THE FUTURE OF STUDENT-LED ADVOCACY

ES
EDUCATED SOLUTIONS

VOL. 13

Exploring the importance of student-led advocacy and the challenges it faces moving forward

FOREWORD

by David Piccini, MPP and Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities

INCLUDING

"Partnering for a Better Future for Student Mental Health"

"How Student-Led Advocacy Promotes Work-Integrated Learning"

"Student Associations and Preparing Young People for Democracy"

AN ONTARIO UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT ALLIANCE PUBLICATION

OUSA
Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

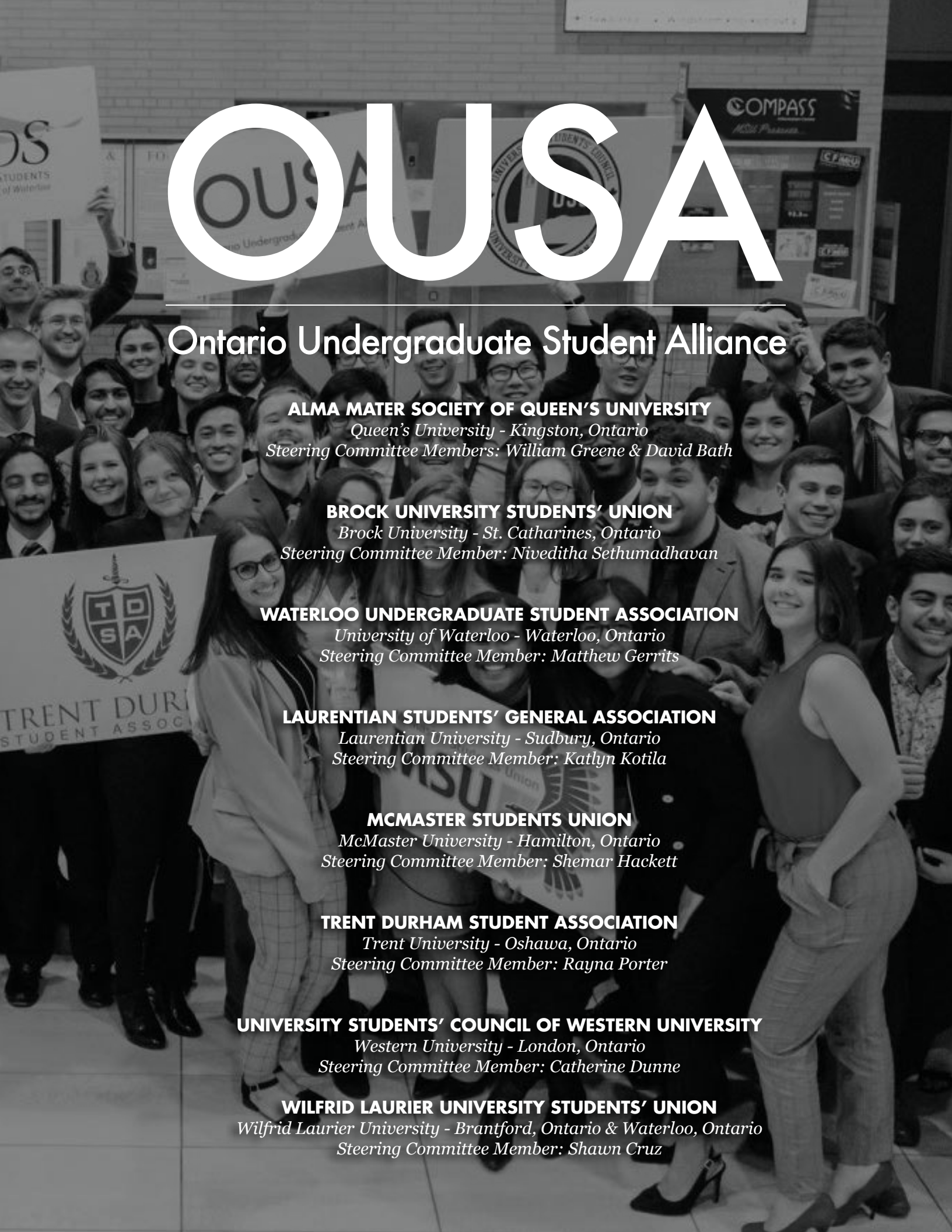

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ES EDUCATED SOLUTIONS

EDITOR: *Ryan Tishcoff*
DESIGNER: *Crystal Mak and Linda Cabral*
OUSA PRESIDENT: *Catherine Dunne*
PUBLISHER: *Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance*

ONTARIO UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT ALLIANCE
26 Soho St, Suite 345
Toronto, M5T 1Z7
phone: *416.341.9948*
w: *ousa.ca* ***e:*** *info@ousa.ca*
twitter: *@ousa*

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From the Editor

RYAN **TISHCOFF**
Research & Policy Analyst

Welcome to Volume 13 of *Educated Solutions*! This year's issue looks at student-led advocacy – why it's important, the challenges it faces, and how to support it. We're proud to feature voices from several of Ontario's leading post-secondary stakeholders as well as OUSA alumni and Home Office staff.

Ontario has a rich history of student-led advocacy. On campus and in the community, student associations and their leaders have promoted solutions to student issues like mental health, work-integrated learning, and financial aid. Their efforts have influenced government policy and led to improvements to student life, including expanded campus mental health services, more co-op opportunities, and, earlier in the decade, increased OSAP grants offered to students from low-income families.

But the future of this advocacy work is in doubt. Starting in Fall 2019, the Student Choice Initiative (SCI) will allow post-secondary students to opt out of the fees that fund student associations. This means Ontario's student leaders may be forced to drastically cut back their advocacy efforts (not to mention the campus services they offer students, like clubs and orientation weeks). That's why we chose this topic: to shed light on why, now more than ever, student associations and student-led advocacy are worth supporting.

A sincere thank you to our authors for taking the time to contribute. Your work and continued partnership is invaluable in OUSA's advocacy toward accessible, affordable, accountable, and high-quality post-secondary education in Ontario.

From the President

CATHERINE **DUNNE**
President 2019-2020

For most student advocates, why we do what we do is obvious. We represent the voices of students. In and of itself, that is meaningful work. However, student associations now need to re-evaluate their sustainability, their worth, and how to prove that value to students. To honor this, this edition of *Educated Solution*s unpacks why student associations came to be in the first place, what value they offer, and what lies in store for them.

Upon reading the thoughtful submissions of the authors, it is abundantly clear that the advocacy student associations conduct not only makes post-secondary education more affordable, accessible, accountable, and high quality, it also strengthens our democratic institutions as a whole. At the beginning of my undergraduate degree at Western University, despite the abundance of ongoing work by student leaders, I could not name one advocacy file they were working on. To me, advocacy was little more than a buzzword. What did matter was that I knew student leaders existed on my campus and that they would listen to the challenges I faced as a student. As the authors in this edition describe, student advocacy is as much about wins as it is the democratic process – listening to students on the ground, amplifying their voices, and working with partners at a grassroots level, in the sector, and in government to effect change. Student associations have long been vehicles for stronger civic engagement, and this should not be forgotten.

As we continue to navigate uncertain waters, I encourage my fellow student leaders across Ontario and across the country to remember our foundations of democracy, representation, and holding universities and all levels of government accountable. Together we can ensure a future where post-secondary education is increasingly affordable, accessible, accountable, and of a higher quality.

FOREWORD

WRITTEN BY DAVID PICCINI, MEMBER OF PROVINCIAL PARLIAMENT AND PARLIAMENTARY ASSISTANT TO THE MINISTER OF TRAINING, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

In my role as Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Training, Colleges, and Universities, I get to see student advocacy first hand at post-secondary institutions across the Province and have enjoyed my relationship with OUSA over the past year.

As a young MPP, I got involved in politics to ensure our next generation have more opportunities than the last and can achieve their full potential.

The current system is not working for Ontario's students or the economy. Students know that many young people are graduating with great degrees but are un-employed or under-employed. Meanwhile, businesses cannot find young people with the skills they need.

In the year ahead, I look forward to working with our institutions to implement changes in our post-secondary education sector that are modern, forward thinking, and will lead to good jobs. That is why we are shifting funding for universities and colleges to be more dependent on student and economic outcomes that will ensure your long-term success.

These changes will lead to a thriving system that is better aligned with industry and offers experiential learning opportunities that will ultimately prepare students for the jobs of tomorrow. I look forward to continuing to work with students to create prosperous opportunities for our next generation and for the province of Ontario.

David Piccini is the Member of Provincial Parliament for Northumberland-Peterborough South. He currently serves as the Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities and is a member of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs.

David began his career with the Federal Public service, first as an International Market Analyst at Agriculture Canada, then as a Policy Advisor at Service Canada. Following his time in the public service, David then took a position in the Office of the Minister of International Trade, working with the Honourable Ed Fast, where he contributed to key trade files, including the Canada-Europe Free Trade Agreement.

In 2015, David was invited to join the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada where he provided strategic advice on policy, business and operational issues for the Royal College's international activities. He oversaw and supported the development and implementation of critical projects around the globe.

While at the Royal College, David helped establish the Canadian International Health Education Association (CIHEA), a nationally incorporated non-profit trade association that brings together universities, colleges, health science centres and businesses across Canada involved in health care professions, training and health initiatives. Notably, David successfully led one of Canada's largest healthcare trade missions to the Gulf region in early 2018.

Canada's Student-Led Advocacy Tradition: *A Look Back*

SOPHIE HELPARD

Reductions in student tuition costs. Landmark legislative victories. Public attention to student mental health and sexual violence.

Student advocacy in Canada – and particularly in Ontario – has made a tangible difference in the lives of millions of university students. While the history of student movements in Canada is under-documented, and frankly less juicy than some of our neighbors, it includes insightful and important lessons for the student advocates of today.

Student advocacy through elected student associations and grassroots mobilization has a long history on Canadian campuses and continues to be a driving force for change with university administrations, with municipal, provincial, and federal governments, and amongst public opinion leaders in the media and policy sectors.

In my fourth year of a political science major at Western University, I wrote a paper that would land me my highest grade of my undergraduate studies. I was ten months into my term as President of the University Students' Council (USC), and I was taking a "Politics of Quebec" course. Through some negotiating with my professor, who knew the paper's due date aligned with a week I would be advocating for students on Parliament Hill, he agreed that the history of the student movement in Quebec would qualify as a relevant topic. The history of the student movement in Canada went from something I had a passing interest in to something I was researching and, after my trip to Parliament Hill, something I was contributing to.

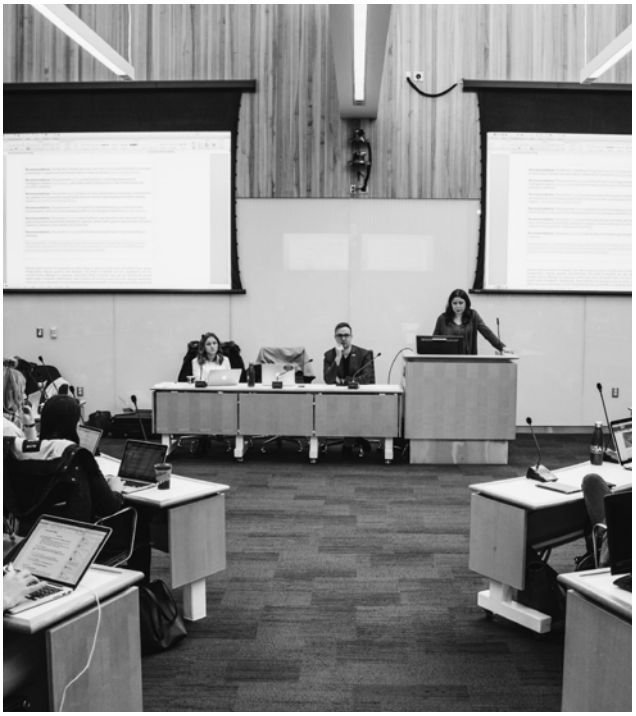
After my term as USC President I had the privilege of working with national and provincial student advocacy organizations to further the student movement across Canada and ensure that every post-secondary student I represented had a voice.

Today, student associations in Canada play many roles on campus. They host events and orientation programs. They offer services to improve student life, supplementing what universities can provide. They employ students and create opportunities for growth, engagement, and development, and even run businesses like cafes, bars, and stores. Yet, despite these competing priorities, advocating to University administration and government remains the most important function of student associations. Advocacy is what student associations were formed to do.

The student government concept was borne out of the historic involvement students had in university decisions. However, over time, students continued to fill important roles in universities, including internal affairs of the student community and representing students, not only in curriculum and university policy, but in the wider community as well. In the mid-1900s, student associations began incorporating as non-profit corporations and levying fees on their members to expand operations and ensure stability. Today, incorporated student associations are even able to hire extensive professional staff to support their efforts. Student associations now fill vital roles on campuses, and they do something that only students can – represent their peers. That representation is why students worked to find a voice within the university system, why they organized and incorporated to solidify that voice, and why hundreds of Canadian students put their name on a ballot every year.

Elected student governments have legitimate roles through which they advocate to university administration, including designated seats on senates, boards, and planning committees. This means that students are consulted on everything from the orientation week schedule, to academic program renewal, to the Strategic Plan of the university. Yet, as mentioned, students also influence government policy decisions.

For hundreds of years, "town and gown" relations have been important to universities around the world. In Canada, many of our oldest institutions have had our largest cities grow around them in the last century. This has led to a need for structured relationships between universities, municipal governments, and, more recently, students. The influence and impact of provincial and federal governments has also increased substantially as funding to institutions and students has increased. Canadian jurisdictions consider universities public institutions and support them accordingly (for the most part).



There are multiple points in history that can help us understand the evolution of the Canadian student movement across the country. For most of the 1900's, the student movement in Canada was driven by the National Federation of Canadian University Students. In 1927, students from the majority of Canadian universities participated in a conference to organize a national coalition to unite Canadian university students in one body, chiefly for the purpose of bringing about greater cooperation and harmony among students throughout the Dominion. This was the beginning of efforts to unite students across the country and would eventually lead to multiple organizations fighting for student-specific social justice causes.

The decades that followed saw remarkable change at Canadian universities that entrenched the need for a prominent student perspective. Today, student leaders strive to be united on issues. And while they may not achieve a perfect outcome, students who join forces can strengthen the perspective they are advocating for – leading to a better result from governments.

The student association landscape in Canada that we now know and love was solidified in the 1990s. This decade saw the founding of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) and almost all of the provincial advocacy groups that are now at the forefront of policy change. For example, the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) was formed in 1992 as an informal alliance of elected student associations that wanted to do student advocacy differently. On February 27, 1995, the member schools officially incorporated after voting to make this informal alliance a permanent student organization – one whose impact on Ontario post-secondary education has since become immeasurable.

The student movement across Canada has seen great change and adaptation over the years and has remained committed to building and re-building as education in the country is redefined. While the students who formed the National Federation of Canadian University Students in 1927 may not have realized the impact that student organizations would have on highly sophisticated government, the fight has remained largely the same. As this issue of *Educated Solutions* identifies, the floor beneath student associations' feet has moved once again with changes to student association autonomy in Ontario. Student associations, and the provincial and federal advocacy organizations they are a part of, will face unprecedented challenges with a change in the student fees they use to fund operations. Decades of infrastructure built (and rebuilt) to serve students may not look the same in the coming decades. What I know to be true is that student associations are resilient, advocates are adaptable, and the student movement in Canada has a rich history full of lessons and examples to support its future.

Though I wasn't at McGill in 1927 to witness the formation of the National Federation of Canadian University Students, nor had I even been born in 1994 when student leaders met at the "Winds of Change" conference to launch a new chapter in Canadian student advocacy, some things haven't changed. Student organizing is still responsive and iterative. It thinks proactively about what's important to students, and it finds the best vehicle to respond to changing political climates. Student organizing is still all about students. It's still about elected student leaders making strategic decisions about the best way to advocate for their peers. And, importantly, grassroots mobilization is still taking place in student-run pubs on campus. The folklore of student advocacy in Canada is rich, and I know from personal experience how dedicated its leaders throughout history have been.

Sophie Helpard is a former Executive Director of OUSA.

Student Advocacy in Ontario Today

ABDULLAH MUSHTAQ

Advocacy in Ontario is changing. After almost 15 years of Liberal governments, the people of Ontario elected the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party in June of 2018, and by many accounts, it wasn't surprising that the scandal-laden Liberal government was replaced by the fiscally-conscious PC Party. But it led to questions for government stakeholders: Which MPPs would become Cabinet Minsters? Who would be appointed to the Premier's inner circle of advisors? How receptive would this new government be to requests for meetings? Would it listen to industry professionals and its constituents?

In the past, it seemed like a given that the previous Liberal government would increase funding for post-secondary education every year. This put students and the post-secondary sector in a position to expect, if not demand, more and more concessions from the government. This eventually led to a redesigned Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) that offered, among other things, a free-tuition program for students from low-income households.

But after the June 2018 election, advocacy organizations across the province were forced to consider the very real possibility that, not only might their sector no longer see funding increases, they could very well have their funds slashed. Advocates were forced to start thinking of creative ways to sell the value of their organization to a government focused, for the most part, on the proverbial "bottom line."

For young student leaders who knew nothing but a Liberal government, there was an adjustment period as they learned to communicate and work with a new government. Preparing workers for tomorrow requires an investment today, but agreeing on what that investment should look like continues to be a challenge.

Investing in students, funding institutions, and supporting faculty are key in preparing for tomorrow's economy. It's more important than ever that these stakeholders work together on issues affecting students across Ontario, like accessibility, sustainability, and accountability. These will only be solved when all partners can agree to a baseline of facts and then move forward toward solutions collectively.

And while there are many opportunities to collaborate within the sector, student advocates are also dealing with their own issues – namely, the Student Choice Initiative (SCI) and cuts to OSAP.

The SCI is an existential threat to student government. Ancillary fees that students were previously required to pay – fees that support student government – are now voluntary. At this point, it's not clear how many students will "opt out" of these fees, and so the exact effects of the SCI are not yet known.

Yet student governments play a crucial role on Ontario's campuses. As democratically elected representatives, they provide student-facing services that are imperative to a healthy campus environment.

Without them, services like on-campus food banks, breakfast programs, and food cupboards could be lost. Scholarships and bursaries could be cancelled. Fair and transparent academic appeals could be at risk, not to mention student employment opportunities, career support, and events like student orientation.

These services are important, and many students rely on them in their day-to-day activities. But student governments also serve a larger purpose: they advocate for the rights of students. Without student governments, there is no one to hold institutions accountable for decisions surrounding fee increases, programming, or strategic plans. Without student governments, there is no one to hold the government responsible for maintaining and improving the post-secondary sector as a whole.

Provincial and local advocacy efforts are essential in Ontario. From better bus routes to increases in OSAP, positive changes in the lives of students don't magically happen. They are the result of hard work and dedication from student leaders with the vision and desire to improve a system they only use for a short period of time. Their desire to change the system is not to benefit themselves but to make sure the next generation of students can attend and excel on post-secondary campuses in Ontario.

Student governments are now in a financial situation unlike anything they've ever seen. Whereas they used to have a guaranteed income stream through a mandatory ancillary fee, students being able to opt out of paying these fees puts critical services at risk. These services worked because all students paid their fair share, so when they needed to appeal a grade or grab a bagel and banana in the morning, they knew where to turn. Now, depending on the number of students who opt in to paying their student government ancillary fee, certain services may not be offered. And the decision to offer these services may not be made until September or later, creating more chaos and confusion.

Worrying about finances also takes student leaders away from other things they could be doing to help students. Instead of spending the past summer preparing and improving regular services, student leaders across Ontario reviewed budgets and began contemplating tough realities, deciding which important services might be cut because their ancillary fee was no longer considered essential. Despite this, student governments have always been resilient. The face of education in Ontario has constantly changed, and student leaders have always been right there to shepherd those changes along.

Additionally, in January, the provincial government announced changes to OSAP, and at the time, this was widely thought to be indicative of an incoming funding reduction for post-secondary students. This was confirmed when the 2019 Ontario Budget was revealed this past April. It wasn't until students began receiving their OSAP estimates in June that they reacted, voicing their displeasure online and initiating an organic form of advocacy using social media. This grassroots OSAP campaign is a sign of what can be done, but there is still work to do. When students band together and support each other, change is possible.

Students need to get more involved in current events and be aware of what is happening politically, whether on campus, provincially, or federally. Politics is about power, and the citizen's power is in their vote. This October, there is a federal election. Student governments need to take advantage of this opportunity to show that young people can mobilize in a real way, and that they are a bloc to be reckoned with. And if students in Ontario take advantage of this election and vote, it will show decision-makers across the province and country that students are not apathetic about their future – that they will fight for improvements in that make Ontario a fairer province.

For Ontario's colleges and universities to succeed, it's imperative that partners in the post-secondary sector – students, administration, faculty, government, and other stakeholders – continue to work together. With disruptions happening to our workforce more frequently than ever, a foundation of collaboration must be put in place where we think about how we train our labour force and whether it's modern and nimble enough to adapt to what may come. We must put aside our individual desires to collaborate and find solutions that position us to continue to develop and keep talent in Ontario.

Abdullah Mushtaq is the Director of Advocacy at the College Student Alliance (CSA).

Student Associations and Preparing Young People for Democracy

MATTHEW GERRITS

A couple of months ago, a curious infographic caught my eye. Reuters had done some in-depth data visualization of candidates in India's Lok Sabha elections and found that independent candidates were far younger than those promoted by the two largest national parties. I decided to dig a bit further. India Today found that though the average age of an Indian citizen was 29, and 10.9% of its population was between the age of 25 (the minimum age for candidacy) and 30, only 1.5% of MPs were between 25 and 30. Strikingly, there were over eight times as many MPs aged 66-70, despite the fact that only 2% of Indians fell in that age range. I haven't studied Indian politics, and I can't speak to what led to that outcome, but this problem is not unique to India. In Canada, the Samara Centre for Democracy found that while 22% of Canadians are aged 18-34, only 9% of our parliamentarians are under 35. Globally, the Inter-Parliamentary Union did a study and found that in 2018, 45 out of 150 countries had no representatives under 30 years of age in their lower chambers of legislature; this study included countries across the world in varying states of development. In 125 of 150 countries, political representation under 30 years was lower than 5%, and the highest, Norway, peaked at just over 13%.

Youth are underrepresented in elected politics – and that's a problem. When youth are underrepresented, so are their issues. And though young adults are diverse in their political views, there are common issues that invariably affect them more, whether it be charting the right course on long-term issues like the environment or debt, or issues that have a distinct importance in young people's lives like transit, the housing market, or mental health care at a time when mental illnesses are more likely to develop. Having fewer bona fide young voices in governments and legislatures means that politicians don't need to spend as much time on youth issues. After all, their potential opponents are rarely young adults who can rally a young adult vote or send a message on youth issues, nor are young people voting in numbers large enough to be considered a key part of electoral coalitions.

It's hard to pin down why young people aren't more involved. They often lack the confidence to scrutinize issues and platforms, and this may lead them to think that voting isn't important. The political system can also be unforgiving for young candidates with less experience, which discourages them from running. And yet Samara Canada finds that youth are more likely to attend political meetings, volunteer on campaigns, sign petitions, boycott, and discuss politics with others, among many other indicators of civic engagement. Students obviously care about political issues and creating change, and they're willing to take action. But the voting and candidacy issues remain. Discovering why is difficult, so instead, I'd like to point to student associations as a tool that has helped and can continue to help bridge the gap between youth and government.

First, student associations are dedicated to publicizing and pushing public officials on policy goals, especially those related to education. It's tough to find civil society and advocacy groups that are based around age – though the AARP in the United States is an example of a highly effective lobby organization for older citizens. But despite the fact that student associations aren't a comprehensive "youth lobby" by any stretch of the imagination, you'll find few other groups with as much youth representation among organizational leadership, policy development and focus, and advocacy efforts.

"YOUTH ARE **UNDERREPRESENTED** IN ELECTED POLITICS – AND THAT'S A PROBLEM. **WHEN YOUTH ARE UNDERRPERESENTED, SO ARE THEIR ISSUES**."

And while many student associations focus narrowly on education, others take broader stances on societal topics as well. On education, students often advocate unapologetically about the fact that education is a long-term investment in our society's future. This advocacy is vital to ensuring that youth and student concerns are accounted for in the policy and political process.

"A STUDENT ASSOCIATION CAN…BE THE FIRST PLACE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE GET TO RUN IN A REAL ELECTION FOR A PAID PROFESSIONAL POSITION REPRESENTING OTHERS"

Student associations also serve as stepping-off blocks for students to become more involved and more prepared to run for office. Advocating on student issues is certainly one way to gain political experience, but a student association can also be the first place that young people get to run in a real election for a paid professional position representing others. It introduces them to the political process as they make meaningful connections with other students and try to convince them of policy ideas and their character, and as they try to earn student votes for a position paid for by those students' fees. It's an opportunity for students, often no more than 20 years old, to serve as the heads of multi-million-dollar not-for-profits, to sit on corporate boards, to write policy, to direct and develop campaigns, to speak to media outlets, and to conduct research on the quality of life of students and student communities. These skills are all useful on any campaign trail, whether as a candidate or a staffer, and many of them are valuable when serving as an elected official. Not only that, but many students, through their student associations, sit on university committees that address complicated problems and have the opportunity to work in a multi-stakeholder collaborative environment.

These skills aren't reserved for the upper echelons of student association executive. Many student associations employ part-time employees who support advocacy work and get exposure to the research, policy, and lobbying environments. And many students have the opportunity to sit on the executive of clubs or advocate to the university on behalf of marginalized student groups. Many clubs – debate clubs, model governments, and partisan organizations, among others – contribute to the wealth of pre-government experience that students have access to through their student associations. Of the "McGill Four," four young undergraduate NDP MPs elected in 2011, three were involved in the leadership of the NDP political activism club in the Students' Society of McGill University (SSMU) club system, and the other was an SSMU employee. This experience might not always immediately qualify students to run for office, but at the absolute least it gives them the opportunity to learn if they like any of these activities and if they want to pursue them further after they leave the student association world.

So what's next? How can we build on the work student associations do? First, parties and party associations can do more to get to know student leaders, especially as those leaders transition out of their roles and might be trying to figure out their next career move after leaving student politics. A key example of this is current Ontario Minister of Education Stephen Lecce, former President of the Western University Student's Council (USC), who impressed Conservative staffers when lobbying in Ottawa and quickly joined Prime Minister Stephen Harper's team as Deputy Director of Communications by age 25. He later chose to run provincially and was elected as a Member of Provincial Parliament at age 31, later becoming a member of the Cabinet at age 32. Student associations often produce high-calibre individuals across different political ideologies, and parties should continue and increase their efforts to make those connections. It's also important that parties not simply have young people run for office in places the party is less likely to win; instead, they should recruit and embrace high-quality young candidates to run for nominations in their safer constituencies as well.

There are also roles for other boards and organizations – it's not just political parties that can benefit from recruiting student leaders. Many student leaders end up in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) soon after graduating. NGO support of student leader development, as well as active recruiting, can foster partnerships in the not-for-profit sector while helping student leaders develop so that they can contribute to society, either through those NGOs or in other opportunities such as running for office. Student associations themselves can also do more to help student leaders transition into the political sphere.

This includes identifying and promoting skills common to effective politics and strong student leadership, including public speaking, marketing and message-setting, interviewing, and techniques to engage with student constituents genuinely, efficiently, and widely. These skills can also help student leaders engage with policymakers as they advocate for student issues, and they can help down the road in a variety of opportunities, politics being only one.

There is also a role for government itself. The Student Choice Initiative may hurt the ability of students to advocate to their universities and government, since advocacy fees will no longer be mandatory. Student leaders' work at the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) and at their own member associations requires people, transportation, funding for research, and consultation. All of this falls under voluntary fees. Many advocacy victories have been achieved because of long-term advocacy efforts funded by students who paid it forward. It's a multi-year structure: current students benefit from the victories funded by those who paid fees before them; future students will benefit from the fees students pay now. But optional advocacy fees puts this cycle at risk. It could lead to students "free riding," ceasing to pay it forward, and hurting the students of tomorrow because – understandably – they want to save any amount of money they can in what is still a high-tuition environment, now with less financial aid. The student leader development, the clubs, and often the other opportunities mentioned here are not mandatory either. If we want to cultivate future student leaders – leaders who are often impossible to identify before they emerge – we don't want to have to turn them away from exploring whether they are interested in politics because they haven't paid a fee; but for many student associations, the reality is that these opportunities might not be able to continue if they don't turn non-paying students away or if not enough students support these key areas.

Finally, there is a role for the media, political parties, and individual politicians. Greater youth participation is incumbent on eliminating the unspoken stigmas young people face when running for office. It is unreasonable to expect a 29-year-old to bring the same experience as a 59-year-old. And while some scrutiny of qualifications is important, it's also important to contextualize the experience young people have, including what they might have achieved in a very short timeframe. Media should be careful when using language that suggests lack of experience. Politicians should also resist the urge to tear down young challengers simply because of their youth or because they haven't had as much time to gain the wealth of experiences some older political candidates may have had.

It's important that all of society play a role in making sure that government reflects the diversity of Canadian society. Young people have won many victories in representation over the years, with voting ages being lowered from 21 to 18, becoming an increasingly desired demographic to make up the electoral coalitions of all parties, and the increase of young voices on issues like the environment, long-term investments, and other policy affecting young people. But the barrier to representation in our houses of parliament remain. I hope to see student associations continue to fly the flag of representing young people, and hopefully their work can increasingly turn out the leaders and representatives of tomorrow. I hope, if student associations continue their great work, and if other partners work to promote young leadership, that we will see not only increased advocacy on student issues and more alumni doing great work in not-for-profits and other organizations, but that we will increasingly see the trust and the votes of citizens for younger candidates in their local communities, in their provinces, and across the country. There is an amazing opportunity to build tomorrow's leaders, and I hope that student associations will have the resources to continue and expand on developing them.

Matthew Gerrits is the Vice-President Finance and a Steering Committee member of OUSA. He is also the Vice-President Eduation of the Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association (WUSA).

OUSA IS A NON-PARTISAN ADVOCACY GROUP STRIVING FOR ACCESSIBLE, AFFORDABLE, ACCOUNTABLE, AND HIGH QUALITY POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IN ONTARIO.

26 Soho Street, Suite 345
Toronto, Ontario
M5T 1Z7

info@ousa.ca
ousa.ca

Grassroots Support: *Lessons for Student Organizing*


ALEXI WHITE AND SAM ANDREY

On a cold winter afternoon in 2013, the OUSA President and Home Office staff piled into a rental minivan and drove to the University of Windsor for a campus visit.

This was no ordinary visit. The University of Windsor Students' Alliance (UWSA) had initiated a referendum campaign to leave OUSA after more than a decade as the only school in Ontario with dual membership in both OUSA and the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS). OUSA's membership rules devolve control over the membership process to the local level, allowing individual student governments to join or leave the organization through a process of their choosing.

The centerpiece of the visit was to be a debate between OUSA and the CFS on the question of whether free tuition was possible or not. This was a trap set to influence the referendum; OUSA was supposed to argue that free tuition was not possible, leaving CFS to valiantly defend it.

The invitation presented a problem for the OUSA Steering Committee. Attending the debate meant walking into a hostile room, being painted as conservative, and lacking in idealism – but declining the invitation would be perceived as a retreat in the middle of a battle for one of our members.

This conundrum gave birth to a very OUSA plan. The Director of Research, not a student leader, would enter the debate with the position that free tuition was possible and a good thing, but also an incomplete solution without investments in student financial aid and early outreach to groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education. This would allow OUSA to pivot to recent lobbying successes in these areas and talk about the value students get from OUSA's advocacy work.

To bolster this argument, OUSA gathered OECD research on equality of access, university funding strategies, and the mix of repayable and non-repayable assistance in countries around the world. The plan was for OUSA to present a vision of idealism tempered by cold hard facts – a strategy suited to a Liberal government that was more interested in improving OSAP than lowering tuition. Students would surely see the value in this. Surely, they would vote to stay in OUSA.

Of course, that's not what happened.

When the minivan got to Windsor, the OUSA team found a campus that had been papered over with pamphlets and posters claiming that OUSA supported tuition fee increases. Every poster board, every cafeteria table, every washroom stall offered misinformation.

There was a small team of pro-OUSA campaigners, but they operated without assistance from OUSA and without a real budget (the same could not be said of the anti-OUSA team). Setting up a small "meet the students" booth, the Home Office team was greeted by hostile questions and many more hostile looks.

The debate turned quickly to a trial of OUSA's progressive bona-fides, presided over by the very organization that sought to oust OUSA from campus. The carefully curated OECD data ended up doing nothing for a room chock full of people who had already made up their minds. Those following the debate on social media saw a hashtag full of anonymous accounts endlessly mocking the OUSA performance.

OUSA lost the debate and the referendum. By a lot.

It was a strange feeling for the Home Office, alumni, and Steering Committee. Through adversity, we had clung to our core values of non-interference, evidence-based policy, and showcasing achievements of real, incremental change for students. We all thought this was the admirable choice – the only choice.

However, it was not a winning choice. Especially for a polarized political climate, where an untrue tweet is more likely to reach every student on campus than a policy paper. In the years since, as political polarization fueled by social media has proliferated, it has been hard not to think of that day as a teachable moment.

THE LESSON: IN THIS CLIMATE, GOOD LOBBYING - EVEN VERY SUCCESSFUL LOBBYING – WITHOUT GOOD GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING WILL NOT CARRY THE DAY. IT IS CRITICAL TO EFFECTIVELY CONNECT AND MOBILIZE STUDENTS TO ACTION AT GRASSROOTS LEVEL

The lesson: in this climate, good lobbying – even very successful lobbying – without good grassroots organizing will not carry the day. It is critical to effectively connect and mobilize students to action at a grassroots level.

This lesson will be especially important as the student movement deals with the Student Choice Initiative, a policy that will have severe consequences on campuses across Ontario, weakening student governments and damaging the fabric of campus life. Thousands of student clubs will lose some or all of their funding, campus journalism may be rendered unsustainable, and students who are already marginalized will suffer most if access to critical services is lost.

The government is aware of these implications and is proceeding with implementing the policy anyway. This could be for any number of reasons. They may be trying to appeal to students on affordability anxiety, value-for-money or consumer choice concerns, though the number of large fees that are exempted from the policy suggests otherwise. Perhaps they are concerned that some student governments may use their resources to organize against them in the face of significant cuts to student financial assistance. Or perhaps, as the Premier has indicated, the government wants to stop student governments from advocating what it sees as "crazy Marxist nonsense". Regardless, the goal of this policy is to pursue a political end more highly valued by this government than the support of student organizations.

No meeting, no policy paper, and no press release will change this basic dynamic. Moreover, no government wants to retreat on a policy once implemented. The only thing that will change things is a demonstration that students and their families have the ability to make an impact at the ballot box and on public sentiment as a whole.

OUSA has traditionally played a key role as a coalition builder within higher education, amplifying the student voice where it aligns with those of faculty and administrators. However, fearful of deeper cuts, the broader university community has so far not united against setbacks to campus life, even though a moribund student experience outside the classroom will inevitably have negative implications for everyone.

Reflecting on OUSA's history, culture, and instincts in this political climate, our best advice for student organizing moving forward would be to consider the following:

- **Spend more time connecting with students than politicians at Queen's Park:**
  The ability to organize and mobilize collective student efforts will be critical moving forward. This doesn't need to mean protests on the lawn of the Legislature, but those should not be ruled out. Politicians of all stripes are responsive to volumes of voters showing up at their office, sending emails, getting in the news and demanding action. Most will be more responsive to this than the most compelling evidence in the world.

  Don't believe us? Just ask climate scientists.

- **Keep messages clear and values-based:**
  Of course, mobilizing students is easier said than done. Organizing and collective action are motivated by feelings and values that individuals already hold deeply. Student organizations like OUSA and CASA that are typically more policy focused may want to consider more emotional, values-based language in their public products.

  This isn't to say that OUSA or CASA should abandon their focus on evidence-based policy. However, working towards language that creates a clear link between policy goals and students' sense of justice and fairness will be critical to the success of any grassroots organizing.

- **Don't be afraid to push back:** OUSA's network and reputation within government has been a classic strength of the organization and has enabled numerous real successes for students. However, when government pursues policy that poses an existential threat to your organization and to student government itself, it's time to re-evaluate the terms of those relationships.

  Does that mean OUSA and CASA should burn all bridges or stop building relationships within government? Of course not. It does mean, however, that the government should come to understand that ignoring student voices will have a cost. There is significant energy on campuses as hundreds of thousands of students realize that their financial aid has been cut–this is energy and therefore power that can be harnessed.

  In successive governments, doctors and teachers have classically been some of the most influential voices in decision-making, precisely because they have the ability to influence significant numbers of voters. It's worth remembering that OUSA represents more members than both of those professions.

OUSA's past success has been rooted in finding tactics that would influence the decision-makers of the day. For much of the last 15 years this meant providing credible policy advice to decision-makers that we re already inclined toward further investment in broadening access to post-secondary education.

There have always been other ways to have influence. The last government often faced protests and grassroots mobilization when it was reluctant to adequately invest in a priority of importance to people. Sometimes this mobilization worked – such as when parents mobilized about the poor state of school repair across Ontario and achieved a $1.4 billion annual investment. Parents of children with autism have also achieved significant investments in both the Wynne and Ford governments through grassroots action.

The change in government has brought new perspectives and priorities to power – few of which obviously favour OUSA or the student movement as a whole. Finding influence will require finding new approaches and building grassroots support that will make students impossible to ignore.

Alexi White and Sam Andrey were senior advisors to the Minister of Education in the previous government. They are former OUSA Steering Committee members and former Home Office staff.

Today they host a podcast on Ontario politics and public policy called Ontario Loud.

Partnering for a Better Future for Student Mental Health

DAVID LINDSAY

Today's university students are Ontario's future makers, drivers of change. They are pushing beyond the walls of the university classroom and making a difference on their campuses, in their communities, and throughout the province.

In many cases, their efforts reach far and wide, helping to effect real and positive impacts in the lives of those around them. From addressing food sustainability in northern Ontario to raising awareness of invasive species in southwestern Ontario, university students are partnering across the province to help find creative solutions to society's big challenges.

But there are also many examples where Ontario's university students have mobilized in order to advocate around an issue much closer to home – one example is the way in which students are advocating for supports for their own mental health and for the mental health of their peers. In fact, the student impact around mental health support is undeniable.

Providing effective mental health resources for university and college students is an important issue on post-secondary campuses today. Now more than ever, students who are coping with mental health issues are recognizing the importance of seeking help, and their peers are speaking up on their behalf.

From programs and services on our campuses to student-led activities, our universities continue to work to support our students and these important mental health initiatives.

Through their work, we have seen students move the needle by becoming the ambassadors their peers need and innovating new products and services to support mental health. Many of these activities are available across every institution to help students reduce stress, including peer health education outreach teams, wellness weeks, and in-house residence programs, among others.

More and more students are also participating in peer-to-peer counselling services. These types of services have not only reduced some of the common barriers and feelings of intimidation when seeking support, but they're bridging the gap between the student and the help they need. Peer counsellors receive on-campus training, sometimes through work-study programs, to ensure that they are prepared, equipped, and capable to support others and address crisis situations. In some cases, the peer counsellor themselves has prior experience using mental health services and is able to form deeper connections with students, leading to a stronger support system where both sides feel a sense of empowerment.

Student ambassadors are helping raise awareness around mental health, reduce stigma, prevent issues from reaching a crisis point, and connect peers with the help they need. But advocacy around student mental health does not rest solely on the shoulders of students. While gains have been made when it comes to treating mental illness, and ensuring that those diagnosed can get the support they need to pursue their ambitions, more can and needs to be done to put effective services in place that respond to a broad and complex range of issues. We all have a role to play.

The path forward for mental health advocacy lies in partnerships and the coming together of many voices to make sure that those who need help can access the services they seek. At the Council of Ontario Universities, we value the opportunity to collaborate with our students and partners – and working together to address student mental health is no exception. In 2017, Ontario's universities, colleges and student groups came together to jointly advocate for student mental health, co-writing In It Together – a report that identifies priorities and recommendations to guide and strengthen the delivery of mental health services for post-secondary students across the province.

The report gave rise to a larger In It Together advocacy campaign that continues to bring attention to the need for a comprehensive, holistic approach to mental health, drawing on government, educators, health-care providers, and local organizations – the whole community.

"THROUGH THEIR **WORK**, WE HAVE SEEN STUDENTS MOVE THE NEEDLE BY BECOMING THE **AMBASSADORS** THEIR PEERS NEED AND **INNOVATING NEW PRODUCTS AND SERVICES TO SUPPORT MENTAL HEALTH**"

This fall marks two years since this initiative began. The In it Together report and joint advocacy campaign launched at a time when post-secondary institutions found themselves at the frontline of mental health issues. In many cases, we still are.

For a number of students, the transition from secondary school to post-secondary studies can be stressful, where they are faced with mounting pressures to succeed and greater workloads, coupled with the added responsibilities of living on their own – a first for many.

Those with identified mental health needs no longer have automatic access to the types of supports and services that were provided to them in high school. If they are no longer living at home, these students often do not have access to the types of primary health-care services that would best address their issues.

For others, mental health issues are only just starting to manifest, leaving them particularly vulnerable. Seventy-five per cent of mental health issues begin before the age of 25, during a time when many are arriving on post-secondary campuses.

In fact, the number of students on college and university campuses with identified mental health disabilities more than doubled between 2012 and 2017, and the second most used billing code by on-campus physicians in 2017 was related to mental health.

These realties resonated among universities, colleges, and student groups, sparking the need to come together and advocate for real, positive change around student mental health. By engaging each other and partnering around such an important long-term goal, Ontario's universities, colleges, and students sparked a joint initiative that was comprehensive and far stronger than anything we could have done individually.

In It Together advocates for curriculum that emphasizes resilience and coping skills that begin in kindergarten and continue through high school, post-secondary life, and into adulthood and the workplace.

It proposes syllabus changes that provide young people with the social, emotional, and practical tools throughout K-12, before they enter post-secondary education. It also encourages culturally diverse counselling and promotes the use of more technology counselling – all free to students, on and off campus.

More than anything, In It Together highlights a need for joint advocacy around student mental health. It taps into an urgency for more hands on deck to create a better future for our young people and ensure their mental health and wellbeing are well supported.

Ultimately, the future of student mental health requires a whole-of-community approach. This is a societal issue with ripple effects that touch everything from health care to the workplace and the economy. It requires the heavy lifting of moving hearts and minds within post-secondary, health care, communities and government to ensure effective services are in place for those who need them.

In our work, we continue to advocate for a whole-of-community approach to mental health where everyone has a role to play, from government and community stakeholders to post-secondary institutions and their students.

As we saw with In It Together, joint advocacy takes any project or initiative further than one voice. By collaborating and advocating for others, we take care of one another and achieve what might not otherwise be possible.

Through true collaboration and cooperation, the government, post-secondary institutions, student associations, health-care providers, and community organizations can ensure that every student has access to the high-quality mental health supports and services they need.

David Lindsay is the CEO & President of the Council of Ontario Universities (COU).

How Student-Led Advocacy Promotes Work-Integrated Learning

JOHNATHAN RIX

Students are a significantly impactful voting constituency in Canada, consisting of approximately 2 million people and almost 250 post-secondary institutions. As such a large, engaged group, their impact on election outcomes and government policy can be felt throughout the country.

At any given time, if you ask students what governments should be focusing on to make life easier for them, "creating good job opportunities" is one of the most common answers you'll hear. In fact, in an Abacus Data public opinion poll commissioned by the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) in March 2019, students most often identified "finding a job" as their top concern post-graduation. This is a valid concern, seeing as employers are often looking for graduates with work experience.

In order to ensure students are keeping pace with market demands, exposure to work-integrated learning as part of the standard academic experience is integral to a quality education. Work-integrated learning involves a practical element of learning through internships, co-ops, applied research, field placements, apprenticeships, or the like while in study. Work-Integrated Learning isn't just important to potential employers either: 89% of students polled agreed that every student who wishes to participate in a work-integrated learning experience should be able to do so.

What does work integrated learning have to do with student-led advocacy? In campus communities, student associations are often an important advocate for students' needs as well as a provider of work-integrated learning opportunities themselves. Many student associations have a vice-president directly responsible for advocacy efforts, with additional advocacy and research support staff that tend to be student positions. In addition to formal employment, advocacy efforts at student associations are often supported by elected student councillors and a network of volunteers. For this reason, student associations are an integral part of the solution to providing students with more work-integrated learning.

Student-led advocacy, which consists of student associations bringing forward student-centric solutions to post-secondary administrations and municipal, provincial, and federal governments, is an excellent source of work-integrated learning on campus. It allows students to not only engage in the political process, but to lead changes within it.

Student associations often organize advocacy efforts that consist of formal meetings with elected representatives, presentations to government committees, responses to public service consultations, and the running of awareness campaigns that help unite students behind a common goal. There is an immense amount of preparation on behalf of many students who are involved in making all of this happen.

Student associations also give student staff and volunteers an opportunity to hone their research skills while supporting these political activities. This research spins into other skill-building activities for students to engage in as well, including condensing research into clearer messaging that can be used in advocacy meetings or awareness campaigns organized and built by students. All of this happens usually within teams working at a student association, and this enhances students' ability to work collaboratively and with individuals that have different educational backgrounds and skill sets.

Student-led advocacy also enriches civic engagement by helping students develop an understanding of how government actually functions on a daily basis. This provides them with a certain level of system literacy that they can then share with other students during awareness campaigns or voter mobilization efforts around elections.

All these skills – research, interpersonal communications, teamwork, project management, campaign planning, relationship management, and system literacy – are desirable in the knowledge economy. Student associations are committed to developing these skills in students.

Another major priority that's commonly identified by students is affordability of education.

While some students are able to access post-secondary education with ease, this is not the case for everyone. Roughly half of students in Canada need financial aid to attend post-secondary. For these students, the cost of accessing post-secondary comes with an average debt load of $27,000 and thousands more in interest payments. For many students, working while studying is not just an option – it's a necessity.

Leveraging the financial benefits of a job to help afford education and living costs while keeping debt levels lower than they may otherwise be is nothing new for students; they've been doing it for decades. What's transformative today, however, is how work-integrated learning opportunities have changed the types of work that students can engage in during studies. Student associations provide thousands of students across the country with steady part-time work while in study.

Often, work-integrated learning opportunities contained within a student association can be even more beneficial than alternatives due to a general cultural understanding that students are students first. Student associations, in particular, are incredibly flexible and work around student class schedules and study requirements. This helps mitigate the impact that employment during study can have on academic performance and goals.

In 2018, post-secondary institutions and student advocacy organizations came together with members of the business community and the not-for-profit sector; they called on the Government of Canada to make getting to 100% work-integrated learning a part of their approach to skills development. In order for Canada to reach 100% work-integrated learning, institutions, businesses, not-for-profits, and students are going to need to work together.

Student associations and student-led advocacy are part of the solution. Often, limited resources is one of the challenges identified when considering the goal of reaching 100% work-integrated learning in Canada. Governments play a significant role in providing students with work-integrated learning opportunities. In Budget 2019 alone, the federal government committed $631.2 million dollars towards expanding work-integrated learning by subsidizing students' wages in the public sector, forming industry partnerships and establishing government-led work-integrated learning programs. This is great news, seeing as the government needs to be both a financial backer and an example setter in pursuing 100% work integrated learning.

But the government cannot accomplish this goal alone. Neither can post-secondary institutions, the business community, or the not-for-profit sector. It must be tackled collaboratively. Student associations are a stakeholder group that is not only invested in the pursuit of 100% work-integrated learning via its advocacy efforts, but that is also an active partner in providing these opportunities to students so they can leave their education as well-rounded and skilled individuals. Yet, even with the thousands of students who already get exposure to work-integrated learning opportunities via their student associations, there could be plenty more opportunities if the financial resources were there to support these positions.

In a time when everyone is committed to achieving the ambitious goal of getting every student a work placement during study that desires one, we should be collectively talking about an expanded role for student associations to provide work placements to students. If student associations aren't able to provide as many work placements as they once had, that amounts to supplying students with less work opportunities when the demand is going up.

Right now, the future of student-led advocacy looks bright because there is such a strong desire among employers to hire recent graduates with prior work experience. Students who get exposure to paid work-integrated learning opportunities during study tend to fair better in the labour market in terms of both employment rates and earnings. Student associations are excellent incubators of skill-building work placements that help produce effective, well-rounded people that are equipped to be leaders in whichever community they choose.

Student associations have been advocates for the advancement of work-integrated learning for a long time and should be viewed as a stakeholder that is ready, willing, and able to not only participate in discussions about finding good work placements for students, but also provide excellent placements themselves. In the face of these challenges and a desire for Canada to be a world leader in providing high-quality education, governments should be doing more to engage with student associations as a partner that can assist them with their public policy goals on work-integrated learning.

Johnathan Rix is the Executive Director of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA).

Positive Distruption: *How Student-Led Advocacy Improves Communities*

LINDA CABRAL

At Ontario's twenty-two public universities, in over thirty communities, students don't just support local culture and economies – they often reinvent them. And yet when we look at the relationship between universities and their surrounding communities, we often think of the institutions, and not the students, as the ones who advocate for improvements to our municipalities. Community residents look at students as temporary – temporary residents, temporary neighbours, and temporary burdens – when in reality, students are a driving force in many social projects in the community. Students spend several years in their institution's surrounding community, and their impact can be seen in how community resources are directed and social problems are addressed. When a student feels connected to their community, they are more likely to extend their advocacy efforts beyond their university; they are more likely to construct solutions to local issues. But students can only help their cities grow if their communities and post-secondary institutions create connections and support their advocacy.

Students in higher education have long been involved in policy and advocacy. It's become ingrained in the curricula as a way for post-secondary institutions to reward and preserve research and innovation. Community engagement helps post-secondary institutions dismantle the elitism often found in its curricula, which typically focus on abstract, theoretical frameworks and designs. Students have become more civilly engaged, mostly because of how the structure degrees have changed, but also because institutions now interact with all levels of government. Students deserve the opportunity to create real-time solutions and have their voices heard – not just as contributors, but as stable voices within their own communities.

All over Ontario, students have made meaningful change in their communities – and it's because they feel connected to their municipalities. Individually or through their student associations, students navigate their communities to advocate for themselves and others. In Hamilton, students have established research-based sexual violence prevention protocols and groups, combining their education and their passions. Student associations have created a safety plan for students living in the community and successfully advocated for landlord licensing. In London, students have fought for ranked-ballot voting, changing the city's political system and the way its residents vote. In Waterloo, students have used crowdfunding to help trans* students continue their education free from harm. This list barely scratches the surface – students are finding areas of advocacy that work for them and creating solutions that help them excel.

Students engage in four major areas of advocacy: advising, lobbying, direct advocacy, and activism. Students advise their communities by evaluating which issues need fixing or highlighting and then proposing solutions. For example, students attend city council meetings and email their research and concerns to the city councilor who represents their institution's community.

Students lobby by conducting research on issues facing their communities; they then either send that research to lobbying bodies that their institution is involved with or ask their student association to lobby on their behalf to stakeholders and decision-makers in the community.

Students engage in direct advocacy through interdisciplinary courses or programs, all of which have a great way of using student research to create solutions that can be developed into policy or design plans – in experiential education, for example.

Finally, students engage in activism by exercising their right to dissent and disrupt, attending protests and organizing at a grassroots level.

All forms of advocacy are disruptive, whether it's advising, lobbying, direct advocacy, or activism. But disruption isn't necessarily a bad thing. It has led to positive social change throughout history, whether through protest, lobbying for change, or dissent. Students have a right to advocate and be disruptive in their communities – after all, these communities are their home – and their institutions should support their efforts.

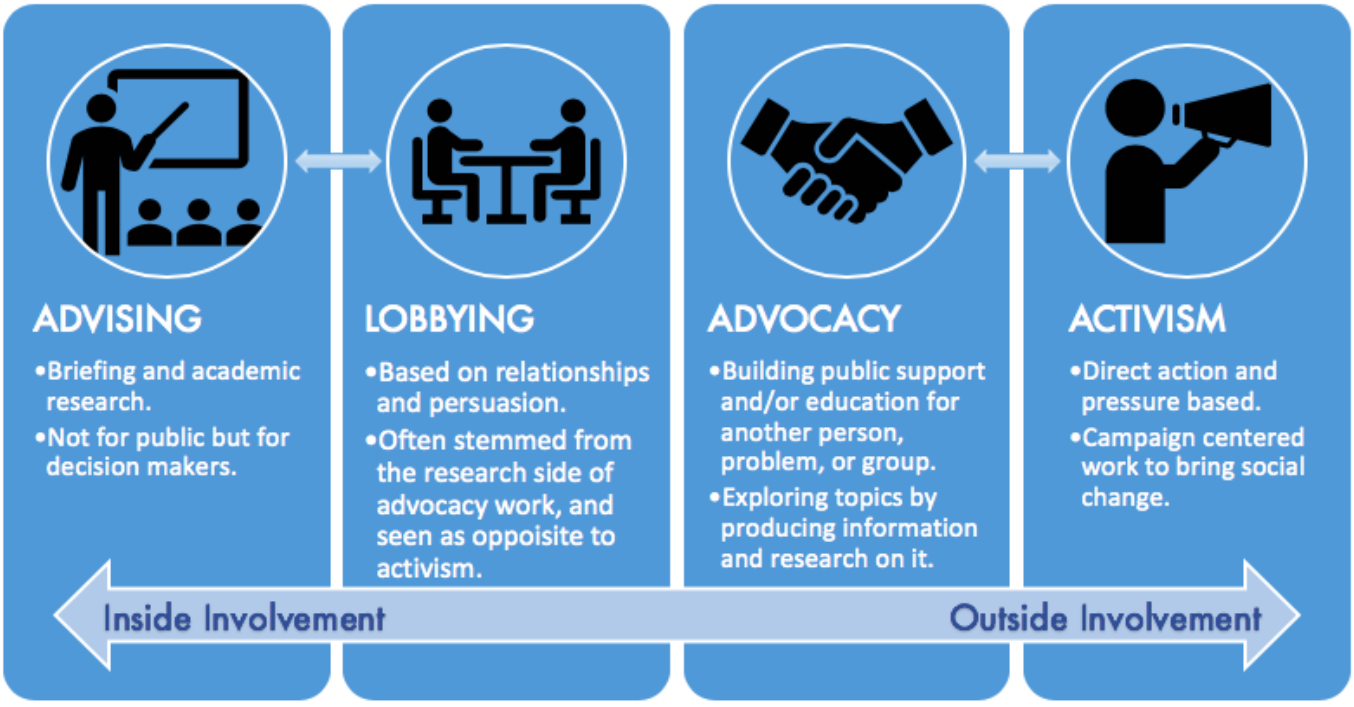
When students are able to learn about advocacy tools, how to access them, and who to reach out to, they become driving forces for positive change in communities.

Post-secondary institutions also benefit from community advocacy. Having local connections helps them secure grant funding for projects, and often institutions will work directly with their municipality to develop funding solutions. Many (unpaid) students participate in this process because it benefits the local public and themselves, and it's often students, not post-secondary institutions, that help build communities and creatively solve problems. For example, institutions have built partnerships linking students to projects, such as Laurier University's C3 Innovation Labs, which have helped students create sustainability solutions for the Waterloo region. At McMaster University and Redeemer University in Hamilton, CityLAB just finished its first year, creating a whole-semester approach to solving municipal problems. Post-secondary institutions should continue to incentivize students to take community-engagement courses. When you give students the means to solve problems, they will use their knowledge to do so. Further, students are more likely to stay and remain involved in a community after graduating if they have invested their time and passion in, which can boost the economy and civic engagement of a municipality.

Communities with post-secondary institutions have a unique opportunity to create a different type of municipality – one that benefits from a constantly renewing pool of innovative student thinkers. Student advocates address local issues and build community resources. And, as post-secondary institutions continue to create degrees and diplomas based on interdisciplinary and experiential education, we will continue to see the rise of students as community-builders. For now, however, there is room for improvement.

When students graduate, we tell them to think critically and go forth with their degrees to improve society; but why should they wait until after graduation? We can create resilient communities now by giving post-secondary students the autonomy and tools to advocate for creative solutions and positive change. So design a student seat in your committees, expand your membership options to include a student discount, connect with your institution regarding courses or internships, and hire students – your community will thank you later.

Linda Cabral was OUSA's 2019 Summer Research Intern and is a recent graduate of McMaster.



Supporting Student Advocates Through Ontario's Post-Secondary Education Crisis

BRITNEY DE COSTA

Post-secondary education is in crisis. This may sound hyperbolic, because the crisis is obscured to those on the fringes of the sector, or to those within it that do not face the same economic and discriminatory barriers that make university in Ontario inaccessible to many. It may sound out of touch as well, because for those who do face barriers, this crisis has long been a reality. I was a student for almost all my life, and as I transition into post-secondary advocacy, what I can say is that, after many years of rapid escalation, this crisis has reached what I hope is its apex.

Universities continue to be financially, physically, and emotionally inaccessible and unsafe for students who do not enjoy wealth, ability, race, and gender privilege. This has always been a reality in the post-secondary sector, yet it is exacerbated by the fact that student advocates – those who fight to make university accessible and safe for all willing and qualified students – are operating in a political climate that invalidates both their intentions and their expertise.

This is a scary moment, not only for these students, but for all of us. I could use this article to explain the importance of post-secondary education, the challenges students face to accessing it, and the work that student leaders and advocates do toward safe and accessible campuses and university experiences. I could reinforce what others have already said about the ways that undermining the efforts of student advocates hurts all students – how it hurts their institutions, their communities, and our society as a whole. But people are already talking about that. *Students* are talking about that, and we need to listen to them. We need to support them. That's why I want to use this space to talk about what it means to support students as they navigate turbulent and hostile waters to better education for everyone.

Before exploring the role of support persons in student advocacy, we need to understand the importance of lived experience in advocacy. There is an incredible wealth of intersectional feminist and critical race theorists, community experts, and advocates who offer stunning, nuanced arguments for the expertise of community and the need to center voices of the people who are most affected by advocacy work. Instead of spending time trying to do their work justice, I simply want to recognize their contributions and reiterate the importance of student advocacy that is led, informed, and performed by students themselves.

As is true in all spaces, students and persons with lived experience are the experts on the barriers and factors affecting their ability to survive and thrive. Students know what they need to access post-secondary education, and they know what stands in their way. Unless we listen to them, it is impossible to fully understand what challenges they face. Unless we listen to *all* students, the barriers for the most underrepresented will continue to be hidden and they will be effectively silenced. We may be able to recognize basic barriers – growing financial fees with limited support, or campus environments that fail to meet provincial standards for accessibility – but without student voices we risk proposing and implementing "solutions" that are entirely ineffective. Without student voices we risk creating additional, often unintended, barriers for those who are already at a disadvantage due to systemic structures of oppression and inequity.

However, it is also important to recognize that students cannot be the only ones in this fight. While they need to be at the forefront and leading any efforts to make post-secondary education attainable and safe for all, it is unrealistic to expect them to shoulder the burdens of advocacy work on top of school, work, and surviving the impacts of existing in a space that can be both violent and dehumanizing. Expecting this of students would suggest that we are not part of the same society that values respect and dignity for all. We all – institutions, faculty, staff, administration, partners in post-secondary education, politicians, and community allies – need to do what we can to help students build a world where they can feel safe and included, both on campus and in their communities.

"THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO SUPPORT STUDENTS IS TO LISTEN TO WHAT THEY HAVE BEEN TELLING US – LISTEN TO THE **CONCERNS THEY SHARE, THE SOLUTIONS THEY PROPOSE,** AND **THEIR EXPERIENCES**"

Depending on our roles in the sector, there are specific things we can do in our work to support students; but regardless of what we do or where we do it, there is an important principle we must all adhere to – *listen to students*. The most effective way to support students is to listen to what they have been telling us – listen to the concerns they share, the solutions they propose, and their experiences. This requires being open to ideas and notions that challenge what we believe about post-secondary education and a willingness to accept solutions that may not be part of our traditional repertoire of advocacy tactics. It means that we need to understand and remain open when students tell us that our solutions may not work for them. As much as we may feel like we know how to best address these concerns (particularly those of us immersed in the sector), we have to be open to the possibility that our perspective may not be the most appropriate or helpful in many situations.

Listening to students also requires looking for what is not being said and who is not being heard. It is especially important that we are conscientious of that fact that there are so many underrepresented voices in post-secondary education – voices that are unlikely to be represented by the majority. Students looking to access and persist in university, despite forces of ableism, financial precarity, racism, colonialism, and heterosexism, have expertise in these barriers; they offer unique insight into how to make their experience more equitable. These students need to be heard, and we need to listen.

Listening to students is not a passive act. It is not enough to simply listen to the voices that are out there and consider them in our work. We need to actively invite students to speak and create spaces where their voices are heard and valued, and we need to use our positions and power to elevate their concerns and recommendations. Unless we do this in our decision-making processes and policy development, it is unlikely that we can offer meaningful supports for students in their advocacy work. Unless we actively and meaningfully listen to students, as much as we may feel otherwise, we will become another barrier they must face to creating a post-secondary landscape that is accessible and equitable for all.

Britney De Costa is a Research and Policy Analyst at OUSA.

Before the Events, There Was Student Advocacy

EDDY AVILA

Every student's post-secondary education experience is different. Each student will have their own aspirations and unique lived experiences. And while all will be enrolled in courses, their university or college experience will be defined by much more than academics. Some will become involved in campus clubs, some will participate in intramural sports, some will become orientation volunteers, and some will help out at their local peer support centre. Many of these experiences will be made possible not directly by their institution's administration but by their student association. Student associations make campus life vibrant. They significantly improve the overall student experience.

With this is mind, it's important to remember that student associations were created with the primary goal of representing students and advocating on their behalf. Over the years, these organizations have grown and expanded their mandate, providing essential services and running programs to enhance the educational experience of students. Yet student advocacy and representation remains at the core of every student association or student council – and we can't forget that.

So how did student associations move from strictly being student advocates to becoming programmers, service providers, and event planners?

At their core, student associations have a good sense of student life on campus. That's part of the reason they exist – to represent and advocate on behalf of students. They see the struggles that students face and hear the challenges that students overcome. Often, this awareness is what prompts student associations to coordinate with stakeholders like university administration to address problems and work towards solutions. However, complex issues like improving supports for student mental health on campus or providing adequate supports for marginalized students are not solved through a single solution; they often take time.

This is where the intersection between advocacy and service provision comes into play. Historically, student associations have often taken charge in responding to student needs and filled in the gaps that their institutions have not addressed. The primary constituents of student associations are the students – unlike university or college administrations, who must consider faculty and staff, campus stakeholders, and other organizations.

Additionally, student associations are considerably less bureaucratic than university or college administrations, allowing them to be more responsive and address concerns faster. This ability has turned student associations into providers of large amounts of essential student services, programs, and events.

Student association-run services and programs help support students and supplement the overall student experience. Examples include peer support centres, orientation week, clubs systems, student food banks, and walk-home services. The role of the student association has grown and they have taken on more responsibilities than advocacy alone. They have become a critical part of student life on campus.

So that's where we are now. Student associations impact the lives of students on campus every day, both through the services they provide and the advocacy they lead.

And while advocacy and representation for students is at the core of all student associations, they tend to be viewed more as student-centric service providers and event planners. However, it's also important for students, university administration, elected representatives, and sector stakeholders to understand how powerful strong student advocacy can be in making meaningful change for students in Ontario.

As OUSA's Executive Director, and as a former President of Western's University Students' Council, I have seen the impact that student advocacy groups and individual student associations can have through strong advocacy efforts.

I have seen many student associations work collaboratively with their institution's administration to implement a Fall Reading Week that allows students to recharge and provides respite during a stressful midterm season. I have seen student leaders advocate at the provincial level for affordable, accessible post-secondary education and transform the student financial aid system to better support students who need it most. I have seen students highlight the importance of work-integrated learning opportunities to the federal government and secure dedicated funding to enhance this type of experiential learning. Student advocacy has the power to make systemic change and improve the lives of large groups of students.

But that's not to say that the everyday services and programs that student associations oversee aren't important. It's about balance. Understandably, students are more aware of the services and programs student associations provide than they are of their student advocacy wins. That's not the fault of the student – it's just a reality that student organizations must come to terms with. Students interact with these services everyday; they are tangible and create meaningful experiences. Student advocacy is longer-term and less tangible. It can often take several years and many cohorts of student leaders to accomplish a policy change within the university or see the government dedicate funding to a student-friendly initiative.

That's why student associations need to get better at explaining who they are and the value they bring to the campus life. They need to remind students of the advocacy student associations do on their behalf. With the government's recent introduction of the Student Choice Initiative, students will be given the opportunity to choose where their ancillary fees are allocated. There has never been a more important time for student associations and student organizations – who are primarily funded through ancillary fees – to show students the value they add to the overall educational experience. If large numbers of students opt out of student association fees, many services that students rely on may not be available or may operate at reduced service levels. The clubs and orientation weeks that become staples of a students' time at university or college may be in jeopardy. Additionally – and just as importantly – there may be significant negative impacts on student advocacy and representation.

Now more than ever, student leaders, student associations, and student advocacy organizations like OUSA need to make a case for the importance of student advocacy. They need to respect the reality that not all students may understand, stay engaged, or prioritize student advocacy. However, it is the responsibility of student associations to be transparent and accountable and to engage in ongoing outreach to show students the value of these activities. Every student association is responsible for balancing their priorities between student advocacy and the student services and events they provide. It's not about which is more important; it's about understanding that both are critical to the short- and long-term success of the overall student experience.

Eddy Avila is the Executive Director of OUSA.

who we are

OUSA represents the interests of approximately 150,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at eight student associations across Ontario. Our vision is for an accessible, affordable, accountable and high quality post-secondary education in Ontario. To achieve this vision we've come together to develop solutions to challenges facing higher education, build broad consensus for our policy options, and lobby government to implement them.

recent publications

AUGUST 2018

Financing Fees: The Inequitable Burden of University Costs

APRIL 2019

Shared Perspectives: A Joint Publication on Preparing Students for the Workplace

JUNE 2019

Habitats: Students in Their Municipalities, 2019

AUGUST 2019

2017 Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey Results: Accessibility

2017 Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey Results: Affordability

Sexual and Gender Diversity in Post-Secondary Education: LGBTQ+ Students Interview Series Report

milestones

2014

$12 million extension of the Mental Health Innovation Fund

2015

Simplified pre-study income contribution

Increased OSAP loan maximums

2016

$365 million of tax credits repurposed into grants for low-income students (The New OSAP)

Links created on OUAC and eInfo websites leading to each university's accessibility service for students with disabilities

2017

$190 million for experiential learning

$9 million for more frontline mental health care workers on campus

$73 million for student psychotherapy

$10,000 increase in OSAP repayment threshhold

$1 million invested in Ontario's Open Textbook Library

Reduction in the parental and spousal contribution expectations for applicants to the OSAP program

2018

Release of the International Student Strategy

Commitments from all political parties on the need for mental health investments (saw commitments from all political parties on the need for mental health investments, with $1.9 billion allocated towards mental health)

First-ever provincial-wide survey on campus sexual violence conducted by the provincial government

2019

Fees funding student transit passes declared mandatory for implementation of Student Choice Initiative

OUSA'S 2019-2020 PRIORITIES

STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

Improving student mental health requires a 'whole-of-community' approach with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for government ministries, post-secondary institutions, student associations, healthcare providers, and community organizations. Students' mental health needs are not being addressed in the post-secondary sector, and students are not considered an independent demographic for funding purposes.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION AND RESPONSE

Institutional sexual violence policies, prevention and education programs, and training initiatives do not meet the needs of students and survivors. All survivors—regardless of gender, sexual orientation, ability, or heritage—should be supported in ways that allow them to seek justice in meaningful ways and safely pursue their education.

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE WORKFORCE

Students are interested in taking a broader approach to preparation for the workforce, focusing not only on discipline-specific knowledge but also on providing opportunities for students to develop skills inside and outside the classroom. There are limited work-integrated learning opportunities available for students in general arts and science programs, and students are graduating without the support they need to articulate skills acquired throughout their undergraduate education to prospective employers.

STUDENT FINANCIAL AID

All qualified students in Ontario should have access to high-quality education, regardless of socioeconomic status. The 2019 changes to the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) have resulted in fewer grants, smaller loans, and reduced support to low-income families. OUSA continues to advocate for changes to student financial aid that will make post-secondary education more affordable throughout the province.

www.ousa.ca

OUSA represents the interests of 150,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at eight student associations across Ontario.

STEERING COMMITTEE

The Directors of OUSA are representatives from each student association holding full membership with OUSA. They form OUSA's Steering Committee and guide the organization's governance, advocacy, policies, and finances. For the 2019 - 2020 academic year, the Steering Committee members are:

CATHERINE DUNNE
President

MATTHEW GERRITS
VP Finance

RAYNA PORTER
VP HR & Admin

DAVID BATH

SHAWN CRUZ

SHEMAR HACKETT

KATLYN KOTILA

NIVEDITHA SETHUMADHAVAN

WILLIAM GREENE

CONNECT WITH US

@ousa

@ousahome

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

ONTARIO UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT ALLIANCE
26 Soho St, Suite 345
Toronto, M5T 1Z7
t: *416.341.9948*
w: *www.ousa.ca* ***e:*** *info@ousa.ca*

OUSA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance