COU Academic Colleagues Committee

Report to Academic Council (March 3, 2021)

Alyson King (COU Academic Colleague Representative for Ontario Tech University)

Synopsis

This report provides an overview of the Academic Colleagues (AC) meetings on December 8-9, 2020, and February 16-17, 2021. All of these meetings occurred online.

Background

The objective of the Council of Ontario Universities' Academic Colleagues committee is to contribute the academic perspectives to the COU Council, which consists of the executive heads and academic colleagues of the institution members of the COU.

Meeting Summaries

COU Colleagues Meeting (December 8-9, 2020)

Evening meeting, December 8, 2020

6:00 – 8:00 pm Conversation with Dr. Scott Henderson, Dean and Head of Trent University on the topic of misinformation and the role of universities.

Dr. Henderson joined the colleagues for a conversation on the role of universities in combating misinformation. He framed the conversation around three questions: (1) What role can universities play in combatting misinformation? (2) How and where can faculty become part of the public discourse by actively sharing information and ideas? and, (3) How can academia stay relevant and timely while respecting the importance of peer review?

Dr. Henderson noted that the increasing volume and rapid spread of information create too much complexity and confusion weakening an individual's ability to discern good information from misinformation. The opportunities for nuanced conversation and analysis is limited by decreased attention spans among the general public. These factors also create challenges for academics. University researchers validate their work through a lengthy and rigorous peer-review process. Often, individuals have already made up their minds about a topic by the time rigorous research is made public.

Colleagues noted that one of the most important ways in which universities can contribute to combating misinformation is to provide a high standard of education that enables students to critically evaluate information. Colleagues also stressed the importance of being transparent about what we know and what we don't yet know, stressing that scientific knowledge is still evolving. Research findings do not always lend itself well to journalism. Colleagues also discussed how to more broadly disseminate their research by participating in public discourse through Op-Eds and other media formats. Some universities actively encourage their faculty to engage with the public in this manner, and provide training.

1. **Update on the launch of the Indigenous Faculty Survey (Katarina Todic and Éilis Karry)**

The results of the Indigenous Faculty Survey will be published on December 14. This the first survey of its kind in Canada. The survey was distributed by OCAV in spring 2019 and received 86 responses in total (all women and full-time employees). Respondents reported a higher volume of service work, formal and informal, all or most of which is related to Indigenous issues. Indigenous faculty are expected to always represent Indigenous worldviews. Respondents reported racism, tokenism and inequities experienced through interactions with students, colleagues and administration, as well as isolation. *Please see attached slides for more information.*

2. **COU update (Mike Snowdon)**

Provincial Budget

The Ontario government tabled its 2020 budget on November 5. The province estimates that spending in 2020-21 will be $22 billion higher than in 2019-20 and that the deficit for this year will be $38 billion. It also projects deficits over the next two years of $33 billion and $28 billion, respectively. University and college base budgets remained essentially unchanged.

(a) Capital and Infrastructure

The government's decision to allocate the same amount of capital and infrastructure funds to universities and colleges will result in less funding for universities than under the previous allocation model. Universities account for three-fourths of buildings and two-thirds of enrollment. COU continues to advocate for more capital and infrastructure funding for universities.

(b) Micro-credentials

The province has committed $60M over the next three years to the development of micro-credentials. The government defines micro-credentials as programs that "recognize granular, specific skills and competencies, are tied to a labour market need, and typically require less time to complete than traditional credentials." Micro-credentials are less than 12 weeks in length.

This funding will be used for, among other things, an online portal, to fund and incent the development of micro-credentials, launch a public awareness campaign, expand OSAP eligibility to include students in "ministry approved, quality-assured" micro-credential programs and to develop a virtual passport that issues and tracks a person's learning experience. Unclear how quality will be assured.

eCampusOntario will play a major role in supporting this initiative by developing a virtual passport that issues and tracks a person's learning experiences.

(c) Research

A small amount of new money, about $9M, was allocated to research, including $2M for Ontario Health Data Platform, which will explore opportunities to integrate datasets and support research projects related to the COVID-19 response, $3.5M to support the operations and maintenance related to

Advanced Research Computing in Ontario (co-funded with CFI), and up to $2 million in funding to enhance collaboration across the research sector.

Financial Sustainability (of Ontario Universities) Advocacy

In the context of COVID-19, COU has been advocating for adequate revenue for all Ontario universities, as well as affordability and access for students. COVID-19 costs and lost revenues are estimated to be more than $1B for this fiscal year. Most of the costs are for upgrades to remote learning, student supports and health and safety. The lost revenue is mainly on the ancillary services side (parking, residences, conference services), which continue to have costs but are not generating revenues. Because tuition fees are the main way for universities to access any increased funding (beyond government grants), COU is advocating for modest increases in some program areas in a responsible way to maintain affordability but also allow for improved financial sustainability.

SMA3

Strategic Management Agreements are now publicly posted. The government has agreed to de-couple funding from performance for the first two years of SMA3 because of de-stabilizing effects of COVID-19.

COU Colleagues Meeting (February 16-17, 2021)
Evening meeting, February 16, 2021
Conversation with Alison Flynn, Associate Professor, Department of Chemistry and Biomolecular Sciences, University of Ottawa, on the topic of online learning

Dr. Alison Flynn joined the colleagues for a conversation on the topic of "Online Learning: Lessons Learned and the Future of Education after the Pandemic**."** As a relatively new medium for education that has expanded rapidly in response to pandemic-related school closures, online learning presents several key challenges that Dr. Flynn believes should be addressed: 1) Ensuring equitable access to technology and making online spaces fair and inclusive**;** 2) Maintaining a sense of community both inside and outside of class; 3) Focusing on the desired goals and outcomes of online learning and tailoring the experience in a way that makes the most of the online setting, while promoting academic integrity.

Dr. Flynn listed access to technology, internet service and working space as material obstacles that students face, but family and work obligations at home can also limit students' access to online courses. She stressed the importance of building community in online courses, and of prioritizing consideration of mental health, wellness and resilience throughout the curriculum.

As universities move forward post-pandemic, they may wish to maintain an online or hybrid model of education. Dr. Henderson noted the difference between online learning, where courses are designed to be conducted online, and remote learning, where an in-person class is simply moved online or streamed. Ideally, online courses should be developed to make the most of the medium, and offer learning outcomes that cannot be obtained by simply surfing the web. Instructors can use growth and goals modules to help students measure their achievements. They should clearly communicate their expectations for academic integrity, and the disciplinary ramifications of dishonesty.

Many Colleagues agreed that online learning is here to stay in some form, probably in a blended/bimodal form, and that faculty and students would benefit from more formal training in online teaching and learning.

Colleagues discussed how student and faculty attitudes towards online learning have evolved as the pandemic has progressed. The sense of achievement many felt after completing their first full semester online has shifted to burnout as the pandemic continues without a fixed end point. Several mentioned the importance of checking in regularly with students and holding regular town halls to hear campus perspectives.

Some key take-aways include:

- Humanizing the learning with compassion and flexibility, but also with defined boundaries
- Connecting learning outcomes, assessment, and integrity so that learners understand they are building towards their careers
- Capacity building for students to learn to become proficient learners
- Bring students to the decision-making tables in meaningful ways

Morning meeting, Wednesday, February 17, 2020, 9:00 am – 12:00 pm

1. Update on Strategic Plan (Steve Orsini)

COU President and CEO Steve Orsini presented the updated COU Strategic Plan that is being reviewed.

2. COU Update (Cecilia Brain)

COVID-19

COU is doing a survey of universities to collect data on their capacity to support COVID-19 vaccination efforts. This includes, among other things, freezers available to store vaccines and personnel that can perform and assist with vaccinations. COU will communicate its findings to the government and convey that universities stand ready to contribute to the effort.

COU continues to advocate to expand the number of university health programs that can be exempt from the 10-person limit for in-person training. There is confusion about the criteria that was used to select programs. For example, nutrition and speech language pathology are exempt from the 10-person limit, but dentistry and optometry are not.

Strategic Management Agreements

Early in the pandemic, the ministry agreed to de-couple SMA3 performance-based evaluations from funding to respond to the instability created by COVID. The government also indicated that all other elements of the performance-based model will continue as planned. This includes data reporting, calculation of minimum performance targets, and performance evaluation.

The Year 1 evaluations for SMA3 have concluded and minimum allowable targets for Year 2 have been established. Year 1 performance results are expected to be published on the ministry's website in late-Spring 2021.

Mental Health

On February 9, the ministry announced that it will provide an additional $7 million in one-time funding to support Ontario's students in publicly-assisted colleges and universities. Institutions will receive a fixed base amount of $100,000 plus an enrolment share top-up. Universities will have flexibility on how to spend these funds to address mental health needs but the government notes the importance of virtually delivered mental health services and other hybrid models and its expectation that universities will work to ensure that the needs of vulnerable and diverse groups (Indigenous, racialized, LGBTQ students and students with disabilities) are met through these supports.

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

The Ontario Human Rights commissioner wrote to universities in December inquiring about policies and approaches to EDI. COU responded with a letter detailing some of the steps and approaches taken by the sector. Executive Heads have also proposed setting up a special committee on EDI and the plan is to leverage the Senior Equity Officers Reference Group as well as representatives from other COU affiliates.

Micro-credentials

On December 17, 2020, the provincial government filed a new regulation that outlines the process by which student financial assistance for micro-credential programs will be assessed and distributed. The OCAV Micro-credential Working Group is working on developing policy recommendations and advocacy on this file, including trying to help the Ministry land on a definition of micro-credentials and encouraging the Ministry not to superimpose burdensome regulatory frameworks—either related to tuition or to quality control.

The Working Group is drafting a letter that will be sent by COU to the ministry seeking clarification and further information about the emerging micro-credential framework. It will also propose a joint sector-ministry technical working group to develop micro-credential policy and programming.

Financial Sustainability

The ministry has recently increased its interest in the financial health of universities and on transparency regarding universities' financial information. COU has reiterated that the Ontario university sector is one of the most transparent. Publically available information includes the individual financial reports of all universities, Ontario and Canada standardized financial reports (COFO and CAUBO) and financial health indicators/benchmarks developed in collaboration with MCU.

COU continues to advocate for adequate revenue for universities as well as affordability and access for students.

3. Pre-Council meetings planning

Colleagues selected the topic of "Building Back Better" as the theme for the meeting preceding the Council meeting on April 1.

Release of the Indigenous Faculty Survey Report

Academic Colleagues

December 9, 2020

Éilis Karry, Policy Analyst, COU
Katarina Todić, Senior Policy Analyst, COU

Background

- In 2015 a joint working group was formed between the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV) and the Reference Group on Aboriginal Education (RGAE) to provide a forum for discussion of issues related to the Indigenization of Ontario universities.

- The group's first project was the Indigenous Faculty Survey – the first of its kind in Canada – focusing on the challenges and barriers faced by Indigenous faculty, specifically those hired after the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report in 2015.

Indigenous Faculty Survey

- The joint working group developed an online survey instrument distributed through OCAV to faculty across all universities in spring 2019.

- Survey questions focused on:
  - Academic pathways for Indigenous scholars;
  - Teaching, research, and service experiences;
  - Campus environments; and
  - Tenure and promotion practices.

- Survey results were analyzed in fall 2019 and a draft report was developed.

Themes of Participant Experiences

- Indigenous faculty have a higher volume of service activities, compared to their non-Indigenous colleagues.

- Representing Indigenous worldviews and knowledges at their institution is an expectation of Indigenous faculty members rather than a choice.

- Racism, tokenism and inequities are experienced by Indigenous faculty through their interactions with students, colleagues, and administration, as well as through institutional structures and policies.

Report Calls to Action

- The survey report makes the following Calls to Action for university leaders to consider as part of Indigenization efforts within their institutions:
  - Examine research and Research Ethics Boards policies;
  - Review university policies on committee representation;
  - Continue anti-racism work;
  - Provide support for all faculty to include Indigenous content and pedagogies in teaching and research;
  - Review policies and practices regarding classroom spaces;
  - Review policies regarding engagement with Indigenous people and communities; and
  - Prioritize the development of mentorship programs for Indigenous faculty.

Releasing the Report

- In the present climate around issues relating to equity and racial justice, the results will be of interest to the media and public.
- A closely coordinated communications/issues management response by universities will greatly aid the sector in consistent messaging and an organized response from institutions.
- With input and review from OCAV, RGAE, the Ontario Universities' Public Affairs Council (OUPAC), and the Strategy and Planning Committee, COU developed a communications rollout plan for the report.
- The plan was approved by Executive Heads on December 4, 2020.

Releasing the Report

- The report and sector-wide results will be released on December 14, 2020.
- Communications objectives:
  - To show that Ontario's universities will continue to challenge themselves to achieve greater Indigenization at our institutions.
  - To demonstrate that universities have a strong track record of commitments to Indigenization and that they will continue to work to ensure Indigenous peoples have a thriving voice and active presence on university campuses across the province.
  - Provide transparency in releasing the survey data to the public to show that, with the help of this data, universities can and will do more to support Indigenization.
  - To reinforce that universities support initiatives that inform a better understanding of Indigenization on campuses, as well as the experiences of Indigenous faculty members in the tenure and promotion practices at Ontario's universities.
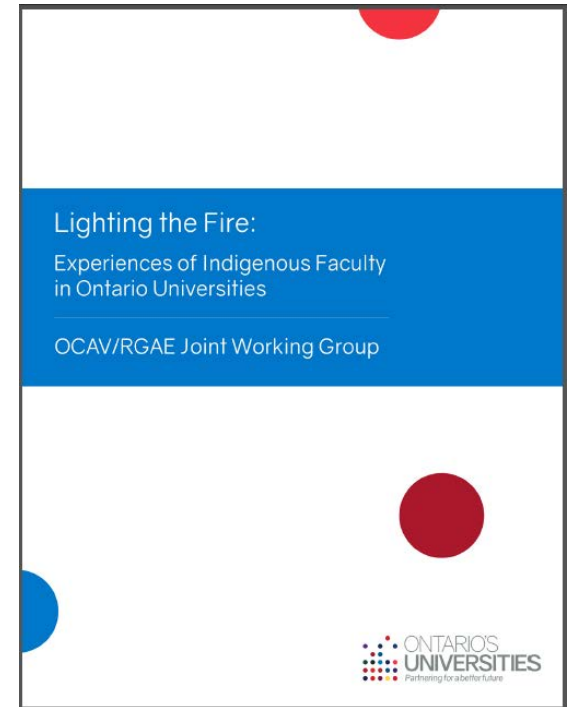
Launching the Report

- On December 14, 2020, there will be a coordinated public release launched by COU, highlighting the report and a response from the sector. The response will reinforce a commitment to accepting the survey results and to using the data to gain a deeper understanding of Indigenous faculty members' experiences, as each Ontario university continues to support and advance the inclusion of Indigenous voices and peoples on our campuses.

Launching the Report

Lighting the Fire:
Experiences of Indigenous Faculty
in Ontario Universities

OCAV/RGAE Joint Working Group

ONTARIO'S UNIVERSITIES
Partnering for a better future

- COU will post the report and accompanying messaging on its website with links to each institution.
- Each institution will be responsible for communicating directly with their communities.
- COU created key messages and Q&As on the sectoral response to support our members' communication.
- COU created a short document highlighting examples of Indigenization initiatives on university campuses.

Launching the Report

- COU is creating an additional feature on its website (ontariosuniversities.ca) highlighting major overarching initiatives taking place across Ontario universities with regard to Indigenization.

- Identified and secured spokespeople, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members, who are prepared to respond to media questions in a timely way.
  - Janice Hill, Associate Vice-Principal (Indigenous Initiatives and Reconciliation), Queen's University.
  - Caroline Langill, Vice-President, Academic and Provost, OCAD University.
  - David Newhouse, Associate Professor, School of Business; Chair, Chaney Wenjack School of Indigenous Studies, Trent University.