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

The COU Academic Colleagues met at Laurentian University in Sudbury, April 19-20, 2012. There was also a meeting of the full Council scheduled for April 20th.

New Program Approvals: Some 48 new program approvals are still pending at MTCU, and the Executive Heads have expressed concern. Bonnie Patterson, the president of COU, has sent a letter to the Minister explaining that this is holding up growth in the postsecondary sector and pointing out that some proposals have been with MTCU for two years.

MTCU "3 Cubed" Policy Paper: This paper advances a framework that the Ministry says will allow colleges and universities to realize 3% savings in each of 3 years by offering one-third of their courses online, adding a summer term in a trimester system, and launching accelerated 3-year degrees. Questions have been raised about what is meant by" three-year degree" in this context: a compressed four-year degree done in three years, or a three-year general undergraduate degree? It has also been suggested that some of the rhetoric around three-semester programs may not be accurate. There is, for example, misunderstanding of how much space on campus is classroom space (about 5-10%). Filling those spaces over three semesters instead of two will not result in major savings in the facilities operating budget and will incur additional costs. Some universities say they have made significant efforts to increase summer enrolment without much uptake from students. More data will be sought in some areas of concern..

Ontario Graduate Scholarships: The proposal that these be managed by universities rather than centrally will likely be approved within the next two months.

Credit Transfer: COU expects more pressure on this file. There is a Credit Transfer Working Group, which is presently discussing a draft university-to-university credit transfer survey. Some colleagues wonder whether there is really a big problem for students, since their local information suggests that students seemed pretty happy with the transfer credit they have received.

International Students: The Executive Heads have voted to maintain a position of public neutrality in reaction to the government's reduction of operating grants for every non-Canadian undergraduate and Masters student.

Teacher Education Programs: Consultations with EDU and MTCU regarding restructuring of teacher education programs are underway. This was described as a constructive dialogue.

Snowstorm: By the time the meeting of the full Council (Academic Colleagues + Executive Heads) got underway, a freak snowstorm was blowing in and flights out of Sudbury were being cancelled. So the meeting was ended early, and a bus was chartered to provide ground transportation to the Toronto airport for those who required it.

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

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The COU Academic Colleagues met in Toronto May 24-25, 2012. There was no meeting of the full Council.

Budget-Related Updates: The fact that Ontario has a minority government shapes the COU agenda in a variety of ways, as does the fact that the condition of the world economy will make it very hard for the provincial government to reach its balanced budget goal. It is generally acknowledged that the present government is well disposed toward the post-secondary sector and that our sector suffered less severe cuts than most others. Nonetheless it seems unlikely that the relatively good situation of universities will continue as it is. The one-year rollover of the tuition framework was not easily achieved, and although COU is arguing for a five-year continuation of the framework, there is reason to think these arguments will not be successful. Political events in Quebec and in the U.S. may further complicate the situation. With respect to the provincial government's "policy levers for efficiency" (also known as "cuts"), COU is arguing for flexibility rather than across-the-board cuts.

Follow-up on New Program Proposals: Fifty programs that had passed Quality Assessment were still pending at MTCU. Nineteen of those have now been approved. Seven have been held back because they are very expensive and are not considered "leading programs for Ontario." The remaining 24 programs are being subjected to further analysis on grounds such as cost and provincial need.

Graduate Enrolment: The government is assuming a slowdown in graduate growth, projecting only three thousand new students over next few years. Thousands of graduate spaces were added under the Reaching Higher policy. This was a major expansion, but not all universities reached their approved targets by 2011-12. As a result, much of the growth over the next few years will be in the form of those universities catching up to their previous targets with the funding commitment still in place. A major focus of COU advocacy will be working with the government to reach a credible agreement on graduate spaces. COU remains in favor of graduate expansion.

Online Institute: Recall that the Minister favors the idea of a new purpose-created university, while COU advocates a model in which existing universities collaborate to make it possible for students to earn online degrees using courses offered by those universities. The discussion continues.

COU Needs Your Help: Please let COU know about your innovative teaching practices and about ways that you engage undergraduate students in research. This will help the Council make the case for universities in its conversations with the government and with the larger public. You can contact COU directly or send me the relevant information: okruhlik@uwo.ca so that it can be passed along.

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