

College Chair's Opening Remarks: Academic Bargaining 2024

As we prepare to engage in the 2024 academic bargaining process, we are once again looking forward to the opportunity to explore with you issues that are relevant to the *CAAT Academic Employee Collective Agreement*. Ultimately, our goal is to work with you towards the co-creation of solutions that will both support the needs of college employees and contribute to the long-term sustainability of Ontario's publicly assisted colleges.

We are aware that this is an ambitious goal, and one that will require the consideration of diverse perspectives as we work through complex issues together. As a collective, our team brings a wide range of knowledge and experience to the table...some achieved through formal education, and some achieved through years of experience working within the college system and related environments. Among other things, this includes experience teaching at the post-secondary level, providing academic leadership within the college system, working in the fields of organizational development and labour relations, and providing financial and administrative leadership within the college system. We all believe strongly in the role that the Ontario college system plays in higher education, and in the importance of keeping students and their needs as our central priority.

In addition, we have spent the last several months consulting with various groups at all 24 colleges. We will continue to work to ensure that we are bringing well-informed and credible positions and responses to the table. Finally, our work will also be guided by additional sources of information including the *Value for Money Audit: Public Colleges Oversight (2021)*¹, the report from the Blue-Ribbon Panel on *Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability (2023)*², the *Report of the Kaplan mandated Workload Task Force* and its related data sets (2024) when it becomes available, .

Throughout the bargaining process, our work will be guided by a series of values and goals.

First and foremost, we aim to respect the bargaining process by maintaining the highest degree of integrity and engaging in rational and informed discussion.

Our team is prepared to listen to and consider your perspectives, just as we expect that you will listen to our perspectives. We view the bargaining process as an opportunity for fulsome and frank dialogue aimed at identifying issues and discovering terms upon which we can reach mutual agreement. As in all bargaining, it is this search for common ground through unhindered dialogue that allows us to create contract language that expresses our mutual intention and becomes the lasting record of our negotiations. We will take the time to understand your

¹ Office of the Auditor General of Ontario (2021). *Value-for-Money Audit: Public Colleges Oversight*. https://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en21/AR_PublicColleges_en21.pdf

² Blue Ribbon Panel (2023). *Ensuring Financial Sustainability for Ontario's Postsecondary Sector*. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ensuring-financial-sustainability-ontarios-postsecondary-sector>

perspectives and proposals so that we can work together in a spirit of cooperation on issues that can effectively be addressed during this round of bargaining. We believe this can be accomplished through respectful and ongoing dialogue and discussion and we should strive to discuss items of importance.

Second, we aim to negotiate a fair and reasonable settlement for faculty that is within our means and aligned with our goals and values.

We know that the success of Ontario's colleges depends on investing in teaching and learning. This includes investments in fair wages, technology, supports, professional development, further education, and infrastructure. These elements come together to create the learning environment that Ontario students and communities demand, and in which Ontario College faculty deliver the quality programs that our students depend on to enhance their education and skills.

Third, we intend to consider all issues from a perspective which acknowledges the fact that Colleges are public institutions focused on meeting the needs of our various constituencies.

This means that as we consider the issues before us, we must keep in mind our legislative context and the diverse and evolving needs of the communities that we serve. As outlined in the legislation that governs our activities, the purpose given to all colleges is 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”³.

The *Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act, 2002*⁴ establishes colleges as agents of the Crown operating on behalf of the provincial government with accountability to the people of Ontario. In other words, colleges are not fully independent entities accountable only to themselves. They are also accountable to the broader public and the government for their actions, for the achievement of goals consistent with government priorities, and for prudent financial management. In this they must operate with a view to long-term sustainability.

As we engage in these negotiations with the intent of achieving a reasonable and fair settlement, we must do so in a way that complies with our legislative framework and maintains accountability and responsibility of all employee groups.

This is no small challenge given the current context. Some of the challenges impacting Colleges' ability to fulfill this mandate are outlined in the Report from the Blue-Ribbon Panel on

³ Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act, 2002, S.O. 2002, c. 8, Sched. F (<https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/02o08f>)

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Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability.⁵ Other new challenges have only emerged in recent months. One example of this includes the recent cap on international student study permits (which was imposed by the federal government) and the resulting decline in international student enrollment in Ontario and anticipated impacts on the College system.⁶

Our consideration of issues that are tabled in bargaining will be guided by our commitment to:

- Operate in a fiscally responsible manner and ensure value for money with respect to the public and student investments that fund our operations;
- Enhance productivity while at the same time endorsing innovation and creativity; and
- Ensure that Colleges continue to respond effectively to the changing needs of Ontario's economy.

Fourth, we intend to approach bargaining and our consideration of the issues through a system-wide lens.

As has been discussed in past rounds of bargaining, we note that the effects of ongoing and emerging funding challenges tend to impact different colleges to varying degrees and in different ways. While many colleges have been operating on sound financial footings, there is an uneven distribution of this success among institutions. The most recent changes impacting international student enrollment will also likely impact each institution differently.

This uneven impact is a particular challenge for province wide bargaining, which focuses on a collective agreement that generally seeks common operating provisions for all colleges. It is in the context of a continued financial challenge along with current enrolment challenges that we undertake our important work together. As we do so, we must keep in mind the unique role that Ontario colleges play within the higher education landscape.

Scholars such as Jones (1997)⁷, Skolnik (2010)⁸ and others, have published research on the creation and evolution of colleges in Ontario; and on the difference between colleges and universities within Ontario. There is historical evidence that the province intended the college focus and objectives to be different than those of its universities and, as such, it set out to create colleges with different legislative and governance parameters to those of universities. Public colleges have a more targeted purpose than that of universities. As the legislation points out, 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”. Even as colleges

⁵ Blue Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability (2023). *Ensuring Financial Sustainability for Ontario's Postsecondary Sector*. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ensuring-financial-sustainability-ontarios-postsecondary-sector>

⁶ Backgrounder: Economic and Fiscal Overview. <https://budget.ontario.ca/2024/eco-fiscal.html>

⁷ Jones, G.A. (1997). Higher education in Ontario. In G.A. Jones (Ed.), *Higher education in Canada: Different systems, different perspectives* (pp. 137-159). New York: Garland.

⁸ Skolnik, M.L. (2010). A look back at the decision on the transfer function at the founding of Ontario's colleges of applied arts and technology. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 40(2), 1-17.

have expanded the breadth and level of the credentials that they offer over time, they have maintained their focus on applied and career-oriented programming. Where they have begun to engage in research, it is research of an applied nature, with direct ties to (and in partnership with) industry and community-based organizations. In contrast, universities have objects that are more general in nature, emphasizing the creation and dissemination of new knowledge⁹.

As we engage with you in the co-creation of future focused solutions, it is our responsibility to ensure that we remain focused on our students, and on the Ontario college context as it is laid out in our legislated mandate.

Given that context and based on the expressed needs of our various constituencies, our 5th goal is to continue to work on the expansion of Colleges' ability to deliver quality programming in a flexible manner.

As the nature and complexity of the needs of our students continues to evolve, we must continue to adapt and diversify the ways in which we deliver our programs.

This does not mean eliminating the ways that have proven effective in the past, but it does mean adding new options and opportunities so that we are able to continue to meet the needs of learners—those who are looking for “traditional” programming options, and also those who require greater flexibility to reduce barriers to access and success.

This means providing flexibility to students in terms of time of day, days of the week, months of the year, and delivery methodology with which our programs and supports are offered.

Sixth, as we did in the last round of bargaining, we intend to undertake this round of bargaining with an intentional focus on the values of equity, diversity and inclusion.

In the last round of bargaining, efforts were made to acknowledge and address language and process issues which may contribute to barriers to creating an equitable, diverse and inclusive workplace. We wish to continue this work in the current round of bargaining.

And finally, I will close my remarks with a focus on our 7th, and one of our most important goals as we head into bargaining...that of fostering an ongoing positive relationship between union and management.

We will continue to make efforts to achieve this goal by remaining forthright and open about the rationale for any additions, deletions, and modifications to the collective agreement that we put forward during bargaining. We trust that the Union will do the same. If together we are to be successful, we must aim to be collaborative, engaging in deep unreserved discussion to find common ground.

⁹ Hogan, B.E., and Trotter, L.D. (2013). Academic freedom in Canadian higher education: Universities, colleges, and institutes were not created equal. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 43(2), 68-84.

I have taken the time today to outline our values and goals so that you can gain an understanding of our approach and thinking. We will reflect on these goals to guide our deliberations and assessment of proposals that come forward as bargaining progresses.

We maintain a strong commitment to finding common ground between us and reaching a negotiated settlement that will ensure that we can preserve the integrity and quality of Ontario's college system.

We look forward to digging into this important work with you over the coming weeks.

Thank you for your time and attention.