

## Council of Ontario Universities – Academic Colleague Report

Reporting period: July 1, 2025- June 2026

Over the course of the reporting period, Academic Colleagues met regularly (every one-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 and CEO of COU (Council of Ontario Universities) Steve Orsini) and to prepare topics for discussion at Council meetings at which the Presidents of the Ontario Universities were Members. On several occasions, invited guests joined a portion of our meeting to present some of their work on the topic selected by the Academic Colleagues to help focus the discussion of the session.

The August 12-13 meeting was an introductory meeting in which we did planning for the upcoming year. This was followed by a COU update by the President, Steve Orsini. He described that the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security (MCURES) was in the process of doing ongoing reviews of university governance and the funding formula. Consultation sessions were being held over held over the summer. He also discussed Bill 33 and the COU response to it. Bill 33 provisions impacted admissions and control of ancillary fees amongst other things. President Orsini reviewed the COU response for the Colleagues. He started by noting that “All of the University Acts and Royal Charters establish self-governance, independence and autonomy to ensure high academic quality, research excellence and student success.” In terms of admissions the COU recommendations included, “Prioritize addressing the lack of funded student spaces through enrolment expansion investments to build the necessary capacity to meet growing student demand. Commit to long-term growth in enrolment funding to ensure access keeps pace with demographic growth and demand.” The COU stated that they projected that by 2030, more than 100,000 Ontario high school students will be at risk of not getting into the program or university of their choice if there is no change. It was also noted that government cuts to OSAP were so large that universities across the province were now providing more student funding support than the government. This is an additional financial burden on universities. In terms of ancillary fees, they recommended preserving student approved governance processes and ensuring co-management of these fees. They also asked for more funds to provide students with more primary care and mental health supports. Lastly, they addressed research security needs. It was clear that a lot of work had gone into developing this document. The colleagues asked questions to better understand the rationale for these responses. It was noted that the Auditor General said university Boards were too big.

In the remaining meetings for this academic year, our discussions focused on a central and recurring theme:

the future of postsecondary education in the context of rapid technological, societal, and economic change—particularly the impact of artificial intelligence.

The October 22<sup>nd</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> meeting began with a talk by Dr. Randy Boyagoda entitled: *A Conversation on Civil Discourse and Academic Freedom*. Dr. Boyagoda, a Professor of English and the Provostial Advisor on Civil Discourse at the University of Toronto, shared his thoughts on the state and stakes of civil discourse for

higher education based on insights and efforts associated with the ongoing activities of the University of Toronto Working Group on Civil Discourse.

Highlights of his talk were as follows:

- 1) While the Working Group did not come to a consensus on the definition of civil discourse, it can broadly be thought of as “thinking out loud together” to increase understanding or perspectives of issues, and serve the public good.
- 2) It is critical for Ontario universities to maintain space for civil discourse. Recent global events revealed challenges of sustaining productive discourse and disagreement on campus, as well as in other institutions. This context has surfaced the opportunity to articulate a distinctly Canadian model for productive disagreement and dialogue.
- 3) He identified some of the themes that create impediments to civil discourse which included: i) existence of a low-trust environment; ii) perceptions of who holds power; iii) technological advances and the complexities they present (e.g. social media); iv) range of views on institutional neutrality; and v) the importance of context and environment in identifying appropriate solutions.

This was followed by a very animated discussion in which Colleagues shared comments on institutional initiatives on community healing and freedom of expression, institutional neutrality policies, and ideas for teaching students and faculty on how to practice civil discourse. The next morning the colleagues broke into working groups and collaboratively summarized their discussions. These were then presented to the Council Members. The recommendations included the need to develop principles of free speech that allow for inclusive engagement and acknowledge that friction can arise and that these principles should be applicable to everyone involved in the university. It was also suggested that there was a need to teach faculty how to have and facilitate these types of conversations, so all groups feel free to speak. Social media also has a large role in influencing free speech and this needs to be addressed in the university setting.

The Dec 9<sup>th</sup> and 10 meeting was focused on Artificial Intelligence. Dr. William Turkel, Professor of History, Western University, delivered a thought-provoking presentation on AI in Teaching and Research, specifically his use of AI in his courses on 21st century history. He explained that AI represents a methodological tool for teaching. Given the rapid pace of AI, he suggested that improvisation is more important than planning for instructors, and skills acquisition is more important than fixed tools acquisition for students. To teach students to use AI wisely he recommended that students should be assessed on syntheses of information, as opposed to memory recall which has been done historically. He also noted that AI is transforming the workforce, this creates an opportunity for universities to empower students with advanced skills and experiences that position them for mid-career-level responsibilities. He ended by saying that AI has become an integral part of today’s world so the focus should be on using it responsibly and thoughtfully to unlock its benefits while addressing concerns about its consequences.

Colleagues then had a session with Dr. Vivek Goel, President and Vice Chancellor, Waterloo who was leading the COU Taskforce on AI. We were asked for our input. Some of the observations made by the

Colleagues included that AI challenges traditional ways of thinking at universities. It provides an opportunity for universities to reconsider how they function as institutions that deliver comprehensive learning and identify the core elements of disciplines that should be preserved in this new landscape. It was also noted there was a major challenge in adapting institutional policies and pedagogy at the pace of AI innovations, resulting in gaps or lack of clarity in institutional policies, particularly those related to academic integrity and acceptable use of AI. This was variably true for different organizations. UofT does have a robust process. There was concern for the university community and their loss of interpersonal connection and skills if AI use became prevalent. There was agreement that faculty were already incorporating AI in their teaching.

Colleagues suggested that institutions consider reassessing risk frameworks and fostering a culture of innovation and experimentation among faculty to allow for the exploration of new AI based teaching models. There was an acknowledgment that AI enables learners to decide how they choose to engage with information, and universities will need to adapt to this reality and refine programming to reflect this. The key takeaway was that AI is not peripheral—it is already reshaping how knowledge is produced, taught, and evaluated.

The following morning President Orsini updated colleagues on COU priorities and activities. He discussed the fiscal challenges faced by universities and described COU's advocacy for predictable government funding. This involved having numerous meetings with members of the Ontario government. He also described that COU is focused on identifying ways that universities can contribute to transforming the economy and preparing students for new realities. The colleagues were very supportive and encouraged the continuing COU reflection and advocacy at the provincial level.

At the February 10th and 11<sup>th</sup> meeting, focused on the broader future of postsecondary education, beginning with a presentation by Steve Orsini, President and CEO of COU. He reviewed a draft document being prepared by the COU entitled the "Future of Post Secondary Education". This draft report focused on the development of a sector-wide vision for Ontario universities, in the context of financial pressures, demographic change, economic transformation, social change; globalization, climate change, and accelerating technological transformation. Our discussion highlighted the need for: i) innovation in teaching and learning; ii) expanded work-integrated learning that will mean strengthening university - industry relationships; iii) strengthened research capacity; iv) refining lifelong learning and scaling programs to create joint programming for flexibility; and v) continued advocacy for sustainable funding.

The COU document will highlight that the financial sustainability of universities is a precursor to transformation, and that fostering Canada's competitiveness requires engagement from universities. Colleagues emphasized that meaningful transformation would require alignment across institutions, government, and sector partners. We also discussed the role of AI and its impact on the future of the sector, and the critical value of universities as sites of research and meeting places for community and shared purposes.

The following day, Chris Evans, Executive Director, and Cindy Robinson, Director of Operations, Quality Assurance Secretariat (for Ontario), delivered a presentation which covered the role and importance of quality assurance at Ontario's universities and the key elements of the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF). In the discussion that followed, Colleagues shared comments on the length of timelines for obtaining new program approvals and the heavy administrative workload associated with achieving QAF requirements.

In the April 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> meeting, colleagues focused academic delivery in the context of artificial intelligence. The session began with a thought-provoking presentation by Dr. Mark Daley, Chief AI Officer at Western University and Vice-Chair of the COU AI Task Force. He mused about the role of universities in an era where knowledge is easily attainable by all.

The colleagues had a very fulsome discussion and then broke into small groups afterwards to discuss collaboratively the following important questions/issues: 1) What does a university become in a world where AI can outperform humans in many knowledge tasks?; 2) AI and students, pedagogy & academic freedom; 3) Future model of the university based on the assumptions fewer students, less funding, and widespread AI; 4) AI and transformation of university research; and 5) AI and the human core, ethics and society. There were very active discussions and identification of many questions and challenges in each category that needed addressing. The colleagues summarized these and presented them to the COU Members not as final answers, but as provocations to support sector-wide thinking and leadership.

Some of the comments made and questions raised are as follows:

- 1) What do universities teach that AI cannot? Colleagues thought this would depend on the discipline, but underlying principles might be the same for all. This could include soft skills such as leading and working with teams, creativity, innovation, developing judgement, building arguments and presenting in front of others. In summary, things that speak to the human experience. AI can't do "human-ness", at least not yet.
- 2) We wondered if universities would continue to exist. Colleagues thought they likely would since there is social value in having a way to attest that a student has spent time developing skills in the field, discipline, and commitment. But that led to the question of what will universities be credentialing, if it is not knowledge?
- 3) Institutions will need to find ways to bridge expertise, work across disciplines, create unique solutions and reinforce the gaps and missing information included in AI models.
- 4) Universities already have researchers who have been studying technology, society, culture, and ethics—these perspectives, largely linked to the humanities, they should be leveraged given that many of long-term impacts of AI will have broad social, cultural, and ethical consequences
- 5) The question of what the university of the future will look like led to a deeper consideration of our core values. It was suggested that the future university may need to be anchored in humanity, relationships, partnerships, and a commitment to deep, meaningful learning not memorization that will contribute to society in a different way than it does currently.
- 6) Research training and practice are about to change fundamentally.
- 7) Universities should consider acting as advocates for AI literacy, developing rules and frameworks for ethical AI use, redesign assessment methods (avoid rewarding what AI can easily do), and

integrate AI into curricula and research training. It will have to support the changes in how research is done.

Given all the issues raised in the April meeting Colleagues decided that the May 13<sup>th</sup> meeting would serve as a follow-up session to further discuss AI based changes and challenges, and actions required. The COU Members had expressed interest in having the Academic Colleagues consider the following questions: i) What might be the best mechanism(s) to foster collaboration around AI adoption between Senates or equivalent, Academic Colleagues and Executive Heads? And 2) How might Academic Colleagues contribute to advancing cross-departmental conversations about AI on their own campuses.

This stimulated so much discussion we decided to continue the dialogue in the August 2026 meeting.

The COU has 24 members from across the province. It appears to be a robust organization grounded in thinking through the critical university events of our time with a focus on advocating provincially as a united voice. It was an honour to be part of the conversation.

Respectfully

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