Investing in Ontario’s Future: OPSEU’s submission to the Ministry of Colleges and Universities’ consultation for the Ontario Jobs and Recovery Committee
# Contents

- Introduction ............................................................................................................................................ 1  
- Summary of OPSEU recommendations ................................................................................................. 2  
- OPSEU recommendations and rationale .................................................................................................. 3  
  - Provide immediate stable funding for colleges and universities ......................................................... 3  
  - Provide free or reduced tuition for all students for fall 2020, including mature students needing to retrain, as well as workers displaced by the effects of COVID-19 ........................................ 3  
  - Expand the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy to public bodies, such as colleges and universities ................................................................................................. 4  
  - Facilitate the voluntary redeployment of underutilized staff within the institution and to other public sector bodies, as needed ......................................................... 5  
  - Mandate online class size caps ............................................................................................................. 5  
  - Implement a moratorium on all privatization schemes, including partnership agreements between public colleges and private career colleges ........................................................................ 6  
  - Facilitate the full engagement of staff and faculty in the planning and preparation for the return to classes in the fall ......................................................................................... 6  
  - Reform the governance systems of the colleges so that academic staff are front and centre of academic decision-making .................................................................................. 6  
  - Abandon performance-based funding for colleges and universities ..................................................... 7  
- Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................... 8  
- Sources .......................................................................................................................................................... 9
Introduction

Ontario’s colleges and universities face an uncertain future with a potential decline in the enrolment of Canadian and international students in the 2020-21 school year.

It is critical that governments take all necessary steps to maintain enrolment and provide stability to post-secondary institutions and their workforce.

Our colleges and universities annually educate more than 700,000 full-time students, are responsible for the direct and indirect employment of tens of thousands of workers, and are economic drivers in their communities and regions.

Years of government underfunding have resulted in post-secondary institutions relying increasingly on tuition fees as a source of revenue and a precarious workforce to fill the majority of staff and faculty positions.

More than half of OPSEU’s 44,000 members at colleges and universities are contract or part-time workers with no job security or benefits. They go to work sick, struggle to afford prescription drugs, work at multiple institutions, and put off making major life decisions, such as having kids.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, these hardworking employees adapted quickly as their institutions transitioned to remote learning.

Now, as a result of forces outside their control, our members face layoffs, non-renewal of contracts, and/or shorter terms of contracts as colleges and universities prepare for a possible decline in enrolments in the fall. The impacts for our members, their families, and their communities will be significant if the layoffs go ahead.

OPSEU is proud to represent more than 24,000 full- and part-time support staff and 14,000 full-time and contract faculty at Ontario’s 24 public colleges, as well as 6,000 members who work in administrative and professional services, special constable services, food services, custodial services and faculty positions at university and college campuses around the province.

Our staff and faculty leaders participated in the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities’ consultation on the impacts of COVID-19 held with labour organizations on May 13, 2020. We advocated for our federal and provincial governments to work together to put our post-secondary institutions on a stable footing, support students in their time of need, and retain staff and faculty.

We urged governments to see these measures, not as a cost, but as an investment in our current and future workforce, including the thousands of workers who find themselves without work because of COVID-19. Below is a reiteration of the points we raised during the consultation on May 13.
Summary of OPSEU recommendations

We recommend that the governments of Ontario and Canada:

1. provide immediate stable funding for colleges and universities

2. provide free or reduced tuition for all students, including mature students needing to retrain, as well as workers displaced by the effects of COVID-19

3. expand the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy to public bodies, such as colleges and universities

4. facilitate the redeployment of underutilized staff within the institution and to other public sector bodies, as needed

5. mandate online class size caps

6. implement a moratorium on all privatization schemes, including partnership agreements between public colleges and private career colleges

7. facilitate the full engagement of staff and faculty in the planning and preparation for the return to classes in the fall

8. reform the governance systems of the colleges so academic staff are front and centre of academic decision-making

9. abandon performance-based funding for colleges and universities
OPSEU recommendations and rationale

Provide immediate stable funding for colleges and universities.

In the 1970s, the province funded approximately 75 per cent of the operating costs of colleges and universities, aided by generous transfers from the federal government. The provincially funded share of operating costs is much lower today. Provincial grants accounted for 41 per cent of the colleges’ operating costs in 2017-18 and 34 per cent of the universities’ total operating costs in 2018-19, according to publicly available figures. (It is likely the provincial share of college system operating costs fell below 41 per cent in 2018-19. We are waiting for the colleges’ revenues and expenses’ figures for that year to be published later this spring.)

On a per-student basis, Ontario spends far below the average of all other provinces on post-secondary education. We need to get our post-secondary institutions back on a stable footing, which will require a significant investment from both levels of government. We want to see the federal government return to its role of being a major funder of post-secondary education and training. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic shutdown have completely altered the employment landscape in Canada, causing millions of workers to lose jobs or hours of work. In a time of recession, many people will go back to school to retrain. It is incumbent on both levels of government to make it possible for them to do so by providing stable funding to colleges and universities.

Provide free or reduced tuition for all students for fall 2020, including mature students needing to retrain, as well as workers displaced by the effects of COVID-19.

Thousands of new and returning students will also need help with tuition. We cannot expect students to take on crushing levels of debt to pay for their education at a time when many families are facing serious financial hardship. Our union represents thousands of student workers at the colleges. Like so many students in this country, they struggle to cover tuition and living costs. The purpose of the tuition reduction for the fall 2020 term is to increase enrolment. A recent survey of university students found that nearly one-third were reconsidering enrolment in the fall. One in two said that COVID-19 was making it more difficult for them to afford tuition and living costs. Of the nearly one-third who said they were reconsidering enrolment, 85 per cent said reducing or eliminating tuition would help them return to university in the fall.
Expand the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy to public bodies, such as colleges and universities.

The federal government recently announced wage relief for academic researchers working at post-secondary institutions who are funded by industry or philanthropic sources. Our union has called for this wage relief to be expanded to include all staff and faculty at colleges and universities. Our post-secondary institutions are among the largest employers in their communities. They employ thousands of faculty and staff, and many more jobs are created on- and off-campus by student and visitor spending. Hundreds of skilled trades jobs are also created from spending on capital projects, such as the construction of new student residences.

The importance of colleges and universities as economic drivers in their regions cannot be overstated, particularly for smaller and medium-sized communities, including those in the North. For example, Canadore College and Nipissing University in North Bay, serving a combined student population of around 10,000, employ approximately 1,150 unionized staff and faculty. Layoffs at the college and university, combined with the reduced enrolment of domestic and international students, could have a devastating impact, not only on the families directly affected, but on the economy of North Bay and the surrounding area.

Without a wage subsidy program, hundreds of staff and faculty are at risk of being placed on temporary layoff and/or not having their contracts renewed. Well over half of all OPSEU members working in the colleges and universities, both staff and faculty, are temporary, contract or part-time employees. Many of them have worked at their post-secondary institutions for 10 or more years. They do not even have the dignity of becoming a layoff statistic, because they are not permanent employees and do not have access to layoff or recall rights. Their contracts will simply not be renewed, and our post-secondary system will lose their knowledge, skills and experience.
Facilitate the voluntary redeployment of underutilized staff within the institution and to other public sector bodies, as needed.

Remote learning can only be effective when students have meaningful and varied ways to engage and participate in classroom discussion and course work. Transforming in-class work to remote learning is about a lot more than posting course material online. Support staff can provide help to students in navigating online learning so faculty can concentrate on teaching and course design.

Recently, the Ontario government approved an emergency order allowing school board employees to volunteer to be redeployed during the COVID-19 pandemic to congregate care settings, such as hospitals, long-term care homes, retirement homes and women’s shelters. These employees will continue to receive their pay and benefits from their school board employers. If underutilized staff in colleges and universities could help with critical staffing shortages in other public sector bodies, and provided there is agreement from the bodies’ respective bargaining agent(s), we believe it is worth considering this option.

M mandate online class size caps.

In media reports and student surveys, it is becoming clear that many students are wary about the effectiveness of remote learning. Faculty know that in order to promote active learning within the online format, there needs to be a mix of lecture, discussion and hands-on exercises in a single class. Class sizes need to be manageable in order to facilitate more engaged learning. Colleges and university administrators should work with their faculty to determine the best class size to meet the learning objectives, course by course. Administrators should not try to cut costs by setting class sizes at too high a number of students.
Implement a moratorium on all privatization schemes, including partnership agreements between public colleges and private career colleges.

Privatization poses a threat to our publicly funded colleges and universities. At a time when the revenues of our public institutions are at risk, there is no justification for government support of privately delivered education. Critical government funds need to go the services and institutions that all of society benefits from, not to private profits. The government should immediately suspend its binding policy directive authorizing public colleges to contract out the delivery of their programs to private career colleges serving international students and halt all other privatization schemes, including the privatization of the delivery of employment programs currently provided by public and non-profit providers, such as the colleges.

Facilitate the full engagement of staff and faculty in the planning and preparation for the return to classes in the fall.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, not all colleges and universities involved staff and faculty in their pandemic preparedness committees. This has changed somewhat through the course of the pandemic. Some colleges and universities have a more consistent record than others of both sharing information and soliciting input from their bargaining agents. We urge all colleges and universities to involve their bargaining agents in the development of plans for the fall semester. Staff and faculty are the experts when it comes to providing a high-quality learning environment that supports the health and well-being of students.

Reform the governance systems of the colleges so that academic staff are front and centre of academic decision-making.

The decision to pivot quickly to remote learning earlier this spring was made in response to an extraordinary situation when time was of the essence. Staff and faculty quickly adapted to support this transition. Colleges and universities are now developing plans for the 2020-21 year. It is essential that all decisions about course modifications are made in conjunction with academic staff. OPSEU has long called for a system of collegial governance in Ontario’s colleges so that faculty and students are guaranteed a role in academic decision-making.
Abandon performance-based funding for colleges and universities.

Our union welcomes the government’s decision to delay the implementation of performance-based funding. However, we urge the government to go further and permanently abandon this destructive funding framework. Tying funding to metrics that are largely outside the control of post-secondary institutions, including the labour market, narrows and skews the focus of institutions, potentially resulting in some course offerings being dropped, such as a child and youth worker programs at a college, in favour of more lucrative programs.

Two further points must be made. First, accountability measures are already in place, and have been for years, with regard to provincial funding for colleges and universities. Secondly, the implementation of performance-based funding will consume resources at the institution level. Work units have been established to monitor, measure and report on the metrics on a cyclical basis to the province. This is a waste of valuable resources which would be better spent providing direct help to students in the classroom, lab and through campus support services.

If implemented, performance-based funding will have a disastrous effect on post-secondary education in this province. It will lead to even greater funding losses for our institutions and less access for our students. We need our governments to invest in high-quality public education that is accessible to all.
Conclusion

Over the years, our union has been a consistent advocate for a well-funded, high-quality and accessible system of post-secondary education and training. We know that continuous learning is critical for all of us, from the recent high school graduate embarking on their first career, to the mature student adapting to technological change and emerging skill needs in the labour market.

Ontario’s colleges and universities, and their staff and faculty, are world renowned. Their work, fostering independent thought and discussion, providing specialized training and expertise, conducting invaluable research, must be supported and enhanced by government. Our public colleges and universities serve the common good, while building our collective skills and productivity.

We urge our federal and provincial governments to act on these recommendations. The future of our new and emerging economy is in their hands.
Sources

Statistics Canada. Table 37-10-0011-01. Postsecondary enrolments, by field of study, registration status, program type, credential type and gender. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3710001101


