

Student Success from a Student Perspective

PRESENTATION TO THE HEQCO CONFERENCE ON STUDENT SUCCESS

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OUSA

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

Background

- Somewhere between measuring student-to-faculty ratios and post-graduation employment rates, the question of what a successful post-secondary experience should look like has been lost.
- In recent years, students have been asking that quality be considered through the student success lens. We believe the question must change from “what do we need to fund to create a quality education?” into “what does a successful student look like?”
- OUSA has focused on two pieces of the student success puzzle – student support and teaching quality – and has developed a set of recommendations for institutions and the government to improve the success of our students.

Supporting Students

Attending university represents a fundamental shift in the lives of entering students, and many will face difficulty dealing with this change. At the same time, the broader learning environment also presents significant opportunities for learning and growth. It is of vital importance that our universities are equipped to proactively offer the resources that will support students in need and expand learning opportunities outside the classroom.

Institutions are often forced to cut student supports when budgets are tight

Unfortunately, these support programs are the first to be cut in times of financial challenge and so often lack the adequate and reliable funding needed to be sustainable year after year. (Interview with Dr. Phil Wood, Dean of Students, McMaster University, 2009)



Supporting Students

- OUSA would support efforts to:
 - Develop early warning systems to proactively identify and assist those students who may need greater support, especially in their first year
 - Place greater emphasis on the first year experience. Enhancements should come in the form of additional opportunities for effective orientation and mentorship opportunities, as well as the introduction of first year seminars
 - Develop comprehensive undergraduate research opportunities programs
 - Create an envelope within the funding formula that designates specific amounts per FTE for student support services
 - Include increasing international opportunities for domestic students as part of the government's emphasis on internationalization

Improving Teaching and Learning

Students feel strongly that the quality of teaching and learning at our universities leaves much to be desired. Large class sizes, a lack of meaningful student-faculty interaction, outdated forms of pedagogy, and the perceived dominance of research over teaching are all at the heart of these concerns. While changing the culture around teaching and learning will be difficult, this is an area where significant improvements can be made without significant investments from the government.

We rely too heavily on outdated teaching methods

"The primary learning environment for undergraduate students, the fairly passive lecture-discussion format where faculty talk and most students listen, is contrary to almost every principle of optimal settings for student learning." (Barr and Tagg, 1995, 14)



There is insufficient emphasis on student-faculty interaction, especially in the first year



"The quality of the college experience is strongly affected by student-faculty interactions. The frequency with which students talk with professors outside class, work with them on research projects, assist them in teaching, and visit their homes, correlates with...every self-reported area of intellectual and personal growth."
(Astin, 1993, 383)

Recommendations

- OUSA would support efforts to:
 - Incorporate a unit on teaching, learning and assessment into all PhD programs
 - Require all new instructors to complete an introductory course on teaching, learning and assessment
 - Set and abide by long- and short-term targets for the number of undergraduate courses using some form of active learning
 - Ensure that all students have at least two “high-impact experiences” during the course of their degree
 - Appoint a teaching and learning leader in each department to work with their colleagues in improving the department’s teaching, learning and assessment strategies and to assist in reviewing and designing curriculum

Recommendations

- OUSA would support efforts to:
 - Provide greater funding for Centres for Teaching and Learning and establish a senior administrative position such as an Associate Vice-President of Teaching and Learning
 - Implement a first-year seminar program with the aim of providing at least one small class experience to each first-year student
 - Develop and implement a program to connect all first-year students from underrepresented groups with volunteer faculty mentor who will assist them in the transition to university