

# COU Academic Colleagues Committee Report to the Ontario Tech U AC

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## Synopsis

This report provides an overview of two Academic Colleagues meetings held on October 16 & 17, 2023, and the 316<sup>th</sup> Meeting of Council. The Oct. 16 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 Academic Colleagues meetings were held in a hybrid format (in-person and online) and I attended these in-person. The Council Meeting was held in-person during the afternoon of Oct. 17.

## 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, October 16, 2023

### **Conversation on Mitigating Anti-LGBTQ2S+ Movements and Navigating Diversity**

*Guest:* Jen McMillen, Vice-Provost Students, Toronto Metropolitan University, and Chair of the Ontario Committee on Student Affairs (OCSA)

*Title:* Mitigating Anti-LGBTQ2S+ Movements and Navigating Diversity to Make Campuses Safer for All Students

*Abstract:* Drawing on their career in student affairs, human rights and policy development, spanning a number of Ontario postsecondary institutions, Jen McMillen, Vice-Provost Students, Toronto Metropolitan University, and Chair of the Ontario Committee on Student Affairs (OCSA), will join the meeting to share observations and reflections on strategies for mitigating anti-LGBTQ2S+ movements and navigating diversity with a view to making university campuses safer for all students.

*Comments:* Dr. McMillen designed a program called Silent Legacy. The focus was on the importance of the visibility of happy, healthy leaders who are LGBTQ2S+ and to have visible support for students. They emphasized the importance of always using “they” for pronouns, under all circumstances, even when the gender is known (e.g., convocation). Language is important and we need to be careful not to make assumptions. Support for LGBTQ2S+ students needs to be visible AND equitable to other equity-seeking groups. They discussed what “allyship” is and what it means to “show up.” Allyship and showing up means speaking up when any form of discrimination is apparent – whether it is subtle or overt. Universities need to take the lead on being allies and in showing up for those who are seeking equity and fighting for equal rights. Universities need to conduct research on these difficult social issues and publicize findings. People are scared right now. With the so-called parental rights groups, LGBTQ2S+ students, staff and faculty members are facing threats that many thought had been dealt with already.

Q &A: What can/should be done?

- Universities can ensure that preferred names can be changed in the student information system without legal name changes. The legal process is fraught and complicated.
- Do not devolve into “oppression Olympics.” We need to address all the issues of racism, poverty, Indigenous reconciliation, etc. The “slippery slope” argument is often used, especially around PRIDE issues, but there is room for all of these things to be addressed.
- Was there an institutional statement regarding parental rights issues at all universities? Not having one leads to erasing LGBTQ+ identity. York University put out a lovely message about it.
- Should universities stop collecting gender information?
- Underpinning this issue is heterosexism, homophobia, transphobia, etc.
- Free speech policies are being tested because of statements on the Middle East right now. What do free speech and hate speech mean? It is important to “Name it, Claim it, Stop it.”
- There has been an emboldening of the vocal minority because of the Trump years. The vocal majority needs to set better standards because the vocal minority is taking up the airtime.
- Trans students need more support: how can we make spaces safer and make sure we are honoring and celebrating, rather than being an afterthought. Our campuses are better because we have trans members.
  - At the Medical and mental health centres, make sure docs and nurses are trained in Trans-positive care.
  - Use an intentional approach in hiring and a community well-being approach. If led by HR and if students know that staff and faculty ensure trans-positive care, life will be better for all students.
  - Residences based on gender and having gender neutral assignments will be helpful.
- Actions need to be both symbolic and meaningful. It is about being seen and valued.
- What does academic inclusion look like? How do we speak about inclusive classrooms? Can we get away from individual policies on each thing? How do we pull a thread when talking about baseline expectations around the treatment of others?
- Let students provide gender identity or not, and then use that data to evaluate if programs and services are appropriate (TMU has a sophisticated management system that allows for this).

#### Debrief

- Because we are entrenched in rules, it takes us months to respond to things.
- Challenge of dealing with members of other equity-seeking groups who are not comfortable with LGBTQ2S+ people is a problem, but it is “cowardly” to allow some to “reject LGBTQ2S+ people” because there is nothing in any religious texts that says you cannot be kind to someone who is LGBTQ2S+.
- Book recommendation: *Hijab Butch Blues*.
- Small signs of allyship through visible representations and signs on doors and laptops are important in creating a more welcoming environment.

#### Morning meeting, October 17, 2023

##### 1. Preparing for the Council meeting

Academic Colleagues make a presentation to the Executive Heads about the topic discussed during the evening meeting. The first task of the day is to prepare the presentation and plan for discussions about the topic. The key point is that campuses have grown and changed with increasing diversity

among all members of the community and there is greater recognition of the intersectionality of our community members. We've been talking about how to make a safe university for LGBTQ2S+ members of the university, especially since the events at the University of Waterloo and the protests under the umbrella of parental rights. (More notes on this presentation are in the report about Council meeting at the end of this document.)

## **2. 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. There was an overall sense that things are not good in the university sector, with lots of cutbacks, hiring freezes, etc., at different universities. There was a concern about new administrative positions with challenging portfolios who are appointed without tenure and therefore may not have the "teeth" to make significant changes.

## **3. Updates and Other Business**

The remainder of the meeting was taken up with committee reports and a discussion of future topics.

## **316th Meeting of Council**

Tuesday, October 17, 2023

### **1. Welcome from the Chair**

### **2. Discussion item: Mitigating Anti-LGBTQ2S+ Movements and Promoting Safe Spaces on Campus**

*Introduction* (Alyson King, Ontario Tech): "Campuses have grown and changed with increasing diversity among all members of the community. There is greater recognition of the intersectionality of our community members. We've been talking about how to make a safe university, especially since the events at the University of Waterloo and the protests under the umbrella of parental rights. We had a guest last night who talked about Mitigating Anti-LGBTQ2S+ Movements and Navigating Diversity to Make Campuses Safer for All Students. It has become increasingly unsafe on campuses and in the surrounding community for students, faculty and staff, some of whom are afraid to leave their dorms or to travel campus. While some classrooms may be safe spaces, not all spaces on campus are. What we are doing right now is not making the university safer for all students."

*Laws and codes of conduct* (Jen McArthur, TMU): Universities have to abide by the laws in place and they have their own academic and non-academic codes of conduct. It is important to revisit them each year to make sure they are relevant. While dissenting opinions are allowed, the right to free speech stops when you harm others. Universities need to figure out how to navigate these issues and set minimum standards. Academic freedom does not mean we can harm students.

*Protests regarding LGBTQ2S+ language in the schools* (Karleen Pendleton Jimenez, Trent University): Karleen described her experience attending a counter-protest to the "Parental Rights" protest outside the Durham District School Board. Counter-protesters were outnumbered about 300-50. The people attending were mixed and the polarizing rhetoric was not as apparent as language about loving their children. In fact, both sides used the language of loving their children. Within the LGBTQ2S+ community, there is a sense of new levels of risk, disempowerment, threat and danger. Only a few universities put

out statements supporting LGBTQ2S+ rights. Much of this issue is posed as a battle over curriculum. At the university, we need to promote and defend programs that teach about human rights in the workplace, in schools and more broadly. We need to make space for conversations, nuanced communications, and provide support for Faculty to manage discussions in the classroom on these issues.

Conversation: Executive Heads (e.g., university Presidents) tended to comment about the value of institutional statements, but also the challenge of being seen to be “taking sides.” Colleagues reiterated the importance of affirmation and recognition for validation of groups who are equity-seeking. While policies exist, they also tend to just sit on the shelf. Training of faculty, staff and students is needed to move beyond the policies.

Challenges included:

- Are we putting people at risk by taking a more aggressive stance?
- Is it possible to have civil discourse rather than courses, training, polices, etc.?
- Government requires universities to stay neutral
- For some who came out in the 1980s, things are vastly different now than they were despite the somber situation. It may be more important to worry less about the rallies and more about the “lone wolf”
- Students say that visibility is important – it makes a huge difference to students who feel that their existence is validated, so organizing and standing up for students is important
- We are living in a culture where we are being actively polarized (e.g., through algorithms). What can we do to rebuild society?
- Hearing a lot about people from all sectors not feeling safe. For urban universities where there is also an anti-policing/security sentiment, how do we make sure people are safe and feel safe?
- Defund the police means finding the best people to deal with the issues; there are things we can do in the meantime to mitigate before escalation, before needing to call the police ... a step in the right direction
- Trans students die at much higher rates than others and they are physically attacked.
- How in touch with reality are we vs how we are perceived? Universities have historically been involved in social change, but going out of one’s bubble is not rewarded. Can we create brave spaces? Have students learned the skills to discuss difficult issues but still walk away from the person with a handshake?
- Little things can help to create safe space that allows for fuller participation and thriving. Across the curricula, we could have pedagogical practices to build the communication skills for the difficult conversations in respectful ways.

Regular Business and Reports

### **3. President’s Report (S. Orsini)**

- Update on the Blue-Ribbon Panel: There are no details yet, but the COU is continuing to advocate about Ontario universities’ value proposition. Ontario universities are the lowest funded across Canada.

### **4. Academic Colleagues’ Report**

- Discussions have occurred about student mental health, the impact of covid and the well-being of international students.