

# BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM

*Teaching and Learning in  
Contemporary Higher Education*

*The 2014 What Students Want  
Report Series*

**OUSAA**  
Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance



# ABOUT OUSA

*OUSA represents the interests of over 140,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at seven institutions 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.*



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

6 / OUSA asked students to answer questions about their experience with high-impact learning, active and participatory learning, work-integrated learning, and online courses. Students were also asked to provide their impressions about what resources should be prioritized within their university, as well as how they viewed the balance between teaching and learning at their institution.

We've found that, for the most part, students are accessing high-impact and work-integrated learning at greater rates than ever, and are having a broad selection of pedagogical experiences. We've also found that more than half of students have experienced an online course. Generally, students are either neutral or positive about the impact these experiences have had on their education.

Students prioritize instructor training to a notable margin over increasing research opportunities and reducing class sizes, and feel that universities generally prioritize research over teaching when balancing the two missions.

# INTRODUCTION

The 2013 Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey (OPSSS) is the third in a series of biennial surveys conducted by the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance. These surveys ask undergraduate and professional students across Ontario a series of questions regarding several important aspects of student life at university, including cost, available resources, and their educational experiences.

2013's survey was answered by nearly 9,000 students from across the province, and provides those of us in the post-secondary system, and beyond, with important insights into their challenges and priorities. OUSA will be releasing a series of reports on our findings from the survey in the hopes that the resulting discussion can positively influence those students through meaningful discussion and public policy.

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance is a not-for-profit research and advocacy organization representing more than 140,000 students through their local student associations. OUSA works with its seven member organizations to provide educated solutions to students' concerns in the areas of quality, accountability, accessibility and affordability in Ontario's public universities.

# HIGH-IMPACT LEARNING EXPERIENCES

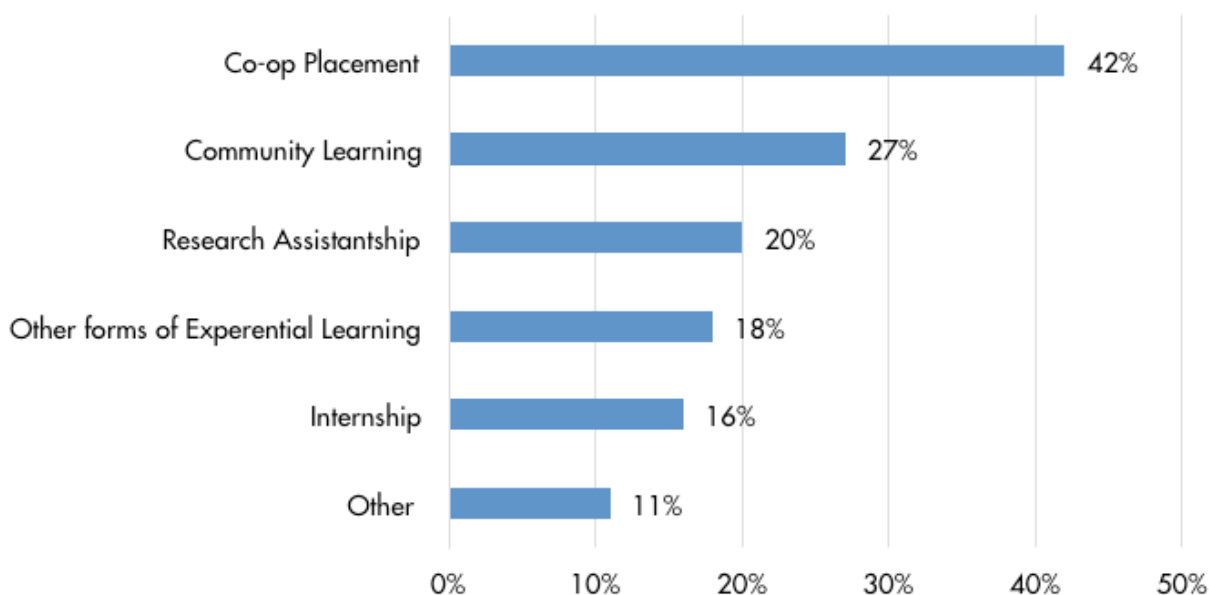
A high-impact learning experience is one in which a student ‘learns by doing’ tasks related to their academics in an environment that allows for structured learning and critical reflections. These experiences allow for students to apply theoretical skills and insights to real-world, contemporary applications. Similarly, this allows professors and even students to bring such practical examples into the classroom in an impactful way.

OUSA has long advocated that interested students be assured of the opportunity for at least one high-impact experience during the course of their studies. These can include (but are not limited to) any of: a capstone (thesis or research) project; a research study or assistance-ship; community service learning; work-integrated learning or independent study.

About half of all students (48 per cent) indicated that they had participated in at least one high-impact learning experience during their studies. Surveyed students could select all options that applied to them; the breakdown of the types of high impact experiences are shown in Figure 1.

Of the students who identified an “other” high impact learning experience, some mentioned student exchange programs, clinical placements, field studies or trips, practicum placements, sports-related experiences, residence supervisory experiences, teaching assistantships, thesis programs, and volunteer work. The wide variety, and significant amount, of “other” entries points to the continually evolving relationship between classrooms and the broader learning environment as well as the breadth of opportunities that students see as contributing to, or benefitting from, their in-class learning.

**Figure 1: Percentage of Students Who Have Participated in Active Learning Experiences**





# INTERNSHIPS

OUSA has long paid special attention to internships, in particular unpaid internships. Unpaid internships, particularly those facilitated by post-secondary institutions, provide limited protections for participants under Ontario's Employment Standards Act (ESA). Even outside of the discussion of official protections, students are becoming concerned about the expectation that students and recent graduates will undertake unpaid work as a form of a prolonged 'job interview' or in order to gain training that should be provided by employers.

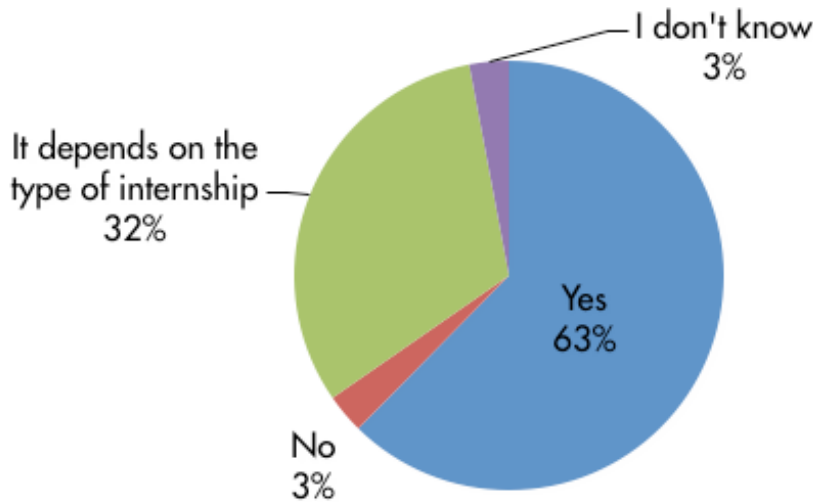
This is an especially troubling cultural shift in light of recent evidence from the National Association of Colleges and Employers that shows that the employment outcomes for those undertaking an unpaid internship were negligible (1.8 per cent better) than those who hadn't taken an internship at all.<sup>1</sup> When it came to salaries, students with unpaid internships fared worse than both students with paid internships and those without internships at all.<sup>2</sup>

In OUSA's survey, 12 per cent of respondents said that they had participated in at least one unpaid internship during their education. The remaining

students were asked if they would ever undertake an unpaid internship. Just over half these students (53 per cent) said they would consider it, however most felt that it would be dependent on the perceived value of the internship. The remaining 47 per cent felt that they would not undertake an unpaid internship under any circumstance.

As can be seen in Figure 2, the majority of students felt that all internships should be paid at least the minimum wage. Of the remainder, the vast majority felt that it would depend on the type of internship and its perceived employment or educational value.

**Figure 2: Student Opinion on Whether All Internships Should be Paid**



# ONLINE LEARNING

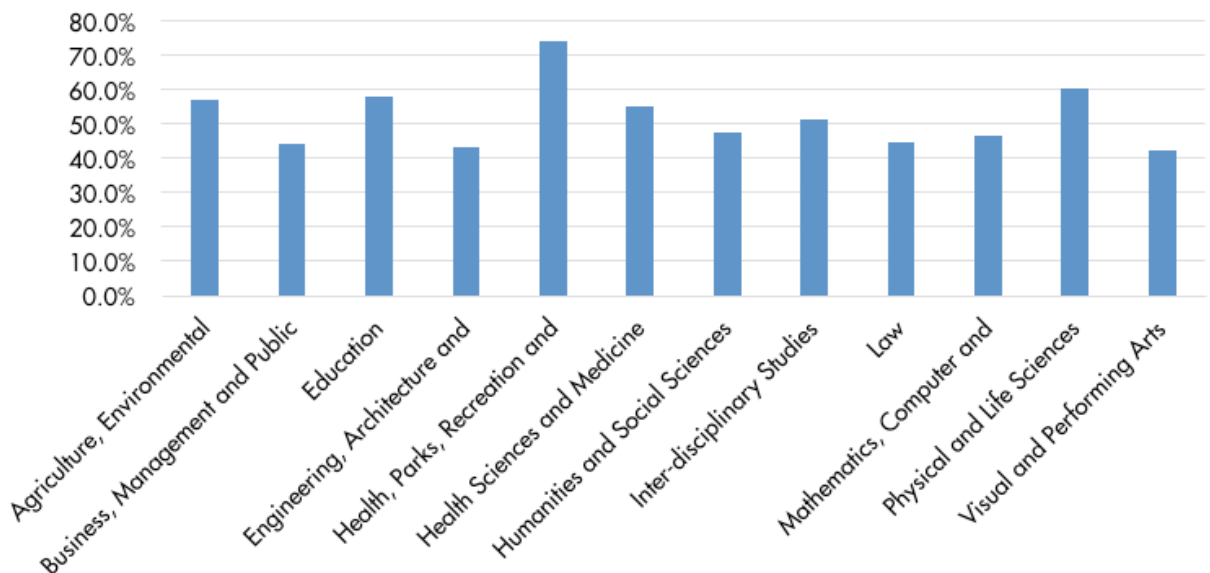
Online learning, and other forms of technology enabled learning, have the potential to provide innovative delivery of content in formats with which younger Ontarians are becoming increasingly comfortable. It also has the potential to augment the tools used to support students with learning disabilities, differing learning styles or even those with various demands on their time. This can be accomplished by delivering information in a variety of formats or in an on-demand fashion.

The growth of individual online courses, and even online programs, shows that students and universities see the value in providing some primarily online offerings. OUSA welcomes the continuing expansion of online learning as a means of broadening access to post-secondary education and of choice for students already undertaking higher education. It is important to note that online education shouldn't be looked to primarily as a cost saving measure, as it presents its own set of costs which, initially at least, can equal traditionally delivered options. Further, this method of delivery is most effective when coupled with appropriate supports and preparation – meaning special consideration and planning.

Our survey reflected this growth in online learning, with over half (53per cent) of all students having participated in at least one class that was delivered primarily online. Of those students who had taken a course delivered online however, opinions about the impact of the educational experience were largely ambivalent. Nearly a third of students felt that online delivery had no impact on their educational experience within the course; of the remaining students most were equally split between somewhat better and somewhat worse, with only small amounts indicating that the experience was much worse (10 per cent) or much better (7 per cent).

Students in Health, Parks, Recreation and Leisure students were most likely to have taken a primarily online course, with nearly three-quarters of students reporting having taken one. The next most likely areas of study were Physical and Life Sciences or Agriculture, Environmental Sciences and Conservation – both around 60 per cent. Students were nearly 15 per cent less likely to have taken a primarily online class in the disciplines of Engineering or Architecture, Law, and Visual and Performing Arts.

**Figure 3: Students Who Have Taken a Primarily Online Course by Area of Study**



# ACTIVE & PARTICIPATORY CLASSROOMS

Active or participatory learning techniques are activities such as discussion based learning, seminars, problem-based learning, and inquiry based learning. Such techniques are generally recognized as being effective ways of delivery content and learning, but only about half of graduates participate in any form of active-participatory learning.<sup>3</sup> Research has found that those who undertake an active or participatory learning experience not only come away with better retention and application of the material, but those students who interact in a structured way with peers will have higher levels of academic development, problem solving skills, and persistence and completion.<sup>4</sup>

As part of its Student Success standing policy, OUSA has long advocated for increased resources so that universities can provide more classes centered on active learning or can incorporate more participatory techniques into existing courses. As part of the OPSSS, OUSA asked students if they would choose to have more active and participatory elements in their classes, were it up to them.

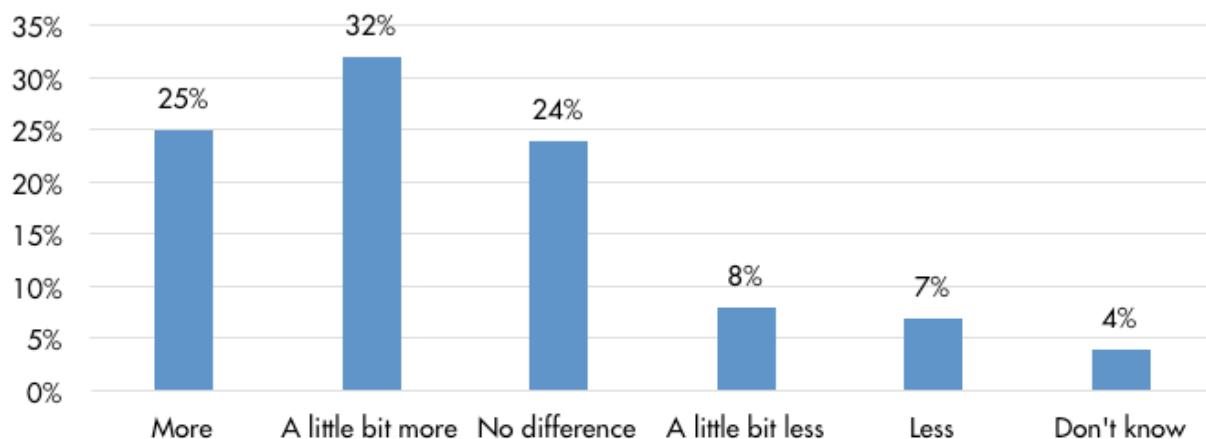
57 per cent of students indicated that they would

rather have more active learning elements in their studies, while only 15 per cent of surveyed students felt that they would rather have less or a bit less.

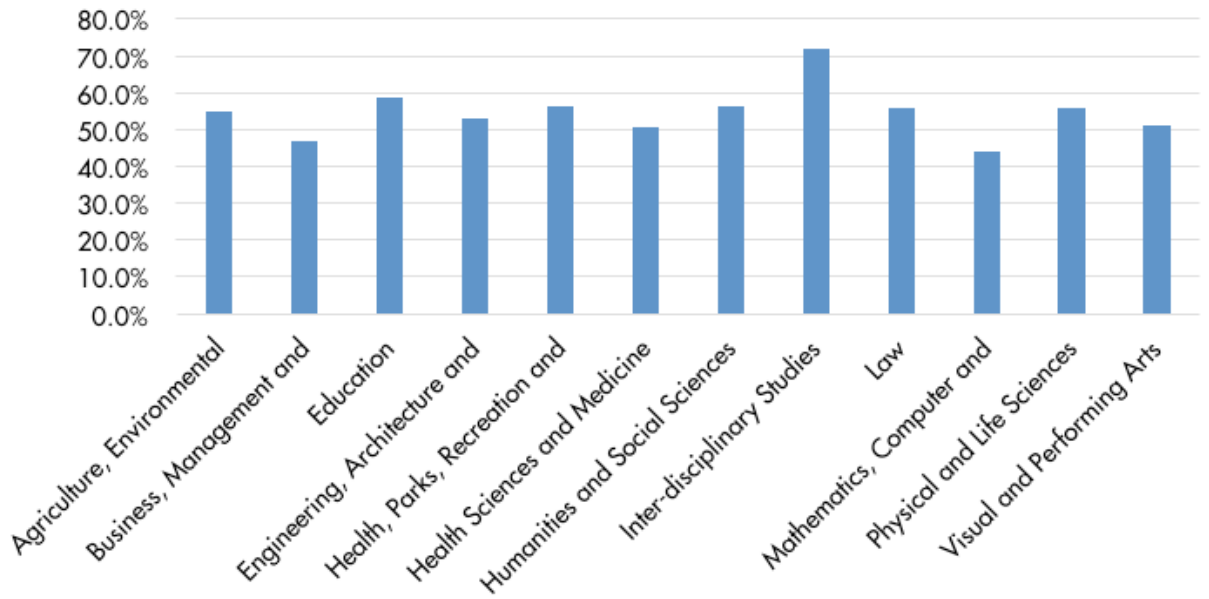
By far, students in Inter-Disciplinary Studies were most likely to say that they wanted more, or a bit more, active or participatory delivery in their classes. The next likely study areas to want such techniques integrated were in Education, Parks, Recreation and Leisure, and Law: all of which were around 55 to 60 per cent.

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**Figure 4: Proportion of Students Who Would Have Thier Courses Use More or Less Active or Participatory-Based Learning Techniques**



**Figure 5: Students Who Want More Active Learning by Area of Study**



# RESOURCE PRIORITIES

Students were asked which of three initiatives they would choose to direct resources to if they had this opportunity. The three initiatives listed were training for instructors in teaching methods, increased research opportunities for faculty and students, or smaller class sizes.

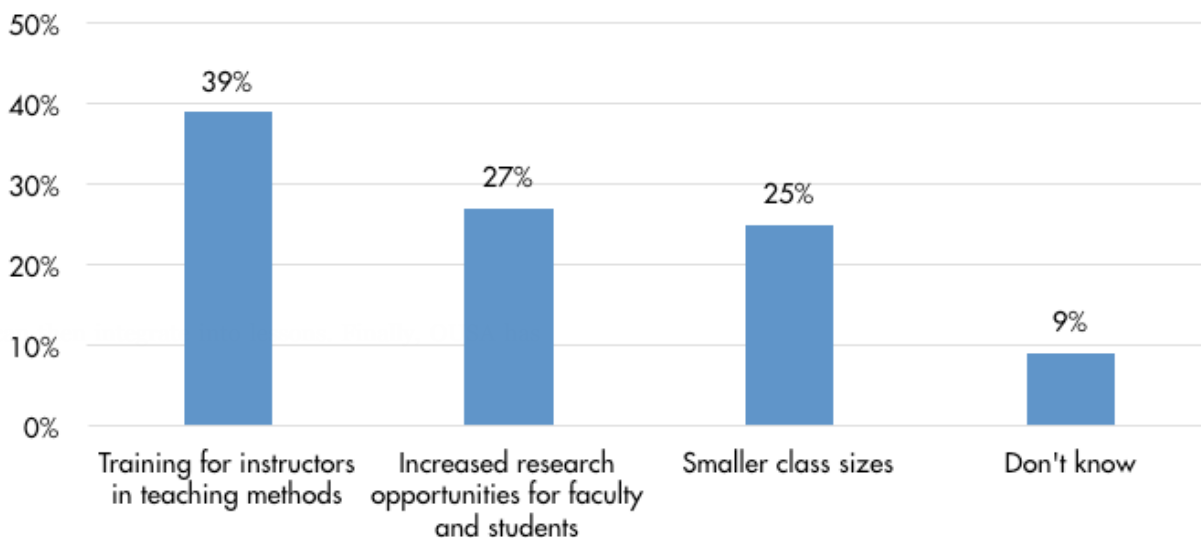
OUSA, as part of its policy on Student Success, calls for a variety of supports in fulfilling each of these priorities. Student representatives have asked that the government, institutions and faculty support enhanced training for all those who will be offering students instruction. In pursuit an enhanced educational experience for students, OUSA has asked that students be offered greater access to high-impact learning, which includes research opportunities for students.

Students similarly support the inclusion of current and leading research in the classroom, and so recognize the importance of continuing to provide faculty who will be teaching with research that they can then integrate into lessons. Finally, OUSA has long called for the hiring of new, full time and long term faculty who will spend at least a majority of

time teaching – ideally leading to lower class sizes and better learning experiences. This is not intended to preclude research, but rather ensure that students have access to faculty who combine both teaching and research.

Of our surveyed students, nearly 40 per cent indicated that their priority for resources would be in enhanced training for instructors in teaching methods. 27 per cent and 25 per cent pointed toward increased research opportunities for faculty and students, and smaller class sizes respectively. Students were allowed to select “don’t know”, and 9 per cent did so.

**Figure 6: Choice of Initiative in Which to Direct Resources**



# BALANCING TEACHING & RESEARCH

When asked how well the university does at balancing its obligation to teaching and research, results were somewhat mixed. One in five students indicated that they didn't know, and 30 per cent reported that they felt it was well balanced. However, 38 per cent felt that their university puts more emphasis on research. The remaining 13 per cent indicated that their university put more emphasis on teaching.

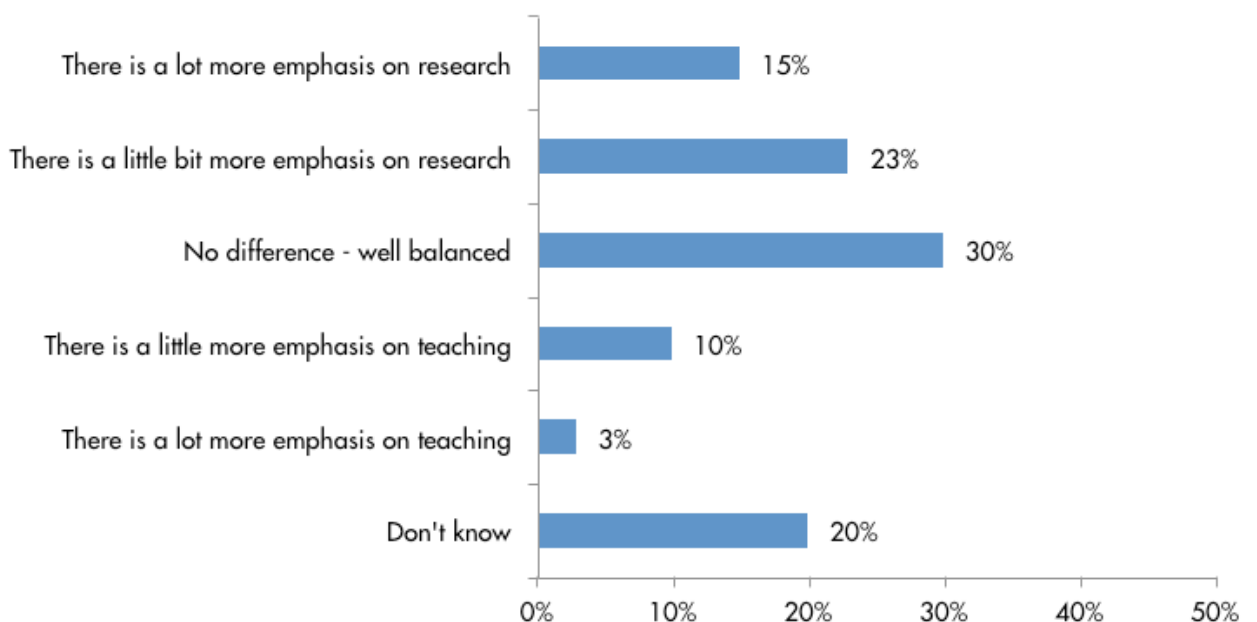
The results get particularly interesting when you adjust for university. When looking at those students from each OUSA school whom answered that they felt their university focused on either teaching or research we find the below results. The only students who felt that a balance between the two areas are achieved were those at Wilfrid Laurier University and Trent University in Oshawa, and only WLU's students felt there was a slight favouring of teaching at their institution.

Of the remaining institutions, students at McMaster University and the University of

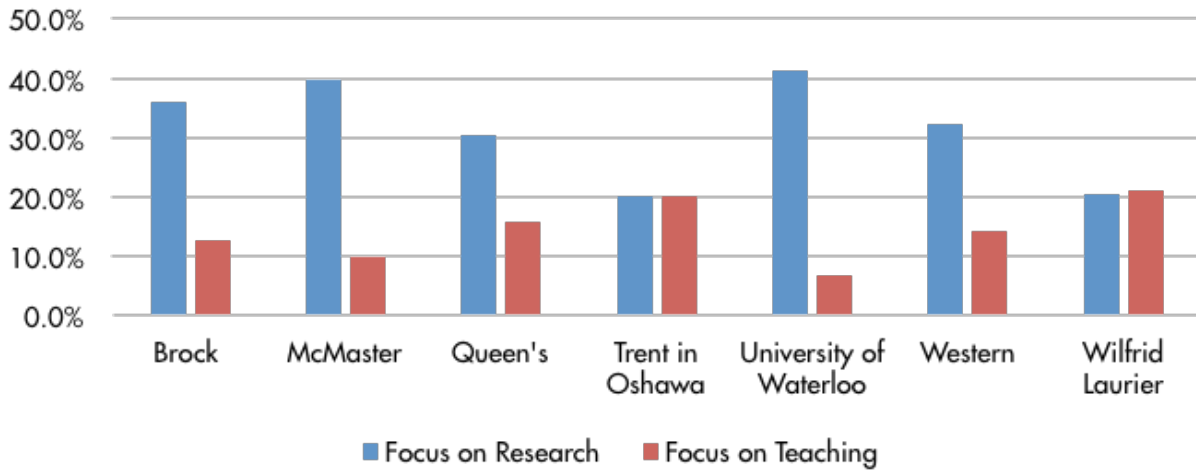
Waterloo indicated feeling the greatest gap between teaching and research.

Just as interestingly, when viewing the results by area of study, no majority of students felt that their university focused on teaching over research. Students who identified as Education students, or Visual and Performing Arts students, indicated the closest balance between the two. A student studying Engineering and Architecture, Mathematics, or Agriculture, Environmental Science and Conservation were all more likely to say their university focused on research over teaching.

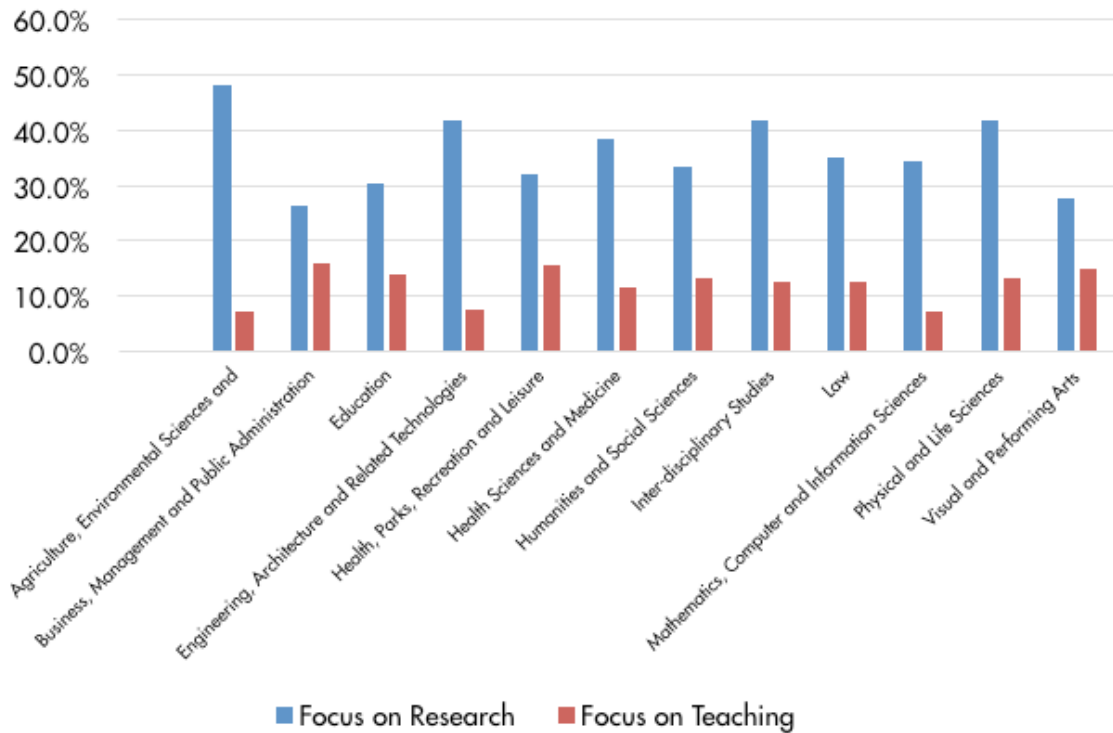
**Figure 7: Balancing Research and Teaching**



### Figure 8: Focus on Research or Teaching by University



### Figure 9: Focus on Research or Teaching by Area of Study



# CONCLUSION

OUSA's biennial survey serves as an important opportunity to have students share their concerns and priorities, to tell us what they want and need. Few things are as pressing or tangible for students as their educational experience. The above findings are presented in order to not only inform OUSA's work, but that of the sector's as a whole.

Students are experiencing education in new and different ways. Be it online, active or work-integrated, we can see that how learning happens is different and varied. Students generally seem to want more of these things, each of which is going to required strategies of support and expansion. Students are aware that there needs to be more instructors, and that those instructors are given tools to expand their own skills and to share their findings in a classroom setting. Finally, students are aware that their institutions are placing relative emphasis on the teaching and research missions of the university.

Going forward, we look forward to bringing these findings to all those who have a role to play in enhancing the educational experience for students.



# ENDNOTES

- 1.) National Association of Colleges and Employers. 2013. *2013 Student Survey*.
- 2.) Ibid.
- 3.) The Center for Postsecondary Research: Indiana. 2012. *National Survey of Student Engagement*.
- 4.) Kuh, G. Gonyea, R. Shoup, R. & Kinze, J. 2007. "Promoting persistence and success of underrepresented students: lessons for teaching and learning." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, pg. 21-38.





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**RECOMMENDED CITATION**

Madden, S. (2014). *Beyond the Traditional Classroom: Teaching and Learning in Contemporary Higher Education*. Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance.