

COU Academic Colleagues Committee Report to the Ontario Tech U AC

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Synopsis

This report provides an overview of two meetings held on **August 17 and 18, 2021**. The meeting on August 17 focused COU priorities. The meeting on August 18 included discussion of reopening at the different universities, information sharing about the universities' actions related to the pandemic, and updates from COU. All 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 and academic colleagues.

Meeting Summaries

COU Colleagues Meeting (August 17-18, 2021)

Evening meeting, August 17, 2021

- The evening meeting consisted of a conversation with COU President and CEO Steve Orsini, who spoke to the group about COU's priorities for the coming year.
- **Reopening:** The government has announced policy directives, including booster shots for the immune-compromised, and the Ministry of Health announced additional steps to prepare for a fourth wave. COU and Colleges Ontario, along with the Toronto Board of Trade, have called for a vaccine mandate and safe pass. The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance also endorsed this call. COU's COVID-19 Reference Table continues to meet regularly and share best practices.
- **Institutional Autonomy:** In April, the government introduced Bill 276, Schedule 16, which establishes Northern Ontario School of Medicine (NOSM) as a degree-granting university and severs its degree-granting partnerships with Lakehead and Laurentian. COU's concern stems from the absence of due process and consultation with the sector, which sets a precedent that threatens universities' autonomy. The new universities do not have a Charter, so the government can step in and make changes by regulation rather than legislation.

The Ministry's speculation that a lack of financial transparency led to Laurentian's bankruptcy also threatens institutional autonomy. Ontario's Universities are among the most fiscally transparent institutions in Canada since financial indicators are all tracked. COU is developing a four-point plan that will flag financial difficulties far enough in advance to head off the possibility of bankruptcy.

- **Financial sustainability:** University operating grants on a student weighted basis have declined by 21% since 2007-2008. Tuition cuts and freezes have eliminated billions in potential revenue for the sector. This has led to an overreliance on revenue from international students and services, sources which are vulnerable to global events such as travel restrictions and international disputes.

DISCUSSION: In the discussion that followed, Colleagues raised concerns about developing a common reopening plan with 34 local public health authorities that may be issuing conflicting

mandates, concerns about how an immunization policy could be enforced, and the need for funding for improvements to infrastructure.

Morning meeting, August 18, 2021

1. Welcome and COU Overview (Cecilia Brain)**

Cecilia Brain presented an overview of COU's structure and activities for the benefit of new Colleagues. Colleagues suggested inviting the COU EDI group and/or Indigenous faculty group to attend a future meeting.

See *Attachment 2: COU Overview*

2. COVID-19 Reopening (Michelle Cyr)

Michelle Cyr presented an overview of COU's COVID-19- related activities, such as the formation of a COVID-19 Reference Table, a Legal Counsels' Working Group, and the current state of reopening policies. At the time of the meeting, 19 Universities were requiring vaccinations for all in-person activities.

Colleagues requested clarification on how vaccine exemptions will be determined and enforced, and how research activities will be classified with regard to distancing and capacity requirements.

3. COU update (Cecilia Brain)

Financial Sustainability and Competition Working Group

COU has formed a cross-functional Financial Sustainability and Competition Working Group to lead the sector's review and analysis of internal policy and advocacy recommendations linked to university funding and support. Its work is to consider government, student, and institutional interests and priorities to develop sector-wide specific policy/advocacy options for consideration by Executive Heads.

This work is being undertaken in the context of a

- **10% cut on domestic tuition, followed by a two-year freeze**, which reduced revenue by \$1.8 billion (as measured by the cut and foregone revenue that would have accrued under the previous tuition fee framework).
- **Overreliance on international student revenue**, which poses a significant financial risk for all institutions.
 - **COVID-19** travel restriction, federal quarantine, and testing fees may discourage students from choosing Canada as their education destination.
 - **Geopolitical tensions (e.g. 2019 Saudi Arabia) and other factors (e.g. exchange rates, recessions)** can affect international enrolment from specific countries and regions. The risks are higher because of the lack of source country diversification. The top 10 countries account for nearly 80% of international enrolment. The top two for 62.2%. Enrolment disruptions from these major source countries could significantly affect university revenues.

- **Increase competition from other countries** including the United Kingdom, the United States, China, and India.
- **Declining operating grant revenue per student.**

Student Access Guarantee

On May 14, the ministry announced a redesign of the Student Access Guarantee (SAG) program. The program was originally designed to provide institutional bursary funding to students for tuition and supplies costs that exceeded funding provided by OSAP.

The announced ministry's changes align with the university sector's recommendations and include:

- An aggregate spending rule, whereby each year, institutions would spend an amount equivalent to 30% of all prior year tuition/book shortfalls on SAG.
 - Institutions have full flexibility to determine which students receive SAG, as well as the amount of funding.
 - No distinction between students in first- and second-entry programs (i.e., eliminates 'automatic SAG' for students in first-entry programs).
 - All students who have unmet financial need stemming from their tuition/book shortfalls would be considered within the eligible pool of students.

The Ministry also committed to publishing a one-page plain-language document about SAG to increase program awareness.

Micro-credentials

In November 2020 OCAV established the OCAV Task Force on Microcredentials to lead the sector's engagement and develop advocacy options for consideration by OCAV and Executive Heads. The task force has been developing positions and engaging with MCU staff and other stakeholders, including Quality Council, eCampusOntario, and HEQCO. In July, the task force submitted a letter to the Deputy Minister outlining principles around quality assurance and stackability/transferability of microcredentials. COU and Colleges Ontario are collaborating to advocate for policies that ensure institutional autonomy over microcredentials. MCU has confirmed that they have received approval for more formal consultations with stakeholders on this file and will be undertaking consultations in September.

OSAP

On March 28, the government announced that maximum OSAP assistance to cover tuition, program fees, books, and equipment will be set at \$5,000 per term, with an additional educational allowance of \$5 per study hour.

eCampusOntario Portal

MCU granted a contract to eCampusOntario to develop a portal that will house OSAP-approved microcredentials. The portal will launch in September.

Ontario Health Data Platform

In 2020, the Government of Ontario created the [Ontario Health Data Platform \(OHDP\)](#) to improve the detection, planning, and response to COVID-19 and to support epidemiology research. Ontario's universities support the objectives of the OHDP. However, the university sector, the research hospital sector, and industry stakeholders are concerned about a research agreement that grants the province ownership of intellectual property (IP) generated through access to the OHDP and are working together to communicate their concerns to the government.

4. OHDP and Intellectual Property update (Sharan Sriskantharajah)

The Ontario Health Data Platform (OHDP) fosters innovation, collating data from all universities. While Ontario's universities support the OHDP's goals, universities and other research institutions share some concerns about the platform's research agreement.

To gain access to the portal, institutions must sign a research agreement, which includes a clause stipulating that any new IP created through access to OHDP will be owned by province. This limits commercialization and deters private sector investment in research. The university sector has been working with Ontario hospitals and other stakeholders to communicate these concerns. COU is currently in discussions with other institutions to negotiate an agreement that will benefit all parties involved.

5. Committee Reports

Quality Council (Andrew McWilliams)

- Approvals of new programs (OnTech, UofT, Waterloo), revised IQAP (Algoma), major modification annual reports (Windsor) and FARS (Brock, UOttawa, St Paul University) proceeded as normal.
- The Senior Academic Director provided an update on the OCAV working group on micro-credentials which has outlined a draft document of principles for micro-credentials, including a section how micro-credential's quality assurance would be included in IQAP.
- MCU has a separate working group established for the micro-credential portfolio, which will include options regarding the quality assurance of micro-credentials but has done so without consulting with the sector. The Provincial Government sees micro-credentials as a way to kickstart the economy post-COVID, and potentially a model that could revamp how post-secondary education is delivered.

Budget and Audit Committee (Doug Ivison)

The Budget and Audit Committee held its last meeting of 2020-21 on Friday, May 14, 2021 via Zoom. The committee reviewed the forecast for 2020-21 budgets and the proposed budgets for 2021-22. The Committee approved the 2021-22 budgets for the COU Secretariat, the Office of Health Sciences, Quality Assurance, and OUAC.

Executive Council (Kim Hellemans)

1. President's Report
 - Steve Orsini gave a brief overview of the COU, highlighting the devastating impact of COVID-19 on revenue
 - We will have a very busy year

2. Treasurer 's Report
 - COU and OUAC worked well; some challenges but OK now
 - We are operating at low GIC rates; have implemented an electronic fund transfer to automate pay processes
 - Invoices can now operate online, seeing improved efficiency as we have achieved paperless pay system from end to end.
3. Report from the May 14, 2021 Budget and Audit Committee meeting
 - 2021-2022 includes 0% increase in assessment
 - Institutions paying at top end are protected; those paying at low end are paying their share.
4. Approval of 2021-22 Budgets
 - a. 2021-22 COU Secretariat Budgets **
 - b. 2021-22 Office of Health Sciences Budgets **
 - c. 2021-22 Quality Assurance Budgets **
 - d. 2021-22 Ontario Universities' Application Centre Budget **

All budgets approved

Note: assumption for next budget cycle is that in person meetings will resume in January 2022, but will be reduced in frequency

Note 2: budget support key priorities (policy, analysis, advocacy, members)

Attachments:

- 1) COU Overview Deck

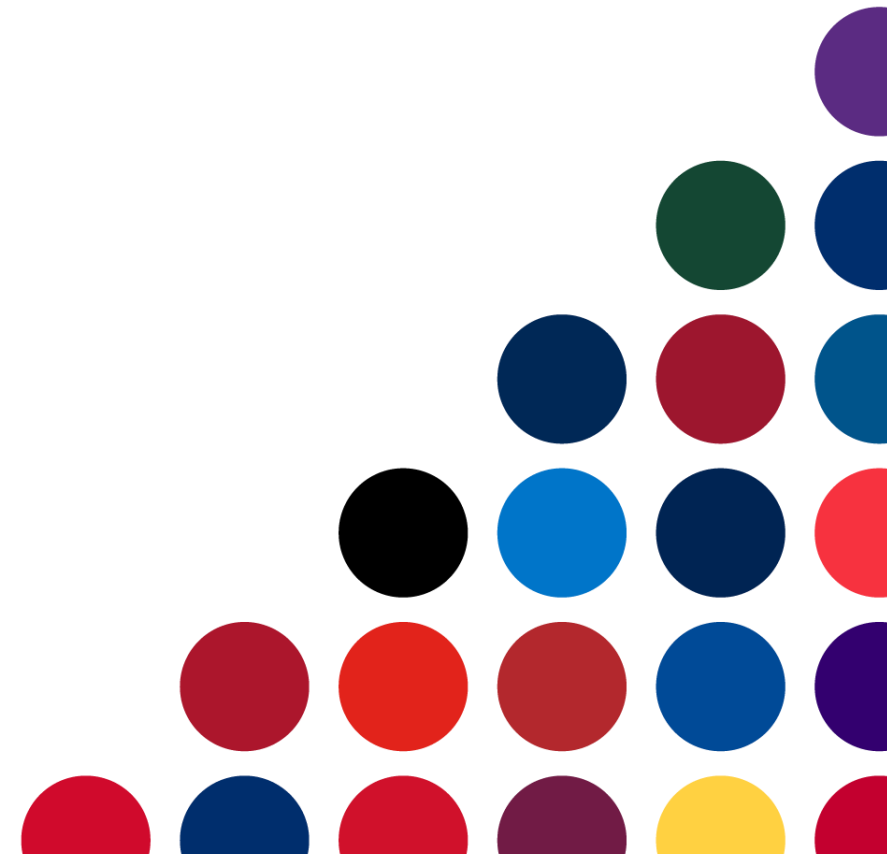
Next meetings: October 13, 6-9pm and October 20, 9-12pm. Council Meeting will take place October 22, 9-11am.



COU Overview

Academic Colleagues

August 18, 2021





Purpose and Structure of COU

- COU is a membership organization
- From the COU Constitution:
 - “to promote cooperation among the provincially assisted universities of Ontario, and between them and the Government of the Province, and, generally, to work for the improvement of higher education for the people of Ontario.”See: <https://cou.ca/about/policies-constitution/>
- Membership:
 - The Executive Head (President or Principal) of each member institution
 - One faculty colleague from each member



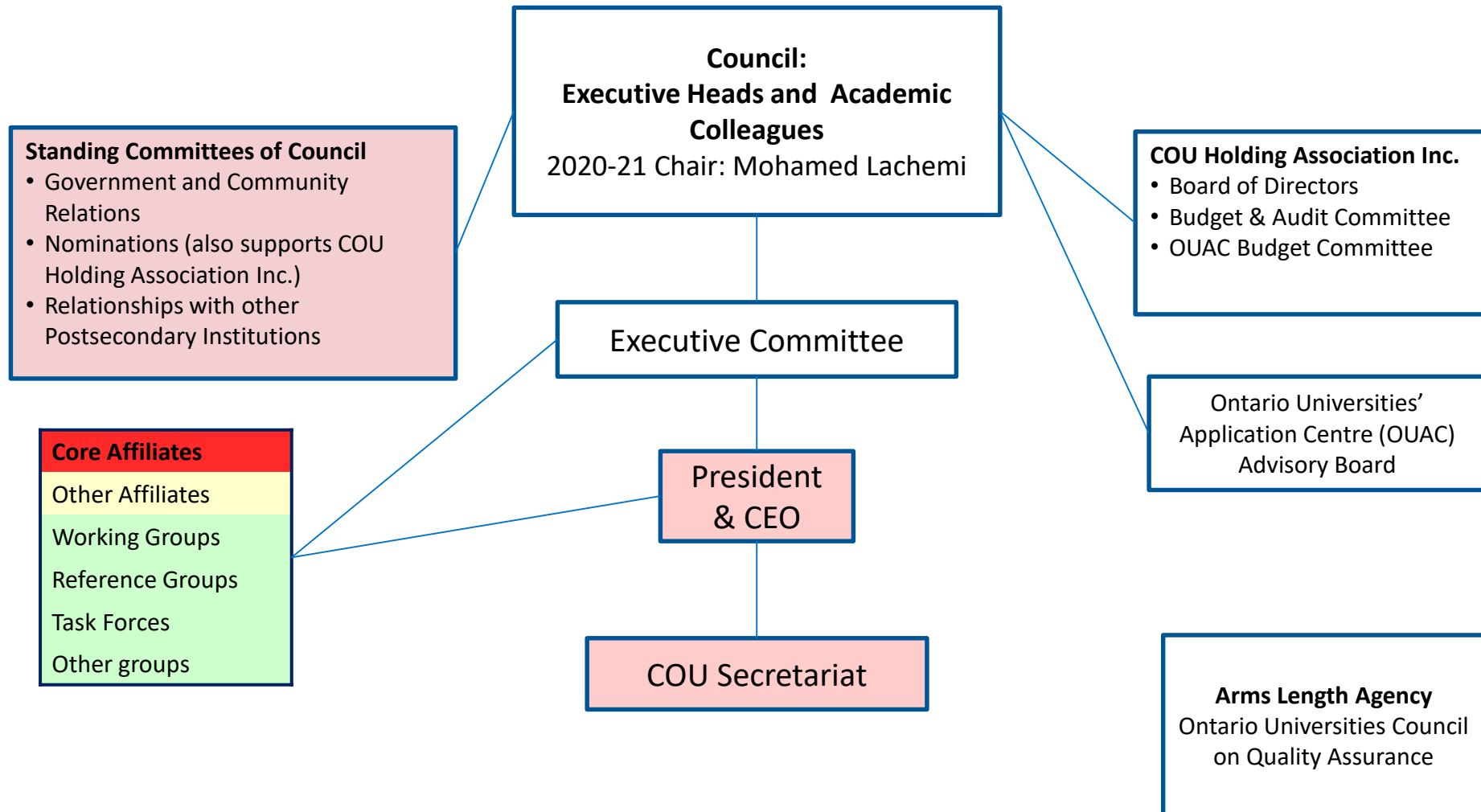
Academic Colleagues

Terms of Reference (developed in 2002):

- As members of the Academic Colleagues' group and COU committees, Colleagues seek to stimulate thoughtful and insightful discussion and action within Council and the wider university community.
- To serve as members of COU standing committees, task forces and working groups.
- To provide regular updates and reports on the activities of Council to their respective academic Senates or equivalent senior academic bodies as determined by their institutions.
- To anticipate, examine and analyze significant issues with a view toward specific contributions to Council objectives.



Council of Ontario Universities - Structure





What is a COU affiliate?

- Individuals at each COU member institution who are united by common interests and responsibilities, who work on behalf of Ontario universities. Much of COU's ongoing work is done through the affiliates.
- Some lead initiatives on behalf of the sector – VPs Academic (OCAV), VPs Research (OCUR), VPs Finance and Admin (CSAO), CUPA (institutional planners) – at the direction of Executive Heads.
- Some have operational responsibility within COU on behalf of member institutions, e.g., the Council of Finance Officers produces the annual financial reports in comparable form for each institution – “COFO reports”.



COU Affiliates

The following affiliates are supported by the COU Secretariat:

- Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV)
- Council of Senior Administrative Officers (CSAO) – VPs Finance/Admin
- Ontario Council on University Research (OCUR) – VPs Research
- Council on University Planning and Analysis (CUPA)
- Council of Chairs of Ontario Universities (CCOU)
- Council of Ontario University Secretaries (COUS)
- Council of Ontario Faculties of Medicine (COFM)
- Ontario Universities' Public Affairs Council (OUPAC)



Taskforces, working groups, reference groups, etc.

Taskforces, working groups, reference groups, etc., are formed for a specific period to undertake a specific task. They usually are staffed with Council members and senior university staff who are subject matter experts, with the COU Secretariat providing policy, research and administrative support. Some examples:

- Financial Sustainability and Competitiveness Working Group
- OCAV Task Force on Micro-credentials
- SMA3 Working Group
- OCAV Reference Group on Aboriginal Education
- Data Strategy Working Group
- Reference Group on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion
- COVID-19 Reference Table
- Task Force on University Space Transformation



Questions?



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