



Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations
Union des associations des professeurs des universités de l'Ontario

Report of the OCUFA University Governance Committee on the COVID-19 and Governance survey

Introduction

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, universities in Ontario have had to take many unprecedented measures and implement changes to the operational and academic activities of their institutions. Unfortunately, on many campuses the administration's response to the pandemic took a non-consultative and top-down approach dismissing the shared governance structures and collegial practices of the institutions.

Earlier in August, the OCUFA Ad Hoc University Governance Committee distributed a survey to faculty and librarian and archivist associations across Ontario. The goal of the survey was to assess and understand the approaches to decision-making and shared governance taken by university administrations across the province and evaluate the extent to which collegial governance may have been undermined in university responses to the pandemic.

Results of the survey

The survey questions focused on the role of senates (or equivalent bodies), faculty associations and other campus groups in pandemic decision-making, the degree to which financial decisions were made in a transparent and consultative manner, job loss at institutions during the pandemic, and the overall approach of administrations in their response to the pandemic.

The "Member survey on university governance during COVID-19" received responses from 27 of the 30 faculty and librarian and archivist associations at Ontario's universities and affiliated colleges.

On the question of consultation regarding plans for the fall term, 69 per cent of the respondents indicated that their senate (or an equivalent body) was not consulted in determining the COVID-related academic teaching and research plans for the fall. Similarly, the majority of respondents (67 per cent) noted that their senate (or an equivalent body) and faculty councils were not asked to provide any collegial input into decisions regarding preparation for, and delivery of, emergency remote teaching.

Further, over half of the respondents noted that their university senate (or an equivalent body) did not meet over the summer or have any special meetings organized to engage in planning for the fall term.

Respondents were also asked to indicate whether their university had struck a task force or a committee to lead the response to COVID-19 and, if so, to note whether members of their

faculty association, senate (or an equivalent body), student union, or contract faculty were represented on the university's task force/committee. Seventy-three per cent of the respondents indicated that the task force/committee did not involve representatives from any of the above-mentioned groups. Only two associations noted that contract faculty were included in their task force. Six institutions had faculty association representatives included and only three institutions had student union representatives and/or senate (or an equivalent body) representatives.

When asked whether collegial processes and structures were respected in the university's response to the pandemic, 65 per cent of respondents indicated that their university's response involved a sidelining of the usual governance practices and an overwhelming 88 per cent characterized their institution's pandemic response as top-down, with only three faculty associations describing their institution's approach to the pandemic as consultative and collegial.

The survey also asked whether senates (or an equivalent body) have been consulted regarding budgetary and financial decisions in response to the pandemic and once again, over 65 per cent of respondents noted that there had been no consultations at their institutions, with 11 per cent indicating that they were not aware of any such consultations.

These numbers are particularly concerning when considering that respondents from nine institutions noted that there has been a reduction to staffing levels (either academic or non-academic job loss) over the period of the pandemic at their institutions.

The survey respondents also noted a number of other concerns regarding their institutions' pandemic response, including violations of collective agreement provisions, abuse of emergency powers, implementation of unilateral decisions on academic matters such as increasing class sizes, lack of recognition of the increased workload of faculty and academic librarians, and post-approval presentation of plans and decisions to the campus community.

Analysis

The results of the survey confirm what our Committee had expected. The response to COVID-19 at the majority of Ontario universities has been inadequately consultative, top-down, and lacking proper process. While the flawed response in the early days of the pandemic might have been explained by the fact that universities had to pivot quickly and make many decisions in a short time frame in order to wrap up the winter term, the same justification cannot be applied to the way university administrations have behaved since the initial period.

Ontario institutions have had months to properly plan for the fall term, consult different campus groups, and follow collegial processes. However, many have actively chosen to use the pandemic conditions as an excuse for making unilateral and non-consultative decisions and excluding the voices of the very people for whom these decisions would impact the most. This exclusionary approach is despite numerous [calls from OCUFA](#), as well as faculty and other campus groups, urging university administrators to respect shared governance structures in their response to the pandemic.

Going forward

With universities opting for mostly online operations and emergency remote teaching in fall and winter, we are still far away from a “return to normal.” As online courses get underway and faculty, academic librarians, and students return for a new academic year under these unique circumstances, a clearer image of the challenges and shortcomings of the universities’ fall plans will emerge.

In the coming weeks and months, in the context of an ongoing pandemic and potential surge in COVID-19 infections, universities will be making further decisions and plans for the teaching, research, and operations of universities for the upcoming winter and spring terms. It is important for our faculty associations to work closely with other campus groups in holding administrations accountable and ensuring that the same patterns of exclusion and sidelining of faculty and librarian voices and shared governance practices are not repeated.

The COVID-19 pandemic and university responses to it highlighted many flaws and deep-rooted issues in the postsecondary system, including the crisis of governance at our institutions. This situation further underscores the need to educate and inform members of our campus community and to engage them in the fight to preserve collegial governance at Ontario’s universities. To help with this effort, our Committee is developing a resource for the OCUFA membership on how best to tackle these serious issues and work towards an engaging and effective model of governance.