Council of Ontario Universities
Report to Senate of the Academic Colleague
Kathleen Okruhlik, February 2012

The COU Academic Colleagues met in Toronto December 15-16, 2011. There was no meeting of the full Council.

Tuition: The current tuition framework expires this year, and the government has not indicated the size of any tuition increase in the next framework. There are real concerns about the ability of the government to pay for growth and for the rising cost of continuance. With 30% of tuition set aside for student assistance and with the constraints of the current framework, a 5% increase would translate into a small overall increase for universities (estimated at 1.75%)– insufficient to cover current cost increases. So discussions are underway about the possibility of relaxing some constraints and providing more flexibility to universities.

Strategic Mandate Agreements and Differentiation: Discussions are proceeding slowly. A working group has been formed to help devise basic principles agreeable to all parties. There is concern about trying to fit institutions into boxes and concern about requiring Ministry approval of missions and mandates. A working group has been formed to help devise basic principles both sides can agree to.

Teaching Effectiveness: The Auditor General is following up on public interest in this topic. COU has engaged with the government, but the Auditor will focus on three to five universities to gather details. Comparisons will be very difficult, given the variety of courses, programs, and universities as well teaching formats. One big question is whether the Auditor will try to encourage innovation or to standardize processes.

Working Group on Graduate Expansion: This committee is formulating recommendations about the 6,000 new spaces that are expected to be made available. (The first set of new spaces is scheduled for allocation by March 2012.) There are some difficult issues to deal with, such as whether expansion should be allowed in STEM programs. There are also concerns about universities that are chronically unable to fill spots and those that chronically accept more students than they have been allocated. Both are seen as problematic, and committee members see a need for rebalancing in these chronic cases; it will be difficult to encourage additional expansion if we arrive at the end of the present cycle under quota. The committee is working through recommendations that involve transfer of spaces from one program to another and from one university to another, as well as requiring spaces to be justified within the context of each institution's mandate. The committee has also outlined a number of principles that have been forwarded to MTCU. These concern such things as transparent evaluation criteria, indication of priorities, transfer of funds between Masters and PhD programs, funding for international students.

OUAC: Discussions about the purchase of a new building continue. Changes to the application system are being introduced to prevent students from "playing the system" (and to allow better tracking).

I shall be pleased to answer questions about these and other issues on the floor of Senate.