How Calgary's Public Universities Addressed the COVID-19 Crisis

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COVID-19 AND CALGARY'S PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

There is no question, COVID-19 has caught universities and colleges around the world off guard. As a result, brick-and-mortar campuses were forced to quickly modify operations and address building hygiene with a sense of urgency. Many of the adaptations are likely to remain permanent: international students had to quickly return to their home countries; classroom-based face-to-face (F2F) instruction transitioned to online (OL) delivery platforms; and libraries, recreation facilities, food services, student housing, and other campus facilities closed. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused administrators, staff, and students to rethink how classes are delivered and research completed during a crisis (Friesen, 2020). The responses taken by the University of Calgary and Mount Royal University—the only two publicly funded universities in Calgary—offer examples of how Canadian public universities addressed issues such as physical space, technological services, and staffing during the COVID-19 crisis.

Established in 1875 as a frontier detachment for the North West Mounted Police and later becoming a major rail-hub for the Western prairies, the City of Calgary is the largest city in the Province of Alberta and third largest city in Canada, with a population of ~1.5 million people. Standing as Canada's youngest major city with ~70% of its population being between the ages of 15 to 64, the city is known for its vivacious, family-focused, and enterprising communities (Calgary Economic Development [CED], 2020). With over 32% of its population holding a bachelor's degree or higher, Canada ranks as the most educated country in the world per capita (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019). Specific to Calgary, with 38.3% of Calgarians holding a bachelor's degree or higher, the city stands as the third most educated Canadian city per capita (Statistics Canada [StatCan], 2017).

CALGARY'S POST-SECONDARY SCHOOL LANDSCAPE

In total, there are five publicly funded post-secondary institutions in Calgary: Bow Valley College (BWC), Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT), Alberta University of the Arts, Mount Royal University (MRU), and the University of Calgary (UC); one private non-profit faith-based university (Ambrose University); and over a dozen other private and faith-based colleges and trade schools. The University of Calgary serves as the city's only comprehensive research university; Mount Royal University as its largest regional undergraduate university; and the Alberta University of Arts (specialty college), SAIT and BWC (community

colleges/trade schools), and faith-based Ambrose University standing as the only other degree-granting institutions.

Founded in 1966, UC is one of Canada's largest research-focused universities with 32,000+ students (26,000+ undergraduate and 6,000+ graduate students), 1,800+ academic staff, 3,200+ non-academic personnel, and 185,000+ alumni, two thirds of whom continue to live in the Calgary area (University of Calgary [UCalgary], 2019). Founded in 1910, MRU is one of Canada's oldest post-secondary institutions with 14,500+ undergraduate students (10,000+ full-time and 4,500+ part-time), 670+ academic staff, 700+ non-academic personnel, and 105,000+ alumni, four fifths of whom continue to live in the Calgary area (Mount Royal University [MRU], 2020a). Both universities are governed by the Alberta Ministry of Advanced Education and Alberta's Post-Secondary Learning Act (2003), respectively. Each board of governors and executive team took similar, yet diverse, paths in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY'S RESPONSE

With one of Canada's largest medical schools and several sizable academic units focused on the health sciences (biology, microbiology, nursing, kinesiology, etc.), it is no surprise that UC has successfully addressed the risks associated with COVID-19 and played a key role in Canada's response to this global pandemic (UCalgary, 2020b). UC's first COVID-19 announcement came on January 24, 2020, which included a succinct summary of the emerging pandemic and suggested safeguards that members of the campus community could take to avoid infection. Dozens of weekly, and sometimes daily, announcements were subsequently sent to the UC community, with a special town hall held March 19 during which the university's response was discussed in detail. As of October 22, the main page of UC's website continues to include a "COVID-19 Update" banner that directs viewers to a comprehensive COVID-19 information 'dashboard' (UCalgary, 2020a).

MOUNT ROYAL UNIVERSITY'S RESPONSE

Being a smaller, undergraduate-only institution, MRU did not have the same ability to address and respond to a global pandemic as the UC. Though MRU's Faculty of Health and Community Studies offers a Bachelor of Nursing program and its Faculty of Science and Technology offers a Bachelor of Science degree with a major in biology, these programs are much smaller than comparable programs delivered at UC. The faculty at MRU primarily focus on teaching whereas the faculty at UC are more focused on research (UCalgary, 2020b; MRU, 2020a). MRU's initial COVID-19 announcement was delivered on March 3, over a month after that of the UC's, with subsequent notices being generally comparable to those made by the UC. One noted difference between the UC and MRU responses was that the UC announcements regularly focused on COVID-19 research being undertaken at the university, whereas the MRU announcements primarily focused on safeguarding members of the campus community from contracting the virus.

DISCUSSION

The response by both the UC and MRU were quite similar (UCalgary, 2020a; MRU, 2020a), with the main difference being that the UC disseminated information slightly earlier than MRU and MRU tended to report its COVID-19 research efforts. Both universities

- kept student residences open, albeit with limited food and recreational services; required masks be worn; and ensured that building hygiene standards were maintained in accordance with the requirements of the Alberta Health Services
- transitioned from F2F to OL delivery in mid-March 2020 and remained OL for their Fall 2020 terms, with both universities providing students with the option of receiving either a traditionally assigned grade or either a COVID-PASS (student receives credit with no impact on cumulative grade point average) or COVID-FAIL (student does not receive credit with no impact on cumulative grade point average)
- closed their campuses to the public in mid-March 2020 through the Fall 2020 terms
- postponed Spring 2020 (June) convocation ceremonies until Fall 2020 (October for MRU, November for UC)
- maintained course delivery, exam, and graduation dates as set prior to the COVID-19 pandemic; transitioned all meetings, classes, exams, and ceremonies to OL platforms; transitioned laboratory instruction at both universities to OL delivery, with research laboratory activities maintained in a highly controlled manner, including the launch of new research activities focused on addressing COVID-19
- expanded Information Technology (IT) capacity and support within days to accommodate the rapid and expanded use of OL technology for course delivery, student support services, and administrative functions

With the UC being one of Canada's largest research universities/medical school and MRU being a much smaller undergraduate-only institution, the UC's response to the COVID-19 crisis has been more robust than that of MRU. Notwithstanding MRU's smaller size and absence of a robust research capacity, MRU has made meaningful efforts to celebrate the contributions its campus community members have made with respect to volunteering at health centres, supporting elder care homes, and generally helping the Calgary community through social-focused efforts (MRU, 2020b). While members of the UC community also made significant social contributions to the community, UC's primary recognition has been for the scientific research it as engaged in to combat COVID-19 (UCalgary, 2020b).

CONCLUSION

Both universities are mandated to adhere to the public health orders, protocols, and standards stipulated by Alberta Health Services. Although there have been minor levels of local protests against mask and physical-distancing requirements (Knight, 2020), the vast majority of Calgarians (including members of the UC and MRU communities), have been strongly in favor of mandatory mask and hand sanitizer usage, and physical distancing requirements (Ferguson, 2020). Though many students have understandably been upset having registered for F2F classes and having to continue with their Fall 2020 (September–December) semester OL, the vast majority are understanding of the unprecedented situation (Fieber, 2020). Instructors have

stepped up to the challenge of adapting formerly F2F classes to OL in short order to continue delivering high-quality education. While this task did come with significant challenges and pushback due to increased workloads and the accompanying adjustments required, the Calgary academic community largely pulled together to share best practices and support mechanisms.

Though only time can tell, the COVID-19 global pandemic likely will have a noticeable long-term impact on Canadian universities and colleges. Now that nearly all courses traditionally delivered in a classroom setting have been transitioned OL, both UC and MRU have gained the opportunity to offer their respective degree programs in a distance education format and possibly opening a new revenue stream and allowing for more international students. What is more, now that the UC and MRU have established robust building hygiene policies, protocols, and practices, during regular cold and flu season, the safeguards implemented due to COVID-19 outbreak safeguards may also help minimize the rate and spread of seasonal viral illnesses. Last, because IT services were rapidly expanded, it is conceivable that academics will continue using their newly acquired educational technologies to enhance their traditional campus-based teaching.

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