COU President provided an update, during the morning meeting, on ongoing advocacy surrounding the international students cap and the government's response to the Blue-Ribbon Panel is expected by end of February. COU is continuing with its escalating advocacy campaign.

At our most recent meetings in April, we were joined by Cheryl Foy from Strategic Governance Consulting Services who spoke about five topics related to university governance: 1) the relationship between university governance and autonomy, 2) shared governance as a system and its models, 3) the roles of boards and academic governing bodies, 4) why we need to pay attention to academic governing bodies, and 5) the role of faculty associations in governance. Ms. Foy noted that there is a direct correlation between governance failures and governments getting involved (e.g., Laurentian financial crisis). Failures include financial sustainability, failure to protect IT infrastructure, failures in management and leadership, failure to respond to societal expectations, internal strife. There was discussion of the most common bicameral governance structure and brief mention of unicameral structure at U of T. It was suggested by a Colleague that member institutions have best practices in place for orientation of board and senate members. I enthusiastically offered that this happens at U of T and described the information in pre-recorded videos and Chairs' introductions to meetings. Cheryl indicated that Boards should be responsible for making university governance effective and for their own effectiveness. Oversight and not getting into the weeds is their role. In addition, Boards should periodically review their own performance. While research shows that many institutions think this function is important, very few do this self-review. Faculty associations play a supporting role in university governance by enhancing faculty voice. Colleagues raised the question about including EDI in governance work. This was not addressed well by the speaker, but Colleagues discussed topics including representation, consideration of gender disparities in service work, and consideration of dismantling colonial governance structure under which all of our institutions operate. There was discussion of the role of indigenization in governance structures. Colleagues also shared their varying perspectives on the role of their senate at their respective institutions and the role of faculty associations. During the morning meeting, information sharing included updates from Colleagues on cyber-attacks and cyber security, new federal policy on research security, academic and operational planning, new senior appointments, mental health on campus and university preparations for the solar eclipse. COU President provided a current update on the international student cap. There were also updates on Bill 166 – Strengthening Accountability and Student Supports Act, and its potential impacts, SMA 4 and a discussion on university autonomy.

Finally, over the course of the year, the Colleagues enjoyed their interactions 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.

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