



SUBMISSION TO THE TOWARDS 2030 TASK FORCES

FROM: The Student Life Professionals Group

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The Student Life Professionals (SLP) group is a network of administrative staff working in student life initiatives across the University of Toronto. Formed seven years ago with the goal of increasing communication and collaboration across the University, SLP now meets monthly, holds several professional development events annually and has seven active subcommittees covering facets of student life from first year orientation and transition to leadership development. Our submission to the Towards 2030 Task Forces emerges from a broad-based discussion held at the SLP annual retreat in late 2007.

Our comments are roughly organized around the themes of four of the Task Forces but, because so many of the issues and concerns raised are interrelated, we have chosen to submit a single document.

I. Long-term Enrolment Strategy

The pressures of recent enrolment expansion are felt well beyond the classroom. Overcrowding results in shortages of student activity space, capped participation at events (including orientation) and a growing sense of social alienation among students.

If enrolment continues to expand, we will need to pay careful attention to the effects on students' sense of community. While technology can provide some tools to help us communicate with one another, resources must be maintained and enhanced in proportion to enrolment growth in order to facilitate student interaction, relationships, commitment, leadership and co-curricular learning. The effects of a sense of community on student learning and development are largely unrecognized by the current provincial funding structures. The University will therefore need to take leadership and make commitments in these critical areas.

A fourth U of T campus, should there be one, must be developed with a community model in mind. That is, the campus must be built and resourced with the infrastructure — physical and organizational — to provide an integrated learning experience for students. This includes everything from recreational facilities and performing arts venues to campus organizations, social spaces and student services on site. Much of the literature on undergraduate education demonstrates that positive learning and developmental outcomes — including resiliency, social capital, civic participation and related skills — are related to participation in extra- and co-curricular activities.

If U of T continues to be a largely commuter-based set of campuses (which seems likely), we must fundamentally rethink how we organize, encourage and reward co-curricular participation — from recruitment and admissions, to orientation, through to how we award academic credit. This should involve strategic partnerships amongst university faculties and divisions and creative partnerships with other organizations such as public libraries, community centres and transit agencies in order to bring programming closer to home for students, and to facilitate access to on-campus programming. Learning communities show great potential as one solution to this issue and should be expanded and adopted as a University-wide transition strategy.

Potential further increases in international student enrolment also raise concerns among student life professionals as we witness the struggles many students face in adapting to North American cultural norms and expectations, as well as the challenges of financial stability and social integration. Any further increase in international enrolment should be met with a commensurate enrichment of resources and support for this population.

II. Institutional Organization

In general, the SLP group appreciates the value of distinct college and campus student cultures, particularly with regard to creating connections and community for students on a smaller scale. It is a goal of the SLP to increase collaboration and enhance communication both inside and across faculties and divisions. We have identified a need for greater consistency in the provision of services and resources within the different divisions, with the goal of ensuring a standard level of student care and access to resources and programs such as financial aid, orientation programs, and staff support for student activities.

Methods to achieve consistency could include a centralized assessment and the establishment of benchmarks for levels of support. We believe strongly that each student should have equal access to support and resources and that this goal should be prioritized over new programs or initiatives.

The SLP wholly endorses efforts and investments made in the name of enhancing the student experience at UofT. The recent review and acknowledgement of Student Life at the university is seen as a strategic and important organizational response, upon which the university should build going forward. Building partnerships, encouraging collaboration, and improving information sharing across faculties and divisions should be included in strategic plans and position descriptions, and resourced accordingly.

III. University Resources

Research in higher education supports the close pairing of academic and co-curricular experiences to enhance student learning. In order to realize such integration, however, the current funding model(s) for co-curricular programs and resources must be reviewed and the University must develop a new model. Services and programs that continue to be disconnected and separately funded operations will prevent us from creating a student experience in which theory and practice come together in meaningful ways.

The physical campus environment is another area in need of further improvement. We recommend more social gathering spaces, alternative learning spaces for group work and collaboration, and spaces that facilitate faculty-student connections outside the classroom. There must be greater consistency among divisions in the provision of student space.

IV. University Governance

Student engagement in governance and decision-making is not only a fundamental value of the University but an important part of the learning experience for students. This should not change. But we should focus on increasing students' level of engagement — their awareness of the University's decision-making structures, their understanding of how to influence change (even without an elected position) and their formal participation in the process as active UofT citizens. Student life professionals can and do play an important role in this endeavour.

We have identified a need for evidence-based decision-making that includes engaging students in research, seeking their perspectives on issues that affect them and consulting them in the process of establishing priorities and plans. We also strongly recommend more genuine involvement of students in decision-making, particularly with regard to policy, by providing them opportunities to understand and to change the university world in which they are participants. This requires greater communication about governance to the student population and more accessible language in the dissemination of policy information.

We appreciate this opportunity to comment on the long term future of the University and look forward to the next phase of planning. For more information on the Student Life Professionals group or to discuss any of the comments in this document, contact:

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