

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 February 7 & 8, 2023. The Tuesday night meeting was a presentation by an invited speaker followed by a brief discussion while the main COU colleagues meeting occurred on the Wednesday morning. Both meetings were held in a hybrid format (in-person and online) and I attended these remotely.

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

Evening meeting, February 7, 2023

Conversation on Mental Health and Wellness in the University Context

Benoit-Antoine Bacon, President and Vice-Chancellor, Carleton University

Abstract: Dr. Bacon will share his reflections on the meaning of a healthy and successful institution, and the distinction between being functional and being well/thriving in the context of individuals and universities as institutions and communities.

Comments:

Dr. Bacon's talk was around the theme that typically mental health has been defined as how well one is functioning and the consideration of treatment to manage any mental health challenges an individual is facing. In reality though, mental health is very complex and "wellness" should also be included. The talk then focused on the support that we have in our educational institutions for mental health and wellness.

Dr. Bacon's presentation was quite different from other academic presentations as he talked about his own experiences in managing his own mental health and wellness growing up in a dysfunctional home.

The presentation was rather broad and Dr. Bacon ended with 2 points for discussion that were:

1. Lots of people that are on campus seem normal to us but are haunted by their past. We teach students to think but we should also equip students to manage their wellness. How do we do that?
2. There are 2 motivations in life: fear and love. Our goal is to release the fear and adopt the love. We should change ourselves before we change the world.

After his presentation the colleagues has a short round table discussion around service available at their own institution and challenges they have faced. Here are some points that I captured from these discussions:

- Where to commence? At any given time, there are students in crisis. Carleton has implemented a care report that seems very useful for faculty and staff. It does not address acute cases but it is a way for staff to report cases.
- Some faculty have experienced challenges on pushing the boundaries in personal discussions in class as they have led to conflicts with administration.
- We need more champions who can speak to mental health and wellness.
- A suggestion was made on opening the dialogue among professorships. This is very challenging and takes mental effort.
- If healing is first over skills how would your course outline and assessment look like?

The evening culminated with short statements by some COU colleague members on what mental health and wellness support mechanisms existed on their campuses.

Morning meeting, February 8, 2023

1. Information Sharing

The group shared some of the challenges that their universities have been discussing at their senate and/or academic councils. These issues varied among the institutions and topics such as some institutions are currently in contract negotiations, others are reviewing their budgets given the Ontario government funding constraints, and student applications.

2. COU President's Report (Steve Orsini)

- The Ontario government is still very hard pressed to allow institutions to increase tuition and corridor funding has had significant impact on declining revenue from domestic students.
- Government wants a thought full review of post-secondary governance. The downside might be a reduction of governance autonomy.
- The Université de Hearst and the Northern Ontario School of Medicine applied for full COU membership that was not accepted mostly based on economy of scales and scholastic quality.
- The Ministry has announced its intention to create a Microcredentials Quality Assurance Framework for the province. The Provincial Educational Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB) will be leading the consultations with stakeholders to develop key principles and an implementation approach.
 - University sector stakeholders to be consulted include the Quality Council and the COU Microcredentials Working Group.

3. COU Internal Updates

Working Group on International Education Recommendations (Marny Scully)

On January 26, 2023, Executive Heads indicated support for a series of recommendations from the Working Group, specifically:

- that Ontario universities commit to leading practices related to agent management;

- that Ontario universities commit to helping international student applicants make informed choices by following leading practices in transparency and predictability regarding tuition and related costs over the course of their program;
- that COU support Universities Canada’s advocacy with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to expedite student visa processing for university applicants;
- that the government review its International Student Recovery (ISR) fee policy and its impact on institutional financial sustainability and supports to international students;
- that the provincial and federal governments enhance alignment of policies on immigration and economic growth by expanding eligibility for experiential and work-integrated learning opportunities to international students to support their transition into the Ontario labour market; and
- that COU play a role in enhancing sector data collection and analysis to support better understanding of international student success and graduate outcomes.

Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance

- The Quality Council has published its 2021-22 annual report that can be downloaded from <https://oucqa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/2021-22-Annual-Report-of-the-Quality-Council.pdf>

4. Discussion on Future Topics / Planning for April 6 Council meeting

The meeting ended with a discussion on the topic that will be the focus for the March meeting that will also be the topic for discussion at the April council meeting with the executives.