



Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

## **POLICY PAPER**

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*Promoting Success through the Broader Learning Environment*

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## ABOUT OUSA

OUSA represents the interests of over 140,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at seven student associations across Ontario. Our vision is for an accessible, affordable, accountable, and high quality post-secondary education in Ontario. To achieve this vision we've come together to develop solutions to challenges facing higher education, build broad consensus for our policy options, and lobby government to implement them.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## BACKGROUND

There is much more to higher education than just attending class. Within the broader learning environment of university is a world of opportunity for students who want to gain work experience, engage in co-curricular activities, and have access to support when they're unsure of their path or are struggling academically.

This Broader Learning Environment paper addresses the entirety of the university learning experience—the aspects of it that are currently being addressed insufficiently, and those that students have identified as priorities for the Ontario government moving forward.

## THE PROBLEM

### **Lack of Professional Development Opportunities**

Despite its many advantages, opportunities for students to engage in co-curricular activities are not always at the level they should be. Students are sometimes unaware of the programs available to them and as a result they miss opportunities to positively augment their university experience.

Furthermore, tools and programs used for tracking co-curricular opportunities are underutilized, lacking proper support, or in some cases not even provided. While not required at all universities, the lack of such tracking programs leaves less opportunity for students to keep a record of their experiences and reflect on the development of their skills and competencies.

Similarly, professional development opportunities for students are lacking. Not only are there not enough opportunities available to students, many do not know of existing programs and are therefore unable to even begin their professional development.

### **Insufficient Student Support Services**

Support for students at different stages of their university experience is currently operating at insufficient levels. Student support services are poorly resourced, or in some cases, simply non-existent, and students have noticed.<sup>1</sup>

Proactive advising, the act of monitoring student performance throughout their university experience, is a service currently not being adequately provided on campuses. Throughout the completion of their degree, students will face complex challenges that affect their ability to persist and succeed towards graduation. Without proactive advising to monitor performance, students may only receive support and guidance at a stage more difficult to recover from, or even worse, they may feel they have no other option than to drop out of school altogether.

For those students who do struggle, access to remedial programs is another issue they must contend with. Programs that are meant to support struggling students often lack sufficient resources and as a result are unable to meet the needs of students and help them identify the root causes of their difficulties.

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<sup>1</sup> Mancuso, M., Desmarais, S., Parkinson, K., and Pettigrew, B. Disappointment, Misunderstanding and Expectations: A Gap Analysis of NSSE, BCSSE and FSSE. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2010.

Finally, students are concerned about the uneven distribution of support dedicated to assisting students through the transitory periods of their university experience, including leading into university, between academic years, and post graduation. While there is often sufficient support for students entering their first year of university, there is a noticeable decline in support levels following the initial transition. This is particularly important for students on the cusp of graduation, who may be entering the workforce or preparing for graduate studies.<sup>2</sup>

### **Student spaces have been ignored**

While student populations at universities have rapidly risen and have been encouraged to grow to such high levels by government policies and university funding models, student spaces on campus have not kept pace with the growth in population. For example, research shows that while enrolment grew 9.7 per cent between 2001 and 2011, space for student services and student life only grew by 3.1 per cent, and library facilities only by 2.5 per cent.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, government funding priorities have for the most part ignored study spaces, student services, and other related student space. The end result has been an overcrowding of student spaces and a negative effect on teaching and research in Ontario's universities.<sup>4</sup>

### **Poorly constructed experiential learning programs**

Traditional work integrated learning (WIL) programs at universities currently suffer from poor design. It is often the case that students, who must pay for work integrated learning programs like co-op, are placed into work environments that are not related to students' chosen majors.

Non-traditional work integrated learning programs, on the other hand, are given relatively less opportunity than other WIL programs. Students from certain faculties have more difficulty finding a suitable placement in their field, and as a result they have fewer opportunities for professional development than their peers in other faculties.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, when it comes to engaging in the broader community in which campuses are located, universities are behind the curve. Despite the multitude of opportunities for student learning and development in these communities, there remains a distinct lack of initiative on the part of university administrations in developing community engagement programs.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Provide opportunity for professional development**

Attending class isn't the only part of a university education. Co-curricular activities and professional development outside the classroom are critical parts of a full university experience and part of the broader learning environment. Research suggests that students actively involved in co-curricular activities may even experience higher career advancement.<sup>6</sup> These opportunities

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<sup>2</sup> "Student Employment," *OUSA*, 2013

<sup>3</sup> Andrew M. Cox, "Students' Experience of University Space: An Exploratory Study," *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* No. 23 (2): 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Council of Ontario Universities, *Inventory of Physical Facilities of Ontario Universities 2010-11*, June 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Ryan Daniel and Leah Daniel, "Enhancing the transition from study to work: Reflections on the value and impact of internships in the creative and performing arts," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 12 (2-3): 2013

<sup>6</sup> Guy Tchibozo, "Extra-Curricular Activity and the Transition from Higher Education to Work: A Survey of Graduates in the United Kingdom," *Higher Education Quarterly* 61, no.1: 2007. P 54.

should be broad and include several options, including volunteer options, experiences abroad, professional networking, internships outside students' programs, and others. In order to realize the principles stated above, students assert that:

- With the consent of, and in consultation with, their student associations, universities should help students to develop measurements of skills gained outside of the classroom and encourage exercises that allow students to critically reflect on those skills.
- In consultation with student associations, institutions should provide whatever recognition or official acknowledgement of co-curricular reflection that student associations deem appropriate.
- Institutions and student associations should be in agreement or otherwise develop an understanding that determines the role of each in ensuring that students have access to professional development opportunities.
- Information regarding the opportunities available to students should be readily available and accessible on their campus in the form of a central listing database, office, or other hub.

### **Improve student support services**

Students should have ample access to support services throughout their university experience. Support and advising services play a key role in encouraging success from students and should be readily accessible for students in need of these programs. In addition to academic advising and low-cost tutoring, students should also have access to non-academic advising, peer support, and programs that support a healthy lifestyle.

Also critical to promoting student wellness and success is the presence of proactive advising for struggling students. For those students who do fall below expected achievement levels and enter probationary status, there should be adequately resourced remedial programs that provide assistance to these students as they work their way back to good academic standing. Finally, support should be provided to students in every phase of their university education, not just from high school to first year.

In order to address these issues regarding student support services, students recommend the following actions:

- The provincial government should create a new special purpose grant within the funding formula that incentivizes improvement of student support services.
- Support services should be interconnected throughout campus and the community such that students can access information to services, and be directed to the correct service from any access point.
- The provincial government should provide incentives for the creation of early warning systems to ensure institutions are proactively assisting students in need. These systems should be capable of noting a student's progress throughout a year, and degree.
- Universities should adopt opt-in proactive advising methods as a means to intervene and assist with cases of at-risk students.
- Universities should construct campaigns to encourage students to participate in proactive academic advising.
- The government should ensure that universities have sufficient funding to ensure that advising services can operate at the capacity needed to be both proactive and effective.
- Universities should have student-centric remedial programs designed for those who are experiencing academic challenges significant enough to threaten their continued enrolment or participation in any other university program.

- The government should engage in consultation or study to uncover the most effective methods of remedial programming, and should make this information publically available.
- Universities should support transitions into university, between years, and out of university by assisting and supporting support programs for any of these transitions that are managed by their student associations.
- Support for transition leading up to and after graduation should be enhanced through more proactive career services and the availability of mentorship, skills building, advising, and networking.

### **Increase student space on campus**

Available student space on campuses is dwindling and government priorities and funding formulas have led to a scenario where student population growth has far outpaced available student space on campus. Simply put, student spaces on campus must expand to match the rise in student populations. To accomplish this, students state that:

- Governments and universities should make student space a targeted funding priority.
- The government funding availability for capital investments should be extended to include spaces associated with student support and services.

### **Expand experiential learning opportunities**

Both traditional and non-traditional work-integrated learning (WIL) programs should be available for students from all academic disciplines and backgrounds, and should be effectively linked to course curricula. WIL programs provide valuable opportunities for students and allow them to gain professional experience while in school.

Another means of experiential learning for students is to give them opportunities to become more involved in the broader communities in which they live and their university is located. Successful relationships between communities and universities can provide meaningful student integration with the broader community, and through these relationships students can immerse themselves in opportunities to explore their career interests, develop professional skills, and gain experience to complement their academic endeavours.

To support students in their experiential learning, it is recommended that the following policies be implemented:

- Where work-integrated learning has been identified as a strategic institutional priority, government and universities should work together with industry to provide meaningful opportunities for students that enhance their chosen field of study through the fulfillment of explicit learning outcomes.
- Universities that have identified WIL as a strategic or differentiated priority should create opportunities for students in all disciplines to undertake a work-integrated learning experience during their undergraduate program.
- Institutions should work with their communities to identify, develop and promote opportunities for community engagement and volunteerism for students and staff.
- Institutions should work with their communities to the development of for-credit community service learning opportunities in their broader communities.

## INTRODUCTION

University administrators and faculty maintain that the value of higher education is not just career or hard skills training, but that it is a wholly enriching experience; university students not only improve their career prospects (which remains an enormous piece of why students go to university), but they also learn how to communicate, how to think, how to ask questions, and how to engage in society as informed, ethical, and intelligent individuals.

Just as there is more to university than preparing students for a job, there is more to the student experience than just the classroom. The broader learning environment - by which is meant university elements or activities that take place outside a traditional learning environment, ranging from the services students rely on, to the spaces they occupy, to the clubs and societies they join - plays as strong a role in determining student success as classroom learning. The broader learning environment is a reference to the out of classroom learning opportunities which students can use to further their knowledge of the real-world applicability of their skills, the activities that enhance the meaning and richness of their time at university, and the supports, services, and resources that promote success in their academics.

It is important to note that each institution may have a different perspective on what the broader learning environment should include, and which stakeholders should be involved and to what extent. The purpose of this paper is to discuss some core elements of the broader learning environment to ensure that students receive the most optimal student experience that leads to success, both personal and professional.

Success, of course, is a complicated subject all its own. Broadly speaking, student success can be defined as persistence to graduation, high academic achievement, post-graduation employment, a satisfying and fulfilling experience, or any combination thereof. However an individual student chooses to define success, it will inevitably be true that fostering it requires all aspects of the university environment to be inclusive, constructive, supportive, and developmental.

This paper touches on a range of issues, and in many ways, spans several subjects of OUSA's policies. This only serves to demonstrate just how many aspects of a university career shape a student's experience.

An enriching broader environment is an important tool in promoting student welfare. Robust and inclusive supports can contribute to health and wellbeing, and help students navigate turbulent and confusing transitions into and during university life and within it. Advising, tutoring, and other academic services can improve retention and persistence. A rich community of extracurricular activity, volunteerism, and social engagement can lead to happier, higher-achieving students.<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of this policy, then, is twofold: to demonstrate that the determinants of success come from the broader learning environment as much as from within the classroom, and to explore students' vision of an enriching, success-enabling university landscape.

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<sup>7</sup> Hughes, J. & Mighty, J. 2010. Taking Stock. McGill-Queen's University Press. page 150.

## SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

### EXTRA AND CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITY REFLECTION

**Principle:** *Self-evaluation and critical reflection outside of the classroom are important to a positive student experience in the broader learning environment.*

**Principle:** *Students who engage in extracurricular activities and actively attend professional development functions are more likely to have an enriching, full student experience leading to success within the classroom and beyond.*

**Concern:** *Despite its many advantages, opportunities for participation in co-curricular activities are not always sufficient.*

**Concern:** *Options for engagement with co-curricular tracking tools and programs are not always provided, encouraged, or well-developed.*

**Recommendation:** *With the consent of, and in consultation with, their student associations, universities should help students to develop measurements of skills gained outside of the classroom and encourage exercises that allow students to critically reflect on those skills.*

**Recommendation:** *In consultation with student associations, institutions should provide whatever recognition or official acknowledgement of co-curricular reflection that student associations deem appropriate.*

An education is not simply defined by what a student learns in a classroom, but by the diverse avenues a student will inevitably take to grow during their time in school. Recognition of this fact has grown in recent years, with the term “co-curricular” emerging to refer to activities outside the classroom that explicitly complement the learning experience, as opposed to those that are purely “extra” curricular. However, much of the research on this subject predates the common usage of the term “co-curricular,” yet research demonstrates learning and professional benefits from both co- and extra-curricular involvement. For this reason, OUSA uses extra-curricular as a more general term, which may or may not include activities specifically designated as co-curricular.

A student’s out-of-classroom experience contributes substantially to their learning and growth, with “participation in co-curricular activities positively related to persistence [and] associated with other outcomes such as interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and leadership.”<sup>8</sup> These effects have been well studied, with a wide range of long-term educational and social benefits having been observed in correlation with extra curricular activity.<sup>9, 10</sup> There is even evidence to suggest that extracurricular involvement has been associated with higher career advancement.<sup>11</sup> Universities that do not actively promote extra-curricular activities, skills development, or other developmental opportunities outside of academics do a disservice to their students.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Mahoney, Joseph L., Beverley D. Cairns, and Thomas W. Farmer. "Promoting interpersonal competence and educational success through extracurricular activity participation." *Journal of educational psychology* 95, no. 2 (2003): 409.

<sup>10</sup> Fredricks, Jennifer A., and Jacquelynne S. Eccles. "Is extracurricular participation associated with beneficial outcomes? Concurrent and longitudinal relations." *Developmental psychology* 42, no. 4 (2006): 698.

<sup>11</sup> Guy Tchibozo, “Extra-Curricular Activity and the Transition from Hight Education to Work: A Survey of Graduates in the United Kingdom,” *Higher Education Quartlery* 61, no.1: 2007. P 54.

In keeping with this notion, students should have access to a tool that allows them to critically reflect on opportunities outside of the classroom and said tool should be a platform for recognizing transferable skills that may be applicable for employers. Many students participate in valuable volunteer, paid, and service activities outside of the classroom, and a process by which students are encouraged to consider and document the useful and transferable skills and experiences they gain would be valuable.

Research suggests that deliberate, intentional reflection promotes effective learning.<sup>12</sup> If a university education is to be touted as giving students strong social, critical, and analytical skills, then it would be remiss not to help students reflect on the skills that can be developed in the broader learning environment. Structured tools that encourage students to reflect on the competencies they are developing, how they might be applied elsewhere, and how to best document their development will go a long way towards helping students leverage these skills in their careers and lives.

Although it would not be necessary at every university, many have chosen to embrace the notions above by adopting the co-curricular record (CCR), which allows students to log their out-of-classroom activities and reflect on any transferable skills and experiences they have gained, then consolidate them as a verified record or transcript. These records capture a wide variety of activities including student association volunteerism or paid work, clubs and associations involvement, philanthropy, entrepreneurship, workshop or event attendance, and service learning opportunities.

While CCRs have great potential, in practice, they are not without flaw. The method of logging, reviewing, and reflecting can be limited by the technologies and systems employed, and without additional encouragement or incentive, they can ultimately be little more than resumés of volunteer experience. When done correctly, however, they not only encourage students to reflect on co-curricular learning, but can also encourage students to become involved and become enthusiastic about extra-curricular activities in the first place.

One way to approach co-curriculars is exemplified by Brock University's "Experience BU" Campus-Wide Co-Curriculum (CWC). CWC offers 10 "domains" of extracurricular activity, ranging from global awareness, to Brock spirit, to career preparation, each with reflection components built in.<sup>13</sup> By participating in pre-determined activities or milestones, students can work towards "completing" domains of the CWC. Students can view their progress and review their achievements, introducing a "game-ification" element to extracurricular activities, which can be a compelling and engrossing motivator. In many respects the system is automated, and students need only swipe their student card to at some events or activities to confirm their participation and have it applied towards the completion of a domain. The CWC allows students to pursue their interests, providing a transcript of activities at the end of their university experience, while encouraging and promoting engagement in campus culture. There is also a "First-

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<sup>12</sup> Cherie Tsingos, Lorraine Smith, and Sinthia Bosnic-Anticevich, "Learning Styles and Approaches: Can Reflective Strategies Encourage Deep Learning?," *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning* 7 (2015): 492 - 504.

<sup>13</sup> "Campus-Wide Co-curriculum" *Brock University*. 2010. Available: <https://brocku.ca/experiencebu/curriculum>

Year Track,” with a prescribed set of activities spanning all 10 domains, designed to guide first-year students through their extracurricular options and introducing them to the broader campus community. The CWC has been received exceptionally well, with active usership more than doubling from September 2013 to April 2015, from 1796 users to 4246.<sup>14</sup>

A system such as Brock’s CWC may not work at every campus. Different populations of students have derive different value from co-curricular engagement. While some institutions may develop robust systems with incentive structures the CWC, others may choose not to pursue verified or awards-based records, and instead instead on tools whose value lies in the facilitation of critical reflection without the need for external validation.

Reflection and skills recognition should continue to be a major purpose of the CCRs, as should encouraging volunteerism and professional development, which correlate with better academic and social outcomes. However, there is also room for CCR activity to be incorporated as for-credit service learning, where appropriate. Additionally, students’ contributions to the campus community should be recognized more broadly; options to accomplish this include awards or extra honours at convocation.

Beyond measurements of learning outside of the classroom, institutions should provide professional development opportunities for students and incorporate them into CCR programs. Institutions should be encouraged to reach out to community members and invite talented individuals to provide professional development opportunities. For example, institutions could invite prominent members of the community to engage with students, offering consultation, networking, and potential knowledge growth outside of the classroom. Students who are provided with said interactions have the opportunity to grow and learn outside of the classroom, which promotes student success and the potential for community engagement.

## PROFESSIONAL AND DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

**Principle:** *Students should be able to explore a broad range of professional development pathways, including volunteer opportunities, experiences abroad, professional networking, internships outside their programs, and others.*

**Concern:** *Students may not be aware of the full range of professional development and enriching experiences beyond their academic program for which they may be eligible.*

**Concern:** *There are not currently enough professional development opportunities for students.*

**Recommendation:** *Institutions and student associations should be in agreement or otherwise develop an understanding that determines the role of each in ensuring that students have access to professional development opportunities.*

**Recommendation:** *Information regarding the opportunities available to students should be readily available and accessible on their campus in the form of a central listing database, office, or other hub.*

There are many ways that students may wish to complement their classroom learning, such as pursuing opportunities that allow them to develop new skills or gain exposure to new, enriching

<sup>14</sup> “Experience BU and the Campus-Wide Co-curriculum” *Brock University*. 2015. Available: <https://experiencebu.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/experiencebu20summary20april201.pdf>

experiences. Professional and personal development ought to be a viable option for students looking to round out their development during their academic careers.

However, outside of service-learning or experiential learning arranged as part of an academic program, students might not know about what options are available to them in this respect. On university campuses, institutions and student associations should have an understanding regarding where professional development opportunities or systems might be found, their role on campus, and which stakeholders are responsible for either providing or facilitating them.

There may be a need for organizations and universities to collaborate in ensuring that information about professional development opportunities reaches students. Databases, hubs, or offices - which might be faculty-specific or more centralized – can be established, in order to create space for interested students to seek out professional development opportunities including those offered by third parties.

Some universities have databases that provide a reciprocal approach for both students and potential employers: students post resumes that recruiters can view and search, and the system matches student candidates with parties interested in recruiting them for opportunities in businesses, government, local chambers of commerce, and non-profit organizations.<sup>15</sup>

It may also be wise for professional development hubs or offices to employ coordinators, particularly should they be faculty-specific: dedicated staff could help guide students towards opportunities with components related to their disciplines, if they so desired. Professional development hubs or offices could also provide a point of access for alumni networks to interact with students. Alumni relationships can have tremendous positive impact on students.<sup>16</sup> Not only can the advice of alumni guide students' choices in academic, extra-curriculars, and other areas of professional development, these relationships persist past graduation and can open the way to options of which students might not otherwise have been aware. As a valuable potential source of personal growth and professional development, universities should take steps to allow students to forge such relationships, and providing a physical space, office, or resource centre through which alumni networking could occur would greatly enhance the broader learning environment.

The role of universities in fostering the professional development aspect of the broader learning environment will vary from institution to institution. However, at the very least, there should be room on campus for helpful and productive tools or networks – such as third party opportunities databases or loci of alumni-student activity – to exist, so that these beneficial characteristics can lead to positive results for students who choose to pursue them.

## STUDENT SUPPORT

### SUPPORT LEVELS

***Principle:*** Student support services are a fundamental part of fostering student success.

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<sup>15</sup> see for example: Renatte K. Adler, Steven J. Loughrin-Sacco, “International Business Internships: Preparing Students for Business Without Borders” accessed November 11, 14: <http://www.rohan.sdsu.edu/dept/econ/WPSeries/WorkingPaper0302.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Tara S. Singer and Aaron W. Hughey, “The Role of the Alumni Association in Student Life,” *New Directions for Student Services* 2002 no. 100 (2002).

**Principle:** *Students should have access to advising and affordable, low cost tutoring to develop and support their academic skills and understanding of the university community.*

**Principle:** *Students should have access to non-academic advising, peer-support, and other services to promote wellness and engagement in university life.*

**Concern:** *Student support services are sometimes non-existent, unpredictably and insufficiently resourced, and students who are in need of these services are often unaware of their existence.*

**Recommendation:** *The provincial government should create a new special purpose grant within the funding formula that incentivizes improvement of student support services.*

**Recommendation:** *Support services should be interconnected throughout campus and the community such that students can access information to services, and be directed to the correct service from any access point.*

**Recommendation:** *Student support services should use stronger advertising methods when promoting to students.*

Universities across Ontario are diverse in terms of structure, organization, and focus. Though universities operate in different ways, and while their overarching autonomy must be respected, there are core areas of support that should be present at each. In order for students to be successful in their education, universities must be equipped with wide-ranging support services that encourage diversity and foster a welcoming community for all students regardless of their background or needs.<sup>17</sup>

Services must include academic advising and tutoring, non-academic assistance for mental health, time-management, career services, and other areas requiring the input and expertise of all members of the university community. By creating and supporting partnerships between students, faculty, and student affairs personnel, universities across the province can foster a culture of student success.<sup>18</sup>

Student supports exist on campuses across the country because they provide essential resources for achievement. In the academic arena, for example, universities with thorough, effective advising have students who are statistically more likely to persist and graduate.<sup>19</sup> Further, many students need additional support to succeed in universities, and some students who are members of underrepresented and minority groups may require higher levels of support when they work their way through the post-secondary education system.<sup>20</sup> Health, counseling, and disability services are universal, but other essential supports such as aboriginal and other equity services often vary in scope and reach. The need for, and types of, student support are diverse, but strong networks of well-funded, effective services such as these are essential in ensuring a quality broader learning environment.

A study conducted by the *Ontario Institute for Studies in Education* noted another advantage of robust student support services at universities: contrasted with a typical community setting (and

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<sup>17</sup> Kuh, G. et. al. 2007 *Piecing Together the Student Success Puzzle: Research, Propositions, and Recommendations*. Hoboken: Wiley p. 43-53

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 99

<sup>19</sup> Tinto, Vincent. *Taking Student Retention Seriously*. American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY. 15 Apr. 2002. Lecture.

<sup>20</sup> For more information on OUSA's positions related to support for underrepresented students, see OUSA's policy paper, "A Comprehensive Access Strategy," and others.

even other student communities, like those at colleges) service providers at universities reported viewed students as not only beneficiaries of support, but co-constructors in its planning and provision.<sup>21</sup> Students at university often work alongside staff to develop and provide important programming, from the upper echelons of decision-making (where student associations often partner with or advise the provost), all the way down to where student volunteers and full-time staff collaborate to provide front-line services (peer-to-peer counseling, resume workshops, and financial advising are some examples). The advantages of fostering highly developed student supports are therefore twofold; not only do they help students in need, they often provide meaningful experiential learning opportunities for student “co-constructors” who participate in providing assistance. Instead of the paradigm of helpless students passively receiving assistance, a well-run student affairs environment can allow students to operate within a broader community, where they both contribute to and benefit from assistive resources.

Students recognize the need for high quality support services at every campus. In fact, in a 2010 survey of undergraduate students, student services placed as the second highest priority for investment after financial aid.<sup>22</sup> Yet a different survey notes that Ontario students are often disappointed with the low levels of support in some areas.<sup>23</sup>

A challenge arises in the inconsistent way universities fund student affairs offices, which in most cases run or are affiliated with student support services.<sup>24</sup> It has been the case in recent years that these offices are subject to budget freezes, and departments have been asked to absorb inflationary increases.<sup>25</sup> This has meant that departments can be forced to make difficult choices regarding what programs to keep or lose, or offset losses with increased student fees. It can be difficult to guarantee a provincial standard of quality when institutions run such vastly different programs, with different funding priorities, while relying on student fees. Given their essential nature to overall success and student retention, these key support services should not be in such flux.

It would seem that student support services are frequently seen as important but ultimately ancillary to the core obligations of a university. This means that when that when austerity decisions need to be made, student supports are often the first services to be cut- or at least experience a disproportionate impact. Given that these kinds of services are a high priority to students themselves (even compared to other aspects of university life) and have a discernable benefit on a student’s post-graduation success and employability, it seems misguided to think that these kinds of services are the first places to be downsized when operating budgets shrink.

Operating fees from the overall university budget are not the only source of funding for many student support offices. They commonly seek large portions of their budgets elsewhere, including revenue generating services (for example, charging employers and companies to use their space and expertise to recruit services), dedicated student fees (which may or may not be subject to annual fluctuation or review), or external funding sources (both government-administered grants and funds from private donors and companies).

While this could be seen as an innovative solution to overcome austerity, it actually can compound the issue of defunding further. The logic can be perverted to justify more cuts: income

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<sup>21</sup> Seifert, Tricia A., and Jeff Burrow. "Perceptions of student affairs and services practitioners in Ontario's post-secondary institutions: An examination of colleges and universities." *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 43, no. 2 (2013): 132-148.

<sup>22</sup> Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, *What Students Want Toronto*: 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Mancuso, M., Desmarais, S., Parkinson, K., and Pettigrew, B. *Disappointment, Misunderstanding and Expectations: A Gap Analysis of NSSE, BCSSE and FSSE*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Dr. Phil Wood, Dean of Students at McMaster University. Personal interview. 2009.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

that student support departments may scramble to find can be misconstrued by onlookers as a windfall, allowing universities to rationalize further deductions.

This trend impacts quality of service in two ways. Firstly, there are “hidden” resource costs to making these departments find other funding; it takes staff hours away from service provision and requires time be spent writing grant proposals, courting external stakeholders, et cetera. Secondly (and more importantly), even these “best case” scenarios of external revenue streams lack the stability and longevity of a standard operational provision: for example, an external private donor may help seed fund a new program for career preparedness, but the funding may only last for two years. Often the university is unwilling to take up the mantle of such programming, and a core service upon which students have come to rely is no longer available. By ensuring that funding to student support services is both adequately and consistently provided by the university operating budget, these kinds of major fluctuations in service could be avoided.

The Ontario government has a variety of tools at its disposal to encourage institutions to fully and reliably fund student support centres, such as special purpose grants or funding envelopes that exist to provide specialized funding to areas of need. While one option might be rolling punitive measures into accountability or performance funding mechanisms, OUSA believes that a more successful option will be creating incentives for institutions to provide consistent service quality. The government has made use of Special Purpose Grants for other priorities. The Quality Assurance Fund, for example, had a specific amount of money set aside for the funding of, amongst other priorities, student support centres. Each special grouping of funds is intended to target specific aspects of the post-secondary educational system for improvement. Funding should be similarly designated for student support growth and capacity expansion.

Tying funding to student supports will encourage the universities that are lacking to develop these areas. Similarly, in places where one form of the services already exists, a specific envelope of funding will free up important operating funds for other uses and provide an element of reliability of funding to student services that are currently missing. Centres that are accessible and well funded will provide the necessary support that students need to persist and complete their studies. An American study found that those institutions that increased expenditures on student services positively influenced graduation and persistence rates, and suggested reallocating funding to student services as a necessary step in improving student outcomes.<sup>26</sup>

This funding could be eligible for supporting a wide variety of critical student services and facilities, including but not limited to: early warning systems, athletics and recreation, disability services, career services, personal counseling, off-campus housing, indigenous or aboriginal services, food banks, LGBTQ+ student services, women’s centres, health services, services, international student services, an ombudsman, campus security, academic counseling, student success or student life offices, writing centres, financial advising, and child care facilities.

Even when well funded, these services can only be helpful if students are aware of them. Their existence and availability must be effectively advertised to all students, especially those students who are marginalized or “at-risk.” First-year and other points of transition would seem a natural time to redouble efforts in disseminating this information.

Student support services, both those of an academic and non-academic nature, require stable funding and the recognition that they are crucial to student success. Moreover, the value and the existence of these services must be advertised to students so that they have the information they need to take full advantage of resources for success at their campuses.

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<sup>26</sup> Douglas A. Weber and Ronald G. Ehrenberg, *Do Expenditures Other Than Instructional Expenditures Affect Graduation and Persistence Rates in American Higher Education* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Higher Education Research Institute, 2009)

## PROACTIVE ADVISING

**Principle:** *Proactive systems of support that monitor student performance are critical when promoting student success.*

**Concern:** *Students face complicated and unexpected challenges in persisting and succeeding through to graduation.*

**Concern:** *Universities may not adequately provide proactive assistance to students that show signs of struggling.*

**Concern:** *Students may feel discouraged or embarrassed to engage with support services that address students who are struggling.*

**Recommendation:** *The provincial government should provide incentives for the creation of early warning systems to ensure institutions are proactively assisting students in need. These systems should be capable of noting a student's progress throughout a year, and degree.*

**Recommendations:** *Universities should adopt opt-in proactive advising methods as a means to intervene and assist with cases of at-risk students.*

**Recommendations:** *Universities should construct campaigns to encourage students to participate in proactive academic advising.*

**Recommendations:** *The government should ensure that universities have sufficient funding to ensure that advising services can operate at the capacity needed to be both proactive and effective.*

Student support services must serve as resources to all students, but they also have an important interventionist role to play for students facing difficulties. Ensuring student persistence and retention is one of the primary goals of a robust, student-centric university culture. Emphasizing this point, studies have shown that students who do not make use of available student support services, particularly tutoring and counseling services, are less likely to persist to graduation.<sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup> As such, student affairs departments must have the resources needed to be proactive about retention. However, all care must be taken when sharing information to respect students' privacy and confidentiality.

A particularly promising methodology "has emerged in the higher education literature as one of the most effective tools to help and ultimately retain challenged and at-risk students."<sup>29</sup> Under this system, when students grades indicate that they are at risk of failing or being put on academic

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<sup>27</sup> Educational Policy Institute. Access, Persistence, and Barriers in Postsecondary Education: A Literature Review and Outline of Future Research. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2008.)

<sup>28</sup> R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. Final impacts report: foundations for success project. Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2009.)

<sup>29</sup> Kuh, et al., 2007, 116.

probation they are contacted routinely and strongly encouraged to attend regular advising sessions, working towards specific long-term goals.<sup>30</sup>

A key component of this method is to make sure that reminders and invitations to attend advising sessions are frequent – whether they are made via email or over the phone – though naturally, should a student request to be left alone, that wish must be respected.<sup>31</sup> This method has been statistically demonstrated to increase the likelihood that students will make and keep appointments, and has been shown to benefit students’ sense of belonging and connectedness.<sup>32 33</sup>

However, this system has the potential to be seen as intrusive and perhaps overbearing. Any such system should only be implemented on a voluntary opt-in basis: students could indicate at the beginning of their studies if they wish to be part of this warning system, granting students the choice of whether or not they want institutional advising branches to participate in their university careers.

Similarly, an important - but deceptively challenging – strategy to increase the efficacy of advising would involve the intentional shifting of culture. Students may feel discouraged or embarrassed to participate in academic counselling due to the stigma associated with requiring assistance or counselling. This is problematic because students are not getting the support they require to improve their academics. OUSA believes institutions and the province should address this by creating awareness to combat this stigma, perhaps through coordinated campaigns on campuses or through other means. Part of this effort could include informing students of the benefits of obtaining academic assistance and why it is important to proactively address potential learning struggles.

Lastly, but perhaps most critically, is the urgent need for advising offices to be have increased capacity to reach out to, and assist, students that are at risk. Long wait times to see advisors and the extraordinary number of cases being managed by relatively few staff dramatically hinders the ability of advising services to operate proactively. Concordantly, the government should ensure that universities’ advising services receive adequate funding to operate proactively.

## REMEDIAL PROGRAMS

**Principle:** *Students who slip below expected achievement levels to probationary status should have access to programming that aims to promptly equip them to continue their studies.*

**Concern:** *Students facing academic difficulties often lack access to programs that are sufficiently supportive, as these programs are underfunded, understaffed, or unable to support students holistically and address the root causes of their difficulties.*

<sup>30</sup> “Redefining Advising Services at Carleton,” Carleton University, Office of the Associate Vice-President (Enrolment Management), 2009. Available: <https://carleton.ca/studentsupport/wp-content/uploads/Redefining-Advising-Services-at-Carleton-Binder.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> “Mentoring” *Carleton University*. 2015. Available: <http://sssc.carleton.ca/what-we-do/mentoring>

<sup>32</sup> Carson, J. "Retaining Success: Carleton University has found a new way to keep students from flunking out." *Macleans*, November 22, 2010:

<sup>33</sup> Efficacy of Intrusively Advising First-Year Students via Frequent Reminders for Advising Appointments. *NACADA Journal* Fall 28 (2): 2008. p. 28

**Recommendation:** *Universities should have student-centric remedial programs designed for those who are experiencing academic challenges significant enough to threaten their continued enrolment or participation in any other university program.*

**Recommendation:** *The government should engage in consultation or study to uncover the most effective methods of remedial programming, and should make this information publically available.*

When academic problems and signs of struggle emerge, universities' ability to provide programming to ensure retention of students is crucial. Not all students are immediately successful in their university experience. For a wide variety of reasons, thousands of students each year find themselves on academic probation or academic suspension. The path back to regular academic standing can be a daunting one, filled with fear of failure as the cloud of expulsion looms over every academic decision that is made.

Many universities have strategies in place to transition and support these students, which benefits institutions as well; fewer students dropping out means greater retention rates and enhanced statistics for the institution, and is also significantly preferable to the costs associated with having to increase recruiting activities to make up for the losses.<sup>34</sup>

However, not all programs are designed in a student-centric model, with the individual needs and concerns of the at-risk student placed at the forefront. Many will not address the underlying causes of the academic difficulties, which can be often be personal or emotional, particularly among students struggling with mental health difficulties. In the journal *Procedia: Social and Behaviour Sciences*, Marcotte and Potvin describe how among vulnerable students, feeling emotionally adapted to college is important, and that "the factor that most strongly predicts resilience is the presence of personal goals, in other words knowing the values and goals that the individual wishes to pursue."<sup>35</sup>

Standard, "band-aid" prescriptions such as suggesting reduced course loads or programs that are believed to be easier may not help such students who need more personal or constructive remediation. Unfortunately, recommendations like these are more common than they should be, due to advisers with enormous caseloads that are often unable to work in-depth with students and address root concerns.

More substantive, guided, and multifaceted approaches are often needed. Some universities have already adopted this thinking. For example, a program at Brock University, launched in the 2009-10 academic year, offers an alternative to academic suspension. Called 'BOOST,' this program has created a course focused on skill development, workshops, and other university services which can be taken concurrently with academic courses, instead of having the student spend time away from school during their suspension year.

When comparing such programs across universities in Ontario and Canada more broadly, common practices become visible, which may hint at some best practices. In a comparison of 6 institutions (Capilano University, University of Toronto, Nipissing University, University of Dalhousie, Carleton University and Ryerson University) strong similarities can be found in their approaches to guiding students through their academic difficulties. Each system, for example,

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<sup>34</sup> "2013 Cost of Recruiting an Undergraduate Student Report." Noel-Levitz. Higher Education Benchmarks series, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Marcotte, Diane, Aude Villatte, and Alexandra Potvin. 2014. "Resilience Factors in Students Presenting Depressive Symptoms during the Post-secondary School Transition." *Procedia - Social And Behavioral Sciences* 159, no. 5th World Conference on Psychology, Counseling and Guidance, WCPCG-2014, 1-3 May 2014, Dubrovnik, Croatia: 91-95.

evaluates students on a spectrum to determine with some nuance how severe their low academic standing is, which affects the requirements to return to good standing.

Another common practice is offering work-based assignments to improve soft skills for long-term academic success rather than how to just get out of their current predicament. In Ryerson's case, for example, they use an online forum to promote their "Fresh Start" initiative. Areas within the website's program include; academic accommodation and support, English language support, Math support. Writing support, A Test center with Study Skills and transition support.

Further similarities among these examples hint at some best practices that can be used to develop remedial tracks that can help students on or near probation to return to good standing: all are self- evaluation focused, with emphasis on reflecting on of areas for growth. There are peer resources options, as well, so students are not solely pressured by administrators, but rather, can receive support and mentorship from their colleagues. This trend is particularly promising, as some research has shown that programs with significant collaboration and peer-learning components can improve the academic performance of students who are struggling.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to these potential best practices, the government of Ontario should engage in comprehensive study to determine what elements of a remedial program would be the most effective. The results of this study should be widely published, and should include recommendations for universities to adopt should they seek to create their own remedial programs.

Remedial programs and transitions into full academic enrolments should be as student-focused as possible, while removing as many obstacles such as increased costs. Such supports are best when "woven into comprehensive plans of action" that address the academic, social, emotional, and financial needs of students.<sup>37</sup>As student retention remains a desired outcome for the provincial government, increased support of increased quality should be made available to assist students in academic jeopardy.

## TRANSITION SUPPORT

**Principle:** *Institutions must support students during the many transitions in their university careers.*

**Concern:** *There is not enough support to guide students during their transition into university, between years, and out of university.*

**Recommendation:** *Universities should support transitions into university, between years, and out of university by assisting and supporting support programs for any of these transitions that are managed by their student associations.*

**Recommendations:** *Support for transition leading up to and after graduation should be enhanced through more proactive career services and the availability of mentorship, skills building, advising, and networking.*

Students are faced with many transitional points throughout their university careers and sometimes need support during these times. A transitional point can be demanding of students as new responsibilities begin to pile on just as they are trying to become accustomed to new

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<sup>36</sup> The Office of Institutional Research, George Brown College. The Student Success Program: From Pilot to Implementation. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (2013).

<sup>37</sup> Bezanson, Lynne, Peter Dietsche, Glen Jones, and Alan Wright. Neither a moment nor a mind to waste. Policy Summit Backgrounder, (Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2008).

lifestyles, new expectations, and when they form important opinions about their institution and their willingness to persist and succeed.

There are three critical points when a student will require the most support, but each of these pose distinct challenges; a cut and paste model applied across the board will not be effective. First is the transition into university, which spans the entire first year. Providing students with the resources to better integrate into their university is key for student success. Students will also need more specialized support when transitioning within university. Examples include transitioning into or out of academic probation, transferring to new programs, or even transferring to new universities. Finally, graduating students need to be supported in their post academic careers and how to transition into future education or employment opportunities.

Students are in a very vulnerable place when transitioning into university as they adjust to their new environment. Most students will move out of their parents' house for the first time when they go off to university, and students are forced to live without the associated comforts of home. It is at this time when responsibilities such as maintaining a household, meals, time management, and general accountability for one's self are solely on the student's shoulders. Furthermore, the academic responsibilities and difficulties are amplified from secondary school, which can cause students an extraordinary amount of stress.<sup>38</sup>

With all these new pressures on students, there are insufficient supports to assist this important transition. For many students, coping and management strategies are briefly touched upon during the whirlwind of orientation weeks but are often lost in the "information dump" of programming are not revisited in a systemic way. Students who are seeking lifestyle, time, and academic management strategies are usually only left with a piecemeal or trial and error approach.

It must be emphasized that transitions also occur throughout a student's university career, not only at the entry and exit points. Currently at most post-secondary institutions, there are many helpful programs targeted at ensuring the retention, health, and success of first-year students. These programs are typically focused on orientation, mentorship, leadership, mental health and other such student interaction programs.

While these programs are able to reach the majority of first-year students, the initial support and advising first-year students receive rapidly decreases in second year. As such, the sudden disappearance of support services and orientations is something of a transition point in and of itself. Academic support programs such as guidance counseling and mental health support must pay specific attention to the first-to-second and second-to-third year transitions when seeking to minimize dropout rates amongst undergraduate students. These programs should include student interaction components such as mentorship and shadowing programs. Therefore, the province should increase support to universities and student associations to allow them to further support these types of transitions through a variety of programming options including formal transition programs, online information and help guides, wellness and academic counseling, and peer mentorship programs.

One example of transition support that can be emulated more broadly and in upper years as well as first is the Spark program, run by the McMaster Students Union. This mentorship-based program connects students in their first semester with upper-year students who provide skills-building and social support.<sup>39</sup> Students can meet with their mentors for regular sessions, and the

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<sup>38</sup> Campbell, Robert L., Lawrence W. Svenson, and George K. Jarvis. "Perceived level of stress among university undergraduate students in Edmonton, Canada." *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 75, no. 2 (1992): 552-554.

<sup>39</sup> "Spark" *McMaster Students Union*. Accessed November 2015: <https://www.msumcmaster.ca/services-directory/45-spark>

program is run year round, to accommodate as many students as possible.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, there are fears and anxiety when departing university. Many are seeking out graduate education or permanent employment for the first time, and there is an inadequate amount of support helping students transition out of university.<sup>41</sup> Support at this stage is critical. There needs to be a focus on the graduating transition, as this is when students head out into the working world (or onto graduate education) for potentially the first time. Those students need to be prepared for that transition. The institution can assist transitions through support such as advising, skills building, and networking opportunities. Those institutions that currently have such transition support processes in place should ensure to regularly review and update their services to keep up with the changing landscape. By providing strong transition services that are proactive and engaging students can have the career advice that they need to be successful quickly after graduation. Other options that need to be explored and improved upon are the mentoring and job shadowing opportunities provided to students. Students should have the ability to work with someone in a mentor setting so the student can best understand what the job is and what it entails. By providing some of these options to students, they could transition with confidence and direction into the workplace.

## SPACE AND INFRASTRUCTURE

### STUDENT SPACE

**Principle:** *The student space available on campus must expand to align with the student population that has seen substantial growth.*

**Concern:** *Funding priorities have largely ignored study space, student services, and similar student space.*

**Concern:** *Government priorities and university funding models have strongly encouraged a rapid growth of the student population without accounting for overcrowding of spaces and resources.*

**Recommendation:** *Governments and universities should make student space a targeted funding priority.*

**Recommendation:** *The government funding availability for capital investments should be extended to include spaces associated with student support and services.*

The quality of both teaching and research in Ontario's universities is being negatively affected by a lack of sufficient space and by aging spaces that are failing to adequately meet the needs of students and faculty.<sup>42</sup>

Unprecedented enrolment growth over the past decade has led to dramatic decreases in the amount of physical space available per student on campus. Overall, there is less space per full-time equivalent (FTE) student and per research staff member on post-secondary campuses today than there was in 1998-99. Data shows that an FTE student in 2010-11 had access to 22% less

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<sup>40</sup> "MSU Spark: Easing the Transition into University Life," *McMaster Students Union*. August 2014. Available: <https://www.msumcmaster.ca/posts/376>

<sup>41</sup> "Student Employment," *OUSA*, 2013

<sup>42</sup> Council of Ontario Universities, *Inventory of Physical Facilities of Ontario Universities 2010-11*, June 2013.

space than an FTE student in 1998-99. Similarly, there has been an 18% decline in research space per FTE researcher between 1998-99 and 2010-11.<sup>43</sup>

Students believe that increases in enrolment growth must be matched by growth in the space available to students. Adequate classroom facilities, study space, library resources, and laboratories are essential, but so too are common spaces and study spaces. Literature on the topic argues for the importance of providing students a choice of study space, from the more social to the more secluded, and that there is “a need to let students own space, to use it in different ways at different times.”<sup>44, 45</sup>

The per-student availability of these kinds of student spaces has fallen dramatically over many years. While enrolment grew 9.7% between 2001 and 2011, for example, space for student services and student life only grew by 3.1%, and library facilities only by 2.5%.<sup>46</sup> Some attention has been directed to in-class spaces during this time, though their expansion still falls short of enrolment growth, at 5.8%.<sup>47</sup> Conversely, over that same period, academic office space increased by 10%, while full time equivalent faculty stayed largely consistent. According to the Council of Ontario Universities’ own measurement systems, academic and administrative office space is at around 105% of what is required, while student space is at 82%.<sup>48</sup> All told, there has been a decline of nearly 38% in space per meters squared per student since 1998.<sup>49</sup>

An additional problem is that government funding is typically not provided for the construction of spaces not devoted to ‘traditional’ academic delivery. This leaves institutions burdened with the capital construction costs of athletic centres, health services, student supports and student centres – facilities which are essential for promoting engagement as well as student health and wellbeing. In the context of rising tuition, this creates an additional financial burden on students. With a lack of government funding for these projects, universities must rely very heavily on students to fund these facilities through ancillary fees, a trend which continues to be a point of concern for students. In 2011-12, the average Ontario student paid over \$110 annually to support construction costs of facilities including student centres, athletic and recreation facilities, study spaces, and health centres.<sup>50</sup> Students are rightfully questioning why the provincial government chooses not to support student and recreational facilities used by faculty, staff, and the broader communities that surround these campuses.

Students believe that government funding eligibility should be extended to student support service spaces. This position is supported by a recommendation in the final report of the MTCU/MEI Long-Term Capital Planning Project, compiled by the Courtyard Group in 2009, which states, “funding should be extended to traditional ‘ancillary’ projects which demonstrate significant contribution to student development.”<sup>51</sup> In June of 2011, the government did announce

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Scott Bennett, “Righting the balance,” Council on Library and Information Resources. Retrieved: <http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub129/bennett.html>

<sup>45</sup> Andrew M. Cox, “Students’ Experience of University Space: An Exploratory Study,” *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* No. 23 (2): 2011.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Arlene Levine. “Inventory of Physical Facilities of Ontario Universities 2013-14” Council of Ontario Universities, 2015

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> OUSA, *Ancillary Fees*, 2013.

<sup>51</sup> Courtyard Group. *Final Report of the MTCU/MEI Long-Term Capital Planning Project*. (Toronto: Courtyard Group, 2009).

funding for a mixed-use academic and health facility at St. Clair College: we are hopeful that this will mark the beginning of an ongoing trend.<sup>52</sup>

*For further information on OUSA's priorities relating to space and infrastructure, see OUSA's 2014 policy paper, "System Vision."*

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

### WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING

**Principle:** *Work-integrated learning must be linked effectively to course curricula.*

**Concern:** *Often students who pay for work integrated learning programs such as co-op are placed in work integrated learning environments that have very little to do with their chosen major due to constraints on how many placements are available.*

**Recommendation:** *Where work-integrated learning has been identified as a strategic institutional priority, government and universities should work together with industry to provide meaningful opportunities for students that enhance their chosen field of study through the fulfillment of explicit learning outcomes.*

High quality internships afford immense benefit to students through the provision of hands-on training, industry perspectives, and skills development. In order for active, co-operative, or service learning experiences to provide value to students, they must be linked to course or program curricula. Experiential opportunities – when linked to students' programs of study – can contribute to improved academic performance, deepen learning, and enhance the overall student experience. Where academic programs are linked to professional positions (e.g., accounting, nursing, education), it is important that the curriculum and the placements that student experience meet the standards of the provincial or national regulatory bodies. In addition, establishing linkages between experiential and classroom learning is important as it reflects the reality that both employers and post-secondary institutions have roles to play in training students for their entry into the labour market.<sup>53</sup>

Program-linked university co-op placements are limited by the number of employers willing to provide them. Unfortunately, many of the opportunities given to students do not directly involve working in their fields of study, or are not what students expect when they sign up for a co-op program. This can lead students to spend excess time and money on a program that might not necessarily help them meet their academic and professional goals.

An effective internship can take many forms, but should encompass a number of structural elements that facilitate high-impact learning. This includes supervision by a qualified and committed individual, intensive training in a professional setting, and a

<sup>52</sup> "HealthPlex Receives \$7.9 Million in Provincial Funding," St. Clair College (June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2011). Available: <http://www.stclaircollege.ca/news/healthplexfunding.html>

<sup>53</sup> Sattler, P., and Peters, J., *Work-Integrated Learning in Ontario's Postsecondary Sector: The Experience of Ontario Graduates*. (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2013).

reflective component tailored to desired learning outcomes. These opportunities may vary in length, level of commitment, and link to credit, but must provide tangible training and overall benefit to the student.

Experiential opportunities should be made more available throughout the province, and the specific skills development and learning outcome potential should be clearly outlined, and mapped wherever possible to those of programs of study.

When implemented properly, internships provide students with the ability to expand upon the learning provided in the classroom. Ultimately, this drives an active engagement that is largely lacking in the traditional classroom context, and would be of great benefit to the quality of post-secondary education across Ontario.

#### NON-TRADITIONAL WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

**Principle:** *Students from all academic disciplines and backgrounds should have opportunity to participate in work-integrated learning.*

**Concern:** *Some disciplines and programs are provided comparatively fewer opportunities for experiential learning than others.*

**Recommendation:** *Universities that have identified WIL as a strategic or differentiated priority should create opportunities for students in all disciplines to undertake a work-integrated learning experience during their undergraduate program.*

Work-integrated learning opportunities provide excellent value to students by immersing them in an industry or workplace while linking their full-time position to classroom learning, work term objectives, valuable experience, supporting professional development opportunities, and financial compensation.

However, students are concerned that WIL may be inaccessible to students in particular academic programs. Research from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) indicates that approximately half (50.8 percent) of all WIL programs are concentrated in accounting, business and marketing, engineering, and human resources with an additional 11 percent concentrated in education.<sup>54</sup> However, opportunities are limited for students in liberal arts or general science programs. While these programs may not directly present the same labour market opportunities, their students would benefit just as highly from the perspectives and skills gained in a work-integrated learning placement.<sup>55</sup>

These gaps can be corrected by broadening universities' partnerships and relationships to create new opportunities for projects or placement with a wide variety of partners. A multidisciplinary approach that places students in various industries to observe and

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<sup>54</sup> Peggy Sattler, *Work-Integrated Learning in Ontario's Postsecondary Sector* (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2010).

<sup>55</sup> Ryan Daniel and Leah Daniel, "Enhancing the transition from study to work: Reflections on the value and impact of internships in the creative and performing arts," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 12 (2-3): 2013

reflect on their skills could serve this purpose. McMaster University has tackled this challenge through its “Applied Humanities” courses. Through these courses, students design learning objectives and goals, and then are guided to work placements where they can pursue them. Examples of previous students’ experiences include a history student who designed an interactive website, an English student who interned as an editorial intern, and a music student who worked as a music teaching assistant at a middle school.<sup>56</sup>

As another example, students could have placements modeled after the ‘staged’ approach typically seen in teachers’ college. A rough outline of this model would be:

the formalization of first-year observations of industry practice, that then leading into supervised internship-style experiences in second year, culminating in intensive and student-led capstone experiences in the final year, which could in fact lay the platform for a much more successful transition to the creative industries sector.<sup>57</sup>

Given value of participating in work integrated learning, all students should be able to access at least one WIL experience throughout their undergraduate program. With an increasing number of students citing post-graduate employment as a factor in their choice of post-secondary education, the development of new WIL opportunities will lead to increasingly competitive and productive graduates. In addition, WIL programs enhance student learning and all collaboration in training between post-secondary institutions and employers.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

**Principle:** *Welcoming communities and strong town and gown relations can contribute to student integration with their broader community*

**Principle:** *The communities in which institutions reside offer tremendous opportunities for students, both formal and informal, to build upon academic learning, develop foundational skills and explore career and personal interests.*

**Concern:** *Universities often do not fully capitalize on opportunities to provide student learning and development experiences in their broader communities*

**Recommendation:** *Institutions should work with their communities to identify, develop and promote opportunities for community engagement and volunteerism for students and staff.*

**Recommendation:** *Institutions should work with their communities to the development of for-credit community service learning opportunities in their broader communities*

We often forget that universities are situated in broader communities with their own unique opportunities, challenges, and character. Whether relationships between an institution (and its students) and the community are positive or difficult, it is often the case that structured opportunities for students to engage with their communities is limited.

<sup>56</sup> “Applied Humanities Courses,” *McMaster University*. 2015. Available: [https://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/current/applied\\_courses.html](https://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/current/applied_courses.html)

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

OUSA feels that building on relationships between institutions and the communities in which they reside can result in such structured opportunities. Students, and really the institution and communities at large, can benefit from the energy and ideas of students eager to apply their particular talents and educational experiences on community ventures. The pursuit of these ventures can also help students pop the “university bubble,” allowing them to explore and engage in their broader living setting.

Opportunities for community engagement can take the form of a volunteer database, opportunities to join community social or recreational groups, or community service learning opportunities that are integrated into a course or program of study – perhaps to the point of being offered for credit or as part of a credential.

As it is now, it is often up to a student or, at best, a proactive faculty member to identify opportunities for a student (or staff person) to engage in a community event, group, not-for-profit or business. As a result of that, these relationships are often temporary and occasionally, as a result of that temporary nature, an unsatisfying or inconsistent experience. Students believe that universities and student associations, working in concert with municipalities and community groups, can provide those consistent, positive and structured experiences.

OUSA suggests that institutions, in concert with student associations, can work to develop registries of volunteer and community engagement opportunities. These can include ongoing opportunities, discrete events, social groups, placements with charities, and so on. Where possible, the involvement of academics and university administration can allow for for-credit community service learning experiences. These community service learning (or CSL) opportunities are moderate term commitments of several hours a week or month where a student works with a community organization, with the goal of tying together the activities of the organization, the development of foundational skills, and the students academic learning in order to benefit each of those activities. Should these stronger community partnerships be pursued and maintained, the hope is that these opportunities can become more academically integrated and encourage critical self-reflection and application by students. But more than that, even where for credit opportunities do not exist, we feel that with universities taking a leadership role in promoting volunteerism and community engagement will help students feel more at home, provide them cultural and religious needs not met on campus, and contribute to strong relationships between universities and their communities.

## POLICY STATEMENT

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### ***Promoting Success through the Broader Learning Environment***

**Whereas:** Self-evaluation and critical reflection outside of the classroom are important to a positive student experience in the broader learning environment;

**Whereas:** Students who engage in extracurricular activities and actively attend professional development functions are more likely to have an enriching, full student experience leading to success within the classroom and beyond;

**Whereas:** Students should be able to explore a broad range of professional development pathways, including volunteer opportunities, experiences abroad, professional networking, internships outside their programs, and others;

**Whereas:** Student support services, are a fundamental part of fostering student success;

**Whereas:** Students should have access to advising and affordable, low cost tutoring to develop and support their academic skills and understanding of the university community;

**Whereas:** Students should have access to non-academic advising, peer-support, and other services to promote wellness and engagement in university life;

**Whereas:** Proactive systems of support that monitor student performance are critical when promoting student success;

**Whereas:** Students who slip below expected achievement levels to probationary status should have access to programming that aims to promptly equip them to continue their studies;

**Whereas:** Institutions must support students during the many transitions in their university careers;

**Whereas:** The student space available on campus must expand to align with the student population that has seen substantial growth;

**Whereas:** Work-integrated learning must be linked effectively to course curricula;

**Whereas:** Students from all academic disciplines and backgrounds should have opportunity to participate in work-integrated learning;

**Whereas:** Welcoming communities and strong town and gown relations can contribute to student integration with their broader community; and

**Whereas:** The communities in which institutions reside offer tremendous opportunities for students, both formal and informal, to build upon academic learning, develop foundational skills and explore career and personal interests.

**Be It Resolved That:** With the consent of, and in consultation with, their student associations, universities should help students to develop measurements of skills gained outside of the classroom and encourage exercises that allow students to critically reflect on those skills;

**Be It Further Resolved That:** In consultation with student associations, institutions should provide whatever recognition or official acknowledgement of co-curricular reflection that student associations deem appropriate;

**BIFRT:** Institutions and student associations should be in agreement or otherwise develop an understanding that determines the role of each in ensuring that students have access to professional development opportunities;

**BIFRT:** Information regarding the opportunities available to students should be readily available and accessible on their campus in the form of a central listing database, office, or other hub;

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should create a new special purpose grant within the funding formula that incentivizes improvement of student support services;

**BIFRT:** Support services should be interconnected throughout campus and the community such that students can access information to services, and be directed to the correct service from any access point;

**BIFRT:** Student support services should utilize stronger advertising methods when promoting to students;

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should provide incentives for the creation of early warning systems to ensure institutions are proactively assisting students in need. These systems should be capable of noting a student's progress throughout a year, and degree;

**BIFRT:** Universities should adopt opt-in proactive advising methods as a means to intervene and assist with cases of at-risk students;

**BIFRT:** Universities should construct campaigns to encourage students to participate in proactive academic advising;

**BIFRT:** The government should ensure that universities have sufficient funding to ensure that advising services can operate at the capacity needed to be both proactive and effective;

**BIFRT:** Universities should have student-centric remedial programs designed for those who are experiencing academic challenges significant enough to threaten their continued enrolment or participation in any other university program;

**BIFRT:** The government should engage in consultation or study to uncover the most effective methods of remedial programming, and should make this information publically available;

**BIFRT:** Universities should support transitions into university, between years, and out of university into the workforce, by assisting and supporting support programs for any of these transitions that are managed by their student associations;

**BIFRT:** Support for transition leading up to and after graduation should be enhanced, through more proactive career services and the availability of mentorship, skills building, advising and networking;

**BIFRT:** Governments and universities should make student space a targeted funding priority;

**BIFRT:** The government funding availability for capital investments should be extended to include spaces associated with student support and services;

**BIFRT:** Where work-integrated learning has been identified as a strategic institutional priority, government and universities should work together with industry to provide meaningful opportunities for students that enhance their chosen field of study through the fulfillment of explicit learning outcomes;

**BIFRT:** Universities that have identified WIL as a strategic or differentiated priority should create opportunities for students in all disciplines to undertake a work-integrated learning experience during their undergraduate program;

**BIFRT:** Institutions should work with their communities to identify, develop and promote opportunities for community engagement and volunteerism for students and staff; and

**BIFRT:** Institutions should work with their communities to the development of for-credit community service learning opportunities in their broader communities.