BACKGROUND

There is much more to higher education than just attending class. Within the broader learning environment of university is a world of opportunity for students who want to gain work experience, engage in co-curricular activities, and have access to support when they're unsure of their path or are struggling academically.

This Broader Learning Environment paper addresses the entirety of the university learning experience—the aspects of it that are currently being addressed insufficiently, and those that students have identified as priorities for the Ontario government moving forward.

THE PROBLEM

Lack of Professional Development Opportunities

Despite its many advantages, opportunities for students to engage in co-curricular activities are not always at the level they should be. Students are sometimes unaware of the programs available to them and as a result they miss opportunities to positively augment their university experience.

Furthermore, tools and programs used for tracking co-curricular opportunities are underutilized, lacking proper support, or in some cases not even provided. While not required at all universities, the lack of such tracking programs leaves less opportunity for students to keep a record of their experiences and reflect on the development of their skills and competencies.

Similarly, professional development opportunities for students are lacking. Not only are there not enough opportunities available to students, many do not know of existing programs and are therefore unable to even begin their professional development.

Insufficient Student Support Services

Support for students at different stages of their university experience is currently operating at insufficient levels. Student support services are poorly resourced, or in some cases, simply non-existent, and students have noticed.¹

Proactive advising, the act of monitoring student performance throughout their university experience, is a service currently not being adequately provided on campuses. Throughout the completion of their degree, students will face complex challenges that affect their ability to persist and succeed towards graduation. Without proactive advising to monitor performance, students may only receive support and guidance at a stage more difficult to recover from, or even worse, they may feel they have no other option than to drop out of school altogether.

For those students who do struggle, access to remedial programs is another issue they must contend with. Programs that are meant to support struggling students often lack sufficient resources and as a result are unable to meet the needs of students and cannot help them identify the root causes of their difficulties.

Finally, students are concerned about the uneven distribution of support dedicated to assisting students through the transitory periods of their university experience, including leading into university, between academic years, and post graduation. While there is often sufficient support for students entering their first year of university, there is a noticeable decline in support levels following the initial transition.² Guidance is particularly important for students on the cusp of graduation, who may be entering the workforce or preparing for graduate studies.

Student Spaces Have Been Ignored

While student populations at universities have rapidly risen and have been encouraged to grow to such levels by government policies and university funding models, student spaces on campus have not kept pace with the growth in population. For example, research shows that while enrolment grew 9.7 per cent between 2001 and 2011, space for student services and student life only grew by 3.1 per cent, and library facilities only by 2.5 per cent.³

Indeed, government funding priorities have for the most part ignored study spaces, student services, and other related student space. The end result has been an overcrowding of student spaces and a negative effect on teaching and research in Ontario’s universities.⁴

Inconsistent Experiential Learning Programs

Traditional work integrated learning (WIL) programs at universities are not always optimally designed. It is often the case that students, who must pay for work integrated learning programs like co-op, are placed into work environments that are not related to students’ chosen majors.

Non-traditional work integrated learning programs, on the other hand, are given relatively less opportunity than
other WIL programs. Students from certain faculties have more difficulty finding a suitable placement in their field, and as a result they have fewer opportunities for professional development than their peers in other faculties. 

Finally, when it comes to engaging in the broader community in which campuses are located, universities are behind the curve. Despite the multitude of opportunities for student learning and development in these communities, there remains a distinct lack of initiative on the part of university administrations in developing community engagement programs. 

RECOMMENDATIONS 

Provide opportunity for professional development
Attending class isn’t the only part of a university education. Co-curricular activities and professional development outside the classroom are critical parts of a full university experience and part of the broader learning environment. Research suggests that students actively involved in co-curricular activities may even experience higher career advancement. Co-curricular opportunities should be broad and include several options, including volunteer placements, experiences abroad, professional networking, and internships outside students’ programs. In order to realize the principles stated above, students assert that:

• With the consent of, and in consultation with, their student associations, universities should help students to develop measurements of skills gained outside of the classroom and encourage exercises that allow students to critically reflect on those skills.
• In consultation with student associations, institutions should provide whatever recognition or official acknowledgement of co-curricular reflection that student associations deem appropriate.
• Institutions and student associations should be in agreement or otherwise develop an understanding that determines the role of each in ensuring that students have access to professional development opportunities.
• Information regarding the opportunities available to students should be readily available and accessible on their campus in the form of a central listing database, office, or other hub.

Improve student support services
Students should have ample access to support services throughout their university experience. Support and advising services play a key role in encouraging success from students and should be readily accessible for students in need of these programs. In addition to academic advising and low-cost tutoring, students should also have access to non-academic advising, peer support, and programs that support a healthy lifestyle. Also critical to promoting student wellness and success is the presence of proactive advising for struggling students. For those students who do fall below expected achievement levels and enter probationary status, there should be adequately resourced remedial programs that provide assistance to these students as they work their way back to good academic standing. Finally, support should be provided to students in every phase of their university education, not just from high school to first year. In order to address these issues regarding student support services, students recommend the following actions:

• The provincial government should create a new special purpose grant within the funding formula that incentivizes improvement of student support services.
• Support services should be interconnected throughout campus and the community such that students can access information to services, and be directed to the correct service from any access point.
• The provincial government should provide incentives for the creation of early warning systems to ensure institutions are proactively assisting students in need. These systems should be capable of noting a student’s progress throughout a year, and degree.
• Universities should adopt opt-in proactive advising methods as a means to intervene and assist with cases of at-risk students.
• Universities should construct campaigns to encourage students to participate in proactive academic advising.
• The government should ensure that universities have sufficient funding to ensure that advising services can operate at the capacity needed to be both proactive and effective.
• Universities should have student-centric remedial programs designed for those who are experiencing academic challenges significant enough to threaten their continued enrolment or participation in any other university program.
• The government should engage in consultation or study to uncover the most effective methods of remedial programming, and should make this information publically available.
• Universities should support transitions into university, between years, and out of university by assisting and supporting support programs for any of these transitions that are managed by their student associations.
• Support for transition leading up to and after graduation should be enhanced through more proactive career services and the availability of mentorship, skills building, advising, and networking.

Increase student space on campus
Available student space on campuses is dwindling and government priorities and funding formulas have led to
a scenario where student population growth has far outpaced available student space. Simply put, student spaces on campus must expand to match the rise in student populations. To accomplish this, students state that:

- Governments and universities should make student space a targeted funding priority.
- The government funding availability for capital investments should be extended to include spaces associated with student support and services.

**Expand experiential learning opportunities**

Both traditional and non-traditional work-integrated learning (WIL) programs should be available for students from all academic disciplines and backgrounds, and should be effectively linked to course curricula. WIL programs provide valuable opportunities for students and allow them to gain professional experience while in school.

Another means of experiential learning for students is to give them opportunities to become more involved in the broader communities in which they live and where their university is located. Successful relationships between communities and universities can provide meaningful student integration with the broader community, and through these relationships students can immerse themselves in opportunities to explore their career interests, develop professional skills, and gain experience to complement their academic endeavours.

To support students in their experiential learning, it is recommended that the following policies be implemented:

- Where work-integrated learning has been identified as a strategic institutional priority, government and universities should work together with industry to provide meaningful opportunities for students that enhance their chosen field of study through the fulfillment of explicit learning outcomes.
- Universities that have identified WIL as a strategic or differentiated priority should create opportunities for students in all disciplines to undertake a work-integrated learning experience during their undergraduate program.
- Institutions should work with their communities to identify, develop and promote opportunities for community engagement and volunteerism for students and staff.
- Institutions should work with their communities to the development of for-credit community service learning opportunities in their broader communities.

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2 “Student Employment,” OUSA, 2013
5 Ryan Daniel and Leah Daniel, “Enhancing the transition from study to work: Reflections on the value and impact of internships in the creative and performing arts,” Arts and Humanities in Higher Education 12 (2-3): 2013