

Report on the Academic Colleagues meeting of COU

(Toronto, December 5, 2008)

Many of the discussions were dominated by the concerns about a wide range of potential negative impacts due to the recent global economic turmoil. The current political uncertainty in concerns expressed in the last COU executive meeting. Highlights of the discussion were as follows:

Report from the Executive Committee Meeting

Some universities are considering job cuts through attrition. Tuition increase of 1.5 to 2.0% has been discussed but the Premier is not supportive of this approach due to several reasons in particular it will disrupt the 3:1 government: student funding ratio and will also compromise the accessibility/affordability issues. President of University of Guelph and the MTCU are enthusiastic about a student mobility program. Dr. Philip Constantineau, an Academic College is preparing a colleagues paper on this subject. It will be presented at the spring meeting of the Executive Heads. Pension funds of several universities are hit hard by the economic downturn. The province is discussing the idea of pooling all the Ontario universities pension funds into one large plan. It was proposed by the Harry Arthur's Report. Serious concerns were expressed on this idea of combining the individual university pension plans into a single pension plan. This will create a nightmare of complication given the diverse history and economic conditions of the different universities in Ontario.

There is uncertainty on graduate expansion funding and the university budget may not be known until well into 2009.

OCAD (Ontario College of Arts and Design) has applied for full membership of COU. Considering the recent expansion of course and program offerings in addition to the traditional Arts and Design program and obtaining its university status the Academic Colleges supported the idea of offering OCADS a full membership at COU.

Given the economic downturn a scenario planning was proposed by one colleague considering factors such as part-time students, unemployed persons looking for university education, job loss of parents who contribute to their children's university education.

President of COU

Political-economic turmoil will influence federal-provincial funding to universities. But Paul Genest remains optimistic and he will strongly advocate for inclusion of university infrastructure and operating fund into the federal government economic stimulus package. He has been in periodic discussions with the concerned ministers and high level officials.

Quality Assurance Task Force

They have adopted a new acronym, OUCQA (Ontario University Council of Quality Assurance)

Dr. Chris Conway (Director, Institutional Research and Planning, Queen's University, Kingston) made a presentation on NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement).

NSSE started in Indian University, Bloomington during 1999-2000. By 2002-2003 it was explored by G13 members. NSSE was first administered in Canada in 2004 by 11 institutions. By 2007 more than 60 Canadian universities used NSSE at least once. It suggests Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice. The Benchmarks are based on 42 key questions on five aspects of students' experience. These five aspects are (1) level of academic challenge, (2) active and collaborative learning, (3) student-faculty interaction, (4) enriching educational experiences and (5) supportive campus environment. When asked by COU Dr. Conway gave the following answers to the questions:

- 1) Do NSSE scores vary by type, location and size of institutions? Yes.
- 2) Do smaller institutions have more difficulty interpreting NSSE results? Yes.
- 3) Do NSSE surveys miss certain aspects of the Canadian PSE? Yes.
- 4) Are issues other than the NSSE measure engagement relevant to quality assessment and improvement? Yes.

Dr. Conway advised the following with respect to NASSE:

- (1) We need to "best" understand the roles of NSSE in Internal management and planning and external accountability and communication.
- (2) We do not want to apply NSSE without caution.
- (3) We should be concerned about simplistic comparison and interpretation of results (as in Maclean's)
- (4) NSSE is neither a stand-alone indicator nor a panacea.
- (5) More fruitful approach would be to compare similar (aspirational) institutions at the faculty, program, student-group level and reflect on meaningful differences (against peers, goals) not just statistical significance.
- (6) Scores per se are not as important as efforts to improve them.

Student Mobility Paper

This paper compares the historical development of and student mobility between Community College and Universities in Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta. Community Colleges are government created institutions that follows government guidelines where as universities enjoy a higher degree of flexibility and autonomy in academic programming and standard. There is a higher student mobility between community colleges and universities in Alberta and British Columbia than that in Ontario. The author will present the full paper at the spring meeting.

Respectfully submitted,

Azim Mallik, Ph.D.,
Academic Colleague,
Lakehead University