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For discussion

Analysis and Policy Proposals on the Declining Enrolment of Laurentian University, the Northern Universities, and Arts Programs

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1 Introduction: crisis

This brief outlines the enrolment crisis engulfing Northern Ontario's universities and Arts programs, and proposes policies to stabilize and increase enrolments and to improve their predictability in a progressive way. The analysis and proposals here grow out of a recent study of Ontario system enrolment and increased tuition-fee dependence as it affects Northern Ontario universities and Arts programs.¹ As well, a selection of tables from the study are appended here.

For most years in the last two decades, the enrolments in Northern Ontario's five universities have been declining relative to Southern universities and, since 2011, Northern university enrolments have been declining in absolute numbers. This has affected Laurentian University as well as Algoma University, Université de Hearst, Lakehead University, and Nipissing University. The enrolment decline in Arts programs has been even more severe than the average decline. At Laurentian University, many Arts programs are currently under the threat of closure or have been closed.² The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply magnified the crisis situation for students, universities, and Northern Ontario communities. Likely, the pandemic will leave in its wake worse conditions and evident need for concerted policy changes.

¹ Leadbeater, David and Caitlin K. Kiernan. 2020 (Dec 1). "Decline and Protracted Crisis in Ontario's Northern Universities and Arts Education." Caitlin K. Kernan graduated in Economics from Laurentian University and is currently completing a Masters in Economics in the Netherlands. The research was supported by a grant from the Laurentian University Research Fund. Full references to the data and quotations in this brief are available in the study.

² In 2020, Thorneloe University, part of the Laurentian University federated structure, closed its Theatre Arts and Motion Picture Arts programs and laid off one tenured faculty member, one tenure-track faculty member, and at least 8 part-time faculty members, some with more than 15 years of service. Laurentian University itself suspended admission to programs in 13 departments, mostly in the Arts and disproportionately in the French language: Études de l'environnement/Environnement durable; Mathématiques – tous les programmes (spécialisation, majeure, concentration) (FR) (BA & Bsc); Music – specialization; Modern languages – all programs; Théâtre (FR) – spécialisation; Geography (EN/FR) – specialisation; Archaeology – all programs; BAA en Ressources humaines (FR); BBA in International Management (EN); BBA in Entrepreneurship (EN); Outdoor Adventure Leadership (FR); Kinésie humaine (Maîtrise) (FR); Anthropology – all programs.

Faced with deteriorating conditions in their universities, university administrations, faculty associations, and student organizations from their varying perspectives have been critical of the inadequacy of provincial funding and the consequences of protracted austerity. Inadequate total public funding has done major harm to Ontario's universities and, currently, the system is faced with further damage as the Ford Conservative government implements "performance-based funding." However, a simple return to enrolment-based funding is not a solution to the deepening crisis, especially for Northern Ontario and for Arts education. The prevailing priorities and structure of the Ontario system has also done major harm not only in terms of the inadequacy of total funding but also by the system of allocation among universities and programs. In particular, Ontario's increasing tuition-fee dependence (with means- or income-testing for aid) has at least four intertwined consequences with direct impacts on Northern universities and Arts programs: it negatively affects not only (a) student accessibility but also (b) enrolments among programs, (c) the behaviour of universities as collegial institutions, and (d) regional development objectives.

Today the usual official explanation of enrolment decline is "demography." But demographic decline in Northern Ontario is only a part of the explanation, especially as the Northern universities are part of the provincial system and the system has been growing overall; indeed, most students enrolled in Northern universities are from outside Northern Ontario.

Greater attention is due other factors affecting Northern Ontario. These include the negative enrolment and allocation effects of Ontario's tuition-dependent system, Northern Ontario's continuing lower university participation rates, and the deteriorating employment prospects in Northern Ontario. Northern Ontario has particular social and economic conditions given by its hinterland-colonial history: a population of about 780,000 (about 6 percent of Ontario) across a land area of 800,000 square kilometres (about 87 percent of Ontario), a multinational make-up including Indigenous nations and Francophone communities, lower employment rates and higher unemployment rates, weaker educational, media, and cultural institutions, lower educational attainment and university participation, and, not least, ongoing and unresolved ravages of colonialism.

- as reported in the 2016 census, in attainment of a Bachelor's degree, Northern Ontario had 12.7 percent compared to 21.0 percent for the province of Ontario: for men, 10.0 percent compared to 21.0 percent and, for women, 15.4 percent compared to 22.8 percent. For Masters and Doctoral levels, Northern Ontario's levels are below half that for Ontario.

2 Low enrolments, tuition fees, and the privatizing of public university education

The problem of low enrolments or excess university capacity is not historically new for Northern universities, and reference here will be made to some past policy proposals about the problem. The fact that the issue is recurring does not mean it should or can be ignored. Today's conditions are in certain ways worse. Not only is there a more widespread deterioration in

employment and social conditions in Northern Ontario, but also Ontario governments have succeeded to a much greater degree in privatizing the provision of public university education and research.

- Ontario governments have reduced their public grants for university operating revenues from a level at about 80 percent in 1980 to around 50 percent in 2004, and to only 38 percent in 2017. The situation has reached a level that Ontario provincial documents and some senior administrators speak openly not of public universities but of “publicly assisted universities” and “publicly supported universities.”
- Over these years, domestic and international tuition fees and miscellaneous fees paid by students jumped from 15 percent of operating funds in 1980 to 45 percent in 2004 to 56 percent in 2017, becoming by far the largest source for operating funds.
- Ontario now spends less per university student than any province in Canada and has the highest tuition fees in Canada.
- At Laurentian University, for example, full-time annual undergraduate Arts and Science tuition fees had increased in 2017-18 to \$6,473, a nearly 9.4-fold increase in nominal terms and 2.6-fold increase in real terms since 1979-80 (see Table 1).
- Further, tuition fees in undergraduate professional programs such as Engineering and Business were “differentiated.” Graduate and post-undergraduate professional faculty fees were increased even further. Miscellaneous user fees to students were also increased and new user fees created, such as for services in registrars offices, athletics facilities, and for materials in some programs.
- As a result of increased privatization and tuition-fee dependency, the Northern universities are also more vulnerable to provincial budgetary austerity. While all these fee increases occurred at the Northern universities, more prestigious universities in Southern Ontario and more prestigious programs with greater student demand and market power saw even higher increases. One result has been that elite universities like the University of Toronto now receive a much higher share of their operating revenues from tuition fees and a lower share from provincial grants than do the Northern universities. For example, taking 2016-17 operating revenues, the University of Toronto received 64.7 percent from tuition and miscellaneous fees and 29.6 percent from provincial grants and contracts; by contrast, Lakehead University received 49.7 percent and 46.1 percent, respectively, and Nipissing University received 41.3 percent and 55.2 percent, respectively.

3 Key patterns in Northern university and Arts enrolments

That the current Ontario university system is failing Northern Ontario is evident in enrolment data. For years, government and university leaderships have accepted even defended increasing tuition-fee dependence and the privatization of Ontario's university system – without seriously interrogating its negative effects. This occurred too in Northern Ontario even its universities were among the first hit by the negative effects of declining overall and Arts enrolments. In the corporate competitive system Northern university leaderships were more inclined to institutional boosterism that covered up such underlying problems than to challenging Ontario's neoliberal university policies. As the enrolment crisis became more visible, the woefully inadequate default explanation of decline became “demography,” while not addressing forthrightly the hinterland-colonial conditions of Northern Ontario or Ontario's neoliberal policies.

Due to years of denial and deflection on enrolment decline it is important here to discuss in some depth crucial enrolment trends affecting Northern Ontario and Arts education. Three in particular are the most threatening enrolment trends undermining Northern universities and Arts education and they deserve urgent attention:

- 1 The decline in full-time undergraduate enrolment in Northern Ontario universities both relative to Southern Ontario universities and in absolute numbers.
- 2 The more severe absolute and relative decline in Arts enrolment in Northern Ontario, especially for the Humanities and Fine Arts.
- 3 The high level of variability in Northern university enrolment, also reflecting the disadvantaged conditions and smaller scale of the Northern universities.

Unless noted otherwise, the data described here are focused on full-time undergraduate enrolment, which accounts for about 75 percent of all enrolments in the Ontario system.³

Relative and absolute decline in university enrolments in Northern Ontario

- For Ontario as a whole, full-time undergraduate enrolments grew in all years from 2000 to 2018, except in 2007 (the end of the double-cohort boom of 2003-06). In 2000, full-time undergraduate students numbered 215,846 while in 2018 they numbered 404,289.

³ In 2018, by headcounts, Ontario's full-time undergraduate enrolment of 404,289 was 74.1 percent of total enrolment of 545,303. The latter includes 66,019 graduate full-time students (12.1 percent), 64,090 undergraduate part-time students (11.8 percent), and 10,905 graduate part-time students (2.0 percent).

Average annual growth was 3.6 percent. Though it slowed after a second boom from 2009 to 2012, the system growth was still positive, about 1.6 percent. Throughout, a majority of undergraduates were females, 57.6 percent in 2000 and 55.8 percent in 2008.

- Part of Ontario's full-time undergraduate expansion is accounted for by international students, whose annual enrolment increases averaged 11.1 percent. From 3.9 percent of full-time undergraduates in 2000, international student numbers climbed to 13.5 percent in 2018.
- Ontario's full-time undergraduate annual growth rates for all Ontario still remained higher than those for Ontario's population, which for 2006-11 averaged 1.1 percent and for 2011-16 averaged 0.9 percent.
- For Northern Ontario universities, by contrast, full-time undergraduate enrolments peaked in 2011 at nearly 18,000, then have declined or stagnated, in 2018, to under 17,000. Annual growth over the entire 2000-18 period averaged 2.7 percent, but from 2011-18 it averaged -0.8 percent.
- As a part of the Ontario university system, the Northern universities reached a relative peak of 5.2 percent of full-time undergraduate enrolments in the years 2004-06 during the double-cohort period, but by 2018 had declined to 4.2 percent.
- Every Northern university has been affected by decline. Full-time undergraduate enrolments peaked at Lakehead University (6,426 students) and at Nipissing University (3,874 students) in 2010, at Algoma University (1,218 students) in 2013, and at Laurentian University (grouped with l'Université de Hearst, 6,624 students) in 2015. These numbers include the Southern campuses of Northern universities (see Table 2).

Part-time and graduate enrolments insufficient to balance full-time undergraduate decline

- In Ontario, the overall trend for part-time enrolments, both undergraduate and graduate, is declining relative to full-time enrolments.
- However, part-time university education has played a larger role in Northern Ontario than in Southern Ontario. In 2014, Nipissing, Laurentian, and Algoma were among the top five universities in Ontario by percentage of students studying part-time.
- Over the period 2000-18, for undergraduate programs, part-time enrolments declined absolutely and from 32.2 to 21.6 percent of all enrolment in Northern Ontario relative to from 22.9 and 13.3 percent for Southern Ontario.
- For part-time graduate enrolment, Northern universities had a much higher initial part-time enrolment, 52.8 percent, but in 2018, at 14.9 percent, the part-time share had fallen

below Northern undergraduate levels. By contrast, in Southern Ontario, the decline in part-time graduate enrolment was from 26.0 percent in 2000 to 14.2 percent in 2018.

- Despite their overall diminished role, in 2018, part-time enrolments as a whole in Northern Ontario were still over 7 percentage points higher than in Southern Ontario.
- For full-time graduate program enrolments, Northern Ontario has seen relatively rapid increases compared to undergraduate enrolments as new graduate programs have been introduced. Between 2000 and 2018, graduate full-time enrolments jumped by over five times to more than 2,000, though from a very low initial level. In 2000, Northern graduate programs had 3.3 percent of all full-time enrolment (and 7.5 percent of part-time) while, in 2018, graduate enrolments had 10.7 percent (and 7.1 percent of part-time).
- Despite the relative improvement in the position of Northern graduate programs, conditions in Northern Ontario were still much below those in Southern Ontario: in 2000, Southern graduate enrolments there were 11.3 percent of full-time enrolments (and 13.1 percent of part-time enrolments), while in 2018 they were 14.2 percent (and 15.1 percent respectively) – both much higher than in Northern Ontario.

Northern enrolment instability

- Northern university full-time undergraduate enrolments did not simply turn negative after 2011, they were overall more variable and reflected a pattern which shows that the Northern universities are now functioning as a *capacity reserve* for the Ontario system.
- During years of rapid system expansion, the rate of expansion in Northern universities was actually higher after a short lag, and in years of slowing growth, the decline in Northern universities was greater, even negative. This was reflected in 2003, the first or intake year of the “double cohort,” when the Ontario system had an overall expansion of 14.9 percent while the Northern Ontario expansion was 20.0 percent. Similarly, in the first year of the boom of 2009, the system expansion was 4.5 percent while in Northern Ontario it was 4.7 percent (see Table 3).
- More often, however, annual growth rates in Northern Ontario have been well below those of the system: the overall growth over 2000-18 for all Ontario was 87.3 percent or an annual average growth of 3.6 percent while for Northern Ontario it was 58.7 percent and 2.7 percent, respectively.

Increasing scale disparities

- In 2000, Northern Ontario’s universities were generally much smaller than universities in Southern Ontario, except for the specialized Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCAD) in Toronto and Trent University in Peterborough. In 2018, the

Northern universities had become even smaller relative to universities in Southern Ontario (except again for OCAD, now OCAD University (OCADU), and Trent University).

- Over the 2000-18 period, the average size of universities in Northern Ontario had increased for all full-time students from 3,681 to 4,747 students or by 29.0 percent, while the average size of universities in Southern Ontario increased from 15,418 to 28,207 students or by 83.0 percent (see Table 4).
- The smaller scale of Northern universities suggests that, if generally slower or no enrolment growth continues in Northern Ontario relative to the Southern universities, there will be an increasing gap in scale between Ontario's Northern and Southern universities.

Adverse hierarchical demand structure

- The position of the Northern universities as a capacity reserve relates not only to its hinterland location and smaller scale but also to the hierarchical structure of student (or student-family) demand in the Ontario system. As the Ontario system has expanded with increased privatization and corporatized competition without adequately addressing initial regional disparities, the Northern universities have fallen further behind in relative enrolment and scale as well as developed a major dependence on extra-regional enrolment.
- The patterns of the cross-regional student flows for enrolment reflect the demand hierarchy as well as metropolitan-hinterland relations. It also affects what is considered "regional." For instance, the Toronto/GTA region has by far the highest own-region participation, ranging from 80 to 97 percent (see Table 5), although the Toronto/GTA universities are not usually deemed to be "regional." By contrast, some universities with low own-region participation rates of less than 50 percent might or might not be viewed as regional. For instance, it is not surprising that elite universities like Queen's and Western depend heavily on students from outside their region. By contrast, it is notable that some Northern universities have less than 50 percent from their own region but are viewed as "regional."
- The relative demand for individual universities or groups of universities, especially given similar tuition levels, is often seen as reflecting relative institutional quality or prestige within the system. One does not have to agree with quality "ranking" (such as commercialized in *Macleans* magazine) to observe that Ontario has an elite-dominated and unequal structure of demand for individual universities within the system. The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), a provincially funded agency established in 2005, has attempted to construct a measure of demand by students (whether alone or with their families) and revealed some of this inequality.

- The initial HEQCO demand measure was based on five indicators: application-to-registrant ratio; percentage of applicants making the university their first choice; percentage of entering students from other Canadian provinces and territories; percentage of international students; percentage of entering students with high school grades above 75 percent. By this demand measure, all the Northern universities were well below average in demand and three were in the bottom 25 percent (Hicks and Jonker 2016: Table 3). A later narrowing of the indicators to two – high school entry marks and application-to-registrant ratio – did not change the low-end ranking of the Northern universities, though perhaps the ranking disparities overall appeared less extreme (Weingarten et al. 2017: Table 3).

More severe Arts decline

- In recent decades Arts full-time enrolments in Ontario have been changing overall towards relative and even absolute decline, but to a lesser degree in elite and Toronto/GTA universities. In Northern Ontario universities, the decline in Arts enrolments has been so severe that it has created a debilitated and precarious situation threatening the existence of Arts education in Northern Ontario.
- Full-time undergraduate Arts enrolment in Ontario peaked in 2012 at nearly 165,000 then declined absolutely over the next five years, by -6.7 percent. Still, for the entire 2005 to 2017 period or for 2008 to 2017 (post-double cohort), there was a net growth, of 7.4 percent or 5.9 percent respectively.
- In Northern Ontario, the absolute decline in Arts was underway earlier, at least as early as 2005. Overall, Arts enrolment in Northern Ontario fell by -33.1 percent – nearly a third – from 2005-17, or by -26.5 percent since the double cohort from 2008-17. Even since the Ontario peak of 2012, the Northern Ontario decline was -25.7 percent compared to -6.7 percent in Southern Ontario (see Table 6).
- All Northern universities were affected, with Nipissing University suffering the largest losses in the entire Ontario system, over -44 percent, from 2005 to 2017. The absolute decline in Arts enrolment in Northern universities brought with it a sharp fall in the relative share of Arts enrolment – overall nearly double the relative decline of Southern Ontario.
- In 2006, full-time undergraduate Arts enrolment was 53.1 percent of all programs in Northern Ontario, which then was higher than the 48.9 percent average for Ontario; by contrast, in 2017, Northern Arts enrolment had fallen to 36.9 percent – well below the 40.3 percent Arts share average in Ontario.

- Among universities in Southern Ontario, the Arts enrolment picture is more varied. A few universities saw large absolute Arts decline in most years of 2005 to 2017, particularly Windsor (-32.6 percent), Trent (-17.6 percent), McMaster (-15.0 percent), Brock (-9.6 percent), and York (-2.9 percent). This led the overall Arts decline in Southern Ontario. Nonetheless, for most Southern universities Arts enrolment grew or at worst stagnated over the period, and some had major increases of more than double the average, like UOIT, Ryerson, Queen's, and OCAD.

The acute threat to Fine Arts and Humanities

- Among the component areas of Arts education, the greatest concerns have been focused on Fine and Applied Arts and on Humanities.
- For Ontario as a whole, Fine and Applied Arts enrolment grew to a peak in 2012 then declined, though overall growth for the period was about 2.7 percent for the whole period or 1.6 percent post-double cohort, and the Fine and Applied Arts share of Arts enrolment declined only slightly, from 9.3 to 9.1 percent. In Northern Ontario, by contrast, Fine and Applied Arts peaked earlier, in 2008, and also began and continued the period at less than half the relative importance within Arts as in Southern Ontario. From a peak number of only 305 and a peak share of 4.0 percent in 2008, Fine and Applied Arts enrolments in Northern Ontario declined to 195 and an Arts share of 3.5 percent in 2017 (see Table 7).
- The area of the Arts suffering the most severe declines during this period was the Humanities. For Ontario as whole, full-time undergraduate Humanities enrolments peaked in 2006, during the double cohort, and declined substantially in most years following except 2009 and 2010. Overall, Humanities enrolments fell by -22.6 percent for the entire period or -19.9 percent post-double cohort. In terms of its share of all Arts enrolments, Humanities fell sharply from 24.9 percent in 2005 to 18.3 percent in 2015.
- The situation in Northern universities was precipitous. Humanities enrolments in the North also reached a peak in 2006, then declined in every year following and more rapidly – nearly -60 percent for the entire period. The decline in the relative importance of the Humanities was also severe, from 26.2 percent in 2005, a level *above* that of Southern Ontario, to 15.8 percent in 2017, a level *below* that in Southern Ontario.
- In contrast, Social Science enrolments in Ontario grew through most of the period, peaking later, in 2013, and leaving net growth of 20.2 percent for the entire period or 17.0 percent post-double cohort. In terms of its share of all Arts enrolments, Social Sciences expanded from 44.7 percent in 2005 to 51.1 percent in 2017.
- In Northern Ontario's universities, Social Sciences was the only Arts component to grow beyond the provincial 2013 peak. For 2005-17, the growth was 5.1 percent, and for the post-double cohort period it was 19.6 percent. From having a 44.2 percent share of Arts

in 2005, similar to that in Southern Ontario, the Northern share of Social Sciences in Arts expanded to 69.5 percent in 2017, much higher than Southern Ontario.

Gender

- Ontario has published detailed enrolment data by gender consistently only since 2006 and until recently only in the male-female binary form. Administrative data on related enrolment participation rates by Indigenous status, Francophone or linguistic status, disability, or economic conditions of students is still not made available.
- In 2006, while about 58 percent of all full-time undergraduate students in Ontario were women and about 42 percent were men, in Arts programs, 65.9 percent of students were women and 34.1 percent were men. Further, while Arts programs had 49.3 percent of all university enrolment, they had 56.1 percent of all enrolment by women and only 40.1 percent of all enrolment by men.
- In the years following 2006, the numbers of women generally increased in university programs as a whole and, until 2012, in Arts. But after 2012 the number of women in Arts declined absolutely, by -6.6 percent. By comparison, until 2012, male enrolment in Arts increased more rapidly than female enrolment until 2012, then decreased more rapidly, by -9.5 percent. The result was that Arts enrolments increased absolutely from 2006 to 2012, then fell absolutely from 2012-2017, by -6.6 percent; while the female share declined from 65.9 percent in 2006 to 64.4 percent in 2012 then increased to 65.5 percent in 2017.
- Significantly, due to the combined declines in the Arts share among university programs and the female share within Arts, Arts programs by the end of the period had less than a majority of female full-time undergraduate students (47.1 percent).
- In examining the component areas of the Arts, it becomes clear that major declines for both women and men in the Humanities were the largest portion of the changed situation in Arts programs, accounting for over half of the magnitude of the enrolment decline in Arts. Unlike other major groups of Arts programs, enrolments in Humanities fell during 2006–12 by -6.3 percent and even more in 2012-17, by -19.1 percent. The decline in male enrolment was even larger than that for females, so the female share in Humanities enrolments actually increased, from 65.2 to 67.2 percent. If one looks at the years of sharpest decline, 2012 to 2017, Arts programs as a whole suffered a decline of 10,902 enrolments, made up of 5,357 women (49.1 percent) and 5,545 men (50.9 percent). Remarkably, Humanities accounted for 6,654 or 61.0 percent of the decline in Arts and 76.5 percent of the decline in female students in Arts.
- While Humanities and all other Arts components declined absolutely after 2012, there was little overall change in Social Sciences. However, there was a change by gender. The

number of women enrolled in Social Sciences actually increased slightly – the only Arts component where female enrolment increased absolutely – which increased the female share in Social Sciences from 64.9 to 67.2 (for 2012 to 2017).

- As a whole over the 2006-17 period, while the Humanities share of Arts enrolment dropped from 25.1 to 18.4 percent, the Social Sciences increased to over half of the Arts (from 45.1 to 51.2 percent) and to over half of all female enrolment within the Arts (46.0 to 52.6 percent). The Fine and Applied Arts, the smallest of the Arts groupings and the one with the highest proportions of female enrolment, declined by -10.0 percent after 2012.
- In Northern Ontario, in 2006, over half – 53.1 percent – of full-time undergraduate enrolment was in the Arts. In 2017, following years of decline, Arts enrolment numbers had dropped sharply to 36.9 percent of all programs. However, as Arts enrolments as a whole declined, Arts programs became more important in the education of female students.
- For all university programs in 2006, female enrolment in Northern Ontario was 63.3 percent compared to 58.0 percent for all Ontario. For Arts programs, female enrolment shares were also higher in Northern Ontario, though not by as much, 68.7 percent in Northern Ontario compared to 65.9 percent for all Ontario.
- Over the 2006-17 years, the share of female enrolment in all programs declined in Northern Ontario, from 63.3 to 59.1 percent. However, in Arts programs, the female share increased, from 68.7 to 71.2 percent. The female share in Arts programs in Northern Ontario was not only higher than the Ontario average in 2006, it increased to more than five percentage points higher than the Ontario average (71.2 percent compared to 65.5 percent).

4 Pressing issues confronting Northern Ontario's universities and Arts programs

Uncoordinated and destructive program adjustment

The governmental and administrative leaders responsible for Ontario's university system have done little either to recognize enrolment decline or to analyze the program adjustment process, particularly the costs to Northern Ontario. One can suppose that official policy thinking follows at best a market-type logic in which it is presumed that for universities (like corporations) low enrolments act as an effective signal to readjust resources and faculty labour from declining to growing programs and this in turn leads to institutional specialization and sectoral "differentiation."

Multiple problems exist with such an approach, especially in conditions of austerity and

overall declining enrolments. One might hope for non-zero-sum outcomes if the Ontario's universities were equal, but they are not – in resources, scale, regional conditions and needs, or connectedness to employment opportunities. For Northern Ontario, there is no substantive university coordination process in support of Northern regional interests. Without some form of social needs-oriented enrolment regulation and planning, the market approach will lead to even greater institutional and regional disparities and instability.

- Given the hierarchical structure of demand favouring elite and better-resourced universities in areas with more favourable employment prospects, Northern students are more likely to leave Northern Ontario for such universities in Southern Ontario. This will continue to reinforce Northern decline.
- Low enrolment is not necessarily indicative of quality, but continuing cuts do undermine program quality with self-reinforcing effects long term. Further, program scale matters. Cuts to already small programs have more severe consequences. Compare the loss of one faculty member in a program sustained by 3 faculty members to the loss of one in a department of 15.
- Among the Northern universities, as each program with low enrolment is threatened, the individual universities will adjust by cutting their own programs. Given there currently exists no mandatory regional-level standards or coordination, the current system of individualized institutional adjustment could lead to Northern Ontario ending up with no substantial or consolidated Arts programs such as in literature, theatre, or music. In short, what might be good for an individual board of governors and administration is not necessarily good for education and research in the region as a whole.
- Northern universities need a reasonable range of programs that includes strong Arts programs. University education is not simply a set of individual programs in isolation, but a joint activity with interactions inside as well as outside the classroom. Universities may become more specialized but university education is not made better for students or faculty members when Humanities, Fine Arts, or other Arts programs and activities are extinguished.
- Beyond the internal impacts of enrolment decline and cuts are negative community or external effects. In addition to reducing local access, the hollowing out and closure of Arts programs negatively impact community and regional research and cultural activities.

Weakened and absent minimum program and staffing standards

Ontario's post-1940s university expansion supposed that minimum standards and scope in academic programs would be set and maintained by faculty members in each department or program area and overseen by university senates and boards. This coupled with the program review process might have been an adequate protection in times of growth. However, in times of

austerity, rising tuition, and enrolment decline there are pressures to lower standards to encourage higher enrolments and tuition revenues. Program and staffing standards are crucial in such conditions to protect the range and quality of programs provided to students. Such standards are also important in establishing a floor of support for remedial courses and initiatives to meet the needs of students whose previous education has been affected by adverse social conditions and the historical disadvantages of the Northern school systems.

We know the normal program review process is failing when, for instance, there are repeated recommendations for increases in hiring or renewal that go unheeded. Yet faculty members have often argued that program quality has been negatively affected by reduced staffing and other academic resource issues like cuts to libraries, which in turn affects enrolments and the competitive position of Northern Ontario Arts programs in the Ontario system. Moreover, Arts faculties, unlike professional programs, generally do not have the weight of professional organizations and the denial of program accreditation as a power to help limit staffing inadequacies and resource cuts in the internal competition for institutional resources.

Weakened university autonomy and the menace of direct provincial government intervention

As the failings of the current funding system have increased, so have administration pressures against faculty members and their unions, and against collegiality in university governance. Faculty members and their unions as well as students and their organizations are currently the major forces against corporatization of higher education and neoliberal educational policy. University autonomy acts as a partial barrier to potentially worse neoliberal measures, so it is not surprising to see such autonomy under threat. In current conditions the worst and likely outcome of reduced university autonomy would be the reinforcing of tuition-dependent corporatization and its anti-Arts orientation. Advocates for reduced university autonomy such as Clark, Trick, and Van Loon (2011) chafe at what they claim is a “tradition of across-the-board policies” using financial incentives and tools applied uniformly, and they urge “more explicit planning.” Such visions of intervention would not break from the neoliberal direction of Ontario’s university policy but facilitate a more aggressive form of it; rather, they would further open the door to more rapid restructuring through direct provincial program closures and prohibitions.

The political direction of university privatization with its intensified market orientation has found support with a belief that Ontario’s university system has succeeded in its social access goals. This is despite clear evidence that Ontario has major disparities in access by region and for Indigenous peoples.⁴ The Ontario government’s neoliberal university policy agency HEQCO barely recognizes the huge unevenness of development in Ontario, particularly Northern Ontario or the negative effects of metropolitan concentration towards the Toronto/GTA. It is with such a truncated metropolitanist gaze that HEQCO (2015) could claim, for instance, “Ontario does very

⁴ Apart from aggregate participation data as noted earlier, the province’s own sponsored research points to these disparities (King et al 2009).

well in virtually all access-related indicators but most notably in postsecondary participation (number of people attending) and attainment (adults with postsecondary credentials)” – without any serious regard to the regional or colonial dimensions of Northern Ontario.

Regional mandateism without substance or accountability

For years Northern university administrations have talked of a “regional mandate” but little has been heard in the way of defining the mandate and particularly what it means for the people in Northern Ontario. Part of the background of the issue is a common view of “regional universities” as a lower tier of universities that are less prestigious, less resourced, smaller, and focused on more limited, local educational and research concerns. In the extreme a belief exists of an outright contradiction between regionalism and academic excellence (Cameron 1978). Such a view, especially in conditions of austerity, would condemn hinterland-colonial Northern Ontario and its universities to permanent marginal status.

The term “regional” is itself misleading. As it has evolved, the Ontario system has a great deal of cross-region student enrolment. Indeed, in terms of drawing students from their area, the most “regional” of universities are actually those in Toronto. This makes the question of community responsibility and the social imbeddedness of all universities (not only “regional” ones) even more important though more complex. The Ontario model has never addressed this issue in a substantial way whether at the level of local educational participation targets, regional research commitments, regional cultural engagement, extension programs, decolonization, etc. Worse, the tuition-dependent system has acted to weaken the Northern regional orientation of the Northern universities. For instance, the desperate search for tuition revenues led Northern universities to initiate satellite operations in Southern Ontario, including at Barrie (Laurentian, 2001-17), Brantford (Nipissing, 2002-19), Orillia (Lakehead), Brampton (Algoma), and St Thomas (Algoma). This occurred even as Northern university participation rates remained far below those of Southern Ontario and large areas of the North remained poorly served.

Accessible data and verification

Currently, detailed data on enrolment and staffing is limited and withheld from the public. At Laurentian University, even Laurentian’s own students are denied access to enrolment data for the university and their programs through the Tableau database, a database available to administrators and faculty members. This secrecy has been part of a general shift in university governance toward the corporate-style control of communications directed to regularizing a monolithic institutional voice fronted by the elevated presence of the President (CEO) compared to other voices, including even of Deans, other academic administrators, or governors. Besides uncritical boosterism, such corporate competitive pressures have led to large sums being spent on marketing programs in wasteful competition with other universities, even against other Northern universities.

The Council of Ontario Universities (COU) with Common University Data Ontario

(CUDO) provides only limited data to the public that is inadequate in its extent, not up to date, and needing independent verification. The inadequacy is so great, whether in terms of data on staffing, region, Indigenous status, gender, disability, or other elements, that it is recommended here that it be collected and made available under legal authority through a more experienced and respected outside party such as Statistics Canada. Although Ontario still has a public system, financial data through the associated Council of Ontario Financial Officers (COFO) is even more limited and, apart from “highlights,” secret from faculty members, students, and the general public. This secrecy is inconsistent with the growing availability of university and other public salary data in Ontario’s Sunshine List legislation since 1996.

The primary short-term goal of policies proposed here is to achieve as a minimum a stable university system in Northern Ontario that protects the provision of a range of high-quality, core Arts and Sciences programs as well as specializations including graduate programs around the basic core provision. Individual universities must still retain autonomy, but the practical possibility of genuine pride in the institution and institutional rivalries based on educational and research achievement depends on system-level commitments. The argument here is not about competition *per se* among academic institutions, which has long existed including in fully public systems, but against a wasteful and corrosive competition structured by revenue-dependence on tuition fees and other private sources. Nor is the argument here that the Arts, especially Humanities and Fine Arts, will be extinguished entirely from the Ontario system – though such a danger does exist in Northern Ontario. Rather, the argument is that the current failing system is restricting and disincentivizing access in a way that is returning Humanities, Fine Arts, and some other Arts to their previous historical status as education for elites and for elite universities, and that this retrograde process has been occurring in an extreme way in Northern Ontario.

There is substantial evidence that governmental quasi-market mechanisms in higher education are not neutral but have an important class distributional dimension. In particular, the Arts, including Humanities, appear to be more strongly supported and enrolled at elite and better resourced universities. This is found not only in the Ontario enrolment data discussed here but also in U.S. studies. In a large study of four-year colleges and universities over 1970-2006, Brint et al. (2012) have examined factors behind the elimination of particular programs and the introduction of new ones. The study finds that “large and high status institutions, whether public or private, tended to preserve arts and sciences fields” (607). Further, the differentiation by status is based less on highest degrees awarded by the institution than it is on their wealth and selectivity (605). The study considers that the decline of core Arts and Sciences during the period to 2006 had been “relatively slow,” but notes also that the data were for years prior to the 2008 recession and the public funding cuts that followed, which might amplify the prior trends (609).⁵

⁵ Brint et al note that the exception to relatively slow pace was European languages and literatures (608). They also note, especially given their importance for scientific and technological progress, that the relative decline included three core fields of the natural sciences:

Along similar lines, Hearn and Belasco (2015) use data on Humanities degrees awarded in four-year colleges in the U.S. from 1972 to 2009 to examine factors affecting colleges that retained a higher proportion of graduates in the Humanities compared to those that turned more to business and technical programs. The Humanities are seen as indicative of a more general commitment to the liberal Arts curriculum (which in the study included also Social and Natural Sciences). It is concluded that institutional wealth was central to the commitment to the Humanities: four-year colleges spending more per student and located in areas with high per capita incomes tended to educate a higher proportion of Humanities students. Similarly, the most selective institutions, those most highly competitive for student applications, tended to maintain a commitment to the Humanities. Private colleges with religious ties were slower at first to reduce their commitment to Humanities but nonetheless did so over time.

5 Previous policy proposals on Northern universities

Issues of low enrolment, excess capacity, and the disadvantaged conditions of Northern Ontario's universities have been raised before. This occurred notably during the 1980s, not long after the founding of Laurentian University (1960) and Lakehead University (1965). The leading advocate and scholar of Northern universities, Dr Geoffrey Weller (1942-2000), a Dean and VP (Academic) at Lakehead, saw the then two Northern universities as "unprotected" in a competitive system in which they had both no distinctive role, higher costs, and neither the autonomy nor funding to meet their developmental role in Northern Ontario.

For Weller, probably the greatest weakness of Lakehead and Laurentian came from the lack of Ontario government support for professional and graduate programs, which not only weakened their developmental role but also, within Ontario's competitive framework, disadvantaged them relative to Southern Ontario universities from the outset. Weller as well as his colleague Lakehead President Robert Rosehart believed that support early on for professional and graduate programs would have led to larger-scale institutions, stronger funding arrangements, and more regionally oriented programming and research, hence, greater impacts on regional development. In terms of graduate programs, in particular, Weller wanted both increased regional content within existing disciplines as well as institutes and programs specialized on matters of importance in their regions.⁶ His was an argument about the need for more funding

mathematics, chemistry, and physics (608-609).

⁶ Weller (1988:220) speculated on what might happen with the graduate and research specialization he proposed: "If such an arrangement were to come to pass it would seem sensible for Laurentian to concentrate on mining related subjects and have something like an Institute or Centre for Franco-Ontarian studies. It would seem logical for Lakehead to concentrate on forestry related subjects and expand its program in Outdoor Recreation. Since there is a northern component to almost everything (politics, geography, health care, etc.) it would be logical to group related areas together into Institutes for research and graduate studies and share the Institutes

together with academic specialization – for an academic enrichment, not for a means to cut programs through a type of faux interdisciplinarity.

For undergraduate programs, Weller argued that Northern universities should continue providing a wide range of programs to serve and attract Northern students. Further, he proposed measures to reduce the outflow of Northern students: by preventing southern universities conducting active recruiting campaigns in the north; by fee reductions or financial incentives to Northern Ontario students to stay in the North; by moving away from a funding formula so closely tied to enrolment in order to strengthen Northern university programs.

Weller's developmentalist approach did not go far enough. In part, it was weakened by not addressing directly the negative consequences of resource-dependent development and by the fact that during the years of much of his work, long-term resource employment decline in Northern Ontario and its social and demographic consequences was in its early stages. As well, the approach did not address adequately the importance of Arts programs either within university institutions, including for graduate programs, or their role in social and cultural as well as economic development. Further, in this period prior to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), elite academic circles were less engaged with the role of Northern universities and Arts programs in decolonization, support for Indigenous-led education, and challenging the existing form of Northern development itself. At this time, too, the role of the Federal government in the deterioration of higher education was less clear. Probably the most serious long-lasting setback to provincial funding for higher education was precipitated in 1977 by the P.-E. Trudeau Liberal federal government's move from shared to limited block funding under Established Programs Financing.

The inadequate and divided founding conditions of the Northern universities did set back their development. However, some recuperation of the graduate and professional program situation did occur in later decades. Besides a growing number of graduate programs, several high-prestige professional programs were established, especially the Northern Ontario School of Medicine (2005) on the campuses of Lakehead and Laurentian, the McEwen School of Architecture (2013) at Laurentian, and the Bora Laskin Faculty of Law at Lakehead (2013). There was also a limited recognition of the higher-cost situation of Northern universities through some special purpose grants, particularly the Northern Ontario Grant and Access Funds. During these decades, campuses also saw several major capital projects and some campuses became independent: Nipissing University (1992) at North Bay and Algoma University (2008) at Sault Ste Marie, while l'Université de Hearst at Hearst moved closer to independence (2014). Nevertheless, the Northern universities still faced relative and absolute enrolment declines particularly in Arts and also in some Sciences.

From their foundation, the Arts programs of the Northern universities had a limited scale

between the two [Lakehead and Laurentian].”

(including graduate studies). In a 1978 study for the Ontario Economic Council, Dr David Cameron observed that the Northern universities in 1973-74 had lower full-time enrolment in Arts and Sciences programs than other small universities in Ontario. Among Northern student applicants at the time, almost 69 percent indicated a southern university as first preference. This said, local and regional access was still of major importance. For example, of Laurentian's full-time students, 56 percent then came from Sudbury and 77 percent from Northeastern Ontario as a whole.

Sadly, Cameron argued that regional scale conditions were such that regional universities were incapable of achieving high quality programs in terms of academic excellence comparable to larger universities in Southern Ontario, by such standard measures as publications, research grants, and success in placing students in post-graduate programs. He went so far as to claim this was "the dilemma" of Northern universities – either academic excellence or regionalism. Such metropolitanist bias against hinterland universities figured in Cameron's recommending that Northern universities should be amalgamated with adjacent community colleges. Weller criticized Cameron's recommendation more on administrative than academic grounds, including its physical impracticality and that programs in the combined community college-university locations would be "regarded as of inferior quality thereby probably increasing, rather than reducing, the number of northern residents who would want to go to university in Southern Ontario."

This said, both Weller and Cameron tended to agree about the issues of program scale and quality in the Northern universities, at least that the then policy status quo would block Northern universities from establishing high-quality, stand-alone programs as in Southern universities. However, Weller's more progressive approach argued for regional graduate specializations along with substantially increased funding particularly for graduate programs and research, as well as for a wider representation on university boards, presumably to deepen the regional commitment. Further, Weller touched on the crucial matter of tuition fees and financial incentives in Northern Ontario, although he did not grapple with the full institutional and social access implications of tuition-dependency and its relation to the issue of program choices and scale as well as to university regional mandates. A narrow resource developmentalism turned out to be inadequate for comprehending the fundamental importance of Arts education for social and cultural development as well as economic development in Northern Ontario.

6 **Proposals for the present Northern university and Arts education crisis**

New policies are needed urgently to deal with tuition-fee induced factors in the general Northern and Arts enrolment crisis, enrolment stabilization and planning, federal responsibilities, increased regional needs-based funds for Northern areas, and a democratic Northern voice in university policy.

- *Reduce and eliminate tuition and ancillary fees at Laurentian and other Northern universities.* First, reduce tuition fees by 50 percent, approximately to Quebec levels, beginning immediately with programs with excess capacity. Then eliminate tuition fees completely and permanently. This tuition fee policy should be applied to all Ontario and domestic students without any means-testing. For international students, tuition fee reduction should be first to levels comparable to those of Quebec for France and Belgium (see Table 8). The province should compensate the universities per student for such tuition fee reductions.

The provincial government and university boards should also adopt policies to limit and then eliminate ancillary fees. This would not apply to student associations and the rights of students to associate and fund their representative organizations. The province in consultation with student associations and faculty organizations should set a minimum provision standard for university ancillary services across all Northern universities, such as for counselling services and athletics facilities, and require that these should be funded without special levies or user fees.

In 2020-21, even after a provincial tuition fee reduction, the full-time undergraduate Arts tuition fee for domestic Canadian students at Laurentian University is \$6,000.30. Students in Quebec just across the provincial border at the Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue pay \$3,275.00 (55 percent of the Laurentian level), subject to a Quebec residency requirement. Students at Memorial University in Newfoundland pay \$2,550.00 (43 percent of Laurentian), also subject to a provincial residency requirement.

- *Provincial stabilization of regional enrolments.* The province must regulate the regional allocation of enrolment to ensure increased enrolment stability in Northern universities.

Relatively small interventions at the provincial level could have major impacts in Northern Ontario, such as through limiting and reallocating enrolment growth in the largest universities to Northern universities. Northern university full-time undergraduate enrolment is about 4.2 percent of Ontario enrolment; even a one-percentage point shift in Ontario enrolment would have a substantial stabilizing effect for Northern universities. Currently, there exist a significant number of Arts programs and some Sciences programs with excess capacity, for instance, fewer than 10 students in 2nd to 4th year classes. So there would be little cost impact to increase enrolment in such programs, and often academic benefits to students and programs.

- *Federal actions to recover from federal-provincial underfunding and to fulfil treaty, constitutional, and international responsibilities.* First, the federal government should cover fully its treaty obligations for the cost of higher education of all Indigenous students. Second, the federal government should assure funding and accountability for higher education in minority national languages, including public stand-alone French-language programs, colleges, and universities in Northern Ontario. Third, the federal government through FedNor and departments responsible for scientific and cultural development, should establish substantial programs to support the development of research and creative arts in Northern universities. Fourth, federal international initiatives are needed for bilateral and multilateral agreements for expanded, reciprocal student exchanges that cover tuition fees and other costs to host universities. Fifth, as student organizations have demanded, the federal government should cancel student loan debt, including of current students. Sixth, Statistics Canada should increase the provision of data on postsecondary institutions including on employees and students at individual universities by Indigenous status, home region, language, gender, and disability.

A substantial federal responsibility for the deterioration in higher education in Northern Ontario needs to be recognized and acted on. As a signatory to international declarations on education access, the federal government should act to facilitate equity and access to higher education across Canada. As a minimum in terms of international responsibilities, the federal government should act to remove discriminatory international tuition fee policies, first against poorer countries. Further, it should support funding and other means against discriminatory domestic out-of-province tuition fees and further fragmentation of the conditions of postsecondary education access in Canada. Universities should have autonomy in admission policies but this autonomy should not include levying discriminatory international tuition fees.

- *A provincial fund comparable to the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund to reduce regional inequities in university and college participation and program quality, including support for extension programs and community arts and media initiatives integrated with university programs.*

The wealth-biased hierarchical structure of demand and relatively weaker conditions of hinterland universities both reflect and reproduce historical patterns of uneven political economic development, including colonial conditions, metropolitan concentration, and disparities in national rights, local school quality, cultural institutions, regional employment and income, and endowed university wealth. The quality of programs is not only affected by historical and ongoing levels of resources, but also by student “quality” or preparation and “peer effects,” and by the extent of resources needed to address regional inequities, including through remedial programs. The fact that the Humanities and Fine Arts are more strongly supported and enrolled at better resourced, elite universities, should not be taken to imply that hinterland or poorer regions have any less right to provide such programs and their external community benefits in their regions.

- *Definition and accountability in regional mandates.* Northern Ontario has a particular need to clarify specific responsibilities associated with regional mandates and these must be formulated with the participation of a full range of the Northern population. These could include priorities from raising university participation rates, community access, and extension programs, to supporting Indigenous languages and cultural development, to building vibrant theatre, music, and dance programs, to increasing research on Northern towns and on regional food security and quality. This can occur while still recognizing the importance of contributions outside the region and internationally.

While Northern universities have spoken of their “regional mandate,” it is often unclear what this means in practice. For instance, in the face of reducing and cutting Arts programs there has been no evident responsibility of Northern boards of governors to provide Arts programs to a minimum level let alone comparable quality to those in Southern Ontario. The desperate competition for tuition-driven enrolment by individual Northern universities without a clear regional framework and enrolment stabilization (such as of the regional board that Weller and Rosehart noted in Sweden) will continue to waste resources and shift attention away from the region.

- *Creation of a multi-constituency Northern council for university education.* Given the dangers to Northern universities and Arts education of the current funding system, including the threat of direct provincial intervention, there needs to be a regional voice rooted in the Northern population, including from Indigenous peoples organizations, labour organizations, L'Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario, local chambers of commerce, arts organizations, teaching and health professional organizations. Once established, elected representation should also be encouraged.

Currently, the university boards of governors are unelected, subordinate to provincial policy, and often in wasteful competition with other universities in Northern Ontario. They have been shown to be an inadequate voice in defending not only student access and Arts programs at their individual universities but also the interests of Northern Ontario as a whole. They have not spoken out against tuition-fee based funding or stood for strengthening Arts programs. Nor has there been financial transparency and community engagement about such questions as satellite campuses or Arts program closures. Further, the Council of Ontario Universities (COU), an elite, administrator-heavy, and GTA-centric organization has shown itself incapable of representing both the major GTA universities and the disadvantaged conditions of Northern Ontario, not to mention the general concerns of students and faculty members, including sessional faculty.

7 Beyond the short term

The above measures are proposed to get through the present grim period of unrelenting cutbacks and corporatization. Such actions are needed urgently to preserve as much as possible of core university programs and values in Northern Ontario – accessibility, academic freedom, collegial governance, and scientific/scholarly standards – for future generations. How much is possible will be affected by the choices of existing Northern university administrations and boards of governors, but it will depend even more on the actions of faculty associations and student organizations and also on local communities, labour unions, scientific, professional, and cultural organizations who understand the hinterland-colonial conditions of Northern Ontario and take seriously the threats to Northern universities and Arts programs. Perhaps broader student, faculty, and community mobilization will help press Boards and individual governors to speak more openly about the negative effects of Ontario and federal government policies against the Northern universities and Arts programs.

Longer-term, there will need to be a renewed and stronger system of Northern universities with more democratic regional mandates, without tuition fees or means testing, and with inclusive participation for all communities. A renewed system might include Indigenous and Francophone institutions, colleges, or universities. It might also include intermediate institutions of the CÉGEP form or specialized institutions for culture and media. A renewed system should include high-level research, creative arts, and graduate studies beyond those directed and funded in support of mining and forestry interests.

Enrolment decline is rooted in the Ontario university system's increasingly tuition-dependent, corporate-competitive provision model with its diminished commitments to non-market social and cultural objectives. It is a model that reinforces the hinterland-colonial conditions of Northern Ontario. We need to learn from the failures of this provision model and the negative, ongoing effects it has had on public universities and Arts education in Northern Ontario.

Special attention here is given to Arts education, although declines are occurring too in crucial areas of the Sciences and also some professional programs. Arts education, research, and creative activities play a role of crucial importance in media, cultural, and political institutions, the expressive and creative institutions, and in major local-regional research, a role that is being diminished by provincial policy and senior university administrations.

The broad post-Second World War expansion of public education in Ontario, Canada, and many parts of the world came under the impetus of larger democratic and egalitarian goals. The role of higher education was then seen well beyond its labour-market aims, such as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948: Articles 26 and 27) which states that "Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms" and "Everyone has the

right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.” This impetus goes even further in the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), of which Canada is a signatory. Arguably, the current privatization of Ontario universities is contrary to Article 13: “They [the signatory States] agree that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. They further agree that education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society...” and “ Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education.”

These international commitments might seem out of place in today’s Ontario. But they are actually of great value in understanding how far university policy conditions and debates have succumbed to political reaction against democratic educational progress. Sooner or later, one hopes, students, faculty members, communities, and even some university administrators and governors will lead in liberating university education from tuition-fees and corporatization in a way that supports a more progressive vision and development of our public universities and Arts programs.

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