

COU Academic Colleagues Committee Report to the UOIT Academic Council

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Synopsis

This report overviews the key discussion items and topics discussed at the COU Academic Colleagues committee for the August and October 2018 meetings. The August meeting was an Academic Colleagues meeting while the October meeting was an Academic Colleagues and Council meeting.

Background

The objective of the COU Academic colleagues committee is to support the COU council, consisting of the executive heads of the institution members of the COU, with feedback from academic colleagues concerning COU initiatives. Every year the COU Academic colleagues committee, with the approval of council, focuses on particular topics of discussion. This particular year the committee has decided to focus on the general issue of “**Free Speech**” which has been triggered primarily by the recent announcement of the Ontario government that has mandated that all Ontario universities should adopt free-speech policies that allow for controversial issues to be discussed in university environments. This is a very challenging topic as there are many views and opinions in this area.

Typical to previous year’s formats the academic colleagues formulate a set of key questions to discuss among the colleagues with the objective to bring to the attention to the executives concerns around institutional free speech policies. Two key questions were posed to the council executive heads:

- How can universities engage with students on issues of free speech?
- How can universities best support faculty to engage with students on free speech?

Rather than simply pose these questions at the executive lunch meeting the colleagues decided to present several “real” cases of situations that colleagues had encountered in their career that exemplified scenarios of free speech and discuss the challenges that colleagues and students encountered in these examples. The scenarios presented were:

- An education student is told by a practicum coordinator that she should not talk about her family situation to public school students. Because she has two moms, her family is considered “too political.”
- An Indigenous student is advised not to indicate her ethnicity on a scholarship application.
- An art student interrupts a class meeting because he believes the artwork being discussed is offensive.
- A student group invites a speaker to a campus event, but some of the members of the group are concerned (and do not approve of the choice of speaker). They seek advice from their faculty advisor, who declines to intervene. The concerned students then seek support from another faculty member.
- An engineering students’ facebook group is being used to disparage other women students, and includes questions about the women students’ eligibility for academic merit scholarships.

After this meeting the colleagues met to summarize the feedback they received and to formulate some key issues concerning academic colleagues such as:

- Course directors need to be prepared to provide guidance and leadership;
- "hot topics" meetings/trainings may be a good way to engage faculty and get in front of these issues;
- training should be offered in a proactive way, especially to department heads and other campus leaders;
- Pedagogy should be the focus of training. All faculty, regardless of discipline, should have an understanding of how to address free speech issues in their classrooms;
- workshops may be organized through teaching and learning centres, as faculty often seek advice from these departments on other issues;
- training may include experts from a variety of offices/roles, including human rights and equity, personnel, security, etc);
- as with mental health, training and preparation should include prevention and de-stigmatization;
- Definitions need to be clear--particularly the differences between academic freedom and free speech;
- Training should include a focus on balancing the principles of free speech and care (with a reminder that free speech is not free; costs are not distributed in equitable ways). An approach that balances different principles may be complex and challenging;
- Reporting to HEQCO should include successes, not just challenges.
- It may be helpful to start with developing civility and care; We may use a broader approach, perhaps thinking about what it means to be a citizen in Canada.
- As universities evolve and become more diverse, the assumption of shared experiences and beliefs will become less true. Lived experiences and context are diverse. This observation should make us thoughtful.
- Redeveloping debating skills outside of social media may be one place to focus our energies. Face to face conversations are different, and may offer opportunities to become more careful; and
- Some of our colleagues who are not engaged may be fearful or angry. We should reach out to them.

Other COU Report Briefs

At all our meetings we receive a number of COU report briefings. These reports are also distributed to executives at the university and some are posted at the COU web site. As such they are not focused on academic colleague concerns and are briefly listed below.

- Much energy at COU is focused on preparing for engagement with the new government. The government has moved forward with its priorities (outlined in campaign commitments). It is not clear what the government will focus on as it moves from campaign mode to governance mode.
- SMA3 pilot projects: Universities are working on pilot projects aimed at developing metrics for SMA3. Final reports were due at the end of October. It is not clear if the new PC government will be interested in continuing with SMAs.
- Students across Ontario completed the Student Voices on Sexual Violence survey last spring. The data is currently being cleaned by the research company, and will be delivered to government and to universities this fall. It is not clear what reporting will be done by the new PC government.