

College Chair's Opening Remarks: PT Academic Bargaining 2026

We are pleased to be here today as members of the Ontario College Management Bargaining Team for negotiation of the inaugural PT and sessional academic employee collective agreement. We look forward to working with you as we explore issues that are relevant to your bargaining unit members. With the support of the College Employer Council and OPSEU SEFPO, our main goal – as has been the case in past rounds of collective bargaining with CAAT OPSEU SEFPO teams - 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 at the best of times. We are also aware that this round of bargaining brings with it a unique set of challenges given that it will result in a first collective agreement and that we are negotiating during a time of significant challenge and change within the Ontario public college system. This will require all of us to bring our knowledge and experience to the table, even as we remain open to considering diverse perspectives as we work through complex issues together.

To facilitate this work, we have assembled a bargaining team that 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, financial, and administrative leadership within the college system, and working in the fields of organizational development and labour relations. 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 from all publicly funded colleges. We will maintain those connections throughout bargaining so that we can continue to present well-informed and credible positions and responses at the table. Our work will also be informed by additional sources of information where relevant. Examples include the CO Ontario 2026 Budget Submission¹ and the 2023 report from the Blue-Ribbon Panel on *Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability*² among others.

Throughout the bargaining process, our work will be guided by a series of values and goals. These have and will continue to remain consistent over time. For those of you who have bargained with

¹ [CO_OntarioBudgetSubmission_2026_EN_Final.pdf](https://cdn.agilitycms.com/colleges-ontario/website/CO_OntarioBudgetSubmission_2026_EN_Final.pdf), https://cdn.agilitycms.com/colleges-ontario/website/CO_OntarioBudgetSubmission_2026_EN_Final.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>

us before, you may also note that they have been shared as part of our opening statement in past rounds of bargaining.

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 perspective 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, so long as we strive to discuss items of importance that are relevant to this bargaining process and that are within our mandate and control.

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, student support, 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.

We also know that such investments must be made in a way that complies with all applicable legislation and frameworks, in a way that remains consistent with government priorities, and in a way that maintains a view to long-term sustainability of our college system.

As a result, our third goal is to consider all issues from a perspective which acknowledges 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. Among the many things that distinguish Ontario's colleges is its governing legislation. As outlined in that legislation, 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. The legislation specifies that 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. This impacts how colleges operate, and more specifically it directly impacts how they deliver some of the best post-secondary programming available to students.

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, keeps students and communities as a central consideration, maintains accountability and responsibility of all employee groups, and colleges’ ability to operate effectively.

This is no small challenge in the current context. As you are no doubt aware, Ontario’s public colleges are currently facing unprecedented fiscal and operational challenges which have led to significant numbers of program closures and layoffs and staffing reductions over the last two years. Some of the issues that have contributed to these challenges were outlined in the 2023 Report from the Blue-Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability,⁵ others have emerged over the last few years. These include changes to federal international enrolment policies and the impact of world events on things such as inflation, to name a few. Colleges have long been successful at finding creative sources of revenue to offset funding challenges. However, their ability to continue to do so has been severely constrained. As outlined in the Colleges Ontario 2026 budget submission:

“Federal changes in the 2025 budget [have highlighted] the fragile state of college funding. International revenue can no longer be relied on to subsidize domestic programs. Funding for Ontario students is meant to come from the provincial government, but support has steadily declined after adjusting for inflation....Additionally, global inflation is adding \$600 per student annually to program delivery, widening the funding gap....With expenses rising

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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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>

(...) the sector faces a structural deficit approaching \$1.5 billion by 2027-28, not including capital and deferred maintenance”⁶

And while recent provincial announcements related to funding for colleges and universities over the next four years and the lifting of the 7-year tuition freeze (which was preceded by tuition cuts) were welcome news, they do not address the full scope of the challenge. Our consideration of issues that are tabled in bargaining must therefore be guided by student needs and 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;
- Maintain needed flexibility of operations wherever possible;
- 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.

To achieve goals two and three and meet these stated commitments, we must also approach bargaining and our consideration of the issues through a system-wide lens.

This fourth goal is related to the fact that college operations are complex and require multiple employee groups working collaboratively together to be successful. It is also related to the fact that ongoing and emerging funding challenges tend to impact different colleges to varying degrees and in different ways.

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’s public colleges play within the higher education landscape to deliver world class education for our students.

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

⁶ CO_OntarioBudgetSubmission_2026_EN_Final.pdf, https://cdn.agilitycms.com/colleges-ontario/website/CO_OntarioBudgetSubmission_2026_EN_Final.pdf

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.

colleges with different legislative and governance parameters to those of universities. Public colleges have a more targeted purpose than those 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 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.

With respect to this round of bargaining in particular, it is not only the unique role of colleges that is important. We must also keep in mind the specific skillsets the bargaining unit brings and the unique role that members play in the college ecosystem. By their very nature, part-time and sessional employment contracts are meant to provide individual colleges with the needed flexibility to operate effectively when student needs, community needs, program requirements, enrolment numbers, and operational requirements ebb and flow. The way colleges schedule and assign work is tailored to their local needs, making it difficult to come up with a one size fits all approach without undermining that flexibility.

As we engage with you in the co-creation of future focused solutions, it is our responsibility to ensure that we retain that needed flexibility, and that we remain focused on the needs of our students and communities in line with 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 means ensuring our ongoing ability to meet the needs of all learners—those who are looking for “traditional” programming options, and 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 services are offered.

It also means maintaining flexibility for colleges to deliver different types of programs and services, some of which must continue to provide the ability to be creative in generating revenues

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.

targeted to subsidize postsecondary programming which costs more money to deliver than colleges are able to generate through grants and tuition.

And finally, I will close my remarks with a focus on our 6th, and one of our most important goals as we head into bargaining...that of fostering an ongoing positive relationship between union and management.

As we embark on the creation of this first collective agreement, we will be making every effort to be forthright and open about the rationale for any proposals or responses 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.

As we have communicated in the past, we are confident that to achieve this shared goal, we must develop trust through dialogue at the bargaining table. Public statements, press releases, and bargaining statements should focus on issues that have been discussed at the table but remain in disagreement. They must not target individuals. We understand that passionate disagreement is a natural part of labour negotiations. However, as has been experienced in the past, personal attacks, intimidation, and threats undermine the integrity of the process and erode the trust necessary for long-term collaboration.

Moreover, such actions set a troubling example for our students, who look to all of us, management and union alike, to model respectful and constructive engagement, even in times of disagreement.

The college community is diverse, with students from across the province and around the world. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that this environment remains safe, respectful, and conducive to learning. We are committed to doing our part to uphold that responsibility and trust that you will do the same. I have taken the time today to outline our values and goals so that you can gain an understanding of our approach and thinking. These goals and values will continue to guide us throughout this bargaining process.

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. To help facilitate that work and ensure that we maintain a positive forward momentum, some of the tangible outcomes we would like to achieve over these first two days of meetings include agreement on ground rules and high level approach for bargaining, and identification of additional bargaining dates over this coming summer and fall.

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

Thank you for your time and attention.