

The question of exactly what constitutes a quality education has long plagued the post-secondary sector. The concept lacks coherent definition, and will necessarily vary between stakeholders in higher education. But one thing is clear: the question cannot be properly addressed without taking into account the holistic experience of the primary stakeholders in the post-secondary system: students.

Students believe that the post-secondary sector must broaden traditional discussions of educational quality. Rather than focusing narrowly on inputs and outputs, institutions and the government should be asking “what do students need from their education to be successful?” By adopting this more student-centred approach, OUSA hopes to re-focus the discussion on the primary stakeholder, and thereby find some concrete solutions to problems facing us today.

## The Problem

The undergraduate experience in Ontario is largely defined by outdated teaching methods and shaky support systems. For instance, the traditional lecture style of teaching remains all but ubiquitous in the sector, despite the fact that the best available evidence points to it as being the least effective teaching model.<sup>1</sup> More active teaching styles, a few of which are outlined below, provide students with the opportunity to further engage with their professors, peers, and community, and as a result are far more effective at promoting student success.<sup>2</sup>

Teaching Style	Description
<b>Community and peer-based learning</b>	Adopted in some jurisdictions in the United States, CPL functions by co-registering small sections of students in first year courses, creating a consistent learning community across a number of courses. These students help each other learn and live in the university setting, fostering a cooperative environment crucial to deep learning and student success.
<b>First year seminars</b>	Small first-year classes are not only geared toward better retention of subject matter through increased student-faculty interaction, but also help facilitate closer interaction between students at the beginning of their university experience, setting the stage for success throughout their university career.
<b>Capstone project</b>	These consist of a high-intensity project undertaken in a student's final year of study, such as a thesis, directed study, or lab project. Students have the opportunity to work closely with an academic supervisor in order to develop their own project management and inquiry skills.

That the traditional didactic lecture is so widespread should come as no surprise; professors are not required to have any formal training in teaching or presentation skills, unlike their primary and secondary school counterparts. In fact, the current system actually discourages professors seeking to improve their teaching ability. Faculty are often given no reprieve from the regular duties in order to attend teaching conferences or seminars, research takes precedence over teaching ability in hiring and promotion decisions, and the academy largely remains attached to an approach to teaching rooted in tradition.

Moreover, students are not getting the out-of-classroom support they need to succeed inside the classroom. Historic barriers for underrepresented students, the lack of preparation students receive from high school, and the lack of awareness about existing support programs all work to prohibit student success at the individual level. While there are some support programs in place, without a mechanism to track students through the entirety of their educational experience, there is little to indicate early on whether a student is showing signs of struggling with or leaving their studies.

<sup>1</sup> Kuh, George D., 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, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Bourner (1997). Cited in (Kuh et al, 2007, p. 91).

## The Result

Without a strategic direction for university teaching in Ontario, education is not being delivered in a way that is most conducive to fostering student success. Innovative teaching practices can be found at many Ontario institutions, but they are often only offered in exclusive small limited-enrolment programs. A 2009 study of Ontario survey results before and after the first year showed that students are widely disappointed in the extent to which collaborative learning and interaction with faculty members takes place.<sup>3</sup> In another study, students were found to only be participating during an average of 6% of their class time – about five minutes per 90 minute class.<sup>4</sup> Students are not having the opportunity to engage in active learning experiences as a core component of their education in Ontario.

Furthermore, students on the margins are in danger of falling through the cracks of the post-secondary education system unless early warning mechanisms and sufficient support for the broader learning environment are prioritized at Ontario universities. This is particularly true for some underrepresented groups, who have historically lower student engagement rates.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, financial pressures prohibit our institutions from adequately investing in these student support services. Given that 15% of university students will be diagnosed with a mental health condition during their studies – and this figure only includes those who seek help – we cannot afford to underinvest in this area.<sup>6</sup>

## The Solution

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

1. The provincial government rightly holds universities accountable for their public support through targeted funding and multi-year accountability agreements. In order to ensure that our institutions teach at a high quality, **the provincial government should require institutions to set long- and short-term targets for the number of undergraduate courses using some form of active learning** in their MYAAs. This will ensure that universities strive toward active-learning models through all programs and years of study, putting them in a better position to foster student success.
2. The government should provide **incentives for training of university instructors in pedagogical methods** such that effective practices are incorporated in the new generation of teachers.
3. Funding shortfalls have led universities to cut many “non-essential” services offered in support of the broader learning environment. The provincial government should **provide incentives for universities to develop work-integrated learning opportunities, undergraduate research opportunities programs, and other programs which help foster the broader learning environment.**
4. The provincial government should incentivize 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.

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Weimar, Maryellen. 2010. “Taking Stock of What Faculty Know about Student Learning.” *Taking Stock: Research on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Kuh et al., 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Anderssen, Erin. 2009. “Mental health worries grow among university students.” *The Globe and Mail*. Accessed at <http://www.globecampus.ca/in-the-news/article/mental-health-worries-grow-among-university-students/>