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College Senates Are Not Permitted but Input from Faculty, Students, and Community Has Always Been a Must

The issue of bi-cameral governance – or the use of academic Senates – at Ontario’s Colleges has recently been raised by OPSEU’s College academic union leadership and shared with news media. It is important to understand why College academic senates are not legally permitted, but colleges have always had input from faculty, students, and the community, both at the Board of Governors, and through statutory advisory committees.

In 2012, Sheridan explored the possibility of seeking university status. In the context of that ambition at that time Sheridan’s academic council was dissolved and a 72-member “Senate” was created. Once it became apparent that the College would not, in fact, remain invested in becoming a university, Sheridan’s Board of Governors commissioned a governance expert to conduct a review on the effectiveness of its Board, Senate, and related committees. This work was undertaken intentionally, as part of a broader, ongoing process to ensure the organization was embracing best practices and demonstrating legislative compliance.

The resultant [report](#) -- which is readily available on the [Sheridan website](#)--articulates why bi-cameral governance at Ontario Colleges is neither permitted nor necessary. Sheridan and its Board of Governors should be commended for their very careful and thoughtful diligence in overseeing its ongoing governance transformation process and for their transparency and efforts to “ensure Sheridan’s governance is as effective as possible within the context in which it operates.” In fact, in informing its stakeholders, Sheridan’s Board Chair authored an open letter to the community on March 25, 2021 focused on Sheridan’s intention “to determine its compliance with all legislative and regulatory requirements, how it compares to best practices among Ontario Colleges, and whether opportunities for improvement exist.”

In preparing the Report, the governance expert interviewed Sheridan faculty senators, senior leadership, union leadership, and governors. All agreed that continuing to embed consultation in the decision-making process is fundamentally important and should include those who are engaged in the delivery, challenges, and opportunities in education and programming, as has always been the case.

The legislative and regulatory framework Colleges operate under makes a Senate unlawful. Unlike universities, the relevant legislation mandates that a College's Board of Governors be solely accountable for a College to its stakeholders. The legislation ensures representation on the Board of Governors from faculty, staff, students, and government appointed governors.

Specifically, unlike universities, governance at Ontario public Colleges is highly prescribed by the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act, 2002 with the stated purpose that they are "to offer a comprehensive program of career-oriented, post-secondary education and training to assist individuals in finding and keeping employment, to meet the needs of employers and the changing work environment, and to support the economic and social development of their local and diverse communities."

As pointed out in the Sheridan report, "the Province intended College governance to be different from that of universities given the different objectives of the two types of postsecondary educational institutions. Public Colleges have a more targeted purpose than universities. They are required to be "career-oriented" and designed to assist in finding employment as well as meeting "the needs of employers and the changing work environment". In contrast, universities have objectives that are more general in nature, emphasizing the creation and dissemination of knowledge."

Matters of governance and accountability within Ontario's Colleges are laid out in a binding policy directive to which all public Colleges in the province must comply. The binding policies address issues including governance and accountability, matters of finance and administration, admissions, and program funding.

It is important to recognize that, although Senates are not a permitted component of the College governance structure, this does not mean that faculty input and consultation is not sought after.

In fact, it is quite the opposite. Faculty input is a valued and critical component of College governance and quality assurance processes. The College binding policy mandates that consultation with key stakeholders, namely faculty, community, business, and industry leaders must occur to help satisfy the requirement for programming to be "career-oriented", assist in finding employment, and meet "the needs of employers and the changing work environment".

Two of the many ways in which Colleges engage in this consultation include Program Advisory Committees (PAC) and Advisory College Councils. PACs are program-level committees comprised of representatives of business and industry, faculty members, and administrators. They make recommendations on new and existing programs and provide advice on a number of academic matters including student placements and scholarships. PACs are a mandated and critical component of the College governance

structure. They bring a wealth of specialized professional knowledge, and help ensure students receive an education that readies them to meet the demands of today's workplace, and the expectations of employers. Pursuant to the Standards and Practices for the PACs, any recommendations they make are to be reported to the Board annually.

Further, the College's "Board of Governors is to ensure that an Advisory College Council is established, the purpose of which is to provide a means for students and staff of the College to provide advice to the president on matters of importance to students and staff. The Board of Governors is to ensure that the structure, composition, terms of reference and procedures for the council are established in by-law. A report from this advisory council shall be included in each College's annual report."

Colleges rely on stakeholder input and advice to ensure students receive practical, career-oriented education. Unlike universities, Colleges are highly regulated and mandated to solicit input from stakeholders, including students, faculty, and industry representation on their Board.

The Sheridan report should be read by those who want to understand more about collegiate governance and gain insight into why senates are not an appropriate or permitted component of it. It is a feature, not a bug, of the College system in Ontario that ensures programs are jointly shaped by industry, faculty and administration to design and implement the best possible curriculum for tomorrow's career-ready workforce.