

Food for thought on Canadian campuses

A Way Forward Despite Our Challenges by Elana Cooperberg¹

At the end of January, the federal government, through the Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship, the Honourable Marc Miller, announced a decrease in the number of new international student permits for 2024. In an effort to “stabilize new growth for a period of two years” (Govt. of Canada, 2023), a decrease of 35% weighted by population will have serious impacts across all higher education institutions, and affect our ability to meet our strategic and student success goals and plans. As partial justification, the discussion has identified protecting international students from fraudulent institutional activities, which is a legitimate concern but does not speak to the 35% overall decrease. These changes beg the question, where’s the evidence? Where is the data that informed this decision? Where is the validated correlation between our country-wide housing shortage and the total number of international students brought in to further their personal growth and to enhance their home countries when they move back or add to our labor shortages here in Canada?

Along the same lines, I work at an English-speaking Cegep in Montreal. A city known for its international joie de vivre, Montrealers come from a variety of backgrounds, speak multiple languages, and enjoy an abundance of social and cultural opportunities that reflect the city’s diversity. In May 2022, the Legault government passed Law 14, designed to protect the French language. As a Dean in an English Cegep, the passing of this law has increased my workload, my team’s workload, and has been the main focus of our efforts for almost two years now. This law has increased the stress levels of faculty and students, as we wonder what the effects will be on student learning and the ability of faculty to teach in a language they were not hired for.

Most recently, in December 2023, the government issued a statement announcing an increase in tuition fees for out-of-province students for the three English-speaking universities in Quebec,

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along with French language requirements for these students. Again, my burning question is, where's the evidence? Where is the data that informs these decisions?

I am not, in full transparency, committed to the idea of effective decision-making using only quantitative data. I support qualitative data from various and extensive sources. I believe we can do better to consult with our varied constituent groups that participate in and benefit from post-secondary education. But where is the data that supports these major decisions that have far-reaching impacts on all our institutions? Furthermore, where are *we* in the discussion? As faculty, educational developers, staff, and administrators – where is the multiplicity of voices, where are our lived experiences, that inform decision-making and truly transform higher education? How can we come together to ensure the societal value of postsecondary education remains at the forefront of government decision-making?

In our post-Covid world, much has been written about the emotional labor in higher education experienced by students, faculty, staff, and administration (Fleming, 2021, Morrish, 2021). I recognize that we are still emotionally and cognitively fatigued, and new measures that come without consultation and clear rationale serve to negatively impact trust in our institutions and the decision-making powers affecting the higher education sector. Communication and caring are fundamental to trust (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2014; Porumbescu et al., 2013). Yet, these two elements have been tragically absent from the recent changes we see in our sector.

These new realities require compassion and collaboration internally, and between institutions. STLHE offers a space and place to come together to share, explore, and situate our work in ways that can fundamentally change our institutional frameworks. As Chair of the Society, I invite you all to participate in our communities, our constituent groups, and help establish new ones based on your needs and interests. In our first Snack Bite, Bruce Ravelli discussed the importance of first-year classes on student engagement and motivation. In the fall, Anita Acai, reflected on declining faculty mental health, and Ana-Maria Petrunic looked at the complexities of English-language learners and the support needed to provide language and intercultural development to students, while building disciplinary knowledge and skills. In our last Snack Bite, Tari Ajadi proposed a community of practice with a focus on Black Studies. Where better to develop a cross-institutional dialogue about these and other issues than within the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education?

I accepted the role of Chair at STLHE because I believe in the possibility of transformation in higher education. The needs are great, but our collective abilities and capacities are far greater. As an organization, we are committed to advancing those issues that affect us all, and that directly impact our students and future students. As an organization, we are committed to the change we most want to witness within and around our institutions. Please reach out to me if you have an interest or

a need that has been left to flounder in our Post-Covid era. We would love to engage more deeply with you all.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. What do you see as additional challenges facing the postsecondary sector?
2. What are some ideas that can support the challenges we are facing?
3. How can we come together within STLHE to reduce our siloed efforts?

RESOURCES

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