

ENDLESS OPPORTUNITY

Supporting post-secondary education in Northern Ontario

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CANADIAN FEDERATION OF STUDENTS—ONTARIO



350,000 UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE STUDENTS UNITED!

With more than 350,000 members at 37 students' unions in all regions of the province, the Canadian Federation of Students—Ontario is the voice of post-secondary education students in Ontario. The Federation represents domestic and international students at college, undergraduate and graduate levels, including full- and part-time students.

January 2017

General inquiries regarding this document should be directed to:

*Canadian Federation of Students—Ontario
225 Richmond Street West, Suite 302, Toronto, Ontario M5V 1W2*

TEL: 416.925.3825 FAX: 416.925.6774 cfsontario.ca

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INTRODUCTION

Ontario is Canada's most populous province, encompassing a vast geographic area that ranges from the nation's capital to the country's largest urban area, from townhome-lined suburbs to lush farmland, from boreal forests to rocky cliffs and bays. This unique geographic landscape makes for a beautiful province, but also one in which communities big and small find themselves dotted between its borders. While many tend to focus on Ontario's southern cone, home to Toronto, Ottawa, Kingston and a host of other cities and towns, the province's northern region is resplendent with towns and cities that boast natural beauty, modern living and world-class education. Ontario's north is home to many colleges and universities, each serving not only as a place of learning for catchment areas hundreds of kilometres wide, but also as major community hubs and employers. These institutions also offer programming and conduct research on unique and region-specific issues of academic interest, from natural resource management to Indigenous languages, history, philosophy and culture.

While studying in the north has many advantages, it also has many drawbacks. Demographic shifts shrinking the university- and college-aged population have hit the region hard, with many institutions struggling to make ends meet. Lack of investment in industries outside of natural resource management has led to chronic out-migration, especially of new graduates. More isolated communities struggle to fund reliable public transit. And some northern Ontarians simply cannot afford to move to the closest urban area with an educational institution.

Nurturing a strong and economically sustainable north is in the province's best interest, and indeed many unique opportunities lie north of Toronto for innovation and growth in traditionally "northern" sectors of the economy and others. But in order to reap the rewards of these prospects, the province must take bold steps to make living, working and studying in northern Ontario not only viable, but attractive. This document outlines some policy options for ensuring that students at northern Ontario colleges and universities feel supported and successful through their academic careers, and in attempting to foster economic opportunities for the region that will keep local students in the area post-graduation and attract others from outside the region looking for beautiful scenery, great education and fresh opportunities.



ONTARIO DISTANCE GRANTS

Unlike colleges and universities in southern Ontario, schools in the north service communities in catchment areas that are hundreds of kilometres wide. In urban and suburban settings, it is common for several institutions to exist in relatively small geographic areas, providing students with choice and access to a wide variety of academic paths. In northern Ontario, students' options are much more limited. If a student is unable to relocate to the south, or simply is more interested in studying closer to home, they usually have a choice of one college and one university within a reasonable distance of home. Even then, attending the school would likely require extended travel times or even relocation. Moving away from home forces students to incur additional costs such as rent, food, transportation and other living expenses that can increase the original costs of education by upwards of 260 per cent.¹ These additional costs feel particularly acute for rural and northern students, who are more likely to require relocation to attend post-secondary education. According to a 2009 study, 32 per cent of students living in rural settings chose to attend university, while 38 per cent chose to attend colleges; for those in urban areas, 48 per cent chose university, while 29 per cent chose college.² About one in five high school students lives more than 80 kilometres from a university and these students are only 58 per cent as likely to attend university as those who live 40 kilometres or less from one.³ By contrast, only three per cent of these students live outside of commuting distance to a college, which may account for higher college enrolment rates in rural areas. Regardless, ensuring rural and northern students are enrolling in and graduating from post-secondary education is a crucial part of any economic growth strategy in the region.



Beyond regular financial assistance programs such as OSAP and the soon-to-be launched Ontario Student Grant, the province offers a \$300 per academic year Ontario Distance Grant to students who must move from their family home to pursue post-secondary education. The home must be 80 kilometres or more from the closest Ontario public college or university or, if you are a Francophone student, your home is less than 80 kilometres from the nearest school but this institution does not deliver your program of study in French.⁴ In the 2014-15 academic year, the government issued approximately \$5.6 million in Ontario Distance Grants to 14,600 students.⁵ In that same academic year, over 35,700 students were enrolled in northern colleges and universities, with Ontario Distance Grant disbursements reaching less than half of those students and many more in remote rural communities in the province's southern regions.

Recommendation

The government should double funding for the Ontario Distance Grants from \$5.6 million to \$10 million. With this increase, grants of \$400 could reach over 25,000 students; grants of \$500 could reach 20,000 students; and grants of \$300 could reach 30,000 students. To reach even more who need assistance, the government should also consider lowering the distance threshold from 80 to 40 kilometres.

1. Canadian Council on Learning, *Post-Secondary Education in Canada: Meeting Our Needs?* 2009
2. Kamanzi, P.C., Doray, P., & Murdoch, J. (2009) "The Influence of Social and Cultural Determinants on Post-Secondary Pathways and Transitions." Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation.
3. Frenette, M. (2004). "Access to College and University: Does Distance to School Matter?" *Canadian Public Policy* Vol. 30, No. 4 p.427-443
4. Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, "Ontario Distance Grant – Travel" <https://osap.gov.on.ca/OSAPPortal/en/A-ZListofAid/PRDR008166.html>
5. Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2016.

PROGRAM COMPLETION GUARANTEES

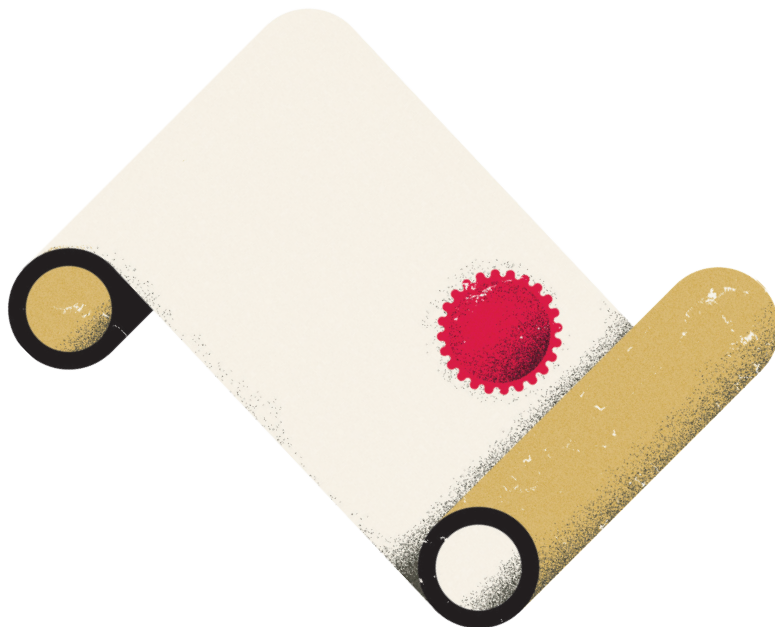
Due to declining enrolment rates and chronic underfunding, colleges and universities have struggled to maintain high-quality and comprehensive programming for students. Across the province, programs are being amalgamated, shrunk or shut down altogether. While no institution, no matter its size or student population, is immune to these challenges, the effects are more acutely felt in northern schools. Smaller overall student populations and more restrictive financial circumstances leave northern colleges and universities more sensitive to fluctuations in enrolment and changing political priorities at Queen's Park.

Nipissing University and Laurentian University's Barrie campus provide two unfortunate examples of students' academic lives being interrupted by mismanagement and politics. In the wake of a damning external report outlining its grim financial situation, Nipissing University was advised to cut courses and programs, lay off staff and sell its Bracebridge campus. The report, authored by PriceWaterhouseCoopers named six departments that should be closed: chemistry, computer science, fine arts, history, political science and arts and cultural studies.⁶

Laurentian University announced it would close its Barrie campus by May 2019, relegating hundreds of students in academic limbo. The university offered students different options to finish their programs, including transferring to another institution, taking online courses and moving to Sudbury to study at the main campus. It would cost less than 1 per cent of Laurentian's annual budget to ensure all Barrie students could finish their programs on the campus where they started, yet Laurentian rebuffed students' requests.⁷

Education is about more than programs and courses, indeed it is about proximity to home and family, the friends and professional connections made and campus life. The Ministry should act to ensure students academic lives are not upended by politics or brash decisions by institutions who find themselves in self-made financial messes.

6. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/nipissing-university-must-consider-significant-downsizing-audit/article28661728/>
7. <http://www.thebarrieexaminer.com/2016/04/15/laurentian-students-in-barrie-take-protest-north--to-sudbury>



Recommendation

The Ministry should require all offers of admission to public colleges and universities contain “Program Completion Guarantees” that would state explicitly that the institution will guarantee the student will be able to finish the program in which they are starting at the campus on which they will be studying.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The viability of northern Ontario relies on initiating and sustaining economic growth in the region. The region is heavily dependent upon natural resource extraction and many northern colleges and universities have programs that directly relate to these sectors such as forestry, mining, outdoor recreation and geology. Another factor in ensuring economic growth is protecting against out-migration and attracting new workers and students to the region. Increasingly, northern institutions are losing out to larger, urban colleges and universities because students see them as closer to important learning and employment opportunities such as internships, co-ops and experiential learning programs.

Experiential learning opportunities have generally tended to fall into the STEM fields, with some opportunities in selective arts and science programs. These experiences are far less common in northern institutions, where the natural resource economy dominates the labour market. Furthermore, the economic climate in the region makes it difficult to attract new businesses or drive innovation. To combat brain drain and economic stagnation, the province must act strategically to keep students in the north and attract others from the south by offering dynamic experiential learning opportunities at northern institutions.

Through the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Internship Program, northern private, not-for-profit and public sector organizations can apply for funding to host a student intern. The funding is eligible for a variety of economic sectors from the digital economy to natural resource management to private enterprise. However, the funding is restricted to internships for college and university graduates and does not apply to students currently enrolled in a post-secondary program.⁸ Graduates are more likely to leave the region swiftly for the economic opportunities offered in urban areas, while students currently enrolled in post-secondary education are more likely to consider staying in the region if they are offered experiential learning opportunities and possible employment paths prior to completing their studies. To retain and attract a young, creative and productive workforce in northern Ontario, the government must act immediately to demonstrate to current students that living and working in the north can be just as economically viable as doing so in Ottawa or Toronto.



Recommendation:

The government should review the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Internship Program policies, allowing for current students to be eligible for internship opportunities that last up to four months. Funding for the program should be doubled from \$5 million to \$10 million.

8. <http://nohfc.ca/en/programs/northern-ontario-internship-program>



SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS LEARNERS

Ontario is home to the largest Indigenous population in Canada, the 2011 census showed that 301,452 Indigenous people called the province home, around 2.4 per cent of the total population.⁹ However, in the northern regions of the province, Indigenous people make up a far larger proportion of the local population, from as high as 20 per cent in the Kenora area to 10 per cent in Thunder Bay. Nationally, Indigenous communities are the fastest growing population in the country. Unlike Canada's overall aging population, the Indigenous population is very young, and this presents unique and important opportunities for social and economic benefits for Indigenous communities and Canada as a whole.

9. Statistics Canada, "Number and distribution of the population reporting an Aboriginal identity and percentage of Aboriginal people in the population, Canada, provinces and territories, 2011." <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-011-x/2011001/tbl/tbl02-eng.cfm>



Unfortunately, due to institutionalized racism, economic disempowerment and ongoing colonial processes, many Indigenous communities struggle with poverty and unemployment. In 2014, Ontario's overall unemployment rate was 6.3 per cent, while the Indigenous unemployment rate in the province was 10.3 per cent.¹⁰ This gap becomes more pronounced amongst younger populations. There is not only a moral imperative, but significant economic benefit, in investing in the education, training and employment of Indigenous people, particularly for northern Ontario. It is estimated that over 300,000 Indigenous youth could enter the labour market over the next 15 years, and a 2009 Centre for the Study of Living Standards report concluded that closing the educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners in Canada could lead to an additional \$179 billion in direct GDP growth and over \$400 billion in total growth over the next two decades.

Indigenous students are primarily funded for post-secondary education through the federal Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP), in recognition that access to education is a treaty right. However, since the late 1990's, funding growth for the PSSSP has been capped at 2 per cent, well below population growth and rising tuition fee levels. This means many Indigenous communities must make difficult choices between who will get fully funded, partially funded or not funded at all for post-secondary education. Another consequence is that Indigenous communities choose to fund lower-cost vocational programs to ensure more students can get some form of education. Vocational and technical training is vital to our economy, but these circumstances also limit students opportunities and choices, and it is crucial to ensure all Indigenous learners can take the educational path of their choosing without financial barriers, whether that be vocational or technical training, apprenticeships, college or university education.

In the 2015 federal election, the Liberal Party ran on a platform that included lifting the 2 per cent cap on the PSSSP and injecting much needed funds into the program, but the 2016 budget, despite making new investments in overall student assistance, did not fulfill that promise. In light of this dearth of federal leadership, the province must step in to adequately fund Indigenous learners and close the educational gap in Ontario.

The Ontario government has already taken important steps to fund and support Indigenous post-secondary education and success, and many other opportunities exist to further support Indigenous learners and fill in the gap left by inadequate PSSSP funding. The province could ensure that funds from OSAP and PSSSP are stackable, ensuring a student who receives PSSSP will not have their OSAP assessment impacted by it. The province could also leverage other financial aid tools such as the Student Access Guarantee to benefit Indigenous learners struggling to pay the costs of post-secondary education.

Through consultation and cooperation, Ontario could become a provincial leader in Indigenous access to education, putting college and university education within reach of thousands of Indigenous students who otherwise wouldn't have a chance to attend post-secondary education, or otherwise would struggle to keep up with its ever-increasing costs.

Recommendation

Working collaboratively with Indigenous communities, learners, colleges, universities and student organizations, the province should develop a new needs-assessment for Indigenous students and investigate opportunities to leverage new and existing financial aid programs to fill in the gap left by inadequate PSSSP funding. Additionally, allow PSSSP to compliment OSAP by not counting funding provided by the program to be considered during OSAP assessments.

10. Employment and Social Development Canada, "Aboriginal Labour Market Bulletin: Spring 2015: Ontario regional labour market profile." <http://www.esdc.gc.ca/en/aboriginal/bulletins/spring2015.page#h2.5-h3.3>

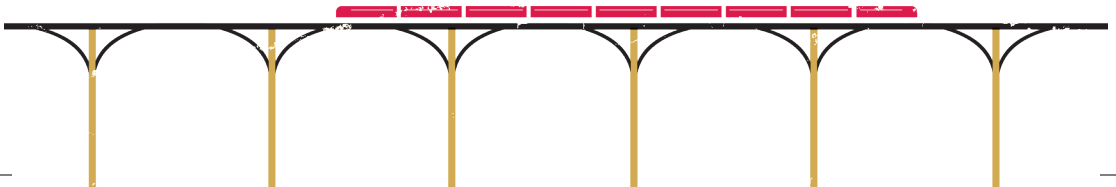
INVEST IN PASSENGER RAIL SERVICE

There are a number of economic, social, and environmental factors that contribute to the importance of reliable passenger train service for communities in Northern Ontario. Rail transit is safer, more affordable, produces less carbon emissions and is easier to access for young people and the elderly. Roughly 6,000 kilometres of rail connects municipalities and First Nations throughout the north. For many Ontarians, it is the only mode of transportation on which they can rely to travel long distances.

Over the past few decades, the decline in passenger rail service and a reduction in Greyhound Canada bus routes have made it more difficult for people to live, work, and study in the north. Although most communities are connected to main highways, extreme weather conditions make highway travel difficult, dangerous and time consuming.

There are a small number of companies who operate train or bus services in the north. Like all businesses, Ontario Northland, Greyhound Canada, and CN Rail are subject to financial limitations tied to the profitability of certain routes. Yet these companies provide the only option for thousands of Ontarians to make necessary trips between communities. The Ontario government must invest in passenger rail service to ensure this mode of transportation remains a viable option for people in the future. Without investments today, existing rail lines will become less affordable due to the rising costs of deferred maintenance.

All levels of government in Canada are investing in public transportation. However, a disproportionate amount of these investments are located in southern Ontario. VIA Rail Canada, the nation's only intercity passenger rail carrier, received \$317.1 million in operating funding and \$80.9 million in capital funding from



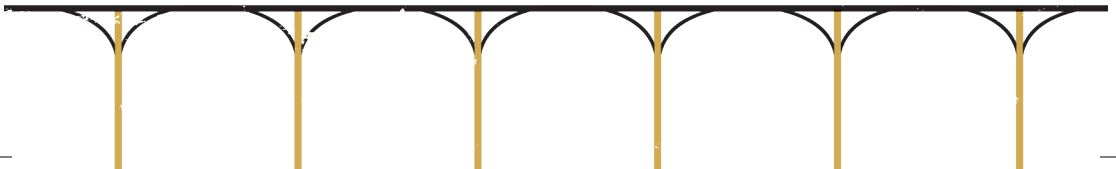
the federal government in 2014. Metrolinx, which operates GO Transit, receives \$2 billion in base annual funding from the province. This crown corporation also benefits from an additional \$1-2 billion dollars in combined funding from the federal and provincial government.

By contrast, in northern Ontario, passenger rail service has seen a decline in government funding over the past several years. This has led to several reductions and cancellations in services, including considerable reductions in VIA Rail's Sudbury to Winnipeg service; the cancellation of Ontario Northland's Toronto to Cochrane passenger service in 2012; and the Algoma Central service between Sault Ste. Marie and Hearst in 2015. Multiple short-line and regional railroads have also been removed or abandoned over the past two decades.

Failing to invest in adequate transportation infrastructure disproportionately affects Aboriginal communities as well as youth and low-income families who rely on public transit to access vital opportunities and services in other parts of the province. In remote communities, a round trip plane ticket to Thunder Bay could easily cost over a thousand dollars. Maintaining connections to a provincial and national transportation system will help to curb the flow of outmigration, especially on reserves, as generations of youth work and study outside of their communities. Universities and colleges in northern Ontario would also significantly benefit from affordable and effective travel options in order to draw from a wider Ontario population base.

Recommendation

The government should invest in a Northern Ontario Public Transportation Strategy that would adequately fund passenger rail service in the region and provide additional funding for public transit in larger urban areas in the North.



TUITION FEE TAX REBATE INCENTIVE

Post-secondary students who study in northern communities often face additional challenges in securing meaningful employment after graduation. Statistics indicate that northern Ontario continues to suffer from youth outmigration, as graduates are driven to leave their communities in search of career opportunities.

Over the next 25 years, the population of northern Ontario is projected to see a decrease of 3.4 percent, from 803,000 in 2013 to 776,000 by 2041.¹¹ In the past, northern Ontario's positive natural increase has offset part of the losses the region has experienced through net migration. However, natural increase in the north as a whole is now negative and is projected to remain so as the population ages. In eight out of nine regional areas across northern Ontario, populations are expected to steadily decline over the next 25 years.

Northern Ontario receives only a small share of international migration and has been experiencing net out-migration, mostly among youth, reducing both current and future population growth. As the population of baby-boomers declines, out-migration threatens to further jeopardize the sustainability of northern economies. Along with a downturn in forestry and mining sectors, the high cost of education forces hundreds of youth to leave the region every year to find work in urban centres in the south. Young people with high levels of debt are particularly vulnerable to out-migration, as graduates may be unable to afford to be unemployed for a period of time, or take on work in low-paying occupations.

Institutions in the north play an important role as drivers of their local economies. In small and remote communities, universities and colleges serve as cultural centres and major employers. Students who attend these institutions bring with them expertise and entrepreneurial goals. When these young people are forced to leave due to financial barriers, local economies suffer. Talented individuals move away and the tax-base is reduced. Communities which have invested heavily in institutions with the intention of investing in the creation of opportunities for young people see a declining return on their investment and families are torn apart.

To help address the issue of youth out-migration and population decline in the north, the government should invest in programs that encourage young people to live and work in the north following their studies. One effective approach would include a tax rebate system where students are able to reclaim some of their tuition expenses after graduation if they remain living in a northern community. The Manitoba Tuition Fee Income Tax Rebate provides a great example of how a tax rebate program might work to incentive students to settle in Northern Ontario. In Manitoba, students are able to collect an income tax rebate on up to 60% of their eligible tuition fees from the time they graduate. This means a student who paid a total of \$25,000 in tuition over the course of their studies would be eligible for up to \$15,000 in rebates.

The maximum annual credit is 10% of the total tuition paid. To get back the maximum 60% of total tuition, a person must be paying enough Manitoba tax to absorb the credit. If they are not paying enough tax in Manitoba, that individual can delay their application for up to 10 years and has up to 20 years after initial application to collect tax rebates.

This type of program provides a valuable incentive for students to continue living in northern and remote regions of the province after graduation, or to move to the north from other provinces. It also directly helps students who wish to return to their homes in these areas, where high-paying jobs may be less common. By providing an additional financial incentive tied to earnings, the government can support students and sustainable communities through this low-cost option.

Recommendation

The government should invest in a new tax incentive for graduates of Northern Ontario colleges and universities that would allow them to recoup portions of their tuition fees through tax credits they are eligible for if they remain working in the region post-graduation. This is a \$27.5 million annual cost.

ECONOMIC IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Colleges and universities play many important roles as places of higher learning, cultural centres, recreational facilities, and major employers. These institutions contribute to sustainable communities by promoting new ideas, drawing in populations of young, career-minded students and creating business opportunities that generate tax-revenue. In northern Ontario, post-secondary institutions also serve a special purpose as regional hubs, where individuals from rural/remote communities can go to live and study over the course of their education. For example, Lakehead University in Thunder Bay brings in students from across a vast region as large as France. Without this university, hundreds of students from remote communities across Northern Ontario would have no option but to travel far greater distances to southern Ontario, at huge financial cost, to obtain a post-secondary education.

Because schools in the north tend to serve significantly larger areas than those in southern Ontario, they are in a unique position to offer a broad range of programs in order to accommodate the different needs of students for whom a particular institution may be their only option. Traditionally, northern institutions have offered a diversity of programs and were suited to provide a well-rounded education in both the arts and sciences. However, government initiatives to specialize colleges and universities through differentiation are slowly driving institutions to reduce the number of programs they offer, as funding is concentrated in the most profitable and competitive fields of study. It is vital that post-secondary institutions in the north are adequately funded to maintain a broad range of programs in order to meet the needs of all students in the region.

In northern cities such as Sault Ste. Marie, Sudbury, North Bay and Thunder Bay, the performance of colleges and universities is closely linked to the success of the local economy. When looking at the annual economic impact of these institutions, one can easily identify the financial and social benefits of their presence in these communities. Most institutions conduct their own economic impact assessments for varying reasons. However, there is no common method of assessment or united strategy for bringing this information together. To



help highlight the importance of northern institutions in local economies, the Advanced Education and Skills Development should mandate the reporting of annual economic impact assessments by university and college administrations.

If this data was made accessible and publicly available, it would benefit policy makers in understanding the important reasons why these institutions must be supported in maintaining a broad range of programs. This information should be carefully weighed in any long-term planning of changes in the geographic structure of post-secondary education in the province.

Recommendation

The provincial government should mandate all publicly funded colleges and universities to conduct annual economic impact assessments that are freely available to the public on institutional websites and in a centralized government database.



CONCLUSION

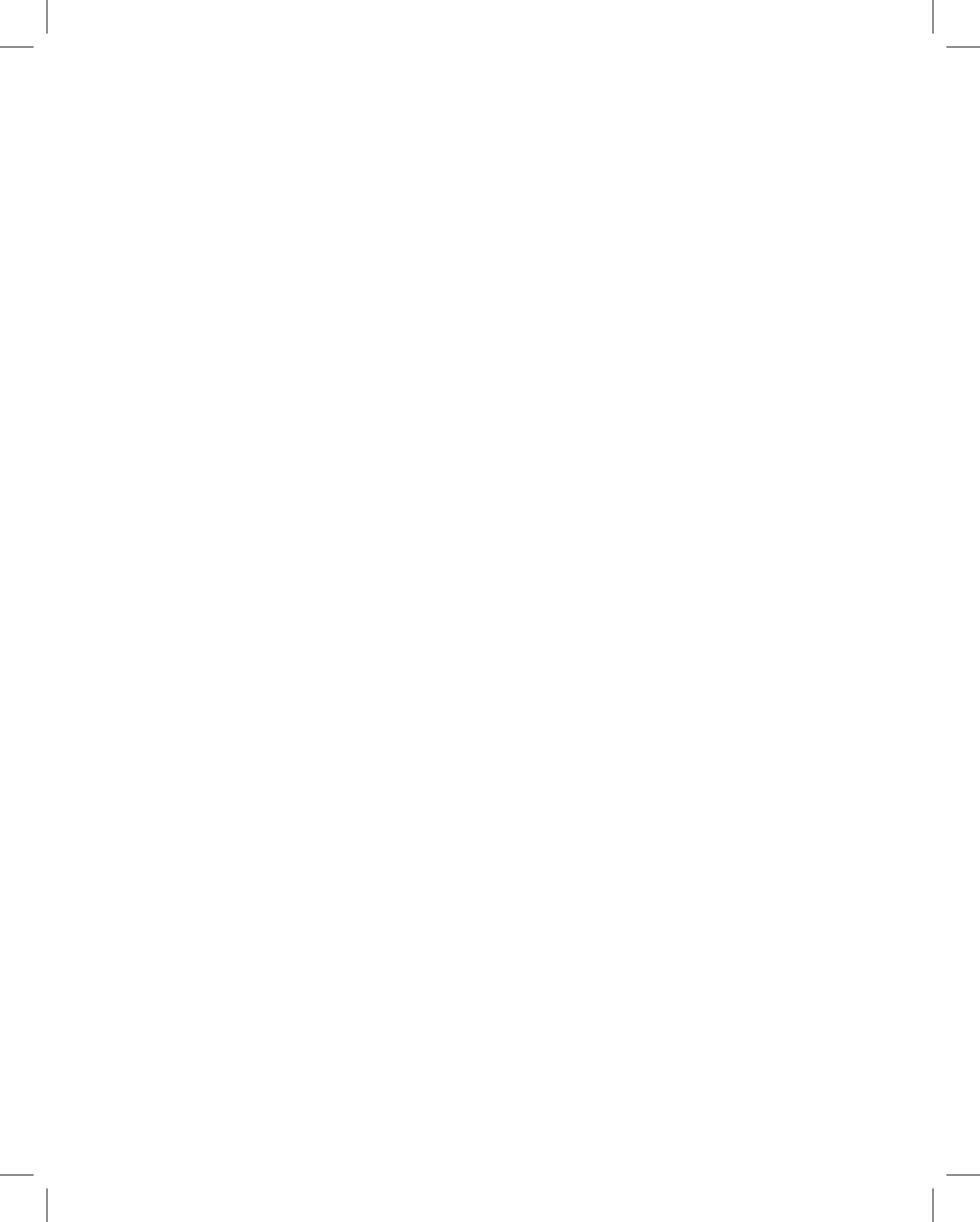
This paper has outlined some of the challenges facing students in northern Ontario: from a lack of public transit to financial constraints to experiential learning opportunities, there are many areas in which northern Ontario pales in comparison to its southern and urban partners. But with challenge comes opportunity, and as this paper has demonstrated, there are a variety of unique and creative opportunities within reach and on the horizon to make northern Ontario an ideal place to live, work and study not just for local residents, but for southern Ontario students, out-of-province students and international students.

To do this, the government must move to work cooperatively and swiftly with students, institutions and communities to build a northern Ontario post-secondary education system that is sustainable, affordable and high-quality.

Many of the proposals outlined in this paper are building on existing programs or implementing design changes that make them more transparent, accessible and effective. By working together, the Federation is confident that northern Ontario can become a vibrant and viable epicenter of academic and economic life in the province's future.











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