

RESEARCH REPORT

OCUFA

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**Overdue For Renewal:  
Pulling Ontario's Universities Together  
By Bringing An Improved Council on University Affairs Back To  
Life**

**September 2004**

**Vol. 5 No. 5**

For as long as Ontario has been providing public support for its universities, the province has been formulating new ways to link funding to results and to reconcile autonomy with accountability. Looking back over the decades of proposals, revisions, reforms and rejections, it appears that every possible form has been tried out, at least briefly. The past eight years, in particular, have provided an example of a university system in drift, with lack of transparency on the government side matched by exclusion, opposition and frustration on the part of most and sometimes all organized stakeholders.

While the Review now being conducted for the government by the Hon. Bob Rae will deal with many topics that will attract greater public attention – notably funding, affordability and accessibility – it is also an occasion to examine what would be the best structure Ontario could put in place to achieve a delicately balanced set of public objectives. As this paper sets out, OCUFA contends that a look at the record supports returning to the model of an independent advisory panel, with clear channels of communication and accountability with government and stakeholders, improving on the best practices of the past with an approach suited to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The 1972 report of the Commission on Post-Secondary Education in Ontario (COPSE), one of many attempts to square the circle of autonomy and accountability, outlined the options this way:

First, we could establish a single unified system of colleges and universities, similar to that which exists in many states of the United States. This we shall call the University of Ontario model. Second, we could adopt the bureaucratic model, which would lead to the direct governance of all universities and colleges in Ontario by a provincial department or departments. Third, we could create a system in which relations between institutions and government are mediated by a third body or bodies with clearly delegated powers. This is the buffer model.<sup>1</sup>

This does not completely exhaust the possibilities. To note one extreme, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the Ontario government reserved the right to appoint the president and all the professors at the University of Toronto – then the only publicly funded university – and to set their salaries.<sup>2</sup> On the funding side, an innovation in 1906 was to give the University of Toronto a dedicated if unusual source of steady income: half the revenues from provincial succession duties.

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<sup>1</sup>*The Learning Society*, Report of the Commission on Post-Secondary Education in Ontario (Toronto, 1972), p. 108

<sup>2</sup>David M. Cameron, *More Than an Academic Question: Universities, Government and Public Policy in Canada*, (Halifax: the Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1991), p. 26.

Historical curiosities aside, the 1972 COPSE report accurately describes the basic choices, and of these the first one – a single unified organization analogous to the University of California system – has not been considered a serious contender in Ontario in recent decades. This option would put at risk the distinctive personalities that have developed over time at the various individual institutions across the province, without any real constituency for whatever advantages might be gained.

The second option – direct bureaucratic governance – was put into effect almost by default in 1996 when the Harris Conservative government suddenly abolished the Ontario Council on University Affairs (OCUA), one of 22 advisory bodies swept away in a move the government said would save \$2.9 million over two years.<sup>3</sup> Before its abolition, OCUA was the latest evolution of the “buffer model” that was in place in one form or another through most of the postwar years.

The experience of the past eight years has highlighted the defaults of the bureaucratic model, notably a perception of opacity and distance from those directly involved in the university experience, whether as students, faculty, staff, administrators or governors. Decisions emerged from government ministries without a clear sense of who might have been able to influence them, or how.

In a simpler time, the 1930s and 1940s, administration of the provincial interest in postsecondary education was more straightforward:

Each year, the premier would receive from the universities statements of their projected needs and/or deficits. Sometimes the institution would send a delegate – either the president or the chairman of its board of governors (or both) – to meet with the premier (or his designate) and present its case. Often contact was only through the mail. ... The fact that the premier was frequently the minister of education as well allowed such discussion to be conducted through quiet consultations with a minimum of bureaucratic delay.<sup>4</sup>

The first step toward development of the “buffer body” approach was the 1951 appointment of R.C. Wallace, retired principal of Queen’s University, as a part-time adviser to evaluate the universities’ requests for funding and report to the minister of education. After Wallace died, the

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<sup>3</sup>Hansard, May 29, 1996. The government never provided an accounting of how much was spent, in this sector and others, to replace the work done by various boards.

<sup>4</sup>Paul Axelrod, *Scholars and Dollars: Politics, Economics and the Universities of Ontario, 1945-1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), p. 79.

position was taken up by J.G. Althouse, chief director of education in Ontario. During this period, projections of enormous impending growth in university enrolment led to ambitious plans for expansion and creation of new universities, leading to the creation in 1958 of a formal body to assess university needs for government, called the Advisory Committee on University Affairs (CUA).<sup>5</sup>

At first the committee was made up of officials from the provincial departments of Education, Treasury and Economics, but in succeeding years its membership was broadened to include people outside government, such as the president of Supertest Petroleum Company, who joined in 1960. In 1964, the government widened participation further to include representatives nominated by OCUFA and by the Committee of Presidents of the Provincially Assisted Universities of Ontario (CPUO).<sup>6</sup>

While most of the recommendations of the Commission on Post-Secondary Education in Ontario were rejected, the report did lead to the creation of the Ontario Council on University Affairs in 1974. OCUA, however, was not granted the significant executive powers suggested in a commission draft report, such as the authority to set admission standards as well as establish and discontinue programs and faculties.<sup>7</sup>

As an advisory body, OCUA made a significant contribution by publishing its recommendations to government, along with thoroughly argued rationales, as well as the government's responses. The result was significantly greater transparency for the entire process of shaping and directing Ontario's universities, which have maintained through all the changes a significant degree of autonomy and independence of action.

### **A New Start**

OCUFA supports the creation of a renewed and improved advisory body broadly similar to the Ontario Council on University Affairs. Such a council could help achieve greater accountability of the university system to the public. It would build a solid base of research for debate and decision-making, expanding the higher education information-gathering activities currently

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<sup>5</sup>This summary of the post-war chronology of Ontario's university governance is heavily indebted to the detailed account in Axelrod, *Scholars and Dollars*, pp. 77-99.

<sup>6</sup>Axelrod, *Scholars and Dollars*, p. 95.

<sup>7</sup>Cameron, *More Than an Academic Question*, pp. 191-194.

undertaken by the Ontario government and the Council of Ontario Universities, while giving faculty, staff, students, administrators and the broader community a forum to participate the shaping of the future of institutions of enormous importance to the province's future.

Under this vision, the council would be supported by a small but well-qualified professional staff. Its membership would include nominees put forward by the major stakeholders (as was once the case), as well as other government appointees and community representatives. It could co-operate effectively with a similar body for the community colleges, perhaps a revitalized version of what was formerly known as the Council of Regents (renamed in 2002 as the College Compensation and Appointments Council, with a narrowed mandate).

There appears to be a broad recognition in the university community that dismantling OCUA in 1996 without a viable alternative was a mistake that left a serious void. Now is a propitious time to incorporate the lessons of the past century in creating a new institution that can play an important role in building the universities of the next century.