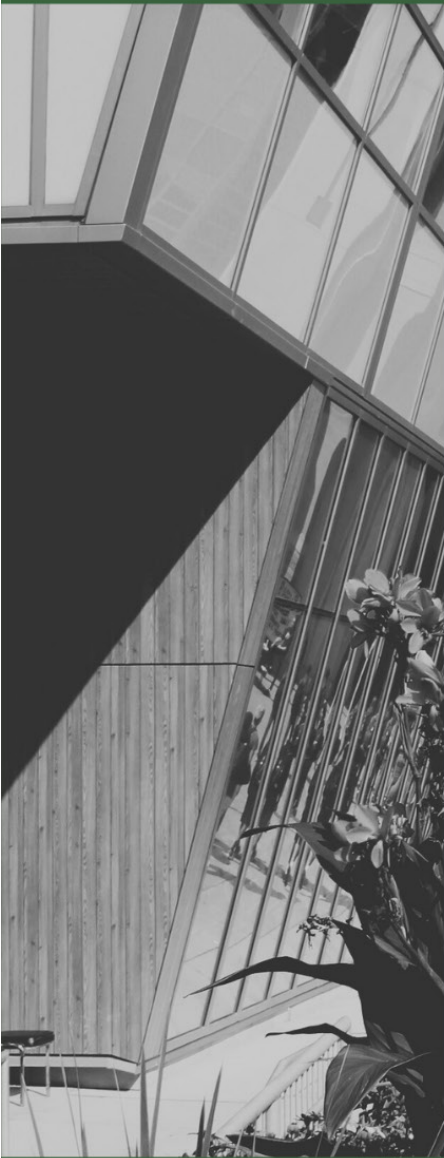


July 2023

Habitats



Students in their
Municipalities

OUSA
Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance



About OUSA

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) represents the interests of 160,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at nine 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 the government to implement them.

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OUSA
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Introduction

Every year, the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) publishes “Habitats: Students in their Municipalities” as a platform for undergraduate students at our nine member institutions to highlight their successes and challenges in their communities through a series of student-written case studies and articles focusing on municipal-level topics. In the past, Habitats has addressed persistent and ubiquitous concerns surrounding housing, transit, student-community relations, and engagement in local politics, illustrating how students and their neighbours experience their communities in both similar and distinct ways.

This year’s edition will focus on these issues within the context of rural and northern Ontario. Considering the diverse geographical, social, and economic contexts, students in rural and northern areas continue to encounter unique challenges in accessing and persisting at post-secondary institutions. Therefore, OUSA has collaborated with Rural and Ready, a student-led non-profit organization, for the 2023 edition of Habitats to recognize and highlight the distinct experiences of rural and northern students and to improve the affordability,

accessibility, accountability, and quality of post-secondary education in the province. Rural and Ready recognizes the systemic gaps and regional disparities between students who grew up in rural towns to those who grew up in urban centers, and supports students in rural areas with academic skills and career mentorship to thrive within their further education and workplace.

This edition of Habitats will acknowledge barriers, inaccessibility, scarcity, but, most importantly, the resiliency of rural and northern students. The themes encompass prevalent issues such as internet accessibility, disruptions of local transit systems and their impact on students, community-student relationships with a focus on student retention, and mental health services in rural and northern Ontario. These student-written case studies and articles aim to spotlight the central issues faced by a student demographic that is often overlooked and forgotten. It is our hope that the insights from these articles and corresponding recommendations will foster a more fulfilling and equitable partnership between students and municipal governments.



Breaking Down Bureaucratic Walls-Bridging the Wi-Fi Disconnect for Students in Rural and Northern Ontario

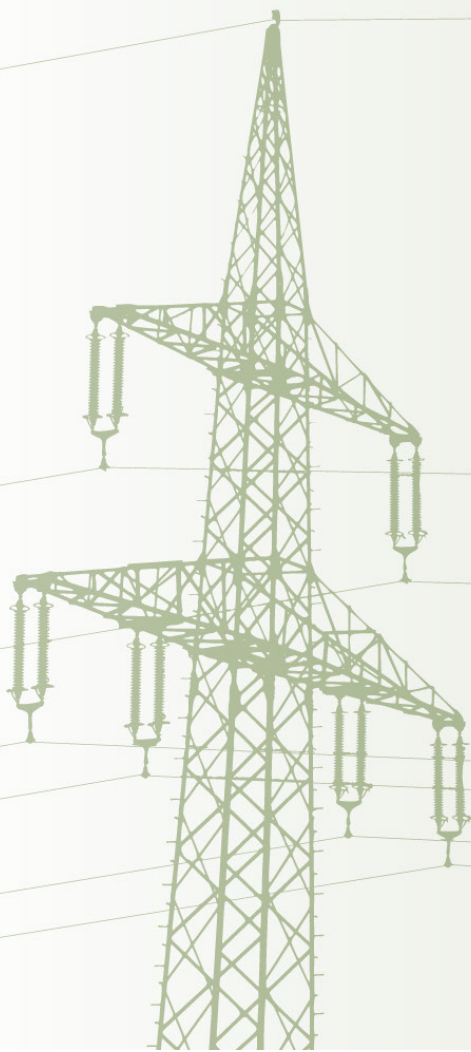
by Charlie Martin

As we enter the post-pandemic world and regain some sense of normalcy, there are several lessons to be learned from our experiences of staying at home. One of these lessons is that, despite technological advancements, internet connectivity remains a problem for many students in Ontario. While most students do not have to worry about being connected to the internet and having a reliable connection, students like myself, who live in rural and northern areas, have to cope with inconsistent internet speeds and connectivity. This inconsistency makes it challenging to engage in post-secondary school work and impacts educational achievement for many students.

Throughout the pandemic, when everyone was confined to their homes and turned to platforms such as Netflix or YouTube for entertainment, the surge in demand strained these channels, leading to overcrowding and slower internet speeds.

Consequently, accomplishing even the simplest tasks became nearly impossible; loading an e-textbook, for instance, would take more than 10 minutes, while activities like watching online lectures or joining a Zoom meeting were rendered unfeasible due to sluggish Wi-Fi speeds.

These issues were not limited to my personal experience; many students residing in rural and northern areas of the province also faced similar challenges. In Canada, 63 percent of rural households do not have internet speeds that meet the standards set by the Canadian Radio-Telecommunications Commission (CRTC). The CRTC suggests that a 50 megabit per second (Mbps) download speed and



a 10 Mbps upload speed should be the standard speeds cross-country¹. Unfortunately, for students like myself, these internet speeds were far from the reality we got.

Even now, with the transition back to on-campus learning, faster internet speeds are needed for individuals in certain parts of the province. Students in rural and northern Ontario still encounter slow internet speeds, creating inequalities when it comes to completing school assignments on time and performing other tasks that require internet access. Being a student with low internet speed can be costly, and the digital divide is becoming a significant issue that needs to be addressed to meet the needs of all individuals, especially students.

Addressing the Digital Divide

The Digital divide separates those who have access to the internet and devices and those who do not. It continues to be a concern for students living in rural areas, as not only are internet prices exorbitant, but the ongoing need to maintain hardware and acquire new internet-compatible devices imposes unexpected financial burdens that can be overwhelming². As researchers from Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) found, the cost is a significant barrier preventing students from accessing the internet³, with 39 percent of low-income households unable to afford it⁴. Interestingly, even in Toronto, only 60 percent of the population receives internet speeds that meet the CRTC standard⁵.

For students, internet access has become an indis-

pensable requirement, especially as educational institutions increasingly transition to asynchronous learning models, wherein students rely heavily on the Internet to access course materials. Furthermore, as more services shift to online platforms, such as government services and information (32 percent), banking (27 percent), healthcare (27 percent), and education (25 percent), individuals lacking Wi-Fi connectivity find it increasingly difficult to access these essential services that are vital to their everyday lives⁶.

The Affordability of Wi-Fi in Rural Areas

Accessing the internet in rural areas is already challenging, and its cost is significantly higher compared to urban areas. According to a report from the CRTC in 2019, the price of Wi-Fi increased by 4 percent in urban areas. Alternatively, the cost has increased by 8.7 percent in rural areas⁷. This should come as no surprise to people who live in rural areas, as the increase in the price is a result of limited internet provider options. A lack of competition allows internet providers to inflate prices, exploiting those paying for the internet.

Additionally, data cap options, which limit a household's Wi-Fi usage, can only be unlimited when additional costs are added, which on average are between \$0.50 and \$3 per GB (2016)⁸. To make matters worse, internet users in some parts of the province are not receiving the internet speeds they are paying for. A study of nearly 69,000 households concluded that 11,385 were not receiving the internet speeds that they paid for⁹. These additional costs become very

1 "All Canadians Deserve Reliable High-speed Internet." Policy Options Politiques. October 24, 2019. <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/october-2019/all-canadians-deserve-reliable-high-speed-internet/>

2 Ryerson Leadership Lab." Leadership Lab. Last modified January 2021. <https://www.ryersonleadlab.com/digital-divide>.

3 Ibid.

4 AlphaPlus. "Ontario's Digital Divide-A Spotlight on the Differences in Online Connection, Activity and Benefits." AlphaPlus. Last Modified 2020- <https://alnh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Digital-Divide-ENG-4pg.pdf>

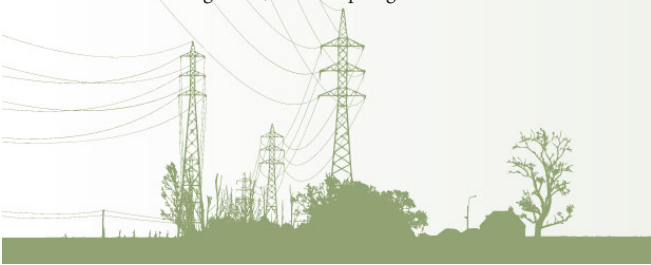
5 Andrey, Sam, M. J. Masoodi, Nisa Malli, and Selasi Dorkenoo. "Mapping Toronto's Digital Divide." Brookfield Institute. Last modified January 2021.

6 Ibid

7 Rural Ontario Municipal Cooperation. Broadband Connectivity a Municipal Primer. Rural Ontario Municipal Cooperation, 2020. <https://www.roma.on.ca/sites/default/files/assets/DOCUMENTS/Broadband/BroadbandConnectivityAMunicipalPrimer20201117.pdf>.

8 Ibid.

9 Allan, Michelle, and April Lindgren. "Internet Test Results Show Many Could Not Access Minimum Speeds, Including Hamilton-area." Global News. Last modified August 23, 2021. <https://globalnews.ca/news/8133460/internet-test-results-hamilton-burlington/>.



difficult to cover, especially for students.

In Indigenous communities, internet availability is a more pressing issue concerning affordability and access. Only 30 percent of households in First Nation communities have the CRTC-recommended connection speed¹⁰. For students who live on reserves, only 17 percent of households have adequate internet speeds to attend online classes¹¹.

The impact of unaffordable and inaccessible internet on post-secondary students is quite concerning as it impacts their ability to attend post-secondary education. Of those students who did not have sufficient access to the internet, statistics show that in 2020, there was a rise in student absenteeism¹². Having to forego attending class due to poor internet connection should not be a concern for students in Ontario or even the whole nation.

Recommendations

Our governments must take more action to enhance Wi-Fi accessibility for people in rural and northern regions of the province. Municipalities, in particular, possess the potential to facilitate the availability and accessibility of Wi-Fi. By developing a comprehensive **'community-based case' for funding**, municipalities can effectively convey the positive impact that accessible internet can have on community members. Notably, the allocation of connectivity funding by municipalities should prioritize rural areas where limited internet access hampers individuals' ability to avail themselves of essential services, such as education, healthcare, and government resources.

Of the many issues the municipal government runs into when making the internet more accessible, **'cutting through the red tape'** is one of them. Red tape

causes many projects to be put on hold or take years to pass through. For example, filling out paperwork or applying for a passport takes forever are all things that are considered red tape. In the case of implementing high-speed internet, red tape prolongs the problem. For instance, I live on a private road in a small town in Ontario. While my neighbours have access to high-speed fibre internet because they live on a public road, my road still needs such connectivity due to pending permits.

The issue of red tape can be brought up to our local municipalities. In fact, a bill proposed by a Provincial MP introduced the *Less Red Tape, Stronger Economy Act, 2023*¹³, which will cut down the time it will take to get a permit to install fibre internet in Ontario municipalities. This act will not only speed up the installation of broadband internet, but it will also increase relations with private internet providers with municipal governments. Municipalities, in reality, can only do so little to ensure a broadband connection is available for their constituents. The onus ultimately falls on the provincial and federal governments to grant municipalities the funds to install faster internet. Meanwhile, municipalities can still take steps to pressure the government to speed up the process and cut through the 'red tape' so more Ontarians can have faster and affordable Wi-Fi.

In eastern Ontario, municipalities, including Haliburton County, are binding together to lobby the provincial and federal government to push for better WIFI connection speeds in their respective communities. Municipalities across Ontario should continue to lobby the provincial and federal governments. If municipalities bind together, just as the case with some eastern municipalities using the 'community-based' method, it could speed up the process, and more voices can be heard.

10 Stewart, Briar. "How COVID-19 Worsens Canada's Digital Divide | CBC News." CBC. Last modified September 22, 2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/covid-19-highlights-urban-rural-digital-divide-1.5734167?cmp=rss>.

11 Steele, Ken. "Surprise! The Digital Divide." Education. Last modified May 31, 2022. <https://eduvation.ca/2022/06/surprise-the-digital-divide/>.

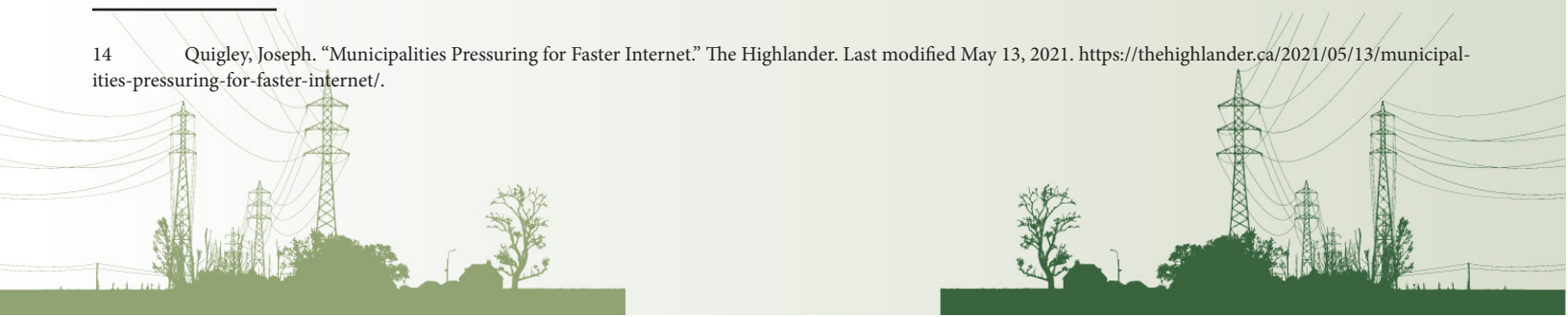
12 Ibid.

13 Legislative Assembly of Ontario. "Less Red Tape, Stronger Economy Act, 2023." Legislative Assembly of Ontario. Accessed July 9, 2023. <https://www.ola.org/en/legislative-business/bills/parliament-43/session-1/bill-91#BK26>.



to push for better WIFI connection speeds in their respective communities¹⁴. Municipalities across Ontario should continue to lobby the provincial and federal governments. If municipalities bind together, just as the case with some eastern municipalities using the ‘community-based’ method, it could speed up the process, and more voices can be heard.

14 Quigley, Joseph. “Municipalities Pressuring for Faster Internet.” The Highlander. Last modified May 13, 2021. <https://thehighlander.ca/2021/05/13/municipalities-pressuring-for-faster-internet/>.



“It’s the End of the Line”: Why out of Municipal Students Rely on Local Public Transport

by Rory M. Norris

Access to public transport is a vital necessity for university students to ensure that they can survive and thrive in their new environment. A recent study looking at undergraduate students’ use of public transportation found that 93% of students used public transportation to get to school, which is greater than Leisure activities (60%), and commuting for work (42%)¹⁵. This clearly shows the importance of public transportation for university students. Moreover, rural and international students often rely more on public transit than their local counterparts. Public transportation provides students with many benefits when compared to traditional travel, such as using a private automobile. The most important of which are how they relate to cost, accessibility / availability, and eco-friendly travel. It is only in recent times, after a strike causing major disruption to these services took place, that I look back at all the ways public transportation helps students.

GRT Strike

In recent days a strike by the UNIFOR Local 4303 has put a stop to the local Grand River Transit Bus Transit system which provides most of the public transport for the Kitchener-Waterloo region. They provide service to Waterloo, Laurier, and Conestogo students. This had made many students, including myself, look back at the ways that the public transport affects themselves and those around them. In the end the strike only lasted 9 days.

15 Silveira, Thiago Carvalho, et al. “Public Transport Usage among University Students: What to Expect Based on Customer Satisfaction Survey (CSS) Analysis.” *TRANSPORTES*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2020, pp. 32–45, <https://doi.org/10.14295/transportes.v28i3.1797>



It was bitter-sweet for many students as the strike took away their access to transit by bus for the first 2 days of the spring term. This meant many students were required to use other forms of transportation such as driving, biking, and walking in order to get to school.

Cost

When it comes to comparing the cost of public transportation to that of traditional transportation, the winner is quite clear. The cost of travelling through a private vehicle is significantly higher compared to using public transportation. This is because using private modes of transportation requires the consideration of gas, maintenance, insurance, and parking. As such, the cost becomes too much to bear for the average student. The average Canadian spends more than \$9,000 dollars on their vehicle annually¹⁶. On the other hand, the cost of public transportation is only a fraction of the cost of owning a car. At the University of Waterloo, where I live, the cost of a Bus Pass, which provides students access to the Buses and local light rail train, is currently only \$112.99 per semester or ~\$338.97 annually¹⁷. Moreover, an average university student in Canada only makes \$35,100¹⁸. You can quickly see why owning a car is out of the question for most students. The cost and income disparity are more evident among rural students. According to Statistics Canada, people in urbanized areas have higher average earnings than those in rural areas¹⁹. While the cost of living is lower in rural areas in Canada, the problem, is that rural students are often required to live in urban areas while in university, which constitutes a higher cost of living. As

well, higher income directly correlated to both higher levels of car ownership²⁰. As such affordability in public transportation is very important because it not only ensures that students have a cost-effective way of getting to and from school, but also can dilute the demand for housing and other services directly surrounding the university by ensuring that student can live further away from the university but are still able to commute comfortably.

Accessibility / Availability

In addition to facilitating travel to and from campus, public transportation offers students the freedom to run errands, meet up with friends, and access support and services within the local community. Trains and buses operate around the clock, ensuring that students always have a convenient means of transportation, whether it's for commuting to campus, exploring the town, or returning home. This eliminates the hassle of driving and parking, making social outings with friends much easier.

This aspect holds even greater significance for rural and international students, who often lack access to personal vehicles and therefore rely heavily on local public transportation.

Moreover, many students face disabilities that prevent them from walking, biking, or driving to school, making public transportation their essential mode of transportation. During the recent strike, numerous students with accessibility challenges were forced to resort to expensive taxis and Ubers for a period of 10 days, underscoring the extent to which students

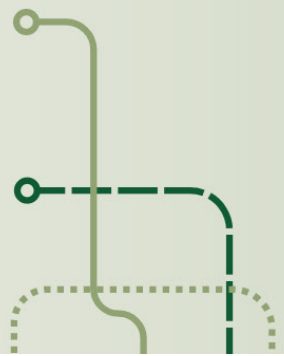
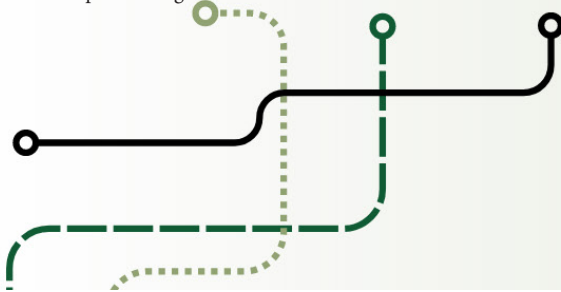
16 Yee, Cameron. "Are the Costs of Owning a Car Worth It for Students?" MoneySense, 9 Feb. 2023, www.moneysense.ca/save/budgeting/are-the-costs-of-owning-a-car-worth-it-for-students/

17 "Fees." Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association, 3 Feb. 2023, <https://wusa.ca/about/your-money/fees/>

18 "University Student Salary in Canada - Average Salary." Talent.com, <https://ca.talent.com/salary?job=university+student#:~:text=The%20average%20university%20student%20salary%20in%20Canada%20is,experienced%20workers%20make%20up%20to%20%24102%2C183%20per%20year>

19 "Cities and Growth: Earnings Levels Across Urban and Rural Areas: The Role of Human Capital – ARCHIVED." Cities and Growth: Earnings Levels Across Urban and Rural Areas: The Role of Human Capital, 27 Nov. 2015, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-622-m/2010020/part-partie1-eng.htm>

20 Geurs, Karst, and Bert Van Wee. "The Role of Non-Motorised Modes in an Environmentally Sustainable Transport System." Sustainable Transport, 2003, pp. 32–47, <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-1-85573-614-6.50009-4>



depend on public transportation²¹. For some, it is not merely a means of reaching school but the sole accessible transportation option available to them.

Eco – Friendly Travel

The last reason why public transportation is so important for university students is because of its low carbon footprint. University students are often aware of the rise of global temperatures and the effects that their actions have on the planet. As such, many of them seek out lower carbon options like public transportation when thinking about their own personal carbon footprint. The average individual who uses public transportation produces 55% less carbon dioxide emission per mile as compared to the average individual who drives a motor vehicle²². In addition, the increase in public transportation is also associated with a decrease in need for land with regards to parking lots, roads, and highways, resulting in a negative carbon output²³. As someone who comes from a small rural community, this is not something that you often think of. For those people who live in the countryside, the only way to get around is by car, and as such not as much thought is put on the ways that one can reduce their carbon footprint through transportation. When it comes to the most eco-friendly forms of transportation, nothing can beat public transportation.

Conclusion

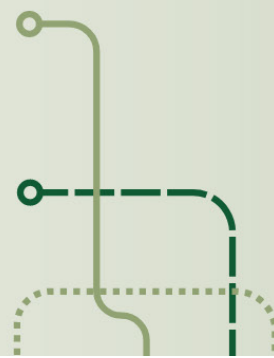
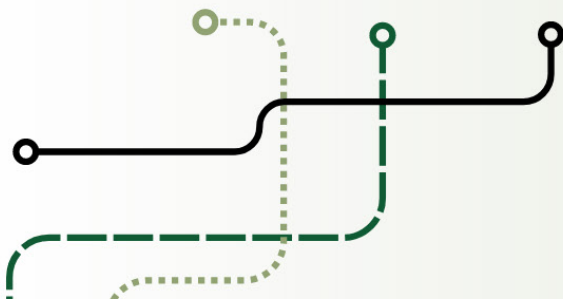
Public transportation plays a vital role in the commuting experience of many university students, especially those who lack access to alternative modes of travel, such as international and out-of-municipality students. A comprehensive examination of available data clearly indicates the importance of public trans-

portation for these students. With its numerous benefits, including affordability, widespread accessibility, and eco-friendly attributes, it becomes crucial for local governments to continue supporting and funding initiatives that enhance local public transport systems in their respective areas. The aim should be to assist university students who have chosen these towns as their educational destinations. To achieve this, municipalities, primarily responsible for operating the local public transport, should prioritize gathering feedback to improve services for university students. Simultaneously, they should implement policies and procedures that minimize the occurrence of strikes, accidents, or technical delays, which can have a detrimental impact on students relying on the public transportation network. As long as we have undergraduate students in Canada, a robust transportation infrastructure that caters to their needs will remain indispensable.

21 Kraemer, Brad. "Local Transit Strike Impacting Waterloo Region Accessibility." CityNews, 2 May 2023, <https://kitchener.citynews.ca/2023/05/02/local-transit-strike-impacting-waterloo-region-accessibility/>

22 Contributor(s): National Academies of Sciences. "An Update on Public Transportation's Impacts on Greenhouse Gas Emissions." The National Academies Press, 20 May 2021, <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/26103/an-update-on-public-transportations-impacts-on-greenhouse-gas-emissions>

23 Ibid



Rethinking By-Laws-Embracing Students for Sustainable Growth in Rural and Remote Ontario

by Josh Sankarlal

Post-secondary institutions are social and economic powerhouses within the municipalities in which they are established. They contribute to thousands of jobs, attract students and other visitors from outside the region, and make local investments in real estate, infrastructure, and more. Beyond their economic value, post-secondary institutions bring about social enhancements, particularly due to the presence of students in the community.

Despite these benefits, many municipalities struggle to embrace post-secondary institutions and their students as integral parts of their communities. Instead of creating cities that attract students and support their prosperity after graduation, governments have implemented by-laws and regulations aimed at controlling their student populations. They are also hesitant to make the necessary investments that would benefit students and the larger community.

Students and By-Laws

Municipalities have gained a reputation for implementing by-laws that specifically target students. While cities might argue this isn't the case, you only need to look at a map of certain by-law's "enforceable areas" to get insight into the intention of the legislations.

To illustrate this point, this author doesn't have to look very far. Nearly a decade ago, the City of Oshawa took heavy fire from the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) for its unaltered by-law. This by-law, known as the Residential Rental Housing License (RRHL), is not uncommon



and has been implemented in other cities like London, Ontario. It requires landlords to obtain a license to rent their properties, subject to specific standards, and applies to the entire city.

However, in Oshawa, the City chose to enforce the RRHL in a very specific area (see Figure 1). This enforcement involves charging fees to homeowners who wish to become landlords and imposes restrictions on the number of bedrooms they are allowed to rent out, even if additional bedrooms are legally incorporated into the residence. As a result, this has exacerbated the student housing crisis in Oshawa, which, like much of Ontario, is facing a student housing crisis parallel to the nation's housing crisis. Ontario Tech University is struggling to accommodate students due to limited options, forcing many into on-campus residences or the limited purpose-built accommodations the City has deemed 'appropriate' for their surrounding neighbourhoods. In addition to the RRHL, the City of Oshawa has launched a 'Student Housing Strategy.' While the Strategy proposes various positive developments such as a variety of purpose-built student housing, it can reasonably be seen as working in conjunction with the RRHL to zone students out of one area and into another, where they are less likely to 'bother' the residents of Oshawa.

laws, the City of Hamilton has recently implemented a nuisance by-law that includes a specific measure called the 'University District Safety Initiative (USDI)'. This initiative outlines a specific area in which the City could circumvent the declaration of a nuisance party to lay out fines. Unsurprisingly, the USDI area is centred around McMaster University's student community. Residents of the area (read: students) could face fines of up to \$10,000 if they are found participating in unsanctioned street parties. While these by-laws certainly have their place, it's easy to see why students and student associations are wary of their implementation - the potential that they would disproportionately impact students is very real.

Although these by-laws are likely well-intentioned, their enforcement in student communities can be unjust and unfair. The selective application of restrictive by-laws to areas where municipalities know students reside is transparently discriminatory. Students have the right to be treated on equal terms with other residents of their communities. I have often heard municipalities justify such actions by claiming that students are only "temporary residents" who do not play a significant enough role in the community to warrant fair treatment. This is a common sentiment in the Region of Durham. However, what is often overlooked is the reason why students do not stay for extended periods.

Why Don't Students Stay?

Local governments might argue that because students are temporary residents in their community, they need not worry about their concerns surrounding student life in their cities. While it is reasonable to expect that a certain percentage of graduates will leave the city they graduated in, specifically if they have lived there their entire lives, cities could benefit greatly from retaining post-secondary educated citizens.

Beyond the expansion of personal horizons, most undergraduate students look for full-time employment within two years of graduation ²⁴.

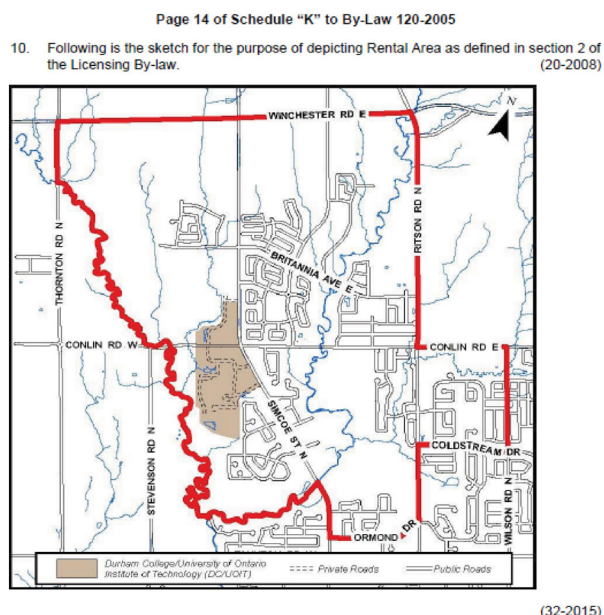


Figure 1: The "Rental Area" described in Oshawa By-Law 120-2005

For a more recent example of explicitly targeted by-

As graduates would search for jobs in the industries they specialized in during their studies, those who live in northern and rural municipalities might face unique challenges, as many of these communities are frequently reliant on a single particular industry to strengthen their economy, leaving their graduates struggling to find employment after they secure their degree.²⁵

Students' firsthand experience within their community significantly influences their decision to stay or leave after graduation. If they struggle to find affordable housing, lack reliable public transportation options, and must drive at least 10 minutes to the nearest grocery store to access basic amenities like grocery stores, it is highly likely that they would not want to return. When these challenges are further exacerbated by by-laws that make the student experience even more difficult, it is no surprise that students graduate and leave rural and northern cities.

Local governments should reframe the way they look at students living in their communities. If they want students to stay after graduation, they must demonstrate that they are invested in, and willing, to improve the quality of student life. Students make valuable contributions to the community while they are in school, and local governments should be embracing that.

The Economic and Social Benefits of PSI

Underserving or attempting to isolate students from the rest of a municipality's population is not only discriminatory but also counterproductive to the region's own development. Reports on the economic impact of educational institutions reveal that post-secondary institutions act as drivers of social and economic growth within a city.

As a commuter school, Ontario Tech may not attract as many students to the Durham Region compared to other institutions such as Queens, for ex-

ample, whose visitors alone contribute up to \$6m to Kingston's GDP, though it certainly retains students who would otherwise have moved elsewhere while looking for post-secondary education. Moreover, Queen's students contribute \$237M to Kingston's annual GDP²⁶, while Waterloo's out-of-town students contribute \$303M to Waterloo's GDP²⁷. Schools like Ontario Tech still benefit the region in which they are situated through job creation and operational spending.

Beyond economic benefits generated by student and visitor spending, post-secondary students contribute to the social development of their municipality by engaging in innovative work collaborations between the institution and local partners. In some cases, municipalities themselves recognize this value, creating "CityLab"-like organizations, where students and civic leaders work together to enhance their cities through joint initiatives.

While it may be tempting to overlook or underappreciate the benefits of post-secondary institutions in municipalities, the consequences communities face when an institution is not adequately supported can be devastating. A recent example is the impact of Laurentian University's financial insolvency, leading to the discontinuation of 69 programs and the loss of hundreds of staff. This crisis had a profound economic impact on the City of Sudbury, projecting losses worth hundreds of millions of dollars and triggering a domino effect that resulted in further population decline as students moved to other universities offering the programs that were cut at Laurentian, and faculty and staff sought employment elsewhere.

Municipalities might very well have reasons to be wary of their student population. Yet, the value that students import (or in some cases, sustain) through their institution should be enough for their

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Conference Board. Universities Benefit Regional Economies: Assessing the Regional Economic Impacts of Universities in Ontario. Conference Board, 2021. https://globalnews.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/11367_impact-paper_eco-impact-ontario-universities.pdf.

²⁷ Queens University. Queen's University Economic and Community Impact Study. 2021. https://www.queensu.ca/community/sites/crwww/files/uploaded_files/Final-Queens-University-Economic-and-Community-Impact-Study-08-01-2021.pdf.

²⁸ R. G. Barnett, Nathan. "Municipalities' Role in Retaining Students PostGraduation." Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance-habitats. Last modified 2022. https://assets.nationbuilder.com/ousa/pages/2159/attachments/original/1652716501/HABITATS_2022_document.pdf?1652716501.



1. Student associations can offer municipalities access to engaged and informed student representatives through town and gown committees. Town and Gown committees in Ontario should ensure that they :

- A) Meet regularly, or at all (a challenge in some areas) and;
- B) Are including their student association representatives in these conversations.

These committees can serve as an incredibly useful tool for Council members to engage and consult with student and institutional leaders before implementing potentially harmful by-laws, and it provides students with an appropriate venue to advocate for themselves among their local decision-makers.

2. Municipalities should reinvest in their student population.

We are already aware that regions heavily rely on the economic activity generated by their student populations and visitors. Municipalities can promote student retention after graduation by investing in improvements that enhance the overall quality of life, appealing to the broader demographic. This entails addressing student needs, such as enhancing public transportation services, collaborating with institutions and student associations to combat food insecurity, and implementing other relevant measures.

These quality of life improvements will assist municipalities in retaining students by ensuring their needs are met and contribute to the city's economic growth. City ²⁹.

3. Municipalities should establish experiential learning programs and internships for students.

Establishing positions specifically for students in public sector roles offers greater opportunities for them to settle in rural and northern regions. Opening positions in the governance and politics field will benefit

the students and contribute to the overall strengthening of municipal governments. For example, a municipal internship program in Alberta allows students to explore opportunities in municipal administration, finance or land use planning³⁰. Therefore, municipal governments should establish internships and co-op programs for students, wherein students can contribute by assisting in bureaucratic functions and taking on important projects, thereby enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of local governance.

29 Mitra, R., Habib, K. N., Siemiatycki, M., Keil, R. and Bowes, J. (2020) StudentMoveTO - From Insight to Action on Transportation for Post-Secondary Students in the GTHA: 2019 Transportation Survey Findings. Web portal: www.StudentMoveTO.ca

30 "Municipal Internship Program – Overview." Government of Alberta | Alberta.ca. Last modified January 10, 2022. <https://www.alberta.ca/municipal-internship-program-overview.aspx>.



Woodstock to Waterloo: Municipal Solutions for Rural Brain Drain

by Alexandra Thorn

Toyota, The Cheese Trail, Canada's Outdoor Farm Show, and the Springbank Snow Countess—welcome to my hometown of Woodstock. Located in Oxford County, Woodstock is also known as the Dairy Capital of Canada. It is situated between London and Waterloo, on the 401 and 403 highways. As someone who grew up there, I always found myself going to neighbouring cities, such as Waterloo and London, to access more amenities and opportunities. This included leaving Woodstock to pursue post-secondary education after high school. While rural areas cover a large portion of Ontario's land area, they only have a small proportion of the total population. This often results in students facing difficulties, such as a lack of job and skill development opportunities, which are attributed to fewer skill development programs and smaller job industries. As a result, many students migrate to urban centers and do not return to their hometowns, which undermines the benefits associated with high concentrations of young graduates in a city.

Importance of Retaining Students in Rural and Northern Towns

Retaining university graduates in rural and northern towns is crucial for their economic development. This is because investing in human capital has proven to produce sound returns. For example, in Ontario, it was found that every additional year of education produced a 10 percent return on investment in terms of labor market outcomes and employability³¹.

31 Massey, Jennifer. "Partnering for economic development: How town-gown relations impact local economic development in small and medium cities." *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 44, no. 2 (2014), 152-169. doi:10.47678/cjhe.v44i2.183813.



Moreover, university degree holders generated a 36-46 percent return over high school graduates, earning 70% higher salaries compared to those with only a high school diploma³². This further contributes to a higher GDP. Additionally, retaining students in their hometowns through increased job opportunities and skill development promotes innovation and diversification in the economy. For example, in Oshawa, entrepreneurship incubators such as the Spark Centre have been successful in providing business mentorship to students, and the cumulative investments in university research and development with entrepreneurship have increased the region's GDP by \$384.4 million in from 1971 to 2021³³.

Professional Development and Employment Opportunities

Skill development opportunities are fundamental to ensure students have the prerequisites to succeed in post-secondary spaces and meet employers' expectations of them in their future workplaces. However, there is a limited number of internship/experiential learning and work-integrated learning opportunities for students in rural and northern communities³⁴. Internally, post-secondary institutions can provide students with experiential learning opportunities by including them in institutional projects to fulfill their long-term strategic plans and meet the institution's goals and vision. However, at northern institutions, these projects are typically underfunded³⁵.

Additionally, the job market in rural and northern areas is predominantly centered around a single industry. A case in point is Woodstock, where the agricultural, industrial, and manufacturing sectors dominate employment opportunities, with major employers including Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Contrans Group Inc., and Vuteq Canada Inc³⁶. This

trend is observable in many small rural and northern communities, where agriculture, manufacturing, and healthcare sectors constitute the primary sources of employment³⁷. However, such a restricted and specialized job market poses potential challenges for students seeking employment, as such opportunities may not align with students' areas of study or interests³⁸. Additionally, while there are recruitment campaigns and training programs, such as the Prosper in Perth program in Perth County and the Northern Wellington Youth Connections event in the Town of Minto, many students are not aware of them.

Recommendations

Given the benefits associated with retaining students in rural and northern cities, municipalities have a huge responsibility to promote employment opportunities aligned with student interests. Municipalities can implement several strategies to facilitate skill development and employment opportunities for students in their communities. Within Ontario, there are numerous strategic town-gown partnerships that entice recent graduates to live and work in the locality. For example, the Mayor of London serves on the board of directors for the University of Western Ontario. This allows greater involvement of the municipality with the university, which has proven to create more opportunities for collaboration. Moreover, as the partnership strengthens, universities can **promote job fairs** and events held by rural communities and create more awareness about local employment options. Conversely, universities can organize their own job fairs or events and enlist the assistance of their rural partners to promote job opportunities in those areas.

32 Ibid

33 Federation of Canadian Municipalities. The Municipal Youth Engagement Handbook. 2021. <https://www.ubcm.ca/sites/default/files/2022-03/LGAW%20FCM%20-%20Municipal%20Youth%20Engagement%20Handbook.pdf>.

34 Abou-Rabia, Malek, David Bath, Katlyn Kotila, and Serina Seguin. Policy Paper: Rural & Northern Students. Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2020.

35 Abou-Rabia, Malek, David Bath, Katlyn Kotila, and Serina Seguin. Rural & Northern Students. Toronto

36 "Business Directory." City of Woodstock. Accessed July 17, 2023. <https://www.cityofwoodstock.ca/en/business-in-woodstock/business-directory.aspx>.

37 Rural Ontario Institute. Workforce Development in Rural Ontario - A Snapshot & Northern Perspective. 2019. https://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/uploads/userfiles/files/Workforce%20Development%20and%20Northern%20Perspective_Rural%20Ontario%20Foresight%20Papers.pdf.

38 Rural Ontario Institute, 2019



Municipal governments in rural and northern towns can engage with high schools and universities to create and promote opportunities for students. To reach a youth audience, municipalities need to be open to online tools and consider adopting new methods to communicate with constituents. By utilizing the most popular youth-accessed social media platforms or implementing innovative applications, municipalities can send a direct message to the next generation that they are willing to share, listen, and discuss local governance with them.

Municipalities are increasingly **forming partnerships** with post-secondary institutions and students to establish municipal, institutional, and student connections. For instance, the City of London offers paid internships to recent immigrants and individuals with limited work experience, aiming to enhance their employability and provide valuable job experience³⁹. Such project-based programs benefit students by offering work experience and skill development opportunities, while municipalities can leverage the skills of current employees and potentially diversify the local employment market⁴⁰.

Furthermore, **student-led organizations** like Rural & Ready can play a valuable role in supporting rural students. Rural & Ready focuses on developing soft skills and leadership abilities among rural students before they graduate from secondary school, providing guidance and support to better prepare them for post-secondary education⁴¹. Initiatives similar to this can benefit students in rural and northern areas by helping them find relevant skill development opportunities and enhancing their chances of success.

39 Nathan R. G. Barnett, Mymoon Bhuiyan, Sharon Birdi, Shemar Hackett, Muhammadhasan Nasser, and Cailean Thompson. Habitats: Students in their Municipalities: 2022. Toronto, ON. Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance. 2022.

40 Nathan R. G. Barnett, Mymoon Bhuiyan, Sharon Birdi, Shemar Hackett, Muhammadhasan Nasser, and Cailean Thompson. Habitats 2022

41 Rural and Ready. Accessed July 17, 2023. <https://www.ruralandready.com/>.



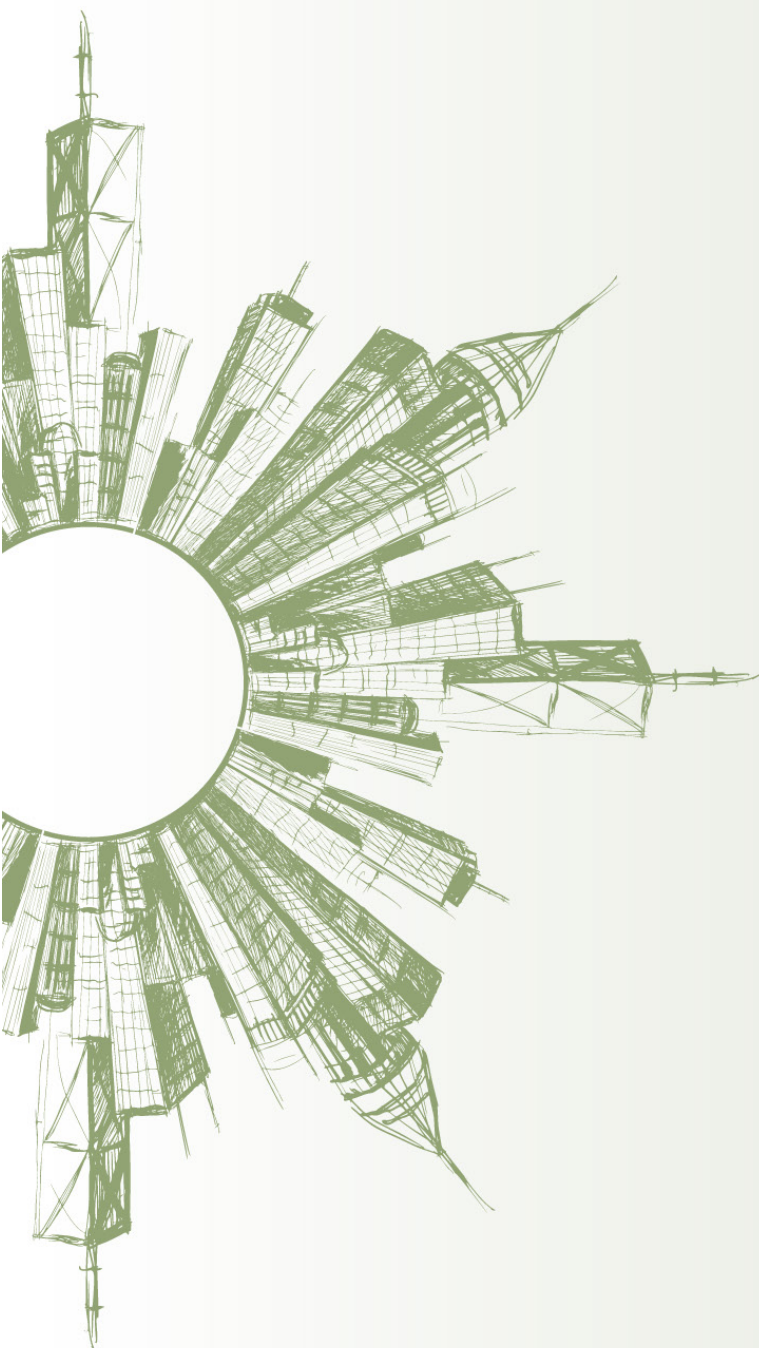
Partnering for Progress: How Organizations and Municipalities Can Work Together to Build Stronger Communities

by Emma Ouellette

Ontario is home to numerous small towns, many of which are situated in rural settings. These towns form the backbone of society and are integral to Ontario's spatial, social, and economic development. The Ontario government is currently making strong investments in rural communities to accelerate economic development, however local grassroots and community organizations have already been playing a crucial role within this space. Additionally, student involvement in such organizations, through post-secondary and community partnerships, has led to positive changes and innovation within rural and northern communities. Personally, I have been actively involved in a charity organization in Brigden, Ontario, known as the Moore Agricultural Society. As their ambassador and a member of the Board of Directors, I have been working closely with the local municipality to represent the student perspective on issues central to the community's well-being.

As more and more Canadians are approaching retirement age, the number of young Canadians entering the workforce is not keeping pace. For the municipal sector, this ongoing demographic shift represents a significant threat to its ability to provide essential services to citizens. Some rural municipalities expect 30-50% of their municipal employees to retire within the next five to ten years⁴². As the population is ageing, municipalities must engage with young residents to attract and retain the future of the workforce. The problem is that municipal

1 Federation of Canadian Municipalities. The Municipal Youth Engagement Handbook. 2021. <https://www.ubcm.ca/sites/default/files/2022-03/LGAW%20FCM%20-%20Municipal%20Youth%20Engagement%20Handbook.pdf>.



leaders need to engage their youth constituency through more outlets and in ways that are more accessible and interactive than ever before. Currently, youth engagement is low, especially in rural and northern municipalities. This is clear from the declining youth voter turnout in communities across Canada. Therefore, through my experience, I believe one way to increase youth engagement is by fostering connection between local organizations and municipalities.

When municipalities collaborate with students and community organizations, solutions become localized, and decentralizing decision-making empowers local leaders and students, thereby fostering greater ownership and engagement among rural communities. A perfect example of this was during the pandemic when local organizations and municipalities supported each other. Students witnessed increasing levels of isolation within their communities and took it upon themselves to engage the youth and organize the Moore Ag Society's Brigden Fair on Thanksgiving weekend. Through innovative ideas and outreach strategies, the fair drew a crowd of 40,000 to 60,000 patrons, including students, local members, and outside visitors who came out to support other local businesses like restaurants, novelty stores, chain stores, or gas stations ⁴³.

Local organizations may have unique insights or perspectives on community issues that can help municipalities develop more effective solutions. By involving these organizations in problem-solving processes, municipalities can access a wider range of expertise and ideas. For instance, during the annual conference hosted by the Economic Developers Council of Ontario (EDCO), a session co-hosted by the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) focused on "Rural & Small Communities: Evolving the Competitive Edge: Rural Community Engagement." Students from the University of Waterloo's Local Economic Development (LED) program volunteered to facilitate the discussion and take detailed notes, producing a report that provid-

ed valuable insights used by the local municipality to drive progress initiatives⁴⁴.

How can we strengthen the partnership between students, local organisations and municipalities

Municipalities can engage student groups through **social media**, encouraging students to become involved in local politics and make a difference in their daily lives⁴⁵. Students can voice their opinions through media they are fluent in and comfortable using, and they can also help create and manage social media pages for rural municipalities to connect with new community residents. Utilizing multiple media channels can promote diverse perspectives.

Municipalities can establish a **youth council** and assign community problems for them to create solutions. This initiative can serve as a mentorship program for future politicians and students interested in politics, ensuring the strength and prosperity of future local governments while fostering civil engagement. Students in this program can benefit from different resources such as public policies, guidance, and industry professional contacts, instilling a sense of pride in their community as they act and make positive differences.

To attract the next generation of municipal leaders, young residents must be engaged in ways that excite, interest, and invest them in the plans and processes shaping the community's future. Post-secondary students have numerous opportunities to get involved with nonprofit organizations and municipalities through various **clubs and interest groups**.

For example, Western University has a Best Buddies club; and post-secondary students work with the municipality through this to enrich the lives of those in the community by fostering one-to-one friendships between adults with intellectual/developmental disabilities and Western students.

Students bring fresh ideas and new perspectives to municipal decisions because they are future

43 Maw, Kyle. "Moore Agricultural Society." Brigden Fair. Last modified July 31, 2016. <https://www.brigdenfair.ca/society/>.

44 Attygalle, Lisa. "Community Engagement in Rural Areas." Tamarack Institute. Accessed July 17, 2023. <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/latest/community-engagement-in-rural-areas>.

45 Bailey, Jordyn D. "Municipal Government: Social Media and Youth Engagement." PhD diss., University of Windsor, 2019.



residents, making decisions that will have the most impact on their demographic. By considering their opinions, local governments can better understand the needs, expectations, and aspirations of upcoming generations, allowing for better long-term planning. Including the voices of university students in municipal decision-making ensures representation and inclusivity, empowering young students to be active participants in shaping their community and preventing decisions that may neglect their specific needs. Engaging with students helps municipal governments make more informed decisions to build a vibrant, inclusive, and progressive community for all residents.



Recentring Attention on the Social Determinants of Health to Build Health Equity in Ontario

by Elizabeth Wong

The feeling of being distant from one's support system, adapting to new work and learning environments, and lacking sufficient resources is not uncommon among post-secondary students. As we transition into a post-pandemic world, it is evident that mental health concerns are on the rise, especially among students in rural and northern Ontario. According to Ontario's universities, the number of college and university students dealing with identified mental health issues has doubled in the past five years ⁴⁶.

Numerous studies have highlighted the regional disparities in student access to healthcare and mental health supports between rural and urban areas of Ontario. However, there is still a limited understanding of how Social Determinants of Health (SDH) affect students. Moreover, the role of municipalities in creating conducive conditions for the promotion of student health and wellness, specifically in regard to the SDH is often overlooked.

What does one mean by Social Determinants of Health (SDH)?

SDH refers to the non-medical factors that influence health outcomes. They include the wider set of forces and systems that shape the conditions of daily life and relate to conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live and age⁴⁷. Social determinants of health include, but are not limited to, income, education level, job insecurity, food insecurity, access

⁴⁶ "Mental Health." Ontario's Universities. Last modified July 29, 2022. <https://ontariosuniversities.ca/issues-priorities/student-supports>.

⁴⁷ World Health Organization (WHO). "Social Determinants of Health." Last modified May 30, 2019. https://www.who.int/health-topics/social-determinants-of-health#tab=tab_1.



to services, and social inclusion¹.

Are there regional disparities in mental health across Ontario?

In Canada, health inequalities are highly evident, particularly among students residing in rural and northern Ontario. These students face poorer mental health and greater health disparities compared to the rest of the province. A significant number of them experience depression, have higher suicide rates, and generally lower life expectancy⁴⁹. Moreover, environmental constraints in rural and northern Ontario, such as exposure to tobacco smoke or wildfire residue, disproportionately contribute to tuberculosis and other injuries among residents of these regions.

The Ministry of Health and Long Term Care acknowledges that access to quality healthcare has been a longstanding issue in rural, remote, and northern communities of Ontario. Various factors contribute to this inequitable access, including geographic remoteness, long distances, low population density, lack of available healthcare providers, and harsh weather conditions⁵⁰. Additionally, the lack of data on the health status of the northern population, especially First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students, hinders the ability to accurately understand and address health inequalities⁵¹.

Furthermore, existing provincial surveys often fail to account for the social determinants of health, limiting their effectiveness in assessing the true extent of the problem⁵². To address mental health concerns in Ontario's rural and remote areas, it is vital to consider the influence of social determinants of health. For instance, the colonialist history of Canada has creat-

ed unique mental health service needs and delivery challenges for Indigenous students. Intergenerational trauma stemming from residential schools, oppressive policies, and colonial healing practices has led to higher rates of substance use, mental health issues, and suicide within these communities.

Doesn't health and wellness fall under the purview of the provincial government?

While the legislative foundation for public health primarily falls under the purview of the provincial government, municipalities possess the agility, focus, and contextual understanding to address the social determinants of health more effectively. Many factors that contribute to a student's environment are controlled by municipalities.

These include drinking water quality, waste management, noise pollution, land use policies, availability of green spaces, and recreational facilities, all of which impact the overall health of the student population. Additionally, municipal policies and services like local transportation, affordable housing, zoning, and food security also significantly influence the health of students. For example, a study found that closer access to greener spaces around campus contributed to the positive mental health of students leading to higher academic achievement rates⁵³.

Within Ontario, the Association of Municipalities Ontario reported that 90 percent of municipal operational expenditures (\$42.5 billion) directly or indirectly contribute to the social determinants of health⁵⁴. When it comes to more direct and medical forms of health support, the provincial government funds 70 percent of health units in Ontario, but the remaining costs are covered by municipal governm-

48 World Health Organisation, 2019

49 Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. Rural and Northern Health Care Report- Executive Summary. 2019. https://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/public/programs/ruralnorthern/docs/exec_summary_rural_northern_en.pdf.

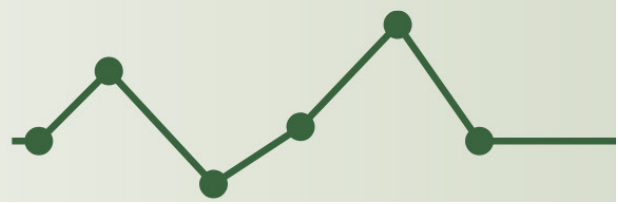
50 Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care.

51 Margo Lianne Greenwood, PhD, Sarah Naomi de Leeuw, PhD, Social determinants of health and the future well-being of Aboriginal children in Canada, Paediatrics & Child Health, Volume 17, Issue 7, August 2012, Pages 381–384, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pch/17.7.381>

52 Mental Health Commission of Canada. Rural and Remote Mental Health in Canada- Evidence Brief on Best and Promising Practices. 2017. https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/wp-content/uploads/drupal/2020-05/Rural_remote_mental_health_evidence_brief_eng.pdf.

53 Liu, Wanting, Ning Sun, Jingyu Guo, and Zhenhua Zheng. 2022. "Campus Green Spaces, Academic Achievement and Mental Health of College Students" International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health 19, no. 14: 8618. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19148618>

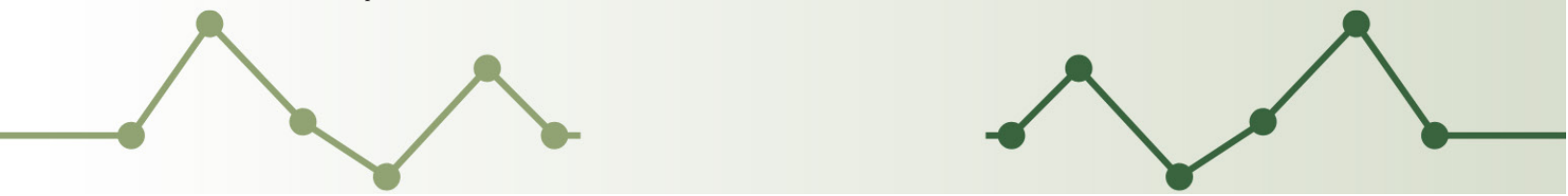
54 Association of Municipalities Ontario, "Municipal governments are partners in community health," webpage, August 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.amo.on.ca/advocacy/health-human-services/municipal-governments-are-partners-community-health>

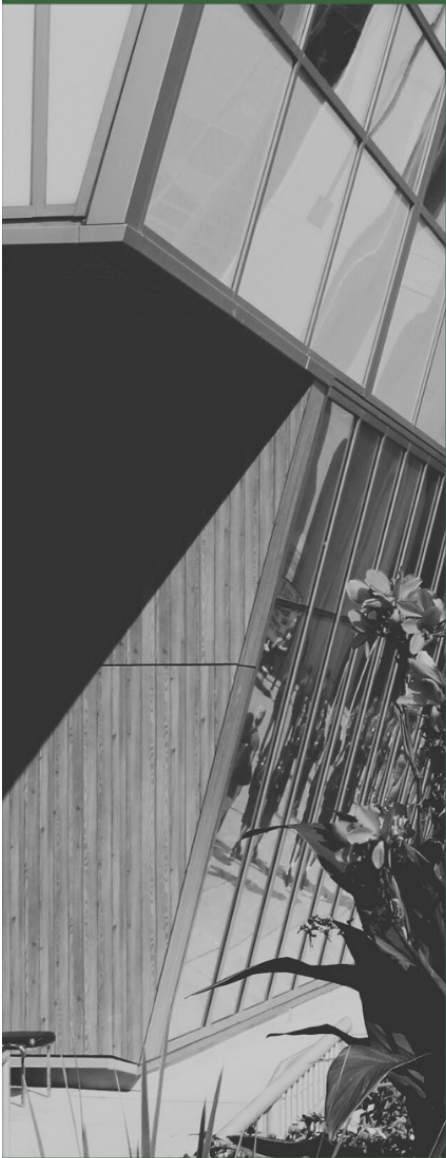


ments ⁵⁵. Municipalities also have representation within regional boards, giving them a chance to collaborate and advocate with other stakeholders. Therefore, while the legislative basis for mental health lies at the provincial level, municipalities often play a direct role in addressing the social determinants of mental health more effectively. They have the contextual knowledge and can leverage local relationships to find innovative and culturally appropriate ways to rectify health inequalities.

Based on OUSA’s recommendations from the policy papers, it is crucial that municipalities take a more active stance in consulting with local community members and students. Since they have more capacity as well as direct reach and local relationships, solutions identified through consultations will help in addressing student mental health in a more contextual and culturally relevant manner. In summary, mental health and wellness are integral parts of a society’s social fabric, many of which are directly influenced by municipal policies, governance, and initiatives. As mental health and wellness gain traction within governmental policies and initiatives, it is essential to consider the social determinants of health and approach these issues through a decentralized pathway.

55 Association of Municipalities Ontario, 2022





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