

# ACADEMIC COUNCIL REPORT

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**SESSION:**

**Public**   
**Non-Public**

**ACTION REQUESTED:**

**Decision**   
**Discussion/Direction**   
**Information**

**TO:** Academic Council

**DATE:** February 27, 2024

**PRESENTED BY:** Dr. Mary Bluechardt, Deputy Provost

**SUBJECT:** Student Success Initiatives and Supports

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**BACKGROUND/CONTEXT & RATIONALE:**

The purpose of this briefing note is to provide Academic Council with a brief overview of the multiple units and the supports and services they provide in our efforts to promote student success at Ontario Tech.

Importantly, once we admit a student into an academic program, we have an ethical obligation to support them along the course of their academic journey. We must remind ourselves of this obligation and routinely challenge ourselves to adapt as needed to find new ways to help them succeed. For example, the barriers to success (e.g., cost, mental health needs) are far greater today than they were in the past. Moreover, some of the unique demographics of Ontario Tech's student population (e.g., high proportion of first generation students, commuters) have to be taken into account when defining our strategies.

There are multiple units on campus which contribute to the sense of community and provide supports for our students. These are situated in various offices across campus including the Office of the Registrar (e.g., Student Awards and Financial Aid, International Office, English Language Centre), Office of the Deputy Provost (e.g., Student Accessibility Services, Student Learning Centre, Test Centre, Student Mental Health Services, Career Services, Academic Advising, Teaching and Learning Centre, etc.), School of Graduate and Post-doctoral Studies, and the Office of Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging.

The purpose of this briefing note is to provide you with an overview of some of our current initiatives and activities, to identify our current strategies in this area, and to prompt further discussion on what additional strategies we may want to consider and/or pursue going forward.

**MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS**

Ontario Tech's Student Mental Health Services team offers a robust set of mental health supports which is supported by a Stepped Care model. This model was introduced to reduce wait times for service, and to increase the likelihood that students receive a service that matches their needs.

In brief, the Stepped Care model uses a triage approach. It recognizes that not all students who request mental health services require counselling support. This model offers a range of supports, including self-help, peer support, and group workshops, as well as short-term counselling and therapy services and referrals to mental health practitioners in the community.

### **STUDENT-CENTRIC ACADEMIC ADVISING**

In March, 2021 the university implemented a new approach to undergraduate student advising, moving from services that were managed on a Faculty-by-Faculty basis to a centrally-led overseen by a Director of Advising and three dedicated Managers of Advising. This has created a student-centric approach to academic advising, as well as a more consistent and accessible service model. For example:

- In response to a December, 2023 term-ending student satisfaction survey (n~2,000 respondents), 96.5% indicated that they would recommend our academic advising services to a classmate or friend. Forty-two percent indicated a preference for in-person meetings with their Advisors. This preference has been on the increase since the end of the pandemic and represents a considerable change from last year when about 73% of students indicated a preference for email contact with their Advisors.
- Academic Advising services are available from 8:30 am-9:00 pm, Monday to Friday, in a variety of in-person and virtual formats.
- Over the last year, Academic Advising has continued to proactively roll out new initiatives and programs. In 2023, they launched an Academic Advising podcast and invited several student support specialists from across campus to participate.
- An application to the Telus Innovation Fund was recently secured for the purposes of purchasing an early alert system to identify at risk students. The goal is to purchase and have the system in place for piloting in 2024.

### **STUDENT RETENTION INITIATIVES**

In the Spring of 2021, the Office of the Provost reconstituted the Student Success Committee and created a new cross campus Student Orientation Planning Committee. These Committees are focused on a number of “sticky campus” initiatives (e.g., dedicated Orientation programming for new incoming undergraduate students, monitoring student performance throughout the student life cycle).

Emerging from the pandemic in September, 2023, our new to Ontario Tech Orientation sessions in early September were expanded to include more in-person events at both our north and downtown locations. Importantly, the planning and execution of these events has expanded to include participation from multiple units (i.e., Academic Advising, Student Life, OTSU, etc.) and with support from peer-students, staff and faculty members, and the Deans.

Data from the Orientation events reveal that over 1,400 orientation kits were handed out and it is estimated that approximately 1,800 were present for the opening welcome events in the CRWC. These numbers represent a considerable increase over in-person attendance compared to prior years, and in comparison to attendance rates for Orientation events during the pandemic.

## **PROGRAMMING FOR AT RISK STUDENTS**

Enrolment into the Learner Engagement Academic Program (LEAP) is offered to students who, at the end of an academic term, are destined for suspension from their degree program due to poor academic performance (i.e., GPA less than 2.0). Students who enroll sign a learning contract which stipulates that they may proceed with a reduced workload in their current academic program while concurrently attending all of the LEAP program's weekly information and coaching sessions. They must also complete all required assignments. Failure to adhere to these conditions results in removal from the LEAP program and the re-imposition of their probation or suspension status.

In-class sessions focus on topics such as effective learning habits, goal setting, personal accountability, short-term planning strategies, time management, and other core skills to support individual success.

Since the program began in the Fall, 2020 term, a total of 535 undergraduate students from all six cognate Faculties have enrolled in the program. As of December, 2023 the following outcomes have been observed:

- In terms of academic standing, 64.3% of all students enrolled in LEAP to date are either in clear standing (n=212) or on probation (n=132). In clear standing includes those who have graduated (n=16).
- 77.6% of all students enrolled in LEAP to date are still actively pursuing a credential (n=399) or have graduated (n=16) from the university.
- Of the 535 students who have enrolled in the program over time, 61 have been dismissed outright from the university. This represents an attrition rate of about 11% which is just slightly higher than the 10% benchmark typical of natural attrition from most academic programs.

## **STUDENT FINANCIAL AID<sup>1</sup>**

In 2022-2023, the Student Awards and Financial Aid Office processed and issued 1,633 Awards and Scholarships totaling \$2,535,000 to our students as follows:

- \$187,000 (n=20) in Admissions Scholarships
- \$1,142,000 (n=703) First Year Entrance Scholarships
- \$999,000 (n=848) In-Course Scholarships
- \$206,500 (n=62) Athletic Scholarships

Ontario Tech students (N=7,427) also readily access OSAP funding at both the undergraduate (n=7,246) and graduate (n=181) levels. In total, \$56,455,838 in funding was issued in the form of loans (i.e., \$21,826,451 or 39%) or grants (i.e., \$34,629,387 or 61%).

## **SUMMARY**

To understand the effectiveness of our efforts, a commitment to routine program evaluation is a

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<sup>1</sup> These numbers are for the 2022-2023 academic year. This summary does not include the financial supports provided to graduate students via guaranteed funding packages, supervisor and Dean top-up funding, the Graduate International Tuition Scholarships (GITS), or other internal and external scholarship programs.

must. We are also committed to continuous improvement in all that we do including challenging ourselves to think about what other existing resources might be leveraged or adapted to support our students.