

October 2009

ontario: a province of knowledge

report on the future of higher education



OU SA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

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report on the future of higher education

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OUSA | ONTARIO UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT ALLIANCE

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About OUSA:

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) is a coalition of elected university student councils from across Ontario. They have come together to protect the interests of Ontario's full- and part-time undergraduate students by providing research and ideas to governments on how to improve the affordability, accessibility, accountability, and quality of post-secondary education in the province. These elected student representatives work together to set OUSA's policies and direction. The organization approaches its goal of advancing the needs of undergraduate students through three means: direct lobbying, issue awareness campaigns and research & policy development. OUSA represents the interests of over 140,000 professional and undergraduate, full and part-time university students across the province.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation recently released a report demonstrating that those with a university degree comprised only 22% of the population but contributed 41% of income tax paid and only received 14% of government transfers. Concurrently, there is a very specific and tangible local economic benefit associated with a post-secondary institution operating in a community. In Kingston, ON, for example, an impact study in 2003 showed that, all told, Queen's University injects approximately \$500 million into the local economy each year. These economic benefits prove that an investment in post secondary education is not only an investment in students and innovation, but also a true commitment to the future success and prosperity of the province and the nation.

In 2005, for the first time in a half-century, the government of Ontario took bold steps towards investing in our economic future by recognizing that higher education is the key to the global creative age. An investment of \$6.2 billion, through the Reaching Higher plan, into post-secondary education over five years began a process of strengthening the overall quality and accessibility of Ontario's higher education system.

The following report will explore, in detail, what changes, alterations and overhauls need to be made in the next three to five years in order to build upon the great strides made in the Reaching Higher plan. The recommendations made by the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance are geared towards a continued transformation of the post-secondary education system in the province. The areas of focus will be student financial assistance, student success, and tuition.

PRIORITY ONE: STUDENT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Ontario students believe it necessary to once and for all modernize financial assistance. This will require reforms to OSAP that bring it in line with the realities faced by students in the twenty-first century. For example, it is no longer reasonable to assume that each student will be fully supported by their parents, be they affluent or otherwise. Further, the limits on assistance have stayed static for the past several years, responding in no way to the larger economy. Specifically, students' recommend that the provincial government:

- Raise the living allowance to at least the poverty line and ensure geographic differences in cost of living are taken into account;
- Raise the in-study income exemption to \$100/week, and tie it to future increases in the minimum wage;
- Immediately raise the OSAP maximum to \$175 per week with a proportional increase from the federal government;
- Fulfill its promise to provide students with an interest-free year before they must begin repaying their student loans; and,
- Maintain the Ontario Student Opportunity Grant at its current level, and finding the funding through the redirection of the tuition and education tax-credits.

PRIORITY TWO: STUDENT SUCCESS

While all of the goals of increased quality may not have been met in the first Reaching Higher plan, it does not mean that a post-Reaching Higher strategy cannot find new and creative ways to ensure that students succeed throughout their post-secondary education experience. First and foremost, the discussion on quality must shift toward a more student centric understanding of a high quality education. The question must change from "what do we need to fund for a quality education" into "what does it take to help students succeed." To this end, students recommend:

- The provincial government mandate institutions to develop early warning systems to proactively identify and assist those students who may need greater support, especially in their first year;
- The provincial government create envelopes within the funding formula that designate specific amounts per FTE for student support services;
- Funding be designated by the provincial government to found and maintain instructional support programs that encourage innovation in teaching and provide ongoing professional development for Ontario's post-secondary educators;
- The provincial government develop incentives for all new PhD students to be given formal instruction in teaching methods and practices;
- The provincial government designate targeted funding to support the development of new teaching and learning pedagogy at all institutions and across all disciplines; and,
- Quality teaching be weighted equally with research performance for all decisions relating to hiring, promotion and tenure. A panel consisting of students, government, university and faculty representatives must be established to explore how this standard can be better maintained.

PRIORITY THREE: TUITION

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance believes strongly that the foundation for a cost recovery system for higher education in the province should be fairness. Fairness means that because both students and society at large reap the benefits of post-secondary education, both parties should support in its provision. While Ontario students accept this reality, over the past two decades their contribution has grown exponentially, while, by comparison, the government portion has shrunk considerably.

It is OUSA's assertion that the provincial government is in the single best position to control tuition fees in Ontario. As an objective third party the province can balance competing stakeholder demands and build a system which is both accessible and able to offer the highest quality education. To those ends, OUSA recommends:

- The provincial government regulate all tuition, including that of international students;
- The Ontario government progress toward restoring a 2:1 cost-sharing model where tuition makes up no more than a third of university operating budgets;
- At minimum, the provincial government must increase university operating grants to the per student national average.
- If tuition increases must occur, then they should go up no more than that of yearly inflation as measured by the Consumer Price Index.

The Reaching Higher plan was as forward looking as it was ambitious, and while no one predicted the economic climate in which our world now finds itself, Ontario is in a better position than it would have been without this plan. Canada is undergoing an economic reorganization which will forever change employment patterns, both at home and around the world. It has long been clear that graduating from post-secondary education provides benefits to both the individual and society as a whole. Reaching Higher must be the catalyst for a long-term strategy to not only pull Ontario out of the current recession but propel our province in the economy of tomorrow.



People with a higher education are often associated with better health and longer life.



POST SECONDARY EDUCATION: ONTARIO'S ECONOMIC FUTURE

"Human creativity is the ultimate economic resource. The ability to generate new ideas and better ways of doing things is ultimately what drives innovation to raise productivity and thus living standards."

- Roger Martin & Richard Florida

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, for the first time in a half-century, the government of Ontario took bold steps towards investing in our economic future by recognizing that higher education is the key to the global creative age. An investment of \$6.2 billion into post-secondary education over five years began a process of strengthening the overall quality and accessibility of Ontario's higher education system. The benefits of the *Reaching Higher* plan are beginning to become clear to Ontarians, but one point is undeniable: more students than ever before have been empowered to access and excel in a post-secondary degree.

The *Reaching Higher* plan was as forward looking as it was ambitious, and while no one predicted the economic climate in which our world now finds itself, Ontario is in a better position than it would have been without this plan. Canada is undergoing an economic reorganization which will forever change employment patterns, both at home and around the world.

Instead of primary or even secondary industry, Ontario will soon be overwhelmingly dominated by professions that require some years of post-secondary education.

Reaching Higher must be the catalyst for a long-term strategy to not only pull Ontario out of the current recession but propel our province in the economy of tomorrow. It has long been clear that graduating from post-secondary education provides benefits to both the individual and society as a whole.

In 2004 TD Bank Group published a report in which they highlighted that a university or college diploma would not only lead to a 12-28% return on investment for the student, but that people with a higher education are "often associated with better health and longer life."¹

These benefits were summarized recently by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation when they demonstrated that those with a university degree comprised only 22% of the population but contributed 41% of income tax paid and only received 14% of government transfers.² Perhaps the most striking point from the Foundation is that the percentage of families with low income "is twice as high for families headed by someone without a university degree as it is for those headed by a university graduate."³

The societal benefits of post-secondary education are undeniable. Concurrently, there is a very specific and tangible local economic benefit associated with a post-secondary institution operating in a community. In Kingston, ON, for example, an impact study in 2003 showed that, all told, Queen's University injects approximately \$500 million into the local economy each year. In the Niagara region, Brock University has estimated in 2008 that their institution is responsible for \$265 million in financial stimulus. The University of Waterloo commissioned Price-Waterhouse-Cooper to complete a report in 2001 which showed that when employment and business "value added" is taken into account, approximately \$1.1 billion is infused into the region.

These economic benefits prove that an investment in post secondary education is not only an investment in students and innovation, but also a true commitment to the future success and

prosperity of the province and the nation. From bookstores and landlords in St. Catharines, to internationally renowned telecommunications firms in Waterloo, institutions of higher education are a foundational part of Ontario's economic future.

Thus, the *Reaching Higher* plan began Ontario down a path that, with continued support, will invariably lead to better life for all who choose to call this province home.

As a plan, *Reaching Higher* focused on areas in post-secondary education which were in dire need of attention. Namely, the plan increased support for student financial assistance, enrolment and outreach, quality, and accountability. Investments over the past five years have included: \$358 million in new student financial assistance by 2009-10, more than double the base funding provided in 2004-05; \$10 million in 2005-06 to undertake new programs and outreach for under-represented groups such as Francophones, Aboriginals, people with disabilities and first generation students. While there have been measurable successes over the past five years, there are also areas where goals were set and plans were laid out but desired results did not come to fruition.

The following report will explore, in detail, what changes, alterations and overhauls need to be made in the next three to five years in order to build upon the great strides made in the *Reaching Higher* plan. The recommendations made by the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance are geared towards a continued transformation of the post-secondary education system in the province. The areas of focus will be student financial assistance, student success, and tuition. The proposals contained herein will help the government continue to build Ontario into the best place to live, learn and work in the world.



The general societal benefits of post-secondary education are undeniable. Concurrently, there is a very specific and tangible local economic benefit associated with a post-secondary institution operating in a community.





Our province can create a system of universities that is truly world class and accessible, producing graduates and achievements that will ensure Ontario has a bright future.



A VISION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

TAKING STOCK

The government's *Reaching Higher* plan comprised the largest investment in post-secondary education in forty years and has had success in improving the accessibility and accountability of the system. But even with this increase, Ontario institutions are still lagging behind other provinces and countries that have recognized the intrinsic value of universities and colleges to their future success. Additional operating funding has been met with an unanticipated enrollment boom, resulting in per-capita provincial funding that is still below the national average.

But money alone cannot fix the system. A cultural shift must occur within institutions and the general public. Institutions must re-discover the purpose and joy of teaching and learning and must explore new methods and opportunities for enhancing their student's education. The public must be engaged in the process and recognize the inherent value of higher education, beyond its ability to merely provide employment credentials. Many of today's students have a dim view of their own future. They are faced with the prospect of high debt loads and an increasingly competitive global job market. Many do not feel that their undergraduate degree will be sufficient to provide them any opportunity beyond that of a desk jockey.

New emphasis on research and innovation has turned high quality teaching into an afterthought. Indeed, the quality of the learning experience for a student today is demonstrably lower than that of a decade or more in the past. And all the while, students have been asked to contribute more.

With recent investments in financial assistance, a greater number of Ontarians have access to higher education, but many still do not, often as a result of socio-cultural barriers that have yet to be addressed. Tuition fees have continued to increase in recent years, even as the quality of education has diminished. The Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) still has serious flaws. Despite record increases in enrolment driven by burgeoning demand, many historically underrepresented groups in Ontario continue to fall behind their counterparts in access and educational attainment.

But there is reason to be optimistic; higher education in Ontario is not beyond repair. Recent government investments have halted what seemed to be the approaching collapse of the post-secondary system and put Ontario back on the path to improvement. The province's public universities have a tradition of excellence and provide the potential for an unparalleled educational experience. Our campus communities of teachers and learners are highly capable and committed to improving their institutions. Our province can create a system of universities that is truly world-class and accessible, producing graduates and achievements that will ensure Ontario has a bright future.

SYSTEM PRINCIPLES

Given the challenges facing Ontario and the role that universities play, it is important that a set of core system principles and values are in place to drive future development.

A Shared Responsibility

The bedrock of our higher education system must be its status as a shared responsibility among many partners, each of them reaping tangible benefits and providing significant resources to ensure the system's success.

Primary responsibility for higher education rests with government, and this responsibility extends far beyond financing. The government has a responsibility to foster access and provide assistance to those in need who wish to attend higher education. Moreover, it has a responsibility to ensure that the cost of education is affordable through the use of regulatory measures. Finally, the government is also responsible to the citizens of Ontario for the accountability of the system as an agent of their tax dollars.

The general public shares greatly in the benefits of a robust post-secondary education system as it is one the main engines of job creation and leads to greater tax revenue and greater socio-economic growth. Thus, society must bear the lion's share of funding.

Students receive tangible individual benefits from higher education and should also share some responsibility for the system through the provision of tuition fees. However, there are reasonable limits to the percentage contribution that is made, as graduates are not the sole beneficiaries of their education. As benefactors of a healthy public system, students also have the responsibility to use their education to become active contributors to the economic, social and cultural fabric of the community that has contributed to their success.

Generally, it is the responsibility of universities to be system stewards. They must be accountable to those who provide them with the financial resources for their operations – the general public, students and government. They are also responsible at a local level for ensuring accessibility and quality through the provision of institutional financial assistance and the assurance of a high quality experience. Ensuring an equitable balance between teaching and research is also an important responsibility.

This compact of responsibility does not end with the government, students and universities. Others have responsibility over the system, as benefactors of and investors in higher education, including faculty and staff, parents and employers.

A Commitment to Affordability & Predictability

In order to ensure access, the cost of education must be affordable for those who wish to attend. Tuition, ancillary fees, books and living expenses must not place an unacceptable burden on students and families. It is the government's responsibility to provide financial aid to students, in the form of loans and grants, to assist those students who cannot afford the increasing cost of higher education.

Alongside affordability, predictability in cost and funding is of the utmost importance. Any successful and sustainable system of higher education requires a holistic long-term commitment to ensure its success. Universities must be able to plan for the future and students must know their tuition is safe from sudden deregulation and rapid increase.

Universal & Equitable Access

Whether for reasons of greater social equality, a more engaged citizenry, or simply to allow individuals to pursue their dreams, all willing and qualified students must be able to access PSE. But access is about more than just getting into the system. Students, once accepted into university, must not be deterred or diverted from completing their degree due to financial, physical, cultural or social barriers.

Individuals from certain groups face greater barriers to accessibility. These include low-income Ontarians, Aboriginal Ontarians, rural and northern Ontarians, first-generation students, students with dependents and middle-income students. For many of Ontario's youth, knowledge barriers play just as great a role as monetary barriers. OUSA supports a province-wide early intervention strategy to tackle this problem. We must not rest until equitable access is achieved for all.



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Fair & Progressive Cost-Recovery

If one of the goals of the system is to provide equitable access to post-secondary education to all Ontarians, any model for recovering the cost of that system must not simply incorporate a plethora of uncoordinated elements. Instead, it must be designed with fairness and equity as its foundation. Yes, students should contribute, but through a fair cost-sharing model.

Equal Emphasis on Teaching & Research

Universities are, first and foremost, places of learning. This learning includes both the cutting-edge research that broadens our collective knowledge, as well as the transfer of this collective knowledge from instructor to pupil. It should be the goal of every university to ensure that both of these pursuits are given equal consideration.

Clarity of Targets & Objectives

Universities, government and even students have a broad understanding of their aims. However, specific targets and objectives are rarely defined, and progress is almost never tracked. In order to move forward effectively, universities and government must set clear targets and objectives that are reasonably attainable.

Student-Centric

A student-centric system should emphasize the quality of the educational experience that a student receives. This will ensure that universities continually focus on the opportunities for learning, discovery and development throughout one's university career – a key indicator of quality and of student success.

Transparent & Accountable

As public institutions receiving public funds as well as revenue from students, universities must be transparent and accountable in all of their activities – financial, academic and otherwise. The provincial government has a responsibility to ensure that taxpayers and students receive this information.

Evidence-Based Change

Policy changes to higher education in Ontario are too often reactionary and are made based on politics or their ability to be successful in a fiscally restrained framework. In order to truly meet the demands of an accessible, affordable and high-quality system, systemic changes and their long-term impacts must be carefully considered. Evidence that a change will bring improvement must be present.

CRITICAL CHALLENGES

Adequately Funding the System

The economic downturn has left governments with little room for new spending. Ontario's universities need money but governments have little to offer them, even though the returns on investment are considerable. Students already pay a much greater proportional cost than their peers in other North American jurisdictions and they have seen little to no improvement in quality even as their tuition continues to rise. The solution must be a combination of decreasing ballooning university costs and increasing government funding.

Balance Between Teaching & Research

Many years of government emphasis on research and innovation have resulted in universities that prize research funding well above quality instruction. Students are taught by professors who often lack any formal training in teaching and who know full well that their research – not their teaching – is the key to tenure and promotion. Universities inevitably follow the money and without incentives to improve teaching and learning, nothing will change.

Changing Enrollment

Over the next twenty years, over 65,000 new students in the Greater Toronto Area will wish to access post-secondary education. Meanwhile, enrolment at schools in less urban areas of Ontario will begin to see declining enrolment and will begin to face difficulty filling seats. It is important the government has a transparent plan to deal with burgeoning enrolment in some areas and declining enrolment in others. This challenge will reshape the face of PSE in Ontario for years to come.

Differentiation & Centres of Excellence

A debate has begun across Canada on the topic of differentiation – a word that means different things to different people. Some see it as the natural evolution of centres of excellence across the Province. Others see it as the creation of teaching-focused universities to free-up money for a select few research-intensive institutions. Eventually, the government must also engage in this debate and decide if changes to the current system are warranted.

Student Mobility

Improving students' ability to move between institutions and retain credit for prior learning will allow them to find their own path to realizing their full potential. A fair, accountable and comprehensive credit transfer system, from college to university, university to university and college to college, must continue to be one of the government's long-term goals.

BROAD SOLUTIONS

Ensuring Student Success

Indicators like smaller class sizes or better university infrastructure can no longer be regarded as the end goals of quality improvement; they are pieces of the puzzle that further our true goal: ensuring student success. A serious quality-improvement strategy must adopt the student success lens and further the goal of increasing the number of well-educated graduates. This will be especially important when improving student mobility and discussing institutional differentiation.

Emphasize Quality Teaching

Stressing research without providing equal support teaching is what has caused the current imbalance between them. The solution is for government to demonstrate their unequivocal commitment to quality instruction. This should begin with increased funding for teaching support services, incentives for institutions to implement new teaching methods, incentives for institutions to develop training in teaching for PhD students, and a provincial grant system that supports research and innovation into teaching improvements in higher education.



The economic downturn has left governments with little room for new spending. Ontario's universities need money but governments have little to offer them, even though the returns on investment are considerable.





The many millions of dollars needed for new Toronto campuses would be much better spent in the form of grants for students who choose to go to school away from home and outside the GTA.



Create Incentives to Fill Capacity Where it Exists

While overcapacity is becoming a serious issue in the Greater Toronto Area, other institutions across the Province are expected to see declining enrolment and a greater need for students to fill seats. Before endorsing the construction of a new university or satellite campuses near Toronto, the government should exhaust all options which assist students in finding pathways to institutions where there is space. The many millions of dollars needed for new Toronto campuses would be much better spent in the form of grants for students who choose to go to school away from home and outside the GTA.

Devise & Implement an Early Intervention Strategy

The best way to fight declining enrolment while also increasing participation in universities is to create an early intervention strategy and reach out to students from underrepresented groups. The government has invested in such programs before, most notably by funding an expansion of the Pathways to Education Program, but an issue of this importance needs serious government attention and a coherent strategy for success. Patchwork funding programs are no longer enough.

Consider Carefully the Implications of More Satellite Campuses

While it may be necessary to allow some institutions to expand into the Greater Toronto Area, the government must ensure institutions avoid the pitfalls that can occur in the management of distant campuses. It is important that satellites are well-positioned geographically and have adequate land available for long-term sustainability. Governance structures must be examined to prevent satellites from becoming second-tier pieces of a larger institution. On the other hand, the presence of a campus in communities around Toronto would likely have significant positive effects on the local community both economically and socially and these factors must be weighed as well.

Resist Invasive Differentiation & Include Student Success in the Debate

Differentiation has a multitude of meanings. Thus, before discussing it we must properly define what we are talking about. OUSA fully rejects the notion that Ontario should take research away from smaller schools to create a two-tiered system of liberal arts institutions and a few large, research-intensive universities. This would hamper, not improve a system that relies on competition to ensure the best projects are funded. It would also have negative impacts on communities across Ontario where universities are the main source of innovation for local industries.

OUSA supports an organic and responsive system, free of central planning, that is based on incentives rather than rules. Through the accountability framework, universities should identify areas of strength and continue to build on them, with the help of the government. Innovation must be supported through the mandate of the institution and the needs of the community in which it is located. Differentiation of this kind will result in increased efficiency and numerous centres of excellence where the climate for innovation can be nurtured in different ways.

Through all future discussions on differentiation, the needs of students must be considered. Currently, concerns over research competition and the need for innovation have gained a stranglehold on the debate. Any movement in this area will have a profound affect on students and that must become a major piece of this discussion.

Identify Cost Savings

With university budgets strained the breaking point, it is tempting to think that greater government funding and higher tuition fees are the only solution. But a third option has yet to be adequately explored – finding savings in the current model. Government and institutions must fully explore all saving opportunities, from using economies of scale, to changing the way research and teaching are delivered.

Provide Institutions with Predictable Levels of Funding

Too often, universities receive a bundle of extra government funding on or near the last day of the fiscal year. As a result, institutions must guess in their budgets how much last-minute funding will come in, usually with no idea of the true amount or whether it will be earmarked for a certain area. This can be very disruptive to long- and even short-term planning efforts. To maintain a healthy system, the government must enhance transparency and predictability in the funding formula.



OUSA fully rejects the notion that Ontario should take research away from smaller schools to create a two-tiered system of liberal arts institutions and a few large, research-intensive universities.





For many young people, the dream of attending higher education could finally become a reality. But there is more to do.



PRIORITY ONE: STUDENT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

After years of cutbacks, the *Reaching Higher* plan finally addressed some of students' long-standing concerns with the Ontario Student Assistance Program. Additionally, the Ontario government, in conjunction with the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, increased the amount of non-repayable financial assistance to Ontario students with the greatest need. These changes meant that students who might never have received government funding in the past were, for the first time, eligible for support. For many young people, the dream of attending higher education could finally become a reality. But there is more to do.

Ontario students believe it necessary to once and for all modernize financial assistance. This will require reforms to OSAP that bring it in line with the realities faced by students in the twenty-first century. For example, it is no longer reasonable to assume that each student will be fully supported by their parents, be they affluent or otherwise. Further, the limits on assistance have stayed static for the past several years, responding in no way to the larger economy. Specifically, students believe that the issues which must be addressed include:

- the OSAP need assessment;
- OSAP in-study income exemption;
- loan maximums and un-met need;
- Ontario Student Opportunity Grant;
- education tax credits;
- loan repayment.

NEED ASSESSMENT

The Ontario Student Assistance Program uses what could be, theoretically, a very simple formula for determining the financial need of a student: need = educational costs – financial resources. However, the application of this equation is where the reality becomes quite complicated and, unfortunately, where some of Ontario's students with the greatest need suffer.

1) Cost of Living:

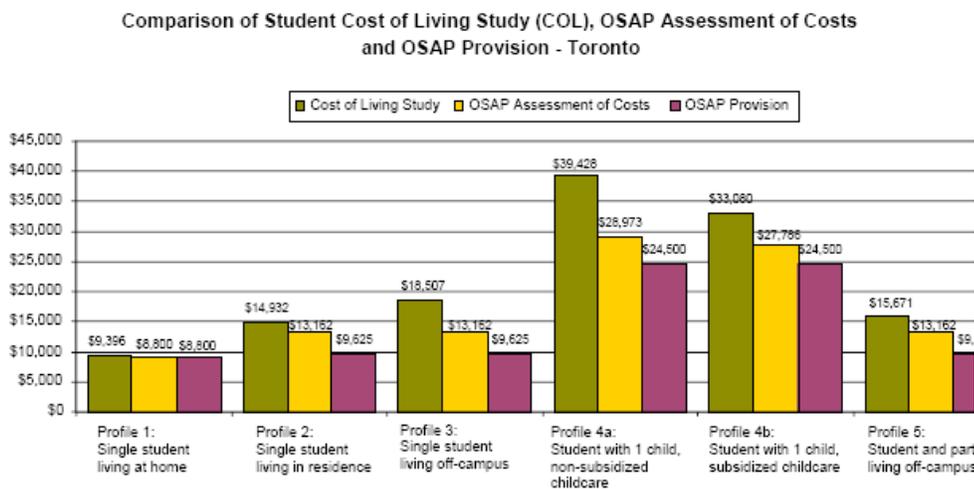
Recommendation One: *The Ontario government should at least raise the living allowance to the poverty line and ensure geographic differences in cost of living are taken into account.*

Many of the problems that OUSA has identified in OSAP derive from the fixed, one-size-fits-all approach used in the formula which hinders the system from having any geographic sensitivity or responsiveness to external change. While the need assessment currently adapts to the differing costs of tuition, books and equipment at each institution, a standard figure is used province-wide in the assessment of living costs.

The 2003 Runzheimer report on the student cost of living shows that, regardless of the situation of the student, the actual cost of living in some areas of the province is much higher than that estimated by the OSAP need assessment.

It is unreasonable to assume that the amount of living allowance for a student in Thunder Bay would be the same for a student in downtown Toronto. Instead of a universal average the Ontario government should seek out the actual cost of living for communities where post-secondary institutions exist.

Figure A



This Runzheimer report concludes that, "Overall, current OSAP assessment and provision levels do not reflect actual costs. The closest they come is for single students living at home. Moreover, there is a compounding effect since, in most cases, OSAP assessments are less than costs and the funding provided is less than the assessment."⁴

As it currently stands, the cost of living allotment for a single-student living away from home over a full twelve-month period would come to a total of \$12,540 for one year. This is a full \$3000 lower than the after tax low-income cut-off for one person in an urban area with population between 100,000 and 499,999.⁵ That our system expects students to live below the poverty line is unconscionable.

Figure B: Low-Income Cut-Off Data

Size of family unit	Community size				
	Rural areas	Urban areas			
		Less than 30,000 ¹	30,000 to 99,999	100,000 to 499,999	500,000 and over
2007					
1 person	11,745	13,441	14,994	15,184	17,954
2 persons	14,295	16,360	18,250	18,480	21,851
3 persons	17,800	20,370	22,725	23,011	27,210
4 persons	22,206	25,414	28,352	28,709	33,946
5 persons	25,287	28,940	32,285	32,691	38,655
6 persons	28,044	32,095	35,805	36,255	42,869
7 or more persons	30,801	35,250	39,324	39,819	47,084
2008					
1 person	12,019	13,754	15,344	15,538	18,373
2 persons	14,628	16,741	18,676	18,911	22,361
3 persons	18,215	20,845	23,255	23,548	27,844
4 persons	22,724	26,007	29,013	29,378	34,738
5 persons	25,876	29,614	33,037	33,453	39,556
6 persons	28,698	32,843	36,640	37,100	43,869
7 or more persons	31,519	36,072	40,241	40,747	48,181

1. Includes cities with a population between 15,000 and 30,000 and small urban areas (under 15,000).

“ Ontario students believe it necessary to once and for all modernize financial assistance. ”



That our system expects students to live below the poverty line is unconscionable.



II) Academic Costs:

Recommendation Two: *OSAP should fully account for the cost of academic materials associated with a degree.*

Unfortunately, living costs are not the only area where OSAP grossly underestimates what students will actually need to afford their education. When assessing the real need of students OSAP has a variety of maximums associated with the costs of attending university. These maximums, like the overall maximum loan amount given to students, have stayed static for many years.

Currently, book costs for a general arts or science course are capped at \$600 per two-term academic year, and \$500 per year for computer costs. For many students, this is much too low. For example, a half-credit math course at Queens University in Advanced Calculus carries a book cost of \$129.96.⁶ If you were a math and science major, this would be one of five books which would easily bring you up to the \$600 maximum in the course of only one term. In programs that are known to have more expensive supplies the maximums are increased, but all book and supply costs will only be considered up to a maximum of \$3000.

If you consider that these costs include expendable supplies (\$400 for two term, non-fine art program), uniforms and minor equipment, field trips, major equipment (cameras, musical instruments, tool kits, etc), graduate thesis costs, and professional association/examination fees, it is easy to imagine reaching the limit quite quickly.

The reality of the situation is that books and supply costs are non-optional parts of attending a specific program at university. If the goal of the loan program is to accurately assess student need then limiting the amount of legitimate costs they can incur to some arbitrary maximum will hinder access and may reduce program choice. Given that institutions report this amount based on data from bookstores and programs, it is not unreasonable for OSAP to use these numbers to make real calculations of the costs of academic materials, thereby fully assessing the expenses that students must bare to complete their education.

III) Parental Contribution:

Recommendation Three: *The Ontario Student Loan assessment should use the federal parental contribution criteria.*

The federal and provincial coordination of government issued student loans is a complicated program in every province, Ontario included. While the interaction between the two programs is a challenge in and of itself, one area in particular has proven particularly detrimental to students: financial resource assessment.

To illustrate one area of divergence between the Canada and Ontario assessments, 'Figure C' shows the amounts used as benchmarks for "moderate standard of living" for both Canada and Ontario. These benchmarks are used when assessing parental contribution based on annual discretionary income (ADI). The moderate standard of living numbers are deducted from the parents' net income and the parental contribution is calculated based on the remaining funds.

'Figure D' clearly shows the federal calculation of a moderate standard of living to be a great deal more generous, coming in a full 28% higher for a family of four when compared to Ontario. The serious variance between the two measurements will lead to students being assessed with a great deal more need by Canada than by Ontario.

Figure C

Moderate Standard of Living (Canada portion of COISL)								
Family Size								
2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
\$42,976	\$53,354	\$60,717	\$66,433	\$71,095	\$75,044	\$78,458	\$81,473	\$84,174

Moderate Standard of Living (Ontario portion of COISL)								
Family Size								
2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
\$37,395	\$42,791	\$47,431	\$51,533	\$55,094	\$58,115	\$60,598	\$62,540	\$63,943

Figure D

Weekly Parental Contribution Based on ADI – Canada	
If annual discretionary income is between:	Weekly Parental Contribution is calculated as:
\$0 - \$7,000	15% of ADI / 52 weeks
\$7,001 - \$14,000	[\$1,050 + 20% of (ADI - \$7,000)] / 52 weeks
\$14,001 and over	[\$2,450 + 40% of (ADI - \$14,000)] / 52 weeks

Weekly Parental Contribution Based on ADI – Ontario	
If annual discretionary income is between:	Weekly Parental Contribution is calculated as:
\$0 - \$7,000	25% of ADI / 52 weeks
\$7,001 - \$14,000	[\$1,750 + 50% of (ADI - \$7,000)] / 52 weeks
\$14,001 and over	[\$5,250 + 75% of (ADI - \$14,000)] / 52 weeks

After the moderate standard of living amount is subtracted from the parents' net income, the government assumes a percentage of the remaining funds will be put toward the child's education. Here again, Ontario is significantly less generous than Canada.

As you can see from these tables, the Canadian government expects parents to contribute 15% of their first \$7000 in discretionary income, while Ontario expects 25% of this income. For the next \$7000, the difference becomes even more apparent, with Canada asking for a contribution of 20% and Ontario asking for a full 50%. The discrepancy grows further as we pass \$14,000.

Based on this data, Canada expects parents to contribute \$2,450 of their first \$14,000 in discretionary income while Ontario expects \$5,250 – more than double that amount.

OUSA has examined the discrepancy in both moderate standard of living and contribution of discretionary income and found Ontario to be much less generous than Canada, often by thousands of dollars. Each time a student is evaluated under these two assessments there will invariably remain a large amount of federal need that will not be covered by OSAP. By using the same measures of financial resources, the Canada-Ontario Integrated Student Loan will better assess and fund the real financial need of Ontario's students.



If the goal of the loan program is to accurately assess student need then limiting the amount of legitimate costs they can incur to some arbitrary maximum will hinder access and may reduce program choice.





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IV) In-Study Exemption:

Recommendation Four: *The Ontario government must immediately raise the in-study income exemption to \$100/week, and tie it to future increases in the minimum wage.*

For over a decade the maximum a student could earn during their study period without penalty was \$50/week of net income, which over a two term academic year equals \$1700. Any income garnered above this amount would be, upon reassessment, clawed back from the original loan amount given. The rationale behind this maximum is based on a student earning minimum wage for ten hours per week.

Given that the minimum wage will soon rise to \$10/hour in the province of Ontario, it seems only logical to finally raise the in-study exemption to reflect the true amount a student will earn in a part-time job. In this way, the so-called OSAP “claw-back” will no longer discourage students from working during their studies, out of fear that their loan disbursement might be decreased.

V) Student Assets:

Recommendation Five: *The provincial government should permit an exemption of a small amount of savings, to allow for emergencies, cash shortfalls, and to promote prudent financial planning and saving.*

In the OSAP need assessment almost all of a student’s assets are counted as part of their resources expected to fund their post-secondary studies. This includes all savings held in cash, at financial institutions, or in the form of investments. Exemptions exist for the gross market value of vehicles minus \$5000 and for \$2000 in RRSPs for every year that a student has been out of secondary school.⁷

These savings and assets are used in the OSAP need assessment to reduce a student’s assistance level on a dollar-for-dollar basis. For example, a student with just \$300 in their bank account would be expected by OSAP to use the full \$300 to fund their education, as their assistance would be reduced by \$300.⁸ This creates an implicit expectation that students should finish the academic year with no money or savings. By requiring students to liquidate all of their assets other than a certain amount of RRSPs, the provincial government leaves many students in a precarious financial situation, without any of the reserve funds they may have worked long and hard to build. Many students, particularly those with children, attempt to keep some funds set aside in the event of emergency, illness, or other situations.⁹

OUSA therefore recommends that the provincial government implement a reasonably-sized exemption for all assets for students. This exemption level should adjust according to each student’s age and circumstances, including their number of dependent children.

OSAP MAXIMUMS AND UNMET NEED

For over a decade the maximum weekly stipend given by OSAP was \$110 per week. In 2005/2006 that limit was raised to \$140 per week, where it has stayed for the past four years, in spite of the fact that the Rae Review recommended an increase to \$175/week by 2006-

2007.¹⁰ During just these last four years when the OSAP maximum has remained unchanged, inflation in Canada rose by 7.1%. Thus, for the coming school year students will be receiving approximately ten real dollars less per week than they would have only four years ago.

Recommendation Six: *The Ontario government should immediately raise the OSAP maximum to \$175 per week and should demand a proportional increase from the federal government.*

It is time for the government to fulfill the Rae Review recommendation and increase the OSAP maximum to \$175/week.

Recommendation Seven: *The Ontario government should tie the maximum loan disbursement for OSAP to the rate of inflation, as measured by CPI, chosen once each year.*

Inflation indexing is already practiced in various parts of government. For example, the Canada Pension Plan adjusts all benefits once a year by the Consumer Price Index in order to ensure that seniors' pension payments are adjusted for them to have the same purchasing power. Low-income cut-offs (often described as the 'poverty line') are also often indexed to inflation, so child tax benefits and other government programs aimed at helping low-income people are sensitive to changes in buying power. These policies recognize that for people on limited budgets, such as seniors and low-income individuals, depreciation through inflation can have a major impact. This same consideration should be applied to students receiving OSAP.

LOAN REPAYMENT

Ontario's students attend institutions of higher learning to prepare themselves for a lifetime of better employment and opportunity than they might have had without. The greater societal interest in graduating as many individuals as possible is due to the large number of benefits offered to Ontario by those with a higher education, such as higher taxable income, greater civic engagement, and less reliance on social services. In order for a student to transition properly into the workforce, it is important that the loan system be supportive rather than punitive in its treatment of repayment. Furthermore, saddling students with a crippling debt that hinders their ability to start and adult life benefits no one and work should be continued to avoid this.

Recommendation Eight: *The Liberal government should fulfill its promise to provide students with an interest-free year before they must begin repaying their student loans.*

The vast majorities of university and college graduates find work in their field and quickly become productive members of society. However, in order to be successful in the early years of work it is important that those with outstanding student loans be given the opportunity to start the new chapter of their life without being immediately punished for the one previous. Currently, as soon as a student graduates from university interest begins to accrue on their outstanding loan. While no payments must be made for the first six months, calling this period of interest accrual a "grace period" is clearly misleading. It will often take graduates a year if not longer to find stable employment which enables them to begin paying back their loan.



The provincial government must immediately raise the in-study income exemption to \$100/week, and tie it to future increases in the minimum wage.





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Premier McGuinty has promised to extend the interest free status to a new “true” grace period, which would be double in length and allow students one year after their studies before either interest accrues or payments must be made. This relatively small amount of extra time, when compared to the lifetime of the loan, will likely reduce default rates and give students a better chance of repaying their loan in a timely and complete fashion.

Recommendation Nine: *Ontario should immediately implement the Repayment Assistance Program (RAP) in concert with the federal government.*

For many years the only options for those who encountered difficulty in repaying their loans in the province of Ontario were the Interest Relief and Debt Reduction in Repayment programs. These two programs were meant to help students who find themselves in financial trouble get back on their feet until such a time as they would be able to repay their loans. There are many limitations with these two programs, the most serious being that they are primarily intended for students who face severe and/or prolonged financial difficulties. Students’ loan obligations must comprise a large proportion of their incomes, particularly for those with the heaviest debt loads, in order to qualify for interest relief or debt reduction. For example, a student with a \$1,400 combined monthly payment on all student loans cannot qualify for interest relief unless their income is lower than \$3,305/month.¹¹ This disqualifies students whose monthly payments comprise less than 42.4 per cent of their income.

Beginning this past August, students who face financial challenge can now apply to have the federal portion of their loan supported by the Repayment Assistance Plan (RAP). One of the key elements of the RAP is that borrowers have to contribute an “affordable payment” which, while based on a sliding scale, cannot go above 20% of gross income. In this scheme, if they are unable to make their full payment everything they would otherwise owe is either paid by the government or deferred to a later date, interest free. Another important feature of the RAP is that after fifteen years of participation in the program the government will completely forgive the debt.

Given that a majority of students take some form of government loan and that average debt levels in Ontario and across the country have risen astronomically over the past decade, Ontario’s complete participation in the federal RAP will go a long way to support students who face financial hardship after graduation.

ONTARIO STUDENT OPPORTUNITY GRANT

For the past decade the government of Ontario has made a commitment that students with the greatest need will not be allowed to accumulate debt beyond \$7,000 per two term academic year. As post-secondary education has become increasingly expensive and tuition has more than doubled over the past two decades, the Ontario Student Opportunity Grant (OSOG) program means that a student in a four year honours program who might have graduated with \$47,600 worth of debt will instead have only \$28,000 to repay. That is a significant difference and can mean the difference between becoming a contributing member of society or being crushed under the pressure of enormous debt.

Recommendation Ten: *The Ontario Student Opportunity Grant must be maintained at its current level.*

While up front grants are important methods of ensuring access to the post-secondary education system, debt relief is an equally important tool to enhance persistence and create more manageable student debt levels upon graduation. With the Ontario government taking such a strong stance on student support, it is imperative that this debt cap stay in place, at the current value of \$7000, to continue to ensure that post-secondary education remains a propellant of our economy, rather than an unintentional hindrance. The funds to keep OSOG in place can be found through the elimination of education tax credits.

EDUCATION TAX CREDITS

Canadian governments collectively spend more than twice the funds allocated to student financial aid on untargeted tax-credits, compared to targeted grants. Unfortunately, tax credits do not equally benefit individuals across income brackets. On average, high income earners claim more through tax credits than people from low or middle income families, putting more money into the pockets of those who can already afford post-secondary education. In fact, 60 per cent of all education and tuition tax credits go to families with incomes above the national median.¹² This is an unfortunate reality that is pulling valuable and scarce funding away from assistance for lower-income and otherwise disadvantaged groups.

Christine Neill, from the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, has argued that although tax credits were theoretically created to make PSE more accessible, they often fail to address the issue of accessibility and rarely benefit those who require the funding, oftentimes low-income students.¹³ Students in school are often unable to claim the tax credit and can only receive it at the end of their education. This situation poses a problem for students who are not able to complete their education due to financial constraints and require the benefit of the tax credit while in school. Neill has stated that “the evidence suggests that the tax credits are ineffective in encouraging enrolment in higher education among those from backgrounds where income is modest.”¹⁴

Recommendation Eleven: *The Liberal government should immediately commit to its campaign promise to replace the tuition and education tax credits with up-front, non-repayable grants through the Ontario Student Opportunity Grant.*

In their 2007 platform, the Liberal Party committed itself to replacing the tuition and education tax credit with a grant at the beginning of a student’s academic year. It is important that this commitment be acted upon by taking the approximately \$150 million currently spent on education and tuition tax credits and channeling it instead into up-front grants that are aimed at the students with the greatest need. It is not enough to simply replace this credit with a universal grant, which will again support many students who would otherwise attend university without that extra funding. Using the money saved from the tax-credit for students who need it the most is the best way to continue growing Ontario’s student body and consequently the knowledge economy.

As outlined in the previous recommendation, the Ontario Student Opportunity Grant is perhaps the most critical debt-reducing initiative in Ontario. Every year the grant assists thousands of



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students manage their debt load. Given the rising cost associated with keeping OSOG at current levels, OUSA suggests that the money currently being spent on tax credits would be best spent maintaining this incredibly important piece of student assistance in Ontario.

THE STUDENT ACCESS GUARANTEE

When the current tuition framework was introduced in 2006-07, the government required Ontario institutions to participate in the Student Access Guarantee (SAG) in exchange for the ability to raise tuition fees. SAG is based on the principle that “qualified Ontario students should not be prevented from attending Ontario’s public colleges and universities due to lack of financial support programs.”

SAG requires institutions to cover each student’s “tuition/book shortfall”, defined as the lesser of a student’s SAG unmet need and the gap between the OSAP maximums and their actual costs as reported by the institution. Many students who receive enough in loans to cover their OSAP need will still be considered by SAG to have unmet need. This is because the SAG need calculation uses the Canada need assessment with the Ontario parental contribution expectation, thus creating a more generous assessment that takes into account full tuition costs.

In order to fulfill their SAG obligations to students in graduate and second-entry undergraduate programs, institutions are allowed to assist the student in acquiring a line of credit, rather than fund the student through grants.

Recommendation Twelve: *The SAG need assessment should be amended to include the actual reported cost of books, equipment and supplies.*

The Canada need assessment, like the Ontario assessment, caps the amount of book, equipment and supply costs that contribute to a student’s need. OUSA is concerned that by not including the full cost of these additional expenses, SAG is not living up to its principles.

For instance, if a student’s textbook costs increase by \$500 over the Canada and Ontario maximum, this will be reflected in SAG’s gap analysis but it will not change the student’s unmet need according to SAG. Since institutions must pay the lesser of the unmet need and the gap between actual costs and assessment maximums, SAG has failed to ensure our hypothetical students receives enough funds to cover this added expense.

Recommendation Thirteen: *Institutions and government must together ensure that second-entry undergraduate students will not need to resort to private loans in order to fund their education.*

OUSA has profound concerns with allowing institutions to meet their SAG responsibilities through the use of lines of credit, even if the institution is mandated to make repayment assistance available after graduation. Private loans collect interest while the student is studying, making them much more burdensome to students than government loans. Moreover, it would cost the government little or nothing to provide more OSAP loans to these individuals. By condoning the use of private loans, the government is acknowledging that OSAP has failed these students.



The question must change from what do we need to fund for a quality education into what does it take to help students succeed.



PRIORITY TWO: STUDENT SUCCESS

The original *Reaching Higher* plan had serious and robust measures aimed at improving the overall quality of the post-secondary education system in the province of Ontario. In the areas of student to teacher ratios, capital improvement and student experience, the government invested with the intention of making higher education better. Concurrently, enrolment at universities and colleges had a boom beyond even the most ambitious of estimations. This unprecedented growth effectively swallowed up any quality improvements that may have been intended.

Though the goals of increased quality may not have been met in the first *Reaching Higher* plan, it does not mean that a post-*Reaching Higher* strategy cannot find new and creative ways to ensure that students succeed throughout their post-secondary education experience. First and foremost, the discussion on quality must shift toward a more student centric understanding of a high quality education. The question must change from what do we need to fund for a quality education” into “what does it take to help students succeed.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS

University is not only an adjustment in learning style; it is a fundamental lifestyle shift for entering students. Some students are prepared to handle this change effectively and others face more difficulty. It is of vital importance that our classrooms are equipped with the resources to detect and deal with students who face difficulties, especially in their first year of studies.

Recommendation One: *The provincial government must mandate institutions to develop early warning systems to proactively identify and assist those students who may need greater support, especially in their first year.*

Academic support services currently lack the resources to proactively help those students at risk of falling through the cracks. To assist these students, institutions must be given adequate resources to track the progress of their students, identify key warning signs, and offer unsolicited assistance when necessary.

Recent research has identified several key groups of students with low student engagement rates (which have been correlated with persistence and student success), as well as several risk factors that show up early in a student’s academic career. Institutions should track the success of these students more carefully than others.

First Generation Students:

Studies reveal first generation students tend to be less engaged due to a variety of direct and indirect factors.¹⁵ Predominant culture on the campus may not mesh with the student’s background or upbringing, leading to difficulty adapting to the new community. In addition, many studies have linked first generation disengagement to the fact that first generation students have parents who did not attend post-secondary institutions themselves.

Off-Campus Students:

NSSE data has shown that students who live on-campus tend to be more engaged than students who live off-campus.¹⁶ This makes sense for a variety of reasons, such as the fact that on-campus students have easier access to support resources, are more likely to be full-time students, have easier access to faculty, and have more time for academic preparation between classes. Also important is the increased sense of belonging students feel when they live and study as part of one community. Living on-campus is vitally important in first year, when students are least aware of the support services offered by the university.

Part-Time Students:

Part Time Students tend to have greater obligations and family responsibilities as well as off-campus work, inhibiting their ability to take part in certain educationally enriching opportunities.¹⁷ These opportunities include study abroad programs, extracurricular events, as well as workshops run by academic support services.

Additionally, factors such as attendance habits, drop and add patterns, early semester and midterm grades, as well as high school performance are can all indicate a student who is at risk of dropping out.¹⁸ Universities must be ensured not only the resources to track this data, but for student affairs professionals and advisors to be able to reach out to students who are in danger of falling through the cracks.

Recommendation Two: *The provincial government must support the enhancement of the first year experience at the institutional level. These enhancements should come in the form of additional opportunities for effective orientation, as well as first year seminars.*

Student engagement at the first year level has an enormous impact on student success. Programs focusing on the first year experience have been positively correlated with a variety of positive outcomes, such as higher persistence and graduation rates.¹⁹ Several initiatives have been proven to have a particular impact on student success, and it is of vital importance that as institutionstighten their belts, these programs are not the ones that suffer.

Orientation:

Studies conducted in the mid-eighties found that institutions providing the most extensive orientation programs had higher graduation rates than institutions that placed less of a priority on orientation. The 2005 NSSE reported that students who attended orientation participated in more educationally enriching activities, reported higher satisfaction rates, had improved perceptions of campus, and reported greater developmental gains during their first year.

First Year Seminars:

First year seminars have taken a wide variety of forms across the institutions that have utilized them. Some are an orientation to university style learning, while others are subject-based and presided over by faculty members. The common thread throughout these programs is that they teach not only course content, but facilitate closer interaction between students without university experience, and faculty or staff who are familiar with success strategies. Through this interaction, students learn not only what is taught, but how to learn it.



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“
Funding this type of initiative allows institutions to increase their research capacity without compromising their commitment to undergraduate education.”

The advantage of utilizing first year seminar-style programs is the positive impact they have on students with diverse study skills. First year seminars have the greatest impact on the least academically prepared students. Students who have taken first year seminars have shown higher grades and reenrollment rates. Since success in first year has been linked with persistence and success in upper years, the opportunity to increase success in first year is an opportunity that must not be missed.

Recommendation Three: *The provincial government should provide financial incentives for universities to develop comprehensive undergraduate research opportunities programs.*

There are few opportunities that can facilitate discovery and skills development as effectively as Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programs (UROPs). UROPs are an integral part of university life in many American universities, but these opportunities have never been fully explored in Ontario, or even Canada. Recently, McMaster University started a pilot project for undergraduate research that is believed to be the nation’s first university-wide UROP.

UROPs have the following characteristics:

- Undergraduates submit proposals outlining their research plan, subject area and faculty sponsor;
- Once approved, students work with faculty researchers on selected projects of shared interest, on projects they devise themselves, or on an ongoing research project from one of the academic departments, professional schools or research centres;
- Students work full-time for summer terms or part-time during the year within an academic department at the university; and
- The research results are presented to the public or can appear in academic journals.

Undergraduate research contributes to the academic culture of an undergraduate education. Involved students feel a part of scholarly history, their work having been recorded and presented to current and future students. Groups of students work together, further defining new areas of study. These programs allow students to develop highly transferable skills in research, writing, analysis and communication. There is a clear benefit to all students, whether they wish to pursue further education or other opportunities outside academia. Studies have shown that participation in undergraduate research, “...made it more likely that students mastered complex scientific concepts and developed critical and independent thinking skills.”²⁰

Undergraduate research opportunities programs have other benefits for institutions and the province as a whole. UROPs can increase research capacity while maintaining quality. Many universities brand themselves “research intensive” while also wishing to be focused on the individual student. Research and undergraduate learning are seen to be separate enterprises, each distinct from the other. Institutions therefore feel they must decide between supporting their undergraduate teaching mission and supporting their research capacity. Undergraduate research aims to bridge this divide. Funding this type of initiative allows institutions to increase their research capacity without compromising their commitment to undergraduate education.

Recommendation Four: *The provincial government should create a grant program for university students to engage in international exchange and should work to increase the diversity of international opportunities available.*

International exchange opportunities are incredibly beneficial to student success. Students are given a chance to experience different teaching styles and unique research, but more than that, personal development is stimulated. This results in increased creativity and freedom of thought, as well as an understanding and appreciation for other cultures and ways of life.

In addition to the personal growth achieved through international programs, these experiences are also beneficial to Ontario's economy. In 2003 it was estimated that U.S. companies lose \$2 billion a year due to inadequate cross-cultural knowledge among employees.²¹ The benefits of international experience cannot be over-emphasized.

The United States Senate declared 2006 as the "Year of Study Abroad."²² Ontario universities are working hard to provide new opportunities for their students but they do not have the same level of support that the U.S. Senate has shown. It's time for the government to lead the way.

Recommendation Five: *The provincial government must create envelopes within the funding formula that designate specific amounts per FTE for student support services.*

Accessibility and participation cannot simply be about filling first year seats; it must be about keeping those seats full from beginning to end of a degree. There are many ideas on how best to help student persist, but beyond debate is the concept of student support. A student who is not burdened exterior stress and does not feel marginalized will be more engaged and, consequently, will be more likely to succeed.²³ Some of the most important student support services are discussed here in greater detail. All have an immense impact on the student experience and their necessity must be recognized and supported by government.

Academic Support Services:

At some point in every student's academic career they will undoubtedly face difficulty in successfully completing an assignment, exam or even a course. It is during these crucial moments that he or she may teeter on the brink of non-completion. Unfortunately, academic support programs often lack the adequate and reliable funding needed to sustain them year after year, especially when universities are tightening their belts.

As the demographics of the average undergraduate student continue to change, the chronic underfunding of academic supports has even graver consequences. With increased focus on accessibility, new types of students fill seats in classes. These new students bring new gifts as well as new challenges to their learning environment. Often, students from diverse backgrounds are misunderstood or their challenges are ignored. "These differences in learning style are sometimes viewed as academic deficiencies requiring remediation."²⁴ Elsewhere, this paper explores the importance of varied pedagogy, however, without concurrent academic supports, students will continue to miss their opportunities for success.

Often, students from diverse backgrounds are misunderstood or their challenges are ignored.



The 2006 national Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) showed that 22% of first year students and 24% of upper year students indicated that their university most needed to address quality of course instruction by professors.



By focusing on the creation of supports for students from all backgrounds, including under-represented groups, more students will persist all the way to graduation. “Advising is thought to be most effective in terms of promoting student success when integrated into academic support services and when sensitive to developmental needs of diverse students.”²⁵ If the government is serious about increasing persistence and graduation rates, then academic supports sit at the foundation of that goal.

Aboriginal Resource Centres:

Retention rates among Aboriginal, First Nations and Métis students are consistently lower than non-Aboriginal students each year.²⁶ The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation has found that 52% of Aboriginal students who discontinued their studies did so out of a “lack of interest or satisfaction in their program,”²⁷ they were unmotivated to pursue their degrees. Aboriginal students, like all students, significantly contribute to the culture, the community and ultimately the success of all post-secondary institutions.

Day Care Centres:

Universities that have child care is available and at a reasonable rate have students who are more likely to remain in school, complete their degrees and “earn higher grades”.²⁸ As well, providing extended hours to part-time students, mature students and students with dependents are important services that will directly impact their chances of degree completion.²⁹

Other Services:

Universities provide a whole host of other student services to improve the experience and success of their students. Athletics and Recreation Services should be readily available at all times to help students stay healthy and relieve stress. Career Services should reach out to students and help them with the transition out of university. Health and Counselling services should be easy to access and should have sufficient staff to handle health needs in a timely manner. All of these services and more are vital to student success.

SUPPORTING TEACHING

Students feel strongly that they are not receiving a sufficient level of quality instruction. The 2006 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) showed that 22% of first year students and 24% of upper year students indicated that their university most needed to address quality of course instruction by professors.³⁰ There is much the Ontario government can do to improve teaching.

Recommendation Six: *Funding must be designated by the provincial government to found and maintain instructional support programs to encourage innovation in teaching and provide ongoing professional development for Ontario’s post-secondary educators.*

Neither teaching nor learning are static processes and should not be treated as such. At present, “most campuses have centres to encourage better teaching practices but they are not mandatory and often it is teachers who need help most who get it the least.”³¹ Individual institutions have made commendable efforts to improve the support offered to instructors; however the province must make a significant investment in the improvement of teaching quality to all institutions in Ontario. The first step is to provide targeted funding to instructional support programs.

Professional development must mean a number of things; training in language, sensitivity, diversity, as well as recommendations on effective pedagogical practices must all be encompassed in professional development for Ontario instructors.

Recommendation Seven: *The provincial government must develop incentives for all new PhD students to be given formal instruction in teaching methods and practices.*

Peer jurisdictions increasingly consider training teachers as an essential part of ensuring a high quality post-secondary sector. “More than 60 UK universities now sponsor either voluntary or mandatory teaching accreditation programs for faculty members”.³² In Canada, most universities are “less active than many of those in the United States in implementing teaching improvement and evaluation programmes.”³³

One of the systemic problems with teaching at Ontario Universities is the fact that professors are not required to complete any formal training in teaching. While many schools have opportunities for professional development, these are not mandatory. This is a concern for OUSA, considering the impact a skilled teacher can have on student success. Unfortunately, mandating current professors to attend formal teaching training wades into the territory of the collective agreements worked out between faculties and the institutions.

In order to teach in elementary or secondary school in Ontario, teachers must have received extensive education and training. Prospective instructors must have attended teachers’ college, and through it, survived some of the most competitive entrance requirements in Ontario. Governments in the past have gone so far as to mandate that teachers must be tested on an ongoing basis to ensure that they still meet certain standards and requirements.

OUSA believes that the best way to ensure that instructors at Ontario universities receive adequate training in teaching is for the training to be incorporated into PhD programmes. A pocket of funding should be made available to universities if they are able to develop teaching training programmes for PhD students. Since many Ontario universities already have centres for teaching and learning, these efforts could be utilized to coordinate the development of these programmes.

The benefits of providing these incentives are clear. Teachers aware of educationally effective pedagogies in the United States have had positive results engaging students from diverse backgrounds with differing learning styles.³⁴ Even for those PhD students not seeking teaching positions, the ability to communicate information effectively is still useful.

CHANGING PEDAGOGY

One unfortunate reality of traditional teaching models is that student learning is very much an independent, isolated experience. With traditional lecture-style classes, there are few formal opportunities for consistent student participation. Students are expected to learn the material presented by the faculty, and demonstrate that they have learned the material through essays, exams and labs. Nowhere in this process are students required or encouraged to interact with their peers, meaning that the traditional lecture-style classes miss a valuable opportunity to enhance student success.



Teachers aware of educationally effective pedagogies in the United States have had positive results engaging students from diverse backgrounds with differing learning styles.





In a 1976 study on peer learning it was found that seventy-percent of students felt more involved with a collaborative teaching model.



Recommendation Eight: *The provincial government must designate targeted funding to support the development of new teaching and learning pedagogy at all institutions and across all disciplines.*

Student interaction with peers has been shown to positively influence overall academic development, knowledge acquisition, analytical and problems solving skills, as well as overall student self esteem.³⁵ Additionally, increased opportunities for peer interaction within the classroom bring students into contact with students from diverse backgrounds, which have also been positively correlated with desirable post-secondary outcomes.³⁶ More importantly, the classroom is the only venue in a post-secondary institution where all types of students are guaranteed to congregate. For this reason, it is vitally important that teaching be done in a way that facilitates interaction between students (as well as between students and faculty).

With provincial support, opportunities for collaborative learning could be extended to students from all faculties and programs.

Learning Communities

Community-based learning is an idea that has been proposed as an effective way to facilitate collaborative learning at the first-year level.³⁷ Learning communities start with students co-registering (or being co-registered) in classes and tutorials so that they discuss topics and attend lectures with a consistent group of peers.³⁸ Some large universities in the United States have already adopted models where students co-register in blocks of 25 to 30.³⁹ They attend larger sized lectures, but stay together for discussion in smaller group. This is similar in principle to tutorials, but the difference is that this discussion group stays consistent between classes.

In Vincent Tinto's "Taking Student Retention Seriously", it is proposed that organizing classes in this manner will require students to work together across classrooms, encouraging them to become more active and involved in each-other's learning.⁴⁰ This is supported by evidence that has been available for quite some time. In a 1976 study on peer learning it was found that seventy-percent of students felt more involved with a collaborative teaching model.⁴¹

Problem-Based Learning

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is a relatively new teaching model developed in the faculty of Health Sciences at McMaster University. PBL asks students to work collaboratively to solve open-ended problems with instructors focusing on the facilitation of learning. In 2005, the PBL program won the Alan Blizzard award for innovation in teaching and learning, partly due to its success in helping students collaborate and communicate with one-another. In fact, one of the goals of the program was to foster community based learning.⁴² In an open letter, one student recalled the impact PBL had on his learning experience. As he describes, "I can see now that I am a much more mature learner than many students I know from other faculties."

With provincial support for similar collaborative learning opportunities, opportunities for collaborative learning could be extended to students from all faculties and programs. These opportunities must not be limited to students in select disciplines.

Service Learning

Service learning is an approach to education that integrates volunteerism and community service into post-secondary education. This is a model that has gained popularity at a number of Ontario institutions, and has learning benefits to students, and economic benefits to the community. It is widely considered to be an educationally purposeful activity.⁴³ This kind of learning is positively correlated with persistence and represents an opportunity for students to become engaged in learning both in and outside the classroom.⁴⁴

In 2005, the J.W McConnell family foundation distributed a series of grants which allowed for the creation of community service learning departments at recipient universities across Canada.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, there are no guarantees that these departments will be continued when the grants stop. Concern has been expressed by the service learning coordinators across Canada that funding will not be sustained.⁴⁶ Additionally, many service learning departments do not have the financial resources to reach out to faculties and implement service learning in the classrooms, severely inhibiting the effectiveness of these centres.⁴⁷

As an educationally effective practice conducive to student success, supporting service learning should be a provincial priority, not only ensuring the longevity of these departments, but also that they have the desired impact on student learning.

RESTORING BALANCE

Teaching and research are often said to be of equal value, but in reality most institutions heavily favour research in decisions related to hiring, promotion and tenure. One study shows that faculty estimate “evaluation of teaching is rated around 20-30% in salary, promotion and tenure decisions, compared to 60% or more for research.” This is particularly troubling given that both student satisfaction and engagement are so strongly linked with student success.⁴⁸

Recommendation Nine: *Quality teaching must be weighted equally with research performance for all decisions relating to hiring, promotion and tenure. A panel consisting of students, government, university and faculty representatives must be established to explore how this standard can be better maintained.*

For many years OUSA has been calling for greater equality between the importance of teaching and research in the tenure process. However, with reason, institutions tend to be protective of their own autonomy, making broad government mandates regarding hiring processes a potentially touchy subject.

To ensure that teaching quality is weighted equally with research with regards to hiring decisions, it is essential that the sector come together to arrive upon a mutually beneficial solution to the issue. If government action is required, it is preferable that it stem from a sector-wide recommendation. For this reason, OUSA proposes that students, the government, institutions and faculties come together to discuss why and how our institutions should hire and promote faculty.



Teaching and research are often said to be of equal value, but in reality most institutions heavily favour research in decisions relating to hiring, promotion and tenure.





OUSA is pleased to see the emphasis on quality that has resulted from the recent implementation of multi-year accountability agreements.



Recommendation Ten: *The provincial government must insist that teaching quality remain a fundamental part of all future multi-year accountability agreements.*

OUSA is pleased to see the emphasis on quality that has resulted from the recent implementation of multi-year accountability agreements. Little information is available however, on how the government plans to hold Ontario universities accountable to these agreements and OUSA urges the government to clarify the process.

One of the objectives of the MYAAs is to ensure each institution receives a predictable amount of funding over a period of several years. Our universities must be confident of receiving their designated funding with sufficient time to implement improvements to teaching quality. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case. OUSA recommends that in the future, the government supply the funding in a more timely fashion.

Recommendation Eleven: *The provincial government should demonstrate its commitment to teaching quality by funding chairs in teaching, similar to the research chairs already in existence.*

In 2005 the province pledged \$25 million to create research chairs at universities across the province. These prestigious appointments are given to researchers who are “acknowledged by peers as a world leader in the field.”⁴⁹

Ontario’s faculty are also developing leading edge curriculum and pedagogy that will have an immeasurable positive impact on the next generation of students. These world leaders are equally deserving of recognition and the government must support their activities if we are to restore the balance between teaching and research.



Students have seen their costs grow from what was once a reasonable and manageable rate up until the early 1990s, to what is now an amount that is difficult if not sometimes impossible to earn in a summer, even when times are good.



PRIORITY THREE: TUITION

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance believes strongly that the foundation for a cost recovery system for higher education in the province should be fairness. Fairness means that because both students and society at large reap the benefits of post-secondary education, both parties should support in its provision. All across Canada, every institution that receives public funding also requires the student to make a contribution. While Ontario students accept this reality, over the past two decades their contribution has grown exponentially, while, by comparison, the government portion has shrunk considerably.

Year after year students have seen their costs grow from what was once a reasonable and manageable rate up until the early 1990s, to what is now an amount that is difficult if not sometimes impossible to earn in a summer, even when times are good. It is time for fairness to be returned to Ontario's cost recovery model.

As the current tuition framework comes to an end, OUSA wishes to highlight the following areas for consideration: the regulation of all tuition and the rate of increase allowable for tuition; "flat-fee tuition"; and, the return to a fair cost-sharing continuum.

TUITION REGULATION

After a very brief tuition freeze during the 2004/05 and 2005/06 academic years Ontario developed a new tuition framework through the *Reaching Higher* plan which took affect in the 2006/07 academic year. In this new framework, if universities participate in the government's Student Access Guarantee, which requires a commitment that no qualified students will be prevented from attending post-secondary due to lack of financial support programs, they may increase tuition by a maximum overall average of five per cent per year. This average is a calculation based on: a tuition increase by a maximum of 4.5 per cent for first-year arts and science and four per cent in other years, combined with an increase by a maximum of eight per cent in first year and four per cent in subsequent years for graduate and some undergraduate professional programs.

While not everyone was satisfied with the framework, it is OUSA's firm belief that the provincial government is in the single best position to control tuition fees in Ontario. As an objective third party, the province can balance competing stakeholder demands and build a system which is both accessible and able to offer the highest quality education.

Recommendation One: *The provincial government should regulate all tuition, including that of international students.*

While most tuition increases were regulated under the expiring framework, one group was completely left out of this regulation: international students. The creative economy and future success of the province depends on having the brightest minds from around the world working and contributing here in Ontario. The province as well as institutions must pursue a greater number of international students and create an environment that promotes their inevitable settlement and integration into communities across the province. International students are an important addition to any jurisdiction as they add to the local economy, especially if they remain in Canada after completing their studies.

A study by Statistics Canada indicates that "over 72% of graduates born outside Canada or the United States intended to remain in Canada upon completion of their doctoral studies."⁵⁰

While international students do not pay taxes and thus should not expect to benefit from the Canadian tax system, there is currently a dangerous trend in the province to charge these students more than the true cost of their education. At Queen's University in 2008, for example, domestic arts and science students paid \$4,785 in tuition while international students paid \$15,765 – more than three times more.⁵¹ Domestic tuition, combined with the government's per-student funding, doesn't come close to equaling what international students are expected to pay.

By charging international students more than the cost of their education, the de facto result is that they subsidize the education of domestic students.

In order to truly compete in the global knowledge economy, Ontario will require a robust policy to attract students to our institutions and province, and regulation of international tuition is the first step in this direction.

RESPONSIBLE COST SHARING

Recommendation Two: *The Ontario government must demonstrate progress toward restoring a 2:1 cost-sharing model where tuition makes up no more than a third of university operating budgets.*

For many years, Ontario kept pace with its immediate neighbours requiring roughly two thirds of the cost of a post-secondary credential from the public and one third from students. This cost-sharing arrangement remains the approximate national average. OUSA's analysis of current tuition fee levels shows that students at Ontario universities pay a much higher proportion of the costs of their education compared to their Canadian peers.⁵²

As of 2004/05, Ontario tuition constituted approximately 45 per cent of the total operating costs of the province's universities, compared to a 29.6 per cent average for other Canadian provinces.⁵³ Ontario also has one of the highest levels of student contribution in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and is well above the OECD average contribution level of 21.4 per cent.⁵⁴

Increasingly, Ontario also measures its success on an international level, particularly against peer jurisdictions in the United States. Compared to peer American institutions, the Council of Ontario Universities found that Ontario universities had 24 per cent less revenue available, when comparing purchasing power.⁵⁵ In order to remain competitive, Ontario will need to raise its per-student funding levels to match its peer jurisdictions. At the very least, it must compete with other jurisdictions in Canada by raising university operating grants to the per student national average and demonstrate progress toward a fair cost-sharing model in which tuition makes up no more than a third of the cost of a student's education.



While international students do not pay taxes and thus should not expect to benefit from the Canadian tax system, there is currently a dangerous trend in the province to charge these students more than the true cost of their education.





While the Reaching Higher plan attempted to reflect this feeling in increased support, Ontario still spends far less than other provinces and peer jurisdictions on post-secondary education.



Recommendation Three: *At minimum, the provincial government must increase university operating grants to the per student national average.*

Even after years of increases in funding, Ontario is still outpaced in provincial operating grants provided to universities on a per-capita basis in relation to other jurisdictions in Canada. The Ontario government has provided the lowest levels of funding per capita of all the provinces, and has remained in the bottom place for ten years. Of equal concern, Ontario increasingly measures its success on an international level, particularly against peer jurisdictions in the United States. Compared to peer American institutions, the Council of Ontario Universities found that Ontario universities had 24 per cent less revenue available, when comparing purchasing power.

In order to remain competitive, Ontario will need to raise its per-student funding levels to match its peer jurisdictions. At the very least, it must compete with other jurisdictions in Canada by raising university operating grants to the per student national average.

Recommendation Four: *If tuition increases must occur, then they should go up no more than that of yearly inflation as measured by the Consumer Price Index.*

Education has an inherent value both to the individual and society at large, which has been the assertion of this report and countless others. While the *Reaching Higher* plan attempted to reflect this feeling in increased support, Ontario still spends far less than other provinces and peer jurisdictions on post-secondary education. In June of 2008, the Council of Ontario Universities reported that, even after *Reaching Higher*, “Ontario is still last in funding in Canada on a per capita basis, with operating grants per student of \$6,052 versus a Canadian average of \$8,500.”⁵⁶ In previous years the Ontario government has turned to students to make up the shortfall, resulting in double digit tuition increases. The clear result has been ever growing student debt, and a host of new accessibility issues which were not as prominent previously. Tuition increases must be tied to the rate of inflation as measured by CPI, rather than increases used to shore up lagging government contribution.

Through this action the government signals that one element of the core funding for post-secondary education will remain constant. Students understand that in an average year some goods and services will cost more than the previous year due to inflation. As argued above, post-secondary education should not be treated any differently than other government programs or services which are also indexed to inflation.

Continually increasing the cost of post-secondary education by what is often much more than inflation impacts the affordability of the system by shifting an ever growing burden of the cost of “public” education on to the student. When the system is made less affordable the impact is seen in a plethora of ways including: increased reliance on student assistance; fewer people accessing post-secondary education due to effects such as “sticker shock”; or, students being forced to work more during their studies, which has academic implications.

All of these have wider implications on both costs to government, as is the case with more students availing themselves of student aid, or society at large, with some studies focusing less time on academics during their studies. Taken together, OUSA believes that Ontario students already bear a burden greater than their peers in other jurisdictions, and thus if there are financial gaps to fill at institutions they should be made up by greater government funding.

Recommendation Five: *All tuition in Ontario must be charged on a per-credit or value-received basis, and all credits within a program must have a similar financial impact.*

Universities across Ontario charge students tuition in a number of different ways. Some charge students based on how many courses they are enrolled in, while others charge students a flat-rate for a full-time student regardless of the number of courses a student takes. Of the twenty largest degree-granting institutions in the province, half currently institute some version of a structure known as “full time rate” or in some places “flat fee” tuition structure. These effectively mean the same thing: any student taking more than a fixed percentage of a full-time course load pays the tuition as if they were taking 100% of a full load.

With the rising cost of education, many students choose to take less than a standard course load due to the constraints of time and money. In order to finance their education, they need to find employment in order to pay for tuition, academic materials, rent, transportation, and other costs. Students at per-credit schools will be able to reduce their in-year costs when they reduce their course load, while students at full-time-rate schools are not able to achieve these savings.

OUSA believes that all tuition models should be harmonized, such that full-time-rate structures are eliminated, all courses are charged on a per-credit basis, and students are only paying for the education which they are receiving.

Additionally, OUSA believes, based on this principle, that a student should pay for the course they are taking and not the degree they are receiving. Currently in Ontario, students taking the same courses at the same institution can be paying different fees from each other due to the faculty of the student. This fee structure is disadvantageous for a number of reasons. First, charging students different tuitions for the same course is unfair to students in higher cost programs, as they are asked to take on an increased burden to receive the same educational benefit. Second, this type of fee structure discourages students in higher cost programs from exploring courses outside of their program, which would enrich their learning experience.

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OUSA believes that Ontario students already bear a burden greater than their peers.

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October 2009