

COU Academic Colleagues Committee

Report to Academic Council (Nov. 5, 2020)

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Synopsis

This report provides an overview of the Academic Colleagues (AC) meeting on October 13-14, 2020, and the 310th Meeting of the Council. All of these meetings occurred online.

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.

Meeting Summaries

COU Colleagues Meeting (October 13-14, 2020)

Evening meeting, October 13, 2020

6:00-7:10 p.m. After general introductions, the evening meeting was a conversation with the new COU President and CEO, Steve Orsini. Mr. Orsini spent the first part of the time introducing himself and the perspective he brings to the COU. He stressed his desire to position COU and universities as partners to government that can help address current government priorities and think long-term about the evolution of Ontario's higher education system. He borrows from Indigenous thinking about the importance of looking at the long term of how will decisions and issues impact not just "my generation", but the following seven generations. He believes that universities could have a big impact on the future of Canada in terms of policy and the academic mission of the university. He believes that the role of the Academic Colleagues is important because they are closer to the students than are the executive heads or the staff of the COU. Academic Colleagues can give a different perspective on the university and the students.

Moving forward, COU will be focusing on three key priorities: (1) Enhancing advocacy to support financial sustainability and postsecondary education policy changes; (2) Demonstrating to government and the public an effective sector-wide response to COVID-19 (in terms of testing, scientific discovery and the many other ways in which university faculties are supporting Ontario through the pandemic); and (3) Growing and enhancing COU's data analysis capacity. The advocacy agenda includes making sure that the government fully appreciates the role of the university sector in innovation, the economy and economic development, social justice issues and the like. He wants the COU to work closely with the Academic Colleagues to make sure that the COU is accurately communicating the importance of the sector to the government. The COU has the ability to marshal analytics to present evidence to the government to support this advocacy. In addition, the COU can provide the human impact perspective by using stories to communicate, not just numbers. One important role played by the COU is in preparing a pre-budget submission on behalf of the sector. Especially with respect to fighting COVID and dealing with the social and economic aftermath, now is an important moment to demonstrate how the university sector can support the government and demonstrate the value of the universities.

During the ensuing discussion, Mr. Orsini commented that the sector is being slowly starved; at a time when society needs the support of universities, universities need resources in order to play their role. For example, do we really know what the impact of going online is for students? Can we do a better job of explaining what students need and that we are providing the best learning experiences as possible under the circumstances?

Various members of the Academic Colleagues commented that it was important for the COU to ensure their advocacy is value-based and does not fall into the trap of seeing universities as being profit-based and students as customers. Often, government statements sound like they see the best way for students to learn is via MOOC-style courses, but the emergency shift to online teaching and learning as a result of COVID-19 has demonstrated that this assumption is not accurate. It will be important to really listen to what the students are saying about their access in terms of technical issues (e.g., stable internet access) and socio-economic issues. In addition, the health of the university community in terms of culture is as important as the economic impacts. How has the universities' ability to respond been impacted as a result of chronic underfunding?

Steve Orsini shared his belief that the federal government is likely to pursue a pro-growth strategy—rather than an increase in taxes or austerity policies—to pay down the debt that has been incurred due to the pandemic. One way to stimulate that growth would be to make significant investments in universities to drive innovation and graduate an adaptable, highly skilled workforce.

7:10-8:00 p.m. Dinner de-brief (after Steve Orsini departed)

- The debrief began with a discussion of the challenges being faced by faculty and students in being online.
- Some Academic Colleagues (AC) expressed concern that there seemed to be an emphasis on the economic footprint/impact because there was less concern about how the students are doing. AC were very concerned that there is a plan by the government to use online learning as a way of reducing the number of professors/instructors and to increase class sizes in order to reduce costs, even though good online teaching and learning requires more resources than face-to-face classes. There was much concern about how the universities will survive with improved support, especially as the quality of degrees are being watered down by approving colleges to award degrees without the same level of oversight and approvals as universities must go through.

Morning meeting, October 14, 2020

1. Planning for Council Meeting (held on October 16, 2020, 8:00-9:00 a.m.)

- The topic of the Council meeting (Executive Heads and Academic Colleagues) was anti-Black racism with Dr. Carl James, Professor and Senior Advisor on Equity and Representation at York University, who was invited as a commentator for the discussion. Colleagues agreed to share some examples of systemic anti-Black racism with Executive Heads and to recognize that addressing anti-Black racism in all its forms requires sustained and concerted efforts from everyone in the institution. They also agreed to focus the conversation on how Executive Heads can provide resources to make meaningful change at the faculty level. For example, through targeted or cluster hiring.

2. Process for election of COU president

- Discussion of process for the election of the COU President. Concern was expressed that if the Academic Colleagues are going to vote, more information is needed beforehand. There was some confusion about the role of the AC representative. As all policies are currently under review, this policy will be flagged as needing clearer language.

3. COU updates (Mike Snowdon)

COVID updates

- COU is continuing to work with institutions to collect data on the impact of the pandemic in order to be able to advocate with the government to support the sector and the students. New cost estimates suggest that \$700 million have been incurred across the sector, with 2/3 on ancillary costs (e.g., residences, sticky costs) and 1/3 is in new expenses (e.g., moving classes online, new financial supports for students).
- It is hard to a coherent picture of the impact on enrolments. Although it may not be as bad as the worst case scenarios predicted, there have been decreases in enrolment, especially amongst international students and the smaller, rural and northern universities. There is uncertainty about what the winter will look like in terms of whether there will be more drops or not. There does seem to be more part-time students. There are still many questions about what next year will look like.
- Some universities are working to support the government in increasing testing.

Modernization consultations

- In August, there was a push for information from the universities, but now they are still waiting for a memo from the government to explain what the government will do in terms of online delivery, help with costs, microcredentials, research, etc. Not sure what the scope for change will be in terms of system redesign.
- COU has sent a letter to Minister Romano about the need to unfreeze tuition that highlights the sector's commitment to affordability, new cost pressures, and the long-term impact of frozen revenue levers.

International Students

- As of October 20th, some international student will be allowed into Canada to attend approved universities.

Policy announcements

- Government has now introduced new “red tape” legislation (Bill 213), and has circulated a backgrounder with more plans about reducing regulations. For the Ministry of Colleges and Universities this includes:
 - Streamlined reporting – including consolidation of some Transfer Payment Agreements, a review of accountability reports, and a review of OSAP reporting;
 - A review of Tuition Set Aside and Student Access Guarantee programs;
 - Support for an improved credit transfer system;
 - A legislative exemption of universities from development charges;

- Legislative amendments to the enacting legislation of Redeemer, Tyndale and Canada Christian, to make them universities and expand their scope of allowable degree programs; and
- There are also several changes relating to Private Career Colleges (PCCs), including streamlining processes for approval of online learning and provincial approval for “Designated Learning Institute” for the purpose of international students getting study permits.

Facilities Renewal Program (FRP)

- Universities and colleges get annual payments to support facilities upkeep. The government just announced a new distribution formula, and universities are receiving less money than in previous years. Despite COU’s efforts to develop and present the Ministry with an evidence-based distribution formula, next year’s university FRP allocation will be \$80.9M – which is \$20M less than previously planned. COU continues to advocate for a fair, evidence-based distribution method and is also seeking one-time capital funding for campus renewal.

Mental Health

- Last week the government announced \$19.5M in funding for postsecondary sector mental health initiatives. About \$3.25M of it is new funding – the bulk of it (\$2.5M) is for new “partnership development” to “support a series of initiatives delivered in partnership with community providers to enhance services offered to students seeking mental health supports and build capacity in the postsecondary sector.” There will be partnership models, but not sure yet about the technical details of who can be involved (e.g., private or community/non-profit). Technical details will be out shortly.

4. Other Business

- Planning for future meetings. Topics might include:
 - Looking more closely at how the university sector can help provide care/support larger society by improving communications about mis/disinformation about COVID
 - How the pandemic is affecting the mental health of students, faculty and staff. What does the long term look like regarding teaching/learning online? What are the impacts on careers and mental health.
 - Burnout/faculty supports through the pandemic
 - Contract cheating & Academic integrity

Next meetings: Tuesday, December 8, 2020, 6 - 8pm and Wednesday, December 9, 2020, 9am to 12pm

COU Council meeting

310th Meeting of Council, Friday, October 16, 2020 , 8:00 to 9:00 am

1. **Welcome from the Chair** – M. Lachemi
2. **President’s Report** – S. Orsini reported that he has been intensely involved in advocating for budget consideration for the sector and reaching out to various Ministers, including Minister Fedeli (to help him understand the state of the sector’s finances). He has been preparing the pre-budget report and

talking about the importance and the needs of the sector in many meetings and conversations with members of the government.

3. **Academic Colleagues' Report** – D. Ivison reported on the two meetings in August and October on anti-black racism. The August meeting on anti-Black racism had Dr. Carl James as a guest. At the October meeting, there was a discussion with Orsini on role of COU and advocacy. At both meetings, the AC continued their ongoing discussion of pandemic impacts in the universities, including the impact of remote delivery.
4. **A conversation about addressing anti-Black racism at universities:**
 - Four Academic Colleagues began the conversation (Catherine Amara, UToronto; Catherine Carstairs, UGuelph; Andy McWilliams, Ryerson U; and, Mike Graydon, Algoma U).
 - Carl James raised the question of how do we move beyond the discussions/talks to actually put in place measures to invite racialized/Black/Indigenous faculty via governance structural change? Why is this a pivotal moment? Does there seem to be a competition between racialized groups? If so, how do we avoid that? What do we do beyond “unconscious bias training”? Accountability is important. How will we measure the effectiveness of the measures being taken? Systemic racism has been identified, but how do we put in governance structures to ensure that this is not just a passing phase?
 - Concern was expressed that EDI takes out the word racism and may reduce empathy. Language is important, as are stories. We need stories to create empathy.
 - Empathy and individual connect is a good start, but we need a whole cultural change beyond the “eloquent discussions”. It is time for action rather than simply consultation. Over the next few years, what do we want to see happen?
 - Ultimately, we are talking about power. This is the time when the shifting of power could take place. We need to consider how to distribute power more equitably and to deal with systemic power. Actions that can take place might include cluster hires, but part of the work is a culture shift. There is emotional difficulty in talking about things like white supremacy, so how do we take the emotional labour out? When you focus on the individual, things get fraught. There needs to be deep intersectional knowledge (team dynamics and anti-racism).
 - How to name the problem and to engage people in the conversation is important, but it is easy to end up with counter-productive conversations and with tension between action and consulting. Need to make the time and space for Black faculty and staff to inform the action, but there is a huge gap that needs to be filled via targeted hires. It is only by seeing Black faculty that students will be impacted.
 - York has the data to inform decisions and has a culture to know who is there and who is missing. Start with accepting that racism exists, then ask how it impacts different groups.
 - There is also a need to bring together racism and mental health for shared wellness and belongingness for all.
 - Importance of looking at the things that can be done simultaneously, as well as valuing the alternative ways of knowing and the different paths to reaching the front doors. It is important to ‘build the pipeline’ so that underrepresented groups can make it through. Changes to the curriculum will come eventually, but there are some things that can be done more quickly, even if it imperfect at first.

Meeting adjourned at 9:01 a.m.