

STUDENT SUCCESS

The Problem

Discussing quality of education has always been difficult. A high-quality education has traditionally meant different things to different stakeholders. The difficulty in finding a common definition of quality has become problematic in recent years, since quality is one of the benchmarks the province uses to measure the effectiveness of Ontario institutions. In 2005, the review of Ontario higher education conducted by the Honourable Bob Rae recommended that quality be measured and reviewed for accountability purposes.¹ While this accountability is overwhelmingly necessary, the question of what constitutes quality education remains unanswered.

For this reason, OUSA is advocating a student-focused conversation about educational quality. Rather than asking “what makes a quality education?” the province should be asking “what do students need from their education to be successful?” For a learning environment to be conducive to student success, the student experience both inside and outside the classroom must be engaging, dynamic, and fulfil student needs.

Unfortunately, the in-class experience of most Ontario students is defined by outdated learning methods and shaky support systems. For instance, the learning method most utilized at universities is the lecture. While this teaching method is the academic tradition, a significant amount of research has shown that its effectiveness with regards to knowledge retention and student engagement is inferior to more collaborative and active learning techniques.² Furthermore, while primary and secondary teachers are required to undergo extensive training and professional development before entering the classroom, professors that teach lectures are not required to have any formal training in teaching or presentation skills.

When students face difficulties with their classes, the difference between persistence and dropping out often comes down to the support networks available on-campus. The frontline efforts put forward by academic support centres and health/counselling centres make an enormous difference in keeping at-risk students in the system. Unfortunately, fiscal pressures on institutions have strained resources for these support centres.³

The Result

Without engaging in-class experiences and proper out-of-class support networks, students on the margin of success are in danger of falling through the cracks in the postsecondary education system. This is particularly true for some underrepresented groups, who have historically lower student engagement rates.⁴ Student engagement is of particular relevance due to the fact that it is strongly correlated with persistence. Student services that could assist at-risk students adjust to university life require proper support to fulfil their mission. Unfortunately, due to financial pressures facing institutions, these services are often not able to grow to meet student demand. This is particularly concerning given the fact that underrepresented groups are projected to take on a greater share of enrolment in the coming years.⁵

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1. Bob Rae. 2005. *Ontario: A Leader in Learning*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario.
 2. George Kuh, Jillian Kinzie, Jennifer A. Buckley, Brian K. Bridges, and John C. Hayek. 2007. *Piecing Together the Student Success Puzzle: Research, Propositions and Recommendations*. ASHE Higher Education Report 32.5. Chicago.
 3. Phil Wood. 2009. *Interview with Dr. Phil Wood, Dean of Students at McMaster University*. Personal interview.
 4. Kuh et al., 2007.
 5. Joseph Berger. 2008. *“Why Access Matters” Revisited: A Review of the Latest Research*. Ottawa: Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

With regards to teaching methods and training, Ontario universities often do not deliver education that is as conducive to student success as could be possible. Innovative teaching practices can be found at many Ontario schools, but they are often exclusive small limited-enrolment programs. Students in larger faculties would benefit from educationally effective practices such as learning communities, service learning and collaborative assignments. In the 2007 National Survey of Student Engagement report, it was highlighted that over half of graduating seniors had never taken part in community-based learning.⁶ Additionally, students from under-represented groups were significantly less likely to have participated in non-traditional teaching methods.⁶ Furthermore, in a 2009 study of Ontario survey results before and after the first year, it was determined that students are widely disappointed in the extent to which collaborative learning and interaction with faculty members takes place.⁷ Conversely, at institutions like the University of Saskatchewan where community-based learning has been implemented, reports have shown 10% grade increases as well as positive student feedback and satisfaction.⁸

The Solution

OUSA believes that the following changes must be implemented to improve the success of Ontario students:

1. Funding must be designated to found and maintain instructional support programs, in order to encourage innovation in teaching and provide professional development for Ontario's university instructors. Additionally, all new PhD students should be given formal instruction in teaching. Furthermore, quality teaching should be weighed equally with research performance for all decisions relating to hiring, promotion, and tenure. For **innovative and engaging pedagogy** to be present at institutions, instructors must learn the skills to deliver it.
2. To ensure student services are adequately supported to meet current demand and to reach out to students who need them the most, the **provincial government must create envelopes within the funding formula that designate specific amounts per FTE for student support services**, such as academic support services, aboriginal resource centres, and health/counselling services.
3. The provincial government must mandate institutions to **develop early warning systems to proactively identify and assist those students who may need greater support**, particularly in first year. This would ensure that first year students who experience difficulty with the transition to university are assisted early on, and that habits conducive to student success are fostered at the beginning of their post-secondary careers.
4. The provincial government should provide financial incentives for universities to develop **comprehensive undergraduate research opportunity programs and international exchanges**, to increase the interaction of students and faculty and enhance the undergraduate learning experience. Studies have shown that participation in undergraduate research makes it more likely for students to master complex concepts and develop critical and independent thinking skills.⁹

6. National Survey on Student Engagement. 2007. *Experiences that Matter: Enhancing Student Learning and Success: Annual Report 2007*. Bloomington: Indiana University.

7. Maureen Mancuso, Serge Desmarais, Kelly Parkinson, and Brian Pettigrew. 2010. *Disappointment, Misunderstanding and Expectations: A Gap Analysis of NSSE, BCSSE and FSSE*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

8. University of Saskatchewan. 2010. *U of S Learning Community Student Grades 10% Higher*. Press Release, May 7th 2010. Saskatoon.

9. Emmanuel Nnadozie, John Ishiyama, and Jane Chon. 2001. *Undergraduate Research Internships and Graduate School Success*. Kirksville, Montana: Truman State University.