



Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations
Union des Associations des Professeurs des Universités de l'Ontario

The Ontario government's "Student Choice Initiative"

May 2019

Context

On January 17th, the Ontario government announced a new policy called "The Student Choice Initiative" which would effectively make many student ancillary fees (collected as part of tuition) voluntary for university and college students. The government is doing so by determining certain services as "non-essential," and thus any associated fees will be made voluntary. Many of these fees were introduced by students themselves through democratic votes. Therefore, this undemocratic move undermines students' rights on campus and their collective decision-making, and most specifically threatens student unions and campus media organizations, which often play a key role in holding university administrations and the government accountable. This initiative will also have a major impact on equity-oriented organizations and groups on campus, which are likely to be deemed non-essential. As we know, these organizations and groups are often the only services that offer support and advocacy services to the most marginalized communities on campus.

Since the introduction of this directive in January, student groups both on campuses and provincially have been active in responding and fighting back. There have been a number of organized protests, actions and rallies on- and off-campus, as well as a province-wide walkout on March 20th, where students walked out of class and assembled on their campuses in protest of the government's initiative.

Why this matters

Students' unions are democratically elected, not-for-profit organizations founded by and for students. Many leaders in Ontario started their political organizing in students' unions and associations. The negative impact of this government directive on democratic student representation, student services, freedom of speech, and the right to organize on university and college campuses is deeply concerning.

In addition to silencing the voices of students (particularly those critical of government initiatives), the reversal of democratically decided upon fees acts as a red herring for people in the labour movement who see this as a possible precursor to attacking the Rand formula* more generally.

In the coming weeks and months, there will be more organizing by students and allies around this issue and it will be of utmost importance for faculty to support students and their fight on their campuses.

Possible actions

- If you haven't done so already, reach out to the student union(s) on your campus (send an email, call, or walk by their office) and ask them what kind of support they need from faculty and how best the faculty association could support their actions.
- Speak to faculty association executive members about the importance of student organizations on campus, and ask the association to publicly support student groups by providing donations and following up on actions the student union members have identified as helpful.
- Have discussions with students who represent the diversity of your student body to learn more about what these changes mean to them, how it will impact their lives, and report back to the faculty association about what you have found out.
- In consultation with the student union and/or other student groups, write a letter of support from your faculty association to the university president, affirming the importance of services offered by student groups.
- Ask the students to notify you of their upcoming events and actions and make sure that you have a representative from your association attend, and consider offering to have a faculty member speak in support of student actions at their event.
- Reach out to the broader faculty association membership to let them know what they can do to support student services, if they are interested in doing so.

*The Rand formula (or automatic check-off) stipulates that paying union dues is mandatory for employees in a unionized workplace. This ensures that employees who may benefit from the protections and rewards of union memberships are also responsible for paying the union dues. The Rand formula came into effect in the arbitration following the 1945 Ford Strike in Windsor, Ontario.