

# Collaboration Across Campuses

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Written by Urszula Sitarz on August 21, 2017

Collaboration: a popular idea in the modern workplace, school, and government. Effective group-work is a skill of increasing importance, visible in the classroom with group assignments, projects, and even tests becoming more prominent and contributing to an increasing portion of students' grades. At the university-level, student unions function on successful collaboration: among student leaders both within and outside of the union, with full-time staff, university administration, stakeholders, and any other campus and community partners.

The goal of being student-driven and student-oriented implies an inherent need for collaboration as they must incorporate student voices and interests in everything they do; from surveys and focus groups to services and events, student unions are built on a network of connections that allow them to enhance student life. This foundational framework should, theoretically, extend beyond the university-level to create networks of student unions for the purposes of advocacy, best-practice sharing, service provision, and more measures to improve student life through a greater scope. We see this in reality, through organizations such as OUSA, which take best-practice sharing and advocacy to heights impossible to reach at the campus union/association level.

An excellent, practical example of the collaboration among OUSA schools is the Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey. Administered to the 8 member universities and reaching over 150,000 students, the survey gathers an understanding of various issues at these institutions from mental health services to work-integrated learning opportunities. This data is then transferred directly to OUSA's lobbying priorities through policies, reports, and all other recommendations. The collaboration of these unions in distributing and promoting the survey to their students provides necessary, effective solutions to the barriers that students face.

As a member of the MSU Education Department I recently observed a Canadian federal advocacy organization conference, which furthered my appreciation for student union collaboration. While the scope of the organization and the landscape of the conference is quite different from OUSA, it was evident that their methods of collaboration are effective. With widespread support, evidence-based recommendations in support of student interests have great potential to create change. One of the greatest aspects of collaboration between organizations is how the wins of one organization can be wins for others. Similarly, the success of student unions can affect students across Canada, regardless of institution, affiliated organizations, or province.

The idea of shared success comes into practice through the sharing of best practices. Within OUSA, the member organizations gather each summer for a day of best practice sharing. With more minds contributing to strategy development, tangible solutions are common practice. This comes to fruition when members enact these changes and can observe how that change has made a positive impact on their students. While each institution has its nuances, this collaboration allows for the adaptation of practices to best serve each organization and its constituency. In contrast, these nuances have the potential to raise the challenges that can occur with collaboration through conflicting ideas and interests. What may greatly benefit one institution may neutrally or even negatively impact another; however, these challenges can result in well-rounded results through extensive research to find solutions that benefit all students.

A common priority among student unions, and affiliated organizations, this year is mental health strategies. There is a clear need for better preventative and responsive measures on campuses. A common strategy among provincial lobby organizations, and the student unions that compose them, must be an effective method for achieving a strong strategy across Canadian campuses. OUSA, in partnership with the Council of Alberta University Students, the New Brunswick Student Alliance, Students Nova Scotia, and with support of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, has done exactly this. Together, these groups recently published a Canada-wide strategy for

effectively handling student mental health on campuses in an intersectional manner. This gained national attention towards student mental health and with an Ontario provincial election expected in June 2018, this will hopefully be a focus of the parties to gain student support. Evidence-based research, representing hundreds of thousands of students, has incredible possibilities to make a significant impact on the mental health climate across the country. It has always been said that there is strength in numbers, a philosophy that student unions and their lobbying organizations truly embody. This must continue to ensure that student leaders can continue to improve student life for years to come.