

# OCUFA

Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations  
Union des associations des professeurs des universités de l'Ontario

## The Nous Group at uOttawa

**nous**

A bigger idea of success

Prepared for the APUO, December 2025

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## Higher education consultants work in several broad thematic areas

- Strategic Planning
- Academic Planning and Program Reviews
- Institutional Improvement/Transformation
  - E.g., the Polaris Project
- Governance Reviews
- Economic Impact Assessments
- Internationalization
- Statistical Collection/Bespoke Research



New operating model helps a Canadian university to realise more than \$100 million in savings

Above: Nous claims that its “strategic transformation” at the University of Alberta saved the University more than \$100 million. \$95 million of this allegedly came from a “new administrative model.” Nous also led an academic restructure at the University, but it does not quantify the savings from this activity (possibly because this reorganization *added* an additional administrative layer).

## Institutional improvement/transformation projects are the most complex and profitable

- Structural reorganizations, from entire universities to individual units.
- Comparative benchmarking of staffing and activities.
- Process/service improvements.
- Unit creation.
- Strategic Enrolment Management (SEM) governance and planning.
- Performance reviews/audits.
- Policy development.

### Welcome to the future of services at York

The Service Excellence Program is building a culture of excellence at York by leveraging the right expertise at the right time, to deliver outstanding services every time. Since 2020, this program has worked to bring this vision to life by collaborating closely with the York community to:

- **Streamline processes** to free-up staff time and expertise for more complex work.
- **Enhance service quality** through shared accountability and a commitment to both sustainability and responsiveness.
- **Create a culture of service excellence** that empowers staff to deliver exceptional services and engage in continuous improvement.

**Above: the Nous “Service Excellence Program” at York University, worth \$7.8 million.**

## Governance reviews tend to marginalize Senates

- Invariably promise to promote efficiency and nimbleness.
- Usually recommend modifying existing composition but occasionally suggest new governance structures.
- As with much consulting work, these tend to reflect the priorities of Boards and Presidents. After all, Boards and Presidents pay the bills and the consultant's job is to keep the clients happy.
  - Limited engagement with academics.
  - Consultants generally have little understanding of the concept of collegial governance and are more used to conventional employer-employee relationships.



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## Nous is a recent entry into Canadian higher ed consulting

- Nous is a boutique consultancy with 750 staff across Australia, London (UK), and Canada (Toronto and Vancouver).
- Founded by Tim Orton, a former McKinsey consultant, who wanted a better work-life balance and to work on projects with “positive influence.”
  - Entered Canadian market in 2020, and Toronto office almost immediately surpassed existing London office in importance.
  - Has recently expanded into Vancouver with a focus on healthcare.
- Acquired Cubane Consulting in April 2021 and recently renamed this business “Nous Data Insights.”
  - Subscription-based UniForum product details comparative staffing levels by university function, allowing leaders to make quick decisions about staffing changes.
  - Nous is the global leader in benchmarking university staffing.



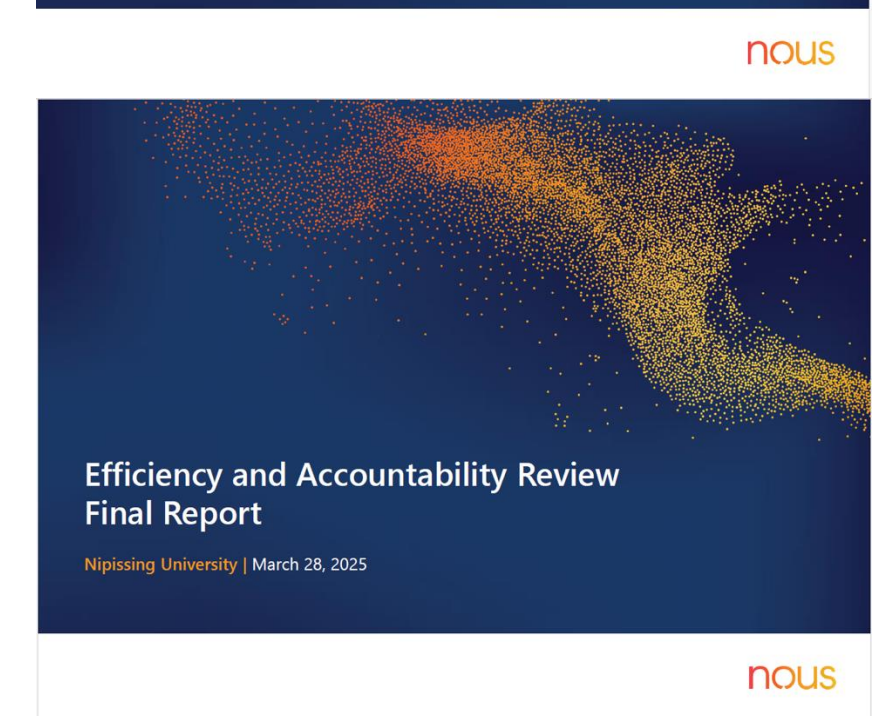
## Nous is engaged in some of the sector's most lucrative projects

- **First major Canadian contract was with York University for its Service Excellence Program.**
  - Secured additional work with York beyond this contract, taking the total value above \$8 million.
- **Contracted to provide the plan for the massive academic and administrative restructuring at the University of Alberta following major provincial funding cuts.**
  - Modeled this work after previous work done for the University of Sydney (Australia).
- **Hired by Laurentian University in October 2021 to perform its governance and operations review.**
  - Recommendations sought to circumscribe the power of Laurentian's Senate, and Nous even encouraged the University to consider unicameral governance.



## Nous is one of the Ontario Government's preferred consultants

- **Ontario's Blue-Ribbon Panel based its recommendation that universities pursue further efficiencies on conversations with Nous.**
  - Nous's UniForum product is geared toward such efficiencies.
- **Feb 2024: Ontario announced \$15 million "to support third-party reviews that will identify actions institutions can take to drive long-term cost savings."**
  - Each review is worth \$500,000 and covers five mandatory areas.
  - Nous is one of a handful of firms approved to conduct these reviews.
  - Nous completed several efficiency reviews in the first round but has struggled to secure projects in subsequent rounds.



Above: Nous Efficiency Reviews completed for NOSM University and Nipissing University.

## uOttawa has been a major Nous target since at least Spring 2021

- uOttawa is a UniForum member.
- Nous provided five “opportunities” for the university to consider in 2023. Items in **green** have either been completed or are underway.
  - **Administrative transformation/service excellence (Polaris).**
  - **Procurement reform (Polaris).**
  - **International student strategy.**
  - Student experience design.
  - Budget model review.

## Polaris might provide copied-and-pasted solutions

- **The Nous Group's major transformation projects tend to look quite similar:**
  - York University's three-year Service Excellence Program sought improved efficiency, effectiveness, and user satisfaction of campus services. This was pursued mainly by moving all transactional services/processes into a centralized University Services Centre.
  - Queen's University's Renew Project "is a multi-year university-wide initiative... to ensure that Queen's professional services are operating effectively... [and] are equipped and supported with the right tools, systems, and processes."
  - At uOttawa, "Polaris is a three-year continuous improvement program that aims to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the University of Ottawa's administrative services for students, faculty, and staff."

## Nous is a symptom of the crisis facing universities; it is neither the cause nor its solution

- The postsecondary sector is chronically underfunded. Nous did not cause this situation, but it has found a way to profit from austerity.
- Once Nous arrives on campus, it seeks additional work. Consultants are encouraged to find “opportunities” that are “out of scope” to drive additional contracts.
  - Nous rigidly follows the scope of work outlined in its contract. Work beyond the defined scope requires additional contracts.
- Solutions tend toward one-size-fits-all. The UniForum product considers only staffing levels, not university priorities.
  - Does it make sense to compare the administrative requirements of a bilingual with a monolingual one?

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## Transformation first requires benchmarking

- **Benchmarking is time-intensive and promotes one-size-fits-all solutions.**
- **Nous Data Insights' UniForum product is the biggest benchmarking service available. It consists of major survey-based products:**
  - UniForum benchmarking: managers list the amount of effort devoted to specific activities and can measure how they stack up against comparators.
  - Service Effectiveness Survey: an optional purchase that tracks user satisfaction with individual services.
  - Has recently expanded to include Teaching Effort Analytics “to inform better decisions on teaching delivery... and workforce planning.” Pushes larger class sizes and fewer course options.
- **UniForum is designed to identify transformational opportunities that consultants can lead. This is policy-based evidence, not evidence-based policy.**

## A coordinated response to benchmarking surveys is needed

- **Establish a strategy for responding to the service effectiveness survey.**
  - University College London and Queen's University have used this approach.
  - Mark all services as “critical,” indicate high-satisfaction, and use open text responses to explain that existing challenges are related to underfunding and understaffing.
  - Publicize critiques of the benchmarking exercises.
  - Major cuts and outsourcing are typically based on poor satisfaction scores – don't give them this rationale! Minor upticks in “satisfaction” are used to justify expensive transformations after the fact.
- **While this alone will not defeat the administration's desire for efficiencies or outsourcing, it is an important step in crafting a counternarrative.**

## Embrace your political power in the Senate

- **Coordinated faculty and Senate pressure at UBC in 2018 forced UBC's UniForum committee to pledge to uphold the decentralized nature of the university.**
  - The committee pledged to “recognize that the university is a complex, diverse, and decentralized organization, and that departments and faculties have developed different approaches and different practices which reflect their diverse disciplines and hierarchies.”
  - Recognizing uniqueness goes against UniForum's one-size-fits-all framework.
- **This remains an ongoing battle. UBC purchased the Service Effectiveness Survey in 2023, but it continues to emphasize that faculty are not subject to UniForum.**
- **The Senate is also an obvious venue to fight any use of Nous's “Teaching Effort Analytics.”**

## Grievances can prevent harm to your members

- **After learning that UniForum would be extended to librarians, the University of Toronto Faculty Association (UTFA) filed an association grievance.**
  - A mediated agreement in 2019 specified that UniForum data would not be relied on in connection with termination, performance assessment, or any negotiations as to terms and conditions of employment for faculty members and academic librarians.
  - UTFA librarians are not required to participate in UniForum training or data collection and there can be no reprisals against those who refuse to participate.

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## The bad news: consultants expect, and pre-emptively dismiss, faculty opposition

- **McKinsey:** “Stakeholders often cling to deep sentiments about their institutions and their school traditions, which impede change.”
  - The solution is to ignore the opposition. As Nous puts it below, “substantial opposition... is not always a strong argument to stop.”
- **Consultants' rationale:** if faculty are inherently oppositional regardless of an initiative's merit, there is no reason to listen to them.

*There will likely be substantial opposition, which is not always a strong argument to stop*

Major faculty restructures are not common because they typically provoke substantial resistance, independent of whether they have a good strategic and organizational logic. Universities are typically very cautious throughout the process and some have initiated the process then not proceeded, while those who have completed the process have been successful. For those who have had success, this has come through wide consultation, watertight logic and a very clear message (and understanding) on the intention of the restructure.

## Enhance your association's ability to conduct financial analysis

- Major strategic transformations and reorganizations are often first signalled by an administrator pleading poverty.
- Developing an accurate counter-narrative is key:
  - Know the difference between audited financial statements.
  - Demystify “restricted funds.”
  - Understand how your university's budget model may determine whether a program appears profitable.

### Queen's University eyes drastic cutbacks to keep its doors open

JOE FRIESEN > POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION REPORTER  
PUBLISHED JANUARY 11, 2024  
UPDATED JANUARY 13, 2024



Nous Group's contract with Queen's was made public two weeks after this story broke. The contract was likely in place before this story. Nous's contract specified that they would build a case for change – what they called an “overarching narrative.”

## Build networks with previous clients

- **Many universities have struggled with Nous.**
  - In Ontario, York and Queen's have similar experiences, while Waterloo, Nipissing, NOSM University and others have also used Nous.
  - They have experienced the process and can identify particularly important moments for intervention.
  - The consulting business depends on selling the same solution to multiple clients. Past clients can tell you what to expect.
- **Collect resources – or refer to those collected by the Queen's Coalition Against Austerity**
- **Track results of previous transformations.**
- **Collaborate with faculty associations at other Ontario universities. Several are UniForum members.**



## Track project milestones by engaging with the project's steering committee

- Large transformations require a campus presence and several willing collaborators from across the university.
- While the input of top administrators is the main driver, consultants will regularly engage (and flatter) deans from the major faculties and department chairs.
  - Getting information from them is key for understanding timelines and knowing opportune moments to apply pressure.
- Members of the project steering committee and major events are often publicized on the project's website.

### Co-chairs

- **Matthew Evans**, Provost and Vice-Principal (Academic)
- **Donna Janiec**, Vice-Principal (Finance and Administration)

### Members

- **Cathleen Crudden**, Professor, Department of Chemistry
- **Kevin Deluzio**, Dean, Faculty of Engineering and Applied Science
- **Michael Fraser**, Vice-Principal (University Relations)
- **Nick Mosey**, Chief of Staff and Special Advisor, Office of the Principal and Vice-Chancellor
- **Lynne-Marie Postovit**, Professor and Department Head, Biomedical and Molecular Sciences
- **Jane Philpott**, Dean, Faculty of Health Sciences
- **Teri Shearer**, Deputy Provost
- **Stephanie Simpson**, Vice-Provost (Culture, Equity and Inclusion)
- **Lori Stewart**, Executive Director, Provost's Office (Committee support)
- **Heather Woermke**, Associate Vice-Principal (Finance and Administration)

**Members of the Queen's Professional Services Working Group (the Nous project's steering committee) have been publicized on the project's website.**

**uOttawa's Polaris Project page is accessible for those with a uOttawa login. It will likely have similar information.**

## Use the Senate to reaffirm the academic role in collegial governance

- **Reorganizations can expand beyond the administrative sphere if the consultants succeed in convincing the administration of the need for more work.**
  - But even reorganizations that are limited to administrative structures can have implications for teaching and research.
- **Consult your university act and fight for the widest possible interpretation of language.**
  - The McMaster University Act empowers the Senate to “control and regulate the system of education.” What might fall under “system?”
- **Preserving collegial governance is essential because institutional leadership is often invested in attacking or circumscribing collegial governance.**
  - Consultants take the blame, but their actions reflect the priorities of whoever hired them.



## Organize with others on your campus

- **Collaborate with other unions, student groups, and affected staff on campus.**
- **Understand that cuts and the outsourcing of any labour sets a dangerous precedent.**
  - Reorganizations will hit front-line administrative staff the hardest – there are potential allies to be found here.
- **Remember that faculty, staff, and students are the university.**
- **Collective action is a great opportunity to engage the media, present your counternarratives, and perhaps work toward a coordinated bargaining strategy.**

## Faculty have multiple resistance strategies

- **Establish counternarratives.**
  - Institutional finances.
  - Institutional services and capabilities.
  - The quality of third-party service providers (such as consultants) and their solutions.
- **Use the grievance process to limit harm.**
- **Organize in and across multiple venues.**
  - The Senate.
  - Across campus with other worker and student groups.
  - With faculty and staff at other universities who have faced, or are facing, similar challenges.