

Date: 03/08/22**To:** Students' Union Council**Re:** President Report 03/08/22

Dear Council,

This is a very hard time for students, the U of A community, and for many of us in governance. The current combination of enormous budget cuts, the pandemic and resulting online classes, academic restructuring and SET, and collective bargaining have made this arguably the worst two years for the University community in more than seventy years. The most difficult thing about our situation is that there are no scenarios in which we can make everyone happy—many of our decisions will come with negative consequences for thousands of students no matter what we do or how well we do it. We need to handle these challenges with humility and compassion, despite the fact that after so many challenges this year many people have lost the capacity for both. The Executive team is looking forward to working with you to address these challenges head on.

Quality of Online Classes

Our position has always been that while online classes may be necessary at this stage in the pandemic, the University is still responsible for maintaining a high standard of quality. If COVID was not a concern, online classes are not the experience most U of A students would prefer, but their quality did not need to fall as low as it has. The UASU conducted a detailed [survey](#) recently to collect student experiences, and found a number of shocking failures by the University. The University's commitment to ensuring that online proctoring would be regulated and allowed only by decanal approval has not been implemented. A minority, but still a concerning number, of professors have not been including any interactive or engaging content, and have sometimes simply been uploading YouTube videos from previous years. While most instructors have done their best under difficult circumstances, the University needs to provide meaningful guidance, support, and accountability for instructors.

To put pressure on the University to address these issues, the Executive team has released an [Instagram post](#) outlining demands to address quality deficiencies and a [media release](#). Our advocacy has been featured in the [Edmonton Journal](#), [CBC Edmonton](#), and on 630 CHED. The findings of our survey have been discussed at Deans' Council and Chairs' Council. We are meeting with academic leaders in the University in the coming days and hope to make some progress on these issues in the next week.

Rowan Ley, President

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University Labour Negotiations

As most of you will know, the University is currently in collective agreement negotiations with the Graduate Students' Association (GSA), Non-Academic Staff Association (NASA) and the Association of Academic Staff (AASUA). Unlike the UASU, these associations are labour unions with constitutional rights to collective bargaining and striking. The [NASA](#) and [AASUA](#) collective agreements have both been expired for almost two years, and the [GSA](#)'s agreement expires this August. Recently, bargaining between AASUA and the University has reached an impasse, and AASUA has requested formal mediation. The University remains publicly committed to reaching a satisfactory agreement and avoiding job action, but students should be aware that if agreements are not reached soon strikes by AASUA and NASA are possible.

Alberta recently had its first-ever postsecondary strike at [Concordia University](#), which lasted twelve days. In Southern Alberta, the University of Lethbridge Faculty Association [held a strike vote this week](#), and [Mount Royal University faculty](#) may follow soon. There is a longer [history of postsecondary strikes](#) in Canada outside Alberta. The current wave of labour unrest at Alberta universities is a direct result of the current provincial government's irresponsible and devastating cuts to advanced education—cuts that are the deepest and most aggressive here at the U of A.

The Executive team is keeping a close eye on the situation. To ensure we understand the diverse needs and perspectives of students, we have added an agenda item to discuss this matter with you at Council, and at an upcoming special meeting of the COFA Joint Board, ASC, and ISA. Aside from these discussions, the most important things you can do at this time are to stay calm, combat the spread of misinformation, and consult with your constituents.

COVID Response on Campus

As many of you will know, the provincial government is preparing to end COVID restrictions in Alberta in the coming weeks, beginning with the Restrictions Exemption Program (vaccine passport). I do not believe it is appropriate or prudent to do this at this stage, especially given that the vaccine passport is only a minor inconvenience for the 90%+ of Albertans who are vaccinated. I am disappointed but not surprised that the government seems prepared to fold to the unreasonable requests of the small minority who refuse a safe and effective vaccine.

We are keeping a close eye on this situation and what it means for universities. We support a return to in-person learning on the 28th, but only if it is done responsibly— we know from our survey data that many students still feel unsafe because of Omicron. I do

not believe that the time is quite here to eliminate mask mandates, and it is certainly not appropriate yet to remove vaccination requirements. We are watching closely for any effort by the government to force these policies on universities. That would be unfair to the thousands of students who would be made to feel unsafe, and an unacceptable intrusion on institutional autonomy.


Exploration Credits: Steady Progress

In a time of mostly bad news, I am glad to report one piece of good news. The University Registrar, Melissa Padfield, and I presented to GFC on our Exploration Credits proposal. The presentation was well received with near-unanimous positive feedback. As a result of feedback from Engineering student representative Adrian Wattamaniuk, we have amended the proposal to allow faculties to authorize closed-list electives to be eligible for exploration credits, for example Complementary Studies Electives in Engineering. The proposal previously only included open electives. This will significantly increase the number of students who can access Exploration Credits, particularly in professional faculties.

Abner, our research team, and I have worked hard to get this proposal where it is, and we are optimistic that Exploration Credits will be in place next year. We anticipate the finalized proposal will come to GFC on February 28th for a final vote. If successful, I believe this will be (arguably) the largest UASU academic advocacy success since Fall Reading Week— and we will have achieved it in under a year. We will work to get communications out to students explaining what this policy is and how it benefits them in late February.

Take care of yourselves as we enter what is hopefully the last month of online learning. This semester has not been what any of us hoped for, and it may yet get worse— but better things are just over the horizon.

Sincerely,



University of Alberta Students' Union President
Rowan Ley