

HOME SCHOOLED

*Municipal Affairs and the Student
Experience in Ontario*

*The 2014 What Students Want
Report Series*

OUSA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

ABOUT OUSA

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

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OUSA asked students about their experiences of living in the community where their university is located: from how far they felt their municipality sought to engage students, to their housing situation, and their use of public transit.

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Overall, students responded positively regarding many aspects of their experiences. For example students were broadly positive about the range and quality of off-campus housing available, and many of the students who relied on public transit to commute to school felt it was meeting their needs.

However, over half of students surveyed felt that municipalities were not actively engaging with students. Further, approximately two thirds of students reported that they did not intend to remain in the community where they had undertaken their studies. This suggests that if cities and towns wish to retain the talent and economic potential of recent graduates they may need to explore how to more actively engage and meet the needs of their student populations.

INTRODUCTION

The 2013 Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey (OPSSS) is the third in a series of biennial surveys conducted by the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance. These surveys ask undergraduate and professional students across Ontario a series of questions regarding several important aspects of student life at university, including cost, available resources, and their educational experiences.

2013's survey was answered by nearly 9,000 students from across the province, and provides those of us in the post-secondary system, and beyond, with important insights into their challenges and priorities. OUSA will be releasing a series of reports on our findings from the survey in the hopes that the resulting discussion can positively influence those students through meaningful discussion and public policy.

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance is a not-for-profit research and advocacy organization representing more than 140,000 students through their local student associations. OUSA works with its seven member organizations to provide educated solutions to students' concerns in the areas of quality, accountability, accessibility and affordability in Ontario's public universities.

TOWN GOWN RELATIONS

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For many students, starting university will be their first experience living independently. Making their home in a city or town, students are able to be active and engaged citizens, and to contribute significantly to the cultural and economic vibrancy of a municipality. Sadly, students often experience negative stigma in municipal relations, as the differing needs and priorities of longer-term residents and students can sometimes come into conflict.

OUSA's member associations engage with municipalities on behalf of their students, tackling issues such as transit, housing, and of course, broader town-gown relations.

Despite the direct impacts these issues may have on the daily experiences of students, less than half of all students surveyed (40 per cent) felt that the city where their university actively engaged post-secondary students in municipal issues.

However, as Figure 2 on the following page demonstrates, students in different localities responded very differently to this question.

Students from Trent-Oshawa were most positive in response to this question, with 50 per cent of respondents agreeing that the city engaged students in municipal issues. Students at Queen's University were the least likely to agree with this statement (30 per cent of respondents) followed by students at Brock University and Western University (39 per cent for each school).

Students were asked to identify the amount of time when not on campus that they spent in the city where their campus is located. As Figure 3 demonstrates, students were broadly split in terms of how much time they spent in the city where their institution is located: 43 per cent reported spending 50 per cent or more of their time in the city, 41 per cent spent less than 50 per cent of their time, and 10 per cent of respondents reported not spending any time at all in the city. These numbers likely reflect the varying levels of connection to the city where a student's university is located, and also the likelihood that many students are maintaining links to their home city.

Students were also asked about whether they

Figure 1: Do You Feel That the City Where You Live Actively Engages Students in Municipal Issues?

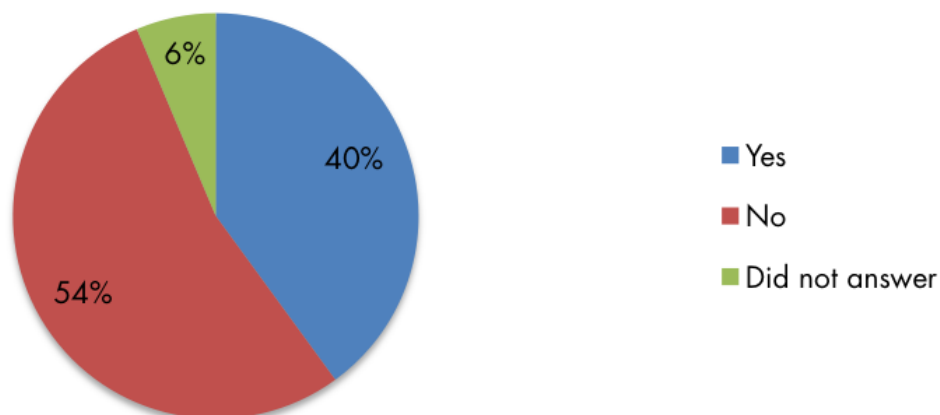


Figure 2: Do You Feel That the City Where You Live Actively Engages Students in Municipal Issues? By Institution

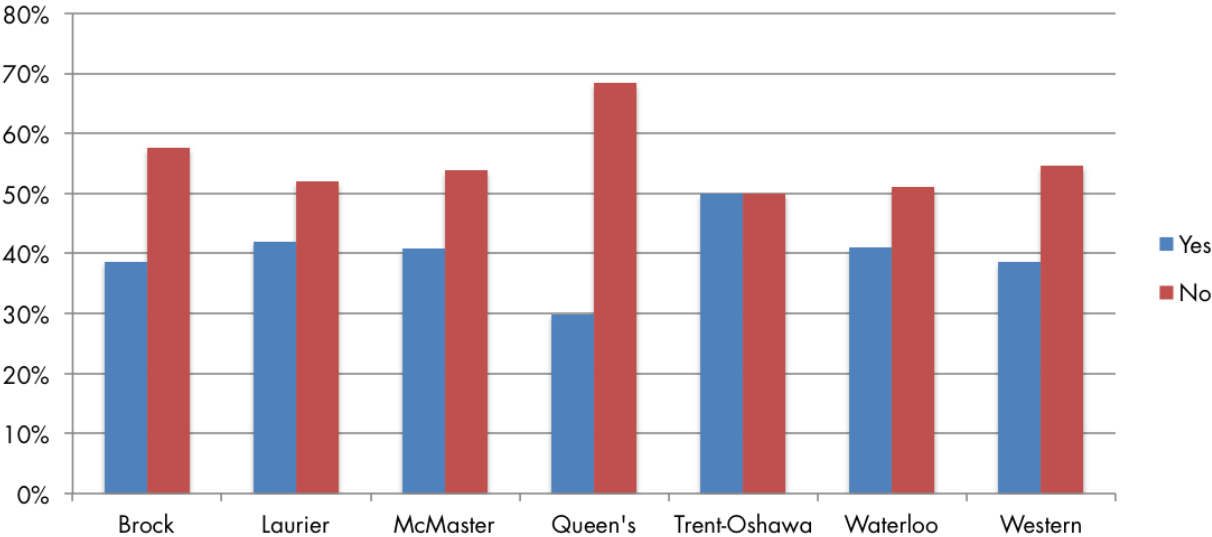
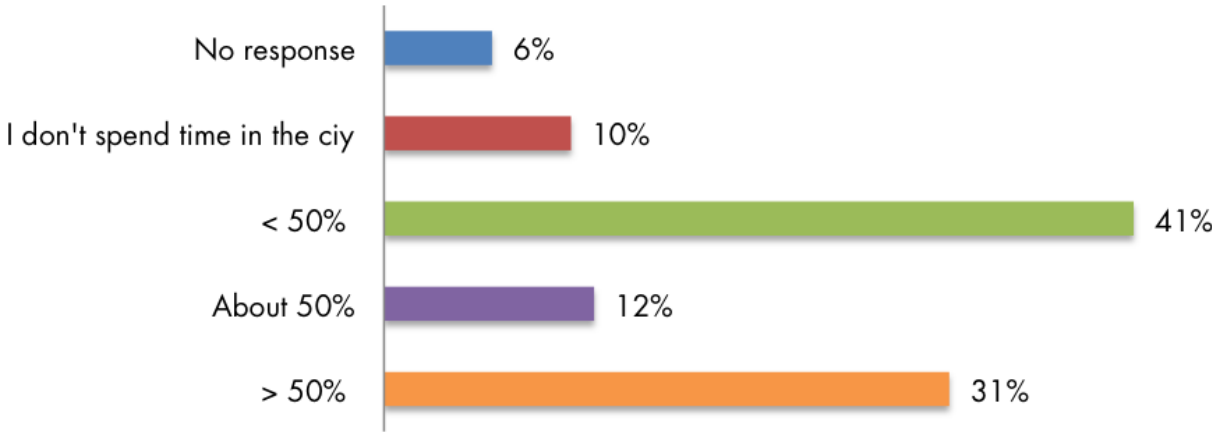


Figure 3: Percentage of Time Spent in City Where Campus is Located, When Not On Campus



intended to remain in the city where they studied post-graduation.

The majority of respondents (59 per cent) indicated that they did not intend to remain in the city where they had undertaken their post-secondary education. However, a significant number (30 per cent) indicated that they had not yet decided whether

they would choose to remain. This may reflect a range of concerns that students grapple with post-graduation, including job prospects, family ties, and of course, their previous experience of the city they have studied in.

While the overall trends remained similar when these results were broken down school by school,

some variations were evident. For example, students at McMaster University and Western University were most likely to report intending to remain in their city of study (12 per cent, respectively), while a higher proportion of Queen's University students

reported their intention to leave after graduation (76 per cent). No students at Trent-Oshawa reported intending to remain in the city post-graduation, but a higher proportion of these students reported being uncertain as to their plans (60 per cent).

Figure 4: After You Graduate, Do You Intend to Stay in the City You Completed Your Post-Secondary Education In?

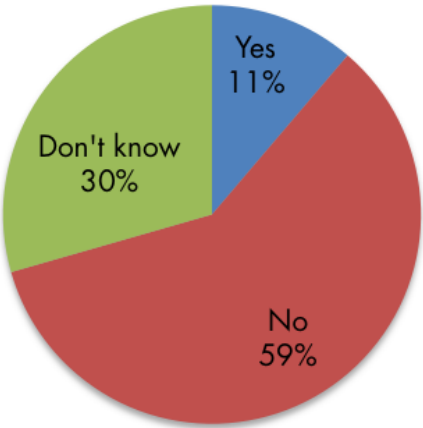
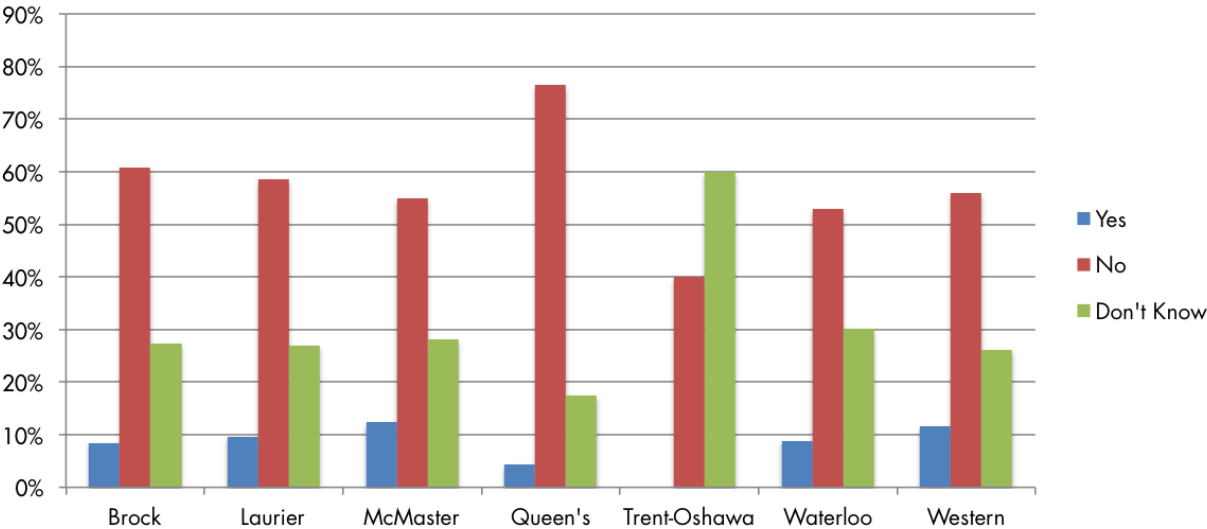


Figure 5: After You Graduate, Do You Intend to Stay in the City You Completed Your Post-Secondary Education In? By Institution



CASE STUDY: QUEEN'S OMB APPEAL

In April of 2013, Kingston's City Council passed By-Law 2013-83 in a controversial 7-6 vote, voting to redraw its electoral districts for the upcoming 2014 municipal election. This decision would have seen the Sydenham district, which encompasses the majority of the Queen's University campus, dissolved into neighbouring Williamsville and King's Town districts. Additionally, the redrawing of electoral boundaries would have been done using census data, which does not account for Kingston's sizeable student population, classifying students as non-permanent residents.

Students from Queen's University were deeply opposed to the bylaw, with the Alma Mater Society (AMS) of Queen's University presenting a petition with over 2000 signatures to City Council at the bylaw's third and final reading in April. The AMS argued that Queen's students reside primarily in four of Kingston's electoral districts, with Sydenham and Williamsville accounting for the bulk of the Queen's University student population. The plan to dissolve the Sydenham district into Williamsville would result in approximately 17,000 students being represented by just one city councillor, thereby reducing the political representation of Queen's students. Additionally, the AMS argued that post-secondary students are important members of the Kingston community who pay taxes, frequent local business, and work and volunteer within the city and therefore have a right to fair municipal representation.

Prior to the passing of By-Law 2013-83, city staff had presented several options for electoral boundary realignment to the Kingston City Council. Initial options had not counted students from Queen's University, St. Lawrence College, and the Royal Military College in population counts, resulting in Council tasking city staff with re-presenting options that accounted for Kingston's post-secondary population. Realignment options that accounted for Kingston's sizeable student population were brought to Council, but ultimately Council voted in favour of the original proposal that did not account for student residents and would dissolve the Sydenham district.

Those councillors who voted in favour of the bylaw argued that students were not actively engaged in municipal affairs and therefore should not be counted in electoral population estimates, with one councillor equating students with guests at a hotel.

In June, three separate appeals were filed to the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) by the AMS, the Sydenham District Association (SDA) and a second year Queen's Faculty of Law student. Following lengthy October OMB hearings at which student leaders from the AMS and the Society of Graduate and Professional students (SGPS) provided extensive testimony, the OMB ruled that City Council had "acted unreasonably" when adopting the electoral realignment structure it selected. The OMB's decision resulted in a preserved Sydenham district and the inclusion of students in all electoral population counts.

Significantly, the OMB ruled that although post-secondary students may be temporary residents of a municipality, they actively contribute to their community and have a right to bring issues to municipal governments. In her ruling, OMB member Sylvia Sutherland stated that "the board finds that the council, in a 7-6 vote, acted unreasonably in adopting an option that does not count more than 20% of the city's population when determining electoral districts."

The OMB ruling may have implications for other student populations in Ontario. In their arguments for preserving the original vote, legal representatives for the City of Kingston maintained that no other municipality in Ontario includes post-secondary students in their population counts when determining electoral boundaries. In response, Sutherland noted in her decision that although it may not be practice elsewhere in Ontario, it does not represent a compelling argument for not accounting for student populations when redrawing electoral boundaries. The OMB's decision has the potential to set a new precedent for student representation in municipalities with sizable student populations.

CASE STUDY: PROJECT L.E.A.R.N.

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Relationships between university students and municipal police services can have a significant impact on feelings of safety and inclusion for students residing in a university town or city. First started as Project Speakeasy in 2002, Project L.E.A.R.N. (Liquor Enforcement and Reduction of Noise) is a campaign conducted annually by the London Police Service (LPS) from late August to late September as students are returning to Western University and Fanshawe College campuses. During Project L.E.A.R.N., additional patrols are scheduled in London's downtown core and identified student neighbourhoods. Officers adopt a "zero tolerance" policy for enforcing bylaws relating to crowds, alcohol, and noise in these communities during the Project.

Representatives from the University Students' Council (USC) of Western University have been longstanding critics of Project L.E.A.R.N., arguing that it unfairly targets and intimidates students, while also souring town-gown relations. Instead, Western students have advocated for a community approach to policing and launched the Good Neighbour Campaign in 2013 as a result, which included community cleanups, a handbook distributed to all Western students detailing community resources and municipal bylaws, and increased engagement at city hall.

In September 2013, Project L.E.A.R.N. made national headlines when the captain of the Western University cheerleading team was issued a nuisance citation for conducting a cheerleading routine on a public street during Western's annual Homecoming celebrations. Following news stories involving Project L.E.A.R.N. revealed that officers from the LPS had begun to go door-to-door in student neighbourhoods requesting personal information, including names, phone numbers, email addresses and parental contact information from Western University students unprovoked. It was reported that many students, unaware that they were not legally obligated to provide officers with this information, did so.

Following the widespread criticism, LPS Chief Brad Duncan announced that the LPS would be conducting an internal review of Project L.E.A.R.N. At a press conference, Chief Duncan stated that the LPS would not continue their canvassing practices during Project L.E.A.R.N. and that all information obtained from this would be destroyed. Additionally, Chief Duncan stated that the LPS would no longer pursue a "zero tolerance" policy during Project L.E.A.R.N. and would instead issue warnings prior to ticketing students accused of violating municipal bylaws.

Criticism of the tactics used by LPS during 2013's Project L.E.A.R.N. campaign transcended political lines. MPP for London West and NDP Critic for Community Safety and Correctional Services Peggy Sattler vocally opposed the canvassing tactics used by LPS officers, noting that the strategy had done more harm than good as it caused students to feel intimidated by their local police. Conservative MPP and Critic for Community Safety and Correctional Services Steve Clark criticized the LPS for conducting the review of Project L.E.A.R.N. internally, urging the LPS to incorporate student feedback into the future of Project L.E.A.R.N.

HOUSING

For many students, university may be their first experience of living away from home, potentially arranging their own leases or rental arrangements, and sharing living space with roommates. It is vital students are able to access appropriate, affordable and safe accommodations, as the effects of sub-standard or expensive housing on a student’s welfare and finances may negatively impact their academic performance.

Students were asked about their current living situation: as Figure 6 shows, students living off campus with roommates accounted for the largest proportion of respondents. However, one fifth of respondents reported living at home with their parents or guardians, while 18 per cent of students lived in on-campus housing.

Students living with roommates were asked to identify how many roommates they shared with: the average number of roommates was 3.42.

Students were further asked to identify if they were living off-campus in accommodation they had to find (i.e. rent, lease, buy) specifically for attending school: 4662 students reported having done so.

Of these students, the majority (67 per cent) were either very or somewhat satisfied with the quantity and quality of housing available and which met their needs (for example, in terms of affordability, proximity to campus and transit, etc.). However, just over one fifth of students reported being either somewhat or very dissatisfied with available housing. There was some variation between institutions on this topic: with students at Queen’s University the most likely to be dissatisfied with available housing (38 per cent of respondents either very or somewhat dissatisfied), while Brock University students were the most positive about their housing, with 79 per cent responding that they were either very or somewhat satisfied.

Figure 6: Current Living Situation

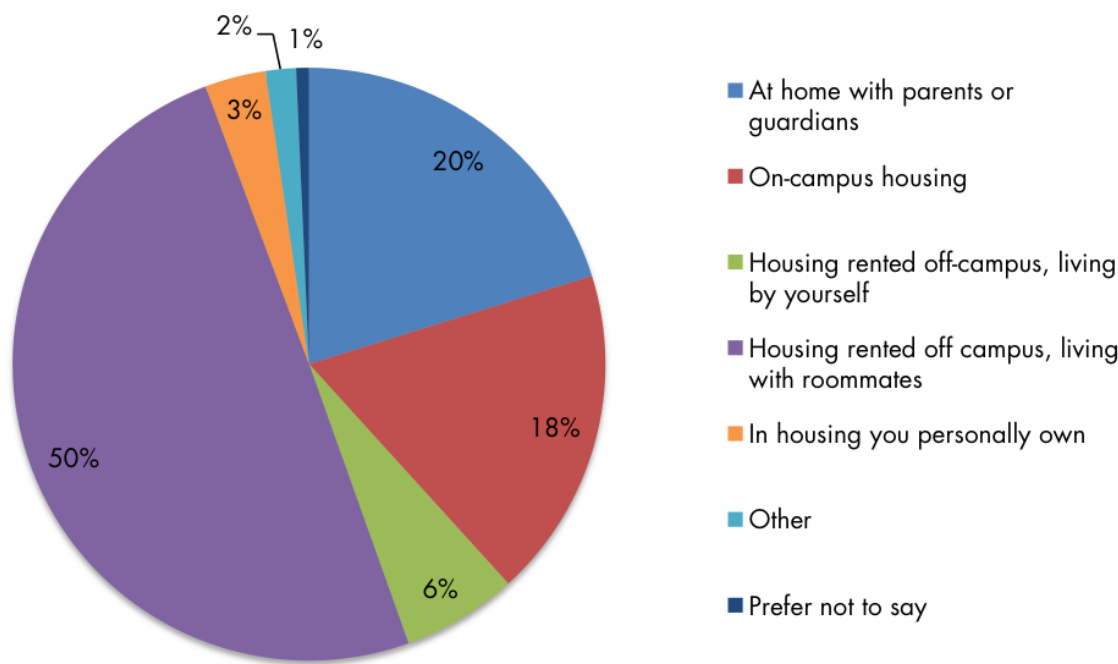
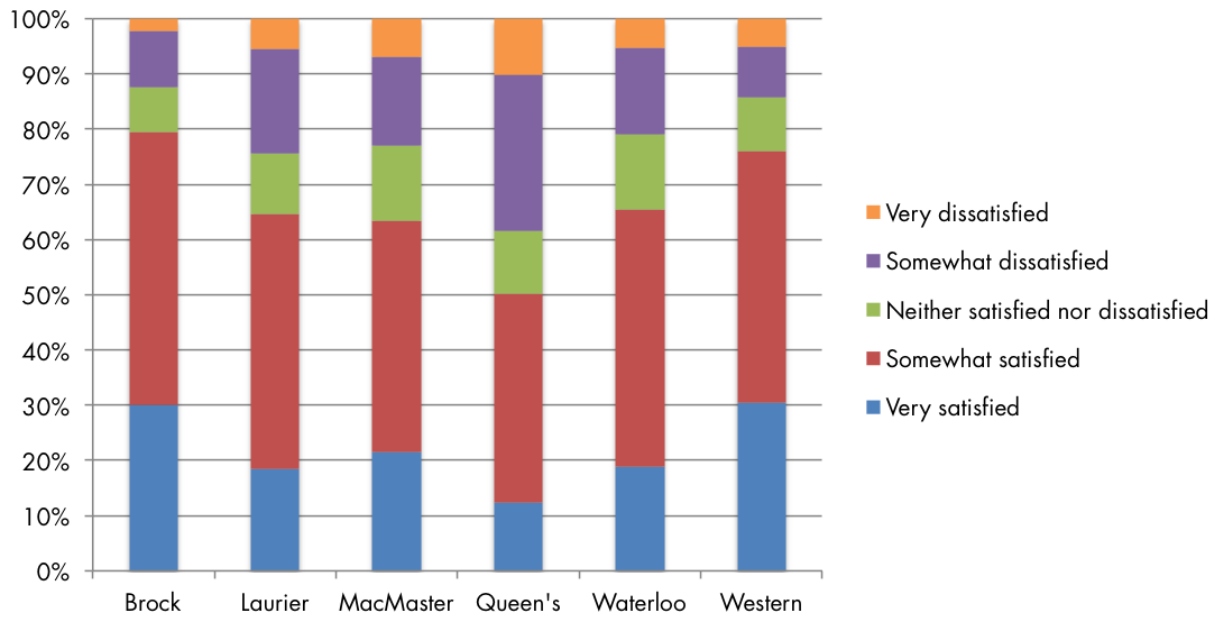
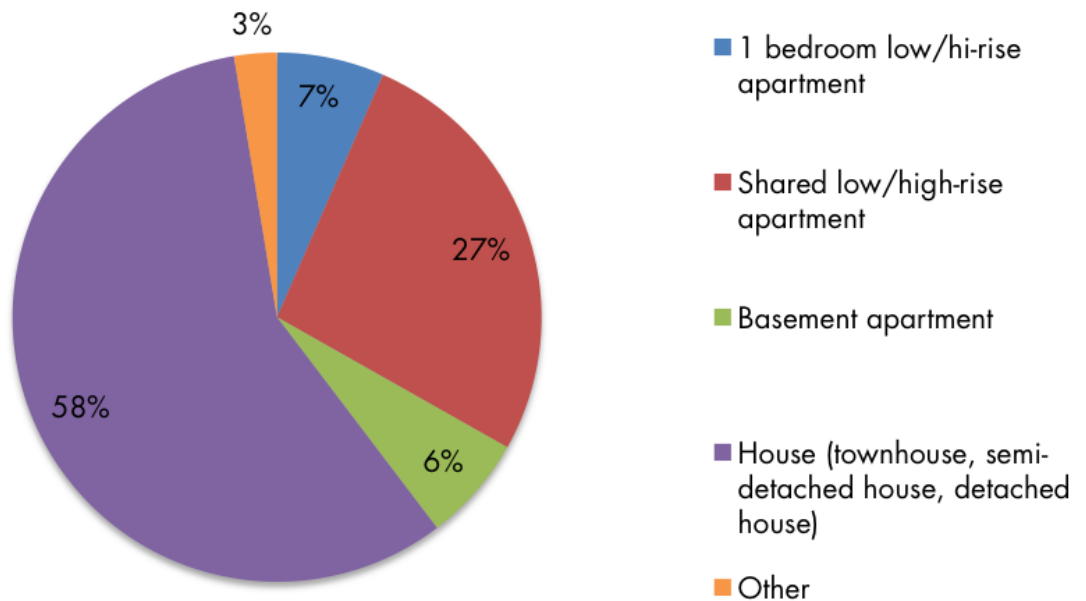


Figure 7: Satisfaction with Available Housing, By Institution**Figure 8: Types of Off-Campus Housing**

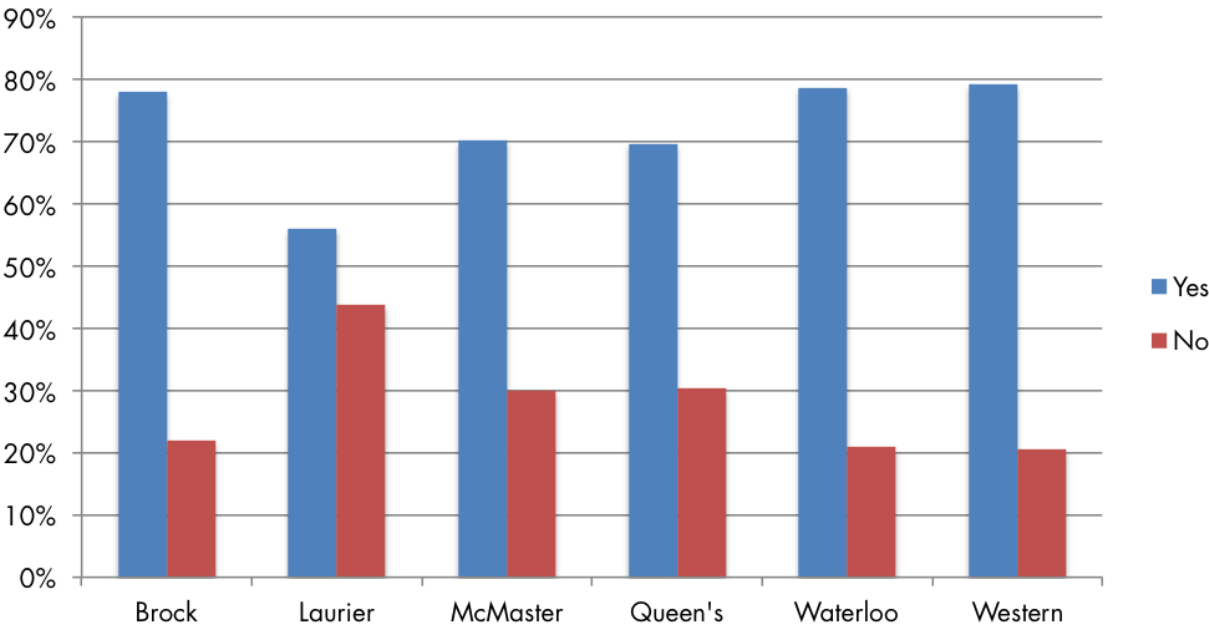
Students who had found off-campus accommodation for the purpose of attending school were also asked to identify the type of housing they occupied. The majority of students lived in some form of house (58 per cent), or in a shared apartment (27 per cent).

Finally, respondents were asked whether they felt safe in the neighbourhood in which they lived, at all hours of the day and night. Reassuringly, just under three quarters of students (73 per cent) reported feeling safe at all hours, although this clearly leaves a sizeable minority of (27 per cent) who do not. When these results are broken down by school some significant differences in students' feelings of safety emerge.

Notably, students at Wilfrid Laurier University are the most likely to report feeling unsafe in their neighbourhood, with 44 per cent of students doing

so. Interestingly, students from the University of Waterloo reported some of the highest levels of feeling safe (joint with Western students) at 79 per cent. This can possibly be accounted for by the differing areas of the city that Laurier and Waterloo students have traditionally resided in as Laurier students are typically concentrated in a high density student housing area close to campus that has been the subject of direct city intervention and planning, whereas Waterloo students have a tendency to be more dispersed throughout Kitchener-Waterloo. Anecdotally, Waterloo students appear to utilize university-funded housing services at a greater frequency than Laurier students. This difference highlights the vital role that universities are able to play in ensuring that students have access to safe and acceptable housing options, and the tangible difference this can make to students' experiences.

Figure 9: Do You Feel Safe in Your Neighbourhood at All Hours of the Day and Night?



TRANSIT

The ability to move easily around a city can significantly impact a student's experience while studying and living in a municipality. This issue can be particularly important for students without access to a car, and who must therefore rely on public transit. Students were asked whether they used public transit to commute to school, and just under two fifths of respondents reported doing so.

Of those using public transit, students were asked to identify how well these services met their needs.

As demonstrated in Figure 11, a significant portion of students reported that public transit completely met their needs (47 per cent), but almost half felt their needs were only partially met by the services they used. This signifies that perhaps more can be done to fully meet the transit needs of the student population.

Once again, these figures varied somewhat based on location: for example, students at Trent-Oshawa with 83 per cent of those who used public transit at this

school reporting that the service only partially met their needs. Students at the University of Waterloo were the most positive about their experiences with public transit, with 54 per cent of respondents reporting that it completely met their needs.

Finally, students were asked to comment on whether they believed their city should invest in building more bike lanes.

Students were broadly positive about this proposition with 46 per cent agreeing with the statement. However, about one third of students did not believe their city should construct bike lanes, and just over one fifth of students selected 'Don't Know' in response to this question.

Figure 10: Do You Commute to School Using Public Transit?

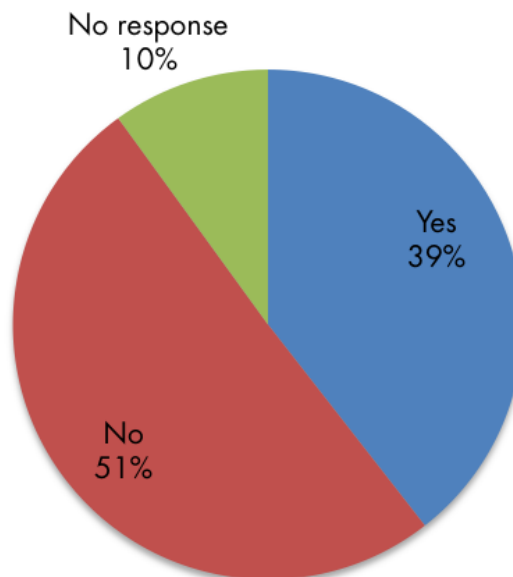


Figure 11: How Well Did Public Transit Meet Your Needs?

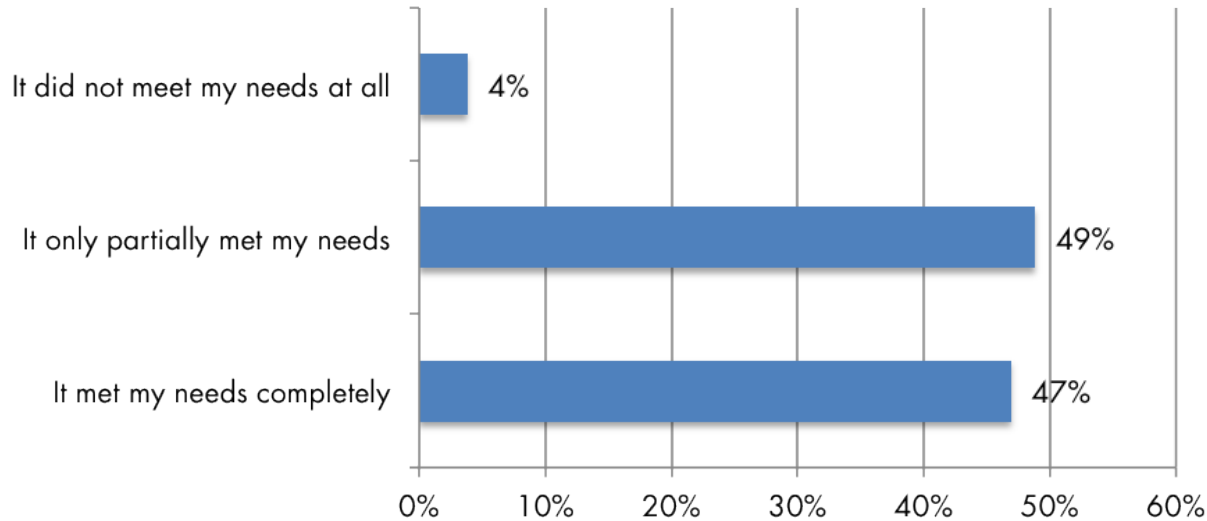


Figure 12: Students Satisfaction with Transit, By Institution

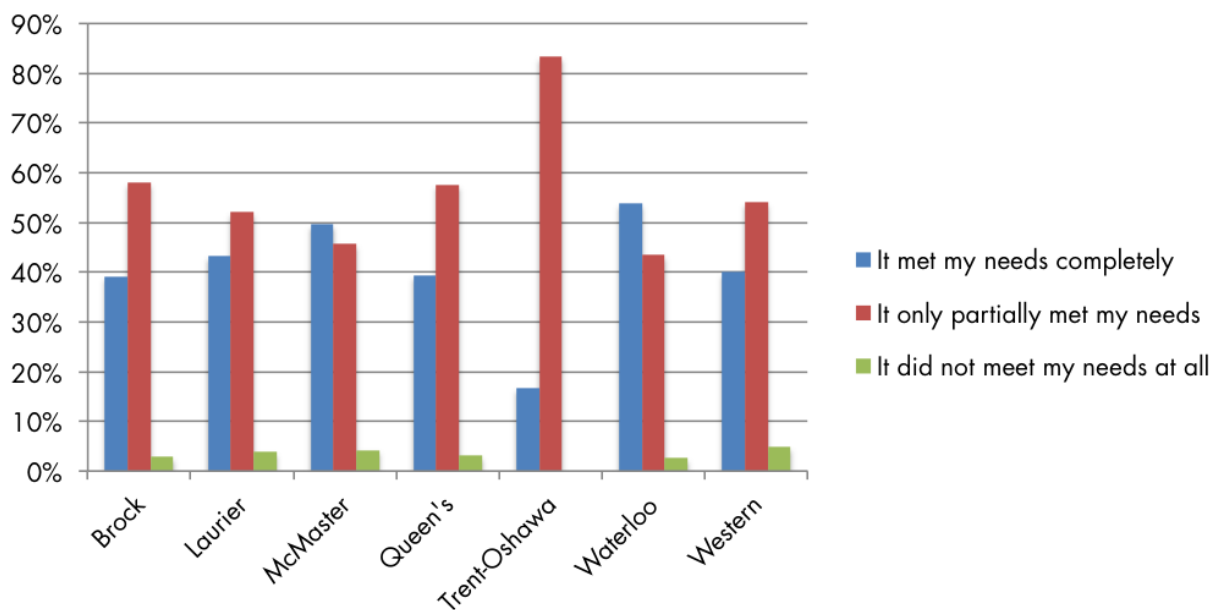
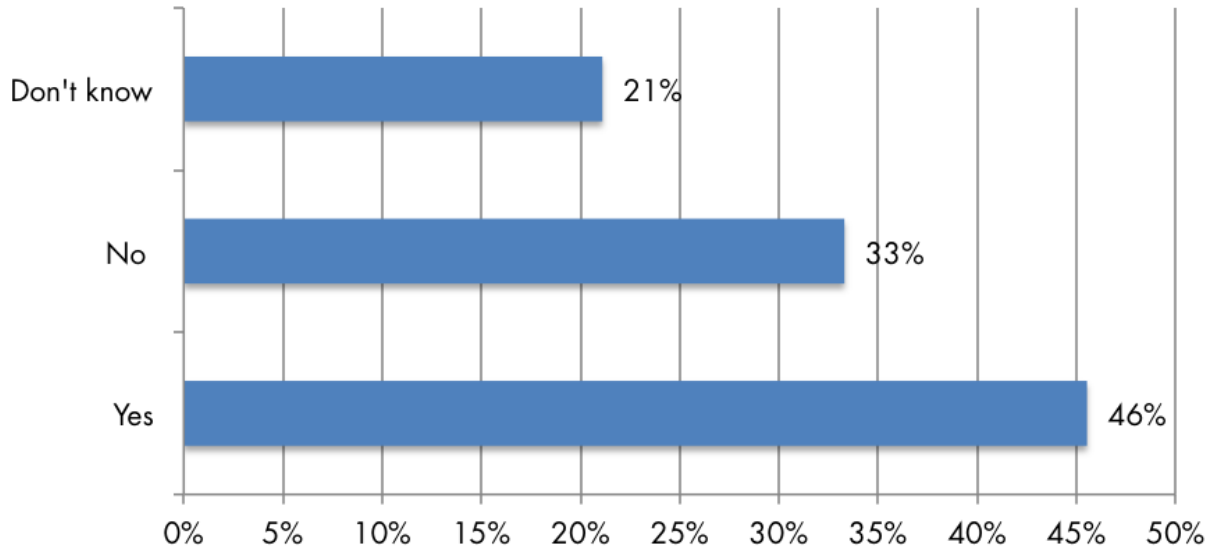


Figure 13: Should Your City Construct More Bike Lanes?



CASE STUDY: WATERLOO REGION U-PASS

In January 2014, representatives from the University of Waterloo's Federation of Students (Feds) and the Wilfrid Laurier University Students' Union (WLUSU) attended a public input session for the Waterloo Regional Council regarding a proposed 7 per cent fare increase to the cost of the Universal Bus Pass (U-PASS) program. Administered by Grand River Transit (GRT), the U-PASS is available to all Waterloo and Laurier students at a cost of \$72.23 per academic term.

At the January meeting, student leaders at Waterloo and Laurier expressed concerns with increased costs to post-secondary education at both institutions, noting that the rising cost of public transportation is of particular concern to their constituents. For many students, the costs of living within walking distance of campus are too high for this to represent a viable option, making public transit a necessity. Students argued that increases to the cost of the U-PASS should not exceed the Ontario consumer price index. During the Waterloo Regional Council's budget discussions, the Council approved the 7 per cent increase to the U-Pass fee, slated to come into effect in July 2014.

Students have participated in the U-PASS program in the Waterloo region since 2007. In February of that year, Waterloo undergraduate students voted 57% per cent in favour of the following referendum question: "Do you support a Universal Bus Pass (U-Pass) at a cost of \$41.08, plus an administration cost of not more than \$9.50, subject to increases due to inflation and student demand, to be paid by each full-time undergraduate student per academic term, scheduled for implementation in September 2007, and which will be reviewed in three years?" Since then, post-secondary students have come to represent 33 per cent of the GRT's ridership, with 6.5 million of 20 million of the GRT's annual rides being students

Student leaders from Waterloo and Laurier are concerned about dramatic and unpredictable increases to Grand River Transit (GRT) fares in recent years. Since 2007, U-PASS costs have almost doubled, increasing from \$42.50 per term in 2007

to \$72.23 per term in 2014. Notably, the 7 per cent increase slated to come into effect in July 2014 does not even represent the most dramatic proposed GRT fare increase in recent years. In January of 2012, the GRT proposed a 23 per cent increase to the cost of the UPASS, increasing from \$60.64 in 2011 to \$74.48 in 2012 that was met with harsh criticism from student leaders. A compromise of a 12 per cent fare increase was made and came into effect for the 2012-2013 academic year as well as an agreement between the Feds and the Region of Waterloo that any future price increases to the U-PASS would match the percentage of average GRT fare increases, estimated to be between 4-9 per cent a year.

Waterloo Regional Council's approval of the 7 per cent increase to the U-PASS for July 2014 triggered an automatic referendum on continued participation in the U-PASS program at the University of Waterloo. Concerned with dramatic increases to mandatory student fees, Feds Board of Directors governing documents require any fee that has seen a cost increase exceeding 14 per cent over two years to be put up to referendum. From February 11-13, Waterloo undergraduates voted in a campus wide referendum that saw an overwhelming 95 per cent of students vote in favour of continued participation in the UPASS program. Had the referendum failed, the UPASS program would have been discontinued at the University of Waterloo, requiring all Waterloo students who utilize the GRT to pay \$72.00 per month.

CONCLUSION

OUSA's biennial survey serves as an important opportunity to have students share their concerns and priorities, to tell us what they want and need. From our conversations with student leaders across the province, OUSA is aware that day-to-day municipal issues are often top of mind for students and their representatives.

Whereas "us versus them" narratives can too often dominate the depiction of town-gown relations, this survey reveals that the concerns of students are much the same as those of other residents: how to secure affordable, appropriate and safe housing; how to get around their city; and how to have their voices heard by local politicians. Students are often also dealing with the added pressure of moving to a new city or town and away from home, leading to complex relationships and patterns of residence. OUSA acknowledges that students are often a unique demographic, whose needs can pose challenges in service delivery, for example. However, OUSA believes it is vital to also acknowledge the vitality and prosperity students bring to their communities: whether it be through volunteerism, cultural contributions, or participating in the local economy, students should be considered valued citizens of a university town.

OUSA looks forward to engaging in deeper conversations with both our own membership, and the sector more broadly, on how we can better work to improve the quality of life for students, and to strengthen the relationship between students and their municipalities.

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RECOMMENDED CITATION

Bristow, A. and Sloan, B. (2014). *Home Schooled: Municipal Affairs and the Student Experience in Ontario*. Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance.

