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April 2010

Doing More with Less: Investing in the Quality of Higher Education

OUSA's Submission
to the Progressive Conservative
Party of Ontario

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance



Ontario must have the best and brightest workforce, not simply hand out the most credentials.



INTRODUCTION

In announcing the \$6.2 billion Reaching Higher plan, the McGuinty government declared that it would improve the overall quality of the post-secondary education system in the province of Ontario. Five years later, promised improvements in access have materialized, but unexpected enrollment increases have effectively swallowed up any additional funding for quality improvements.

Students believe that a renewed emphasis on quality and student success is necessary for Ontario's future economic prosperity. It is undeniable that participation rates have climbed steadily toward 70%, the percentage of new jobs expected to require a post-secondary credential in the coming decade. That said, countries around the world are catching up, especially in university enrollment, and Ontario cannot compete with the world based solely on volume of graduates. With universities in India and China turning out hundreds of thousands of graduates, Ontario must have the best and brightest workforce, not simply hand out the most credentials.

It is with this in mind that the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance submits the following plan for improving the quality of education at Ontario's colleges and universities. Considering Ontario's fiscal situation, it is important to stress that this plan is designed to achieve the most progress at the lowest cost. Discussions around quality are too often reduced to questions of deferred maintenance costs and student-faculty ratios. While these are both important factors, students believe that a more nuanced approach is needed. For instance, why spend billions on hiring thousands of new professors when there is much we can do to improve the teaching ability of our current professors – and at a fraction of the cost?

A 5-POINT PLAN TO IMPROVE QUALITY

“A priority for enhanced funding needs to be enhancing the student experience. In 2006, Ontario's universities participated in the national survey of student engagement (NSSE), a US-based survey that measures students' experiences in their universities. The results indicate that Ontario universities compare favourably with their US peers in providing a solid academic challenge to their students. But in other areas – enriching educational experiences, active and collaborative learning, and student-faculty interactions – our students are less positive about their experiences. Typically, our universities are in the bottom third of ratings in these factors.”

– Taskforce on Competitiveness, Productivity and Economic Progress, 2008

1. Target new funds to support and expand Centres for Teaching and Learning at Ontario colleges and universities

Neither teaching nor learning are static processes and should not be treated as such. At present, most campuses have the equivalent of a Centre for Teaching and Learning to encourage better teaching practices but they are not mandatory and often it is teachers who need help most who get it the least. Individual institutions have made commendable efforts to improve the support offered to instructors; however real progress will only be made when the province recognizes the need to improve teaching and responds with the first step of a significant investment in these support centres.

How much funding is needed to give these Centres the resources they need to create change

is uncertain. OUSA suggests that an average increase in funding of 500,000 at each university, a total investment of \$11 million a year, would empower these Centres to do what is necessary to change the culture around teaching and learning on their campuses. Moreover, this funding would send a signal to the universities that the government is serious about improving the quality of teaching and learning on our campuses.

2. Require new instructors to complete a training module in teaching, learning and assessment

Peer jurisdictions increasingly consider training teachers as an essential part of ensuring a high quality post- secondary sector. “More than 60 UK universities now sponsor either voluntary or mandatory teaching accreditation programs for faculty members”.¹ In Canada, most universities are “less active than many of those in the United States in implementing teaching improvement and evaluation programmes.”²

One of the systemic problems with teaching at Ontario Universities is the fact that professors are not required to complete any formal training in teaching. While many schools have opportunities for professional development, these are not mandatory. This is a serious concern for the students of Ontario, considering the impact a skilled teacher can have on student success.

In order to teach in elementary or secondary school in Ontario, teachers must have received extensive education and training. Prospective instructors must have attended teachers’ college, and through it, survived some of the most competitive entrance requirements in Ontario. Governments in the past have gone so far as to mandate that teachers must be tested on an ongoing basis to ensure that they still meet certain standards and requirements.

Why do we continue to allow instructors with absolutely no teaching experience into our university classrooms? Surely our high school graduates are not so advanced that they no longer need to be taught by someone with a teaching credential. Organized instruction in teaching for new college instructors has existed for some time and we should expect the same from our universities.

OUSA proposes that each university and college be required by the government to develop and provide a module of pedagogical training to all new instructors. The equivalent of each institution’s Centre for Teaching and Learning would develop their own curriculum and would provide the instruction on campus through existing infrastructure; the government would only need to specify the number of hour of instruction – say 40 hours – and provide some funding to expand the resources of these Centres enough that they could carry out this objective.

OUSA believes an average of \$300,000 per year would be required at each university to hire educational developers and to operate training programs. At a total cost of less than \$7 million, such a program would have a profound impact on the next generation of university instructors.

3. Require all graduate and PhD students to be given formal instruction in teaching, learning and assessment

Again, the benefits of providing this training to graduate and PhD students is clear. As the next generation of professors and the current generation of teaching assistants, these student can and will continue to have a profound impact on the learning experience of students for decades to come. Even for those PhD students not seeking teaching positions, the ability to communicate information effectively is critical to future employment.

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OUSA envisions this instruction as a small unit that would be incorporated into the curriculum separately from the main subject of study. Just as engineering students must take a short unit on ethics, graduate and PhD students would be required to take a short unit on teaching, learning and assessment. An incentive-based funding approach should be used to entice universities to include a unit on teaching and learning in their curriculum. Again, the equivalent of each institution's Centre for Teaching and Learning would assist in the development and implementation of the curriculum, including providing the necessary instruction through the experts and infrastructure available to these Centres.

Again, OUSA believes an average of \$300,000 per year would be required at each university to hire educational developers and to operate training programs, for a total cost of \$7 million.

4. Set a province-wide target for the percentage of college and university courses employing forms of active learning.

For over 40 years we have known that the traditional lecture method of teaching is not very conducive to learning in comparison to active learning strategies such as service-learning, collaborative-learning, inquiry-based learning and problem-based learning.³ Student interaction with peers has been shown to positively influence overall academic development, knowledge acquisition, analytical and problems solving skills, as well as overall student self esteem.⁴ Additionally, increased opportunities for peer interaction within the classroom bring students into contact with students from diverse backgrounds, which have also been positively correlated with desirable post-secondary outcomes.⁵

A pervasive myth is that active learning can only be employed in small classes and therefore thousands of new teachers would be required. In fact, a great deal of progress has been made in recent years on strategies for active learning in even the largest classrooms.

Targeted government support for the implementation of new and better teaching methods would finally signal that the old way of teaching is no longer good enough for the 21st century economy. More importantly, thousands of students would receive a better education than they do now.

Some funding would be required to assist institutions in this endeavour, but much of the answer is simply to have the government demonstrate leadership on this issue and demand change from our institutions. Once administrations understand that this is a priority, they will find the means to make change.

5. Fund chairs in teaching, similar to the provincially-funded research chairs already in existence.

In 2005 the Ontario government pledged \$25 million to create research chairs at universities across the province. These prestigious appointments are given to researchers who are “acknowledged by peers as a world leader in the field.”

Ontario's faculty are also developing leading edge curriculum and pedagogy that will have an immeasurable positive impact on the next generation of students. These world and campus leaders are equally deserving of recognition and the government must support their activities if we are to restore the balance between teaching and research.

The Ontario Research Chair program provides \$150,000 per faculty member. At this unit cost, one hundred teaching chairs could be established for only \$15 million.

1. Gail Riddell, Teaching and Academic Growth Newsletter 12, no.2 (BC: UBC, 1998).
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3. Christensen Hughes, J. and J. Mighty, eds. 2010 Taking Stock: Research on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Montreal and Kingston: Queen's Policy Studies Series, McGill-Queen's University Press.
4. Kuh, George D., Jillian Kinzie Jennifer A. Buckley, Brian K. Bridges and John C. Hayek, "Piecing Together the Student Success Puzzle: Research, Propositions and Recommendations", ASHE Higher Education Report, Volume 32, Number 5, (2007). Page 58
5. *ibid*, 59
6. <http://orc.cou.on.ca/>

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About OUSA:

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) is a coalition of elected university student councils from across Ontario. They have come together to protect the interests of Ontario's full- and part-time undergraduate students by providing research and ideas to governments on how to improve the affordability, accessibility, accountability, and quality of post-secondary education in the province. These elected student representatives work together to set OUSA's policies and direction. The organization approaches its goal of advancing the needs of undergraduate students through three means: direct lobbying, issue awareness campaigns and research & policy development. OUSA represents the interests of over 140,000 professional and undergraduate, full and part-time university students across the province.

OUS A

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