

Lalonde: COVID-19 – Universities must slow down and consult students about the way forward article text (March 26, 2020)

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Dear university administrations: Picture this. You're a third-year university student at the tail end of mid-term season, anxiously preparing for finals, when you receive an email completely upending your current plans. School is closed and a global pandemic has wreaked havoc across campus and the world. You have no toilet paper, no food, no guidance and yet you are still expected to finish that essay due on Friday.

Universities across Ontario have responded poorly to the COVID-19 outbreak, leaving students in extreme states of stress. Educational institutions have prioritized maintaining deadlines in order to finish the semester in a timely manner and, as a result, have compromised the mental health of students, while sacrificing the quality of their education. Students are experiencing overwhelming amounts of stress and pressure as they adjust to life in a pandemic, while also struggling to keep up with coursework.

The rates of depression within universities are already alarmingly high and it must be expected that these rates will increase with the added challenges presented by COVID-19's impact. Schools must be cognizant that students need time to adjust and to process the situation, without the added stress of impending deadlines. The two extra days offered by Carleton University are not enough. Many students are being whisked home amidst panic and fear, while others simply find it difficult to meet basic needs due to sudden unemployment and limited essential supplies, such as toilet paper and food.

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Students of sound body and mind, with strong support networks in place, are struggling to come to terms with the new reality that COVID-19 has brought upon them. Now consider those with pre-existing mental health illnesses, who may be more susceptible to feeling alienated and isolated, particularly as our communities embrace social distancing. Schools must be prepared to address this issue and should be making efforts to create online communities where students can come together and form connections and find support from their peers and professionals.

Although schools are telling students to take necessary steps based on individual need, the underlying tone continues to imply that the expectations for the semester remain relatively unchanged. Students have been made to feel responsible for their own success, regardless of the current state of external circumstances.

A major risk of these implications is students who will fail to take preventative measures with their health, in order to not fall behind in their academics.

As students, we often forget that we pay immense sums for the education that universities deliver and that these institutions therefore work for us. Recently, we have seen universities race to respond to the challenges of COVID-19. Their priorities have been to proceed with the semester on an uninterrupted schedule, forcing both students and professors to carry on at all costs.

Shifting courses online is one answer, but may not necessarily be the most effective solution. Not all students have the resources or spaces available to them to ensure optimal learning and productivity. The rushed nature of the transition does not provide adequate time for students to make adjustments that can allow them to prepare for education online. Professors have had to abruptly change their outlines and delivery methods, without any opportunity to consult the student body on the best way to proceed.

This may result in a level of education that is not on par with what students deserve for their investments. Moreover, the urgency to continue with classes without an adequate adjustment period may result in poor academic performance. This hierarchy of priorities demonstrates that universities care more about pushing students through the system than they do about investing in delivering good quality education that reflects the ways people learn.

Alternative options are possible. For instance many schools, such as the University of Guelph and the University of Ontario, put their semesters on hold for a week to determine their plans. Universities must coordinate between administration, professors and students. Thus far, students have not been invited to the conversation about the path of their own education.

The decisions schools are making have a direct impact on the lives of their students, and so we must have a voice in how these institutions handle the impacts of this outbreak. If this disease has told us anything, it is to slow down and work together. It is time for our universities to listen. Adjusting to life in a pandemic is unprecedented, and we as students understand that this will be a learning process. As we tackle circumstances that coerce us unto isolation, let us move forward in a way that allows us to learn and to grow together.

Emily Lalonde is a third-year architecture student at Carleton University. This piece was written in collaboration with two other Carleton students and expresses concerns shared during a conversation with a larger group of students from the Ottawa region.