

Social Change Challenge: The Unaffordability of University Education

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Beginning the journey towards making social change was very challenging. In order to choose a topic to focus on for our Social Change Challenge, we first had to brainstorm. We came up with various important human rights issues to focus on relating to contemporary Canada such as; Indigenous rights, accessibility issues for people with disabilities, and wait times within the universal healthcare system. Overall, we chose to focus on the unaffordability of university education. As students, we could all relate to this struggle and were passionate about the issue. Although our issue did not directly focus on a minority group (even though students can arguably be considered such), we used an intersectional analysis to examine the topic, focusing on how racialized and historically marginalized groups can encounter more barriers than most in accessing affordable education. I believe that when you can relate to an issue and are truly passionate about it, great things can come about. Enthusiasm has the potential to provoke change if directed properly, and that is why we collectively agreed on this topic. We reached this decision fairly and democratically via an online poll, in which the chosen topic won the majority by four votes.

Our topic generally focuses on the unaffordability of university education in relation to many sub-topics such as tuition, books and supplies, living arrangements, parking and transportation, and the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP). Students across Ontario face outrageous financial debt and burdens in pursuing a post-secondary degree. In a world where the relative demand for post-secondary graduates is steadily increasing due to technological advancements and globalization (Frenette, 2019), it is unfortunate to know that many cannot access this higher-level education, not because they lack the skill or knowledge, but because of the costs that are associated with being a student. In fact, according to Statistics Canada, Bachelor's Degree holders owed an average of \$30,000 upon graduation in Ontario in 2015 (Statistics Canada, 2015). To put this into perspective, it takes an average of

ten years for students to repay their loans according to the Canada Student Loans Program (Canada Student Loans Program, 2012-2013). However, it is not exclusively tuition that is difficult to afford. The University of Toronto estimates that living and studying costs for the academic year (8 months) can range anywhere from \$5484- \$9780 which includes food, clothing, local transportation, books, supplies, instruments and miscellaneous things (not living arrangements or tuition) (University of Toronto, 2019). This means that a student working minimum wage (\$14.00 per hour) in Ontario would have to work 11.5-20 hours a week during the school year (average 34 weeks) just to afford basic things that do not include paying off loans for tuition, or rent. Admittedly, working 20 hours a week is not always feasible as a full-time student with schoolwork obligations. In terms of living solutions, Toronto is the 16th most expensive city in the world to rent a mid-range two-bedroom apartment and the 8th most expensive city in the world for monthly public transportation tickets according to a recent study (Allen, Nicol & Reid, 2019, p. 9 & 21). The study found that a mid-range two-bedroom apartment in Toronto costs an average of \$2,322.90 CAD (data converted from USD with a 1.45 exchange rate) per month, while a double room at the Quad residency at York University costs an average of \$4,782 CAD per month (Uppal, 2018); a drastic increase. Racialized groups face even greater barriers in their ability to access post-secondary education due to social inequalities, biases, racism, (Codjoe, 2001) and our primary focus; unaffordability. According to research from the Metcalf Foundation, 63% of Toronto's working poor are racialized (Hulchanski & Stapleton, 2019, p.6). This can severely impact diversity which can strengthen innovation in post-secondary institutions.

With these obscene numbers in mind, one can assume that the Ontario government would grant students comprehensive financial aid. However, this is not the case. In fact, Premier Doug Ford announced changes to the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP)

in January 2019 after the Auditor General found that the previous OSAP plan under Kathleen Wynne would cost the government over two billion dollars annually by 2020-2021 (Andric, 2019). The 670 million dollars worth of cuts (Jones, 2019) included drastically reduced grants, the elimination of free tuition for low-income students, as well as the elimination of the interest-free, six-month 'grace period' for post-secondary graduates (Andric, 2019). The Ford government advertises the cuts as necessary for reducing the overall tuition costs for students by 10% (Jones, 2019). However, this approach redistributes the savings in a way that disadvantages low-income students who need it most. Students that rely on financial aid like Aidan Gowland, who is disabled and unemployed, are having a hard time staying afloat (Syed, 2019). Gowland saw a \$3,400 decrease in OSAP aid last year due to these cuts (Syed, 2019). Gowland said; "I really thought I would have to drop out" after struggling to pay for his education at the University of Toronto (Syed, 2019). Many of us in this class, like Gowland, have all faced these tough thoughts and considered alternative routes. Can we continue learning when the cost of being a student is often too high to bear? Well, we decided that instead of sacrificing our own education, we would analyze how the government in cooperation with universities can make it more affordable for us, and how we can use this challenge to truly make progress towards change. After all, we would like to be the change we want to see in the world, without having our opportunities stripped away from us because of our socio-economic status and conditions.

We commenced our project by creating awareness around the issue. First, we agreed on ironically calling our campaign; Students Against Debt (S.A.D) and divided ourselves into groups, each focusing on a different campaign aspect. First, we made different social media accounts in order to appeal to the new generation of technologically-savvy minds. We made a Twitter account (@ChangeYork), a Facebook page (@SAD- Students Against Debt), and an

Instagram page (@students\_against\_debt). The fourth group we made focused on advocacy surrounding the issue at a governmental level. I was a part of both the Instagram group as well as the advocacy group.

On the Instagram page, we focused on starting the conversation around unaffordability and being an open platform to express student opinions and experiences. We shared many tips on how to save money at university, some of which were suggested by our followers through a Google Forms link in our biography. We also posted any current contests, news, and petitions to help students stay informed and potentially receive money, as well as a few relatable 'memes' to keep it light-hearted and fun. We let student voices be heard through polls on our Instagram Story, and videos we posted in which we interviewed some students on campus. The first video we made was about spreading awareness about S.A.D and listening to students' personal experiences with the unaffordability of university education. The second video we made focused directly on a current issue regarding the potential elimination of the GO-TTC co-fare discount, considering many students at York use the two methods of transportation to get to school. We asked students at the York University Subway Station how they feel knowing that they may have to pay up to \$780 more per year if the \$1.50 GO-TTC discount is eliminated (TTCRiders, 2020) and as expected, they were not pleased. While interviewing, we handed out print media for awareness on the issue as well.

Our Instagram account was made through an intersectional lens and took into account minority groups from the very beginning. For example, every post has an image description for the visually impaired underneath the caption, so that people with visual disabilities can use Siri and other reading programs to understand our posts better, as many programs, unfortunately, do not read images. We also ensured that for our interview videos, we had a selection of people that represented the many diverse groups within our student body. Some

posts such as our post about scholarships focused directly on racialized groups, people with disabilities, and Indigenous people, bringing their awareness to particular financial aid opportunities. Overall, the page was successful, gaining new followers daily.

In the advocacy group, we focused on creating a political campaign. We did so by keeping in contact with Members of Provincial Parliament that represent each of the areas that students in our classroom live. Fortunately, local MPP Tom Rakocevic (of Humber River- Black Creek) reached out and agreed to set up a meeting with us to discuss our issues with affordability as students. The meeting that was held on March 11th, 2020, was successful in capturing Rakocevic's opinion (as a member of the New Democratic Party) on many issues concerning affordability and the lack thereof. We asked him pressing questions such as; what are the next steps to ensure that the GO-TTC co-fare is not removed? What are the reasons for its removal? What is your plan to address OSAP cuts? Food options on campus are more expensive than in other areas, can something be done to stop the inflation of prices? Overall, although he was generally not allowed to give specifics regarding the NDP's agenda for the upcoming election, he shared his own personal views and generally agreed with us as a York alumnus who also rode public transit. Overall, I hope that we encouraged him to fight for us in parliament, as he encouraged us to get politically active. His office even asked us to write a statement about the GO-TTC subsidization removal to be read in parliament and/or at a rally (see page 10). Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this was cancelled, although we used a portion of the statement for our Instagram page.

Given additional time and/or resources, a lot more could be done in relation to our topic. Therefore, in order to achieve more of the goals we initially set out to accomplish, we are continuing the Instagram page and campaign after this assignment is complete. Unfortunately, although we tried to meet with more Members of Provincial Parliament in

order to get representation from all parties, many (understandably) had busy schedules and due to the COVID-19 situation that developed later, cancelled all meetings per social distancing recommendations. The pandemic also prevented us from interviewing more students on campus to produce new episodes of our series on IGTV. We had originally planned to interview students at the University of Toronto and Ryerson University as well, but campuses were empty and eventually shut down. Hopefully, with more time, we can see more positive action follow through with issues such as the removal of the GO-TTC co-fare. Given funding, we could have organized an event and discussion panel on the issue, complete with snacks and drinks such as coffee or tea. Also, a printing budget for distributing more posters and print media would have been useful because we were only able to hand out a limited amount of flyers given that I had to print them in black and white from home.

Overall, with more time, action, and resources, I am optimistic and hopeful that we will see more resolution to the issues concerning the unaffordability of university education. We have made some great progress in raising awareness. Now, it is a matter of continuing the fight and staying passionate so that students can have access to more affordable education long-term. We are always told that we are the future, so when will we begin to be treated as such?

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An open letter, on behalf of our fellow York University commuter students

\$23.32 a day. That is the amount that it costs York University student Qaiss Wahdath in public transportation daily. Many students like him are struggling with the unaffordability of education, and the increasing unaffordability of public transportation. That being said, we the students are willing to put in the work and find feasible solutions and personal alternatives to the increasingly over-expensive public transportation. As opposed to using the GO and TTC one could perhaps, live in residence. The Quad residency, for example, costs \$1,300/month for a single bedroom or \$805 with a shared bedroom. This is a luxury not too many students can afford. Given that York is a commuter school, residency should not be seen as the answer for most.

So, perhaps it makes more sense to find a part-time job, to help support the costs of public transportation. Given that students generally attend school 5-days a week, that leaves only 2 days, or 16 hours, to work. Let's break down the economic ramifications of this. According to the GO website, the price of GO from Brampton to 407 is \$8.46, with a \$3.20 TTC fare, both with the presto discount which means \$11.66 a trip, \$23.32 a day, \$116.60 a 5-day week or \$6,063 a year. Given that the average tuition, according to York University, is \$7,758 for domestic students, a number that is almost paired by the cost of public transportation, we the students are often paying around \$13,821 a year to simply attend classes. With the co-fare, public transportation costs go down to \$5,283.20, saving about \$780 a year, which goes a long way. This equates to just over 8 hours of minimum wage work, which is about half the time that many students can work, as we often go to school 5-days a week. This leaves many working students with \$116 a week to survive off of, after spending 50% of their income on public transit. This does not take weekend exams, weekend meetings, events, study groups or school work hours into account, nor does it take into account public transit to and from work. Given these facts, it is evident that part-time jobs are not enough to adequately support the increasing costs of public transportation.

Perhaps the best alternative is to turn to cars, which would be extremely damaging to the environment, but we must do what we can to make it to classes. However, according to the York University website, there are around 37,500 commuters, not including staff, professors, graduate students, or Seneca at York students. Given that there are only 9,200 parking spaces on Keele campus, even if every single parking space was taken up by a student vehicle, that would leave 28,300 public transit commuters, which is over 50% of York's student population.

We the students understand that there is a 9.3 million dollar shortfall in Metrolinx, but raising fares and removing the fairness of public transportation does not solve this issue. The York Federation of Students Director of Founders College Lyon Hart states;

“Each fare increase acts as an increase of taxation on the poor. This is innately an attack against the students who are already struggling to afford post-secondary education. To not have a GO-TTC co-fare, and to drop this subsidization, is in blatant disregard of the

public interest. Students' confidence in the government to uphold values of equity wanes with every passing day."

Another student leader, Kayne Alleyne-Adams, who founded and campaign managed the YFS slate Renew YorkU stated that;

"When students are put in a position where they have to spend over \$20 a day on public transportation costs, we have to question the integrity of public transportation as a whole. With the unaffordability of transit, with the removal of this co-fare and the recent TTC fare increase, it is a given that students will be forced to act in their own self-interest and avoid paying that fare, either by fare jumping, skipping classes, or removing themselves from post-secondary education altogether. The latter is not feasible given the increasing demand for university degrees in the workforce. Fare evasion is the symptom, unaffordability is the disease."

We the students are struggling to afford school as it is, and an increase to public transportation costs, specifically through the removal of the GO-TTC co-fare would further remove the chances of an affordable future for post-secondary education. Education is not only for the wealthy, not only for those who can afford to live in residence, not only for those that can afford \$23.23 a day on transportation. Education is the backbone of Ontario's future, and the removal of this subsidization is a direct attack against education, against the students, and as such, against our future.