

Report to the Academic Board, University of Toronto

By U of T's Academic Colleague on the Council of Ontario Universities (COU)
Gage Averill, June 2, 2010

The mandate of the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) includes advocacy on issues of interest to the universities, government and stakeholder relations, collective action, policy analysis, the leveraging of efficiencies of scale for the system, and the building of consensus among its 19 member universities and two associate members (OCAD and the Royal Military College). It aspires to present the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU) with a single voice and partner, rather than having the Ministry deal one-on-one with each of the Province's universities. Working with various partners, the COU has helped to inaugurate a system-wide Ontario Universities' Application Centre; an inter-university transit system for mail; the Scholars Portal, which provides access to library resources across the Province; and an online tool to help train Ontario universities in the new Customer Service Standard of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).

The Council is composed of the Executive Heads of the Universities and of the Academic Colleagues, who used to be called the Companions of the Presidents. The Colleagues are a heterogeneous group: in universities with strong Faculty Senates, they tend to be elected from rank-and file faculty members. In others, they are appointed by the Presidents and may have academic-administrative duties of some form or another, as is true of this Colleague. The rationale for the existence of the Colleagues is to broaden the perspectives represented at the Council table beyond those of the University presidents. The Academic Colleagues meet approximately every other month for a half-day, share a dinner and a presentation the night before, and, once a semester, they meet together with the Executive Heads as a Council.

The Colleagues prepare one significant discussion paper per year for the Council's attention, drawn from a set of short thought-pieces by individual Colleagues. This year, it was my piece entitled "Rethinking Retention" that became the discussion paper, prepared in its final form by Sylvie Albert of Laurentian and John Logan of Carleton. The paper argues that there is a "structural" or background level of attrition, the result of a range of factors that are mostly beyond the ability of a university to influence, and calls into question the naïve reliance on retention as an index of quality. It notes that a single-minded focus on retention can help to erode academic standards and/or work against the goal of opening up access to postsecondary education to disenfranchised communities. As a result, it wonders aloud about the significant investment of resources intended to lower attrition and boost retention. This was presented at the Council meeting at the Royal Military College of Canada, (where, parenthetically, I have to say that we were treated to a wonderful meal in the historic officer's mess with military pipers announcing our arrival and departure).

Let me quickly recap some of the major issues we addressed this year:

- The new Framework for Quality Assurance was approved by the Executive Heads at the April Meeting. This Framework is the result of years of work and negotiations involving COU, the MTCU, OCAV (Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents) and other partners. A Quality Council is currently in formation and each university has been asked to prepare an Institutional Quality Assurance Process (or IQAP). The Academic Board is well acquainted with this process.
- Pension plans. Following the Harry Arthurs Report, the Province is preparing to mandate extensive payments from Universities to achieve both “going concern” and “solvency” status for every university pension plan, and the combined impact could be as much as \$555M per year across the system. Individual universities and the COU are continuing their advocacy to provide more relief for institutions hard hit by these requirements.
- Pathways / credit transfer. The Ministry has established both a Steering Committee and a parallel Working Group to advance student mobility and to create a more comprehensive credit transfer system amongst universities and colleges in Ontario. This will contain representatives from COU, Colleges Ontario, CUCC and student associations to develop options for a credit transfer system for Ontario. Although this issue has been on the back burner for many years, there is some hope that it will move ahead now that the Quality Assurance Framework is resolved.
- The Throne Speech and Provincial Budget. Finally, the COU focused intensely on the postsecondary items in the Throne Speech and the Provincial budget, including: the \$248M allocated to universities for enrolment growth through 2010-11 (which has reduced the threat of a discount on unfunded BIUs), the increased emphasis on foreign student enrolment (50% growth), the surprising announcement of a commitment to online degrees and courses, the anticipated upcoming multi-year accountability agreements (MYAAs), the 2-year cap on compensation, and of course the thorny resolution of pension plan financing. For each of these topics there is an emerging university advocacy agenda.

It is likely that there will be funding increases for the postsecondary sector as part of Reaching Higher II or whatever succeeds Reaching Higher, but it is also likely that these will be in return for progress on a range of policy goals that include: accommodating increased access and enrolment pressures, holding the line on affordability, improving accountability, leveraging information technology in education, enhancing immigrant retraining and credentialing, raising foreign student enrolment, and increasing student mobility between colleges and universities.

The Academic Colleagues are a very collegial and intellectually stimulating group, and over the year we heard engaging presentations on teaching and learning, digital education, retention issues, and the demographics of the postsecondary sector in

the decades ahead. A retreat to discuss the findings of the book *Academic Transformation: The Forces Reshaping Higher Education in Ontario*, by Ian D. Clark et al, is scheduled for August.

I'd like to thank the Academic Board for this opportunity to serve the University in the capacity of COU Academic Colleague, and I would like to acknowledge the excellent work of my predecessor, Professor Dan Lang of OISE who played a key role in both the Quality Assurance Framework discussions and Pathways, and who continues to represent the COU in the Pathways discussions long after his term has ended.