

December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011

To: Students' Council

Re: VPX Report to Council

## Days in the Legislature

The Fall sitting is well under way, and for the first time since I have become VPX, the government is officially doing business with no Party elections to distract them. A few days after coming back from Ottawa I had spent a considerable amount of time in the Legislature. On Monday November 21<sup>st</sup>, Duncan Wojtaszek and I went to Question Period, where the following questions were asked of the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology:

*Ms Woo-Paw: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. For some time now postsecondary students have been expressing their concerns about colleges, universities, and technical institutes basically sidestepping this province's tuition cap and charging high fees that are deemed noninstructional. Institutions are using fees for things such as athletics and recreation technology and registration fees as a way to get around tuition caps. My questions are to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology. What are you doing to make sure that this practice stops and that students are not literally paying the price?*

*Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know the students are extremely concerned about the cost of noninstructional fees, and so am I. It is an issue that we promised the students we would deal with when we met earlier this year. Since meeting with them, I have sent a letter to all of our postsecondary institutions asking them to develop policy on how they will include the students in the discourse around any future fees that will be charged to those students.*

*Ms Woo-Paw: To the same minister: when will students see outcomes?*

*Mr. Weadick: Thank you. We've asked all of the institutions to be back to us with their policies on student engagement within the next 90 days.*

*Ms Woo-Paw: To the same minister: given that the public postsecondary institutions' tuition fee regulations set a model for predictable increases to tuition fees, why not just regulate these noninstructional fees the same way you do tuitions?*

*Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. That suggestion has come up from the students, but, you know, we have 26 publicly funded postsecondaries across Alberta, and they're all very different and unique institutions. Some are extremely large; some are smaller and rural. We determined that it would be better if each institution had a chance to look at how they could engage their student body, their students in the process and come up with a way that would work in their institution. We don't believe that one solution would work in every institution across the province.*

Later that day we were back at the Legislature to support Ms. Woo-Paw's Private Member's Bill 506:

**"Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the Government to review the procedures and rules that determine post-secondary student funding to ensure that student funding meets the diverse and evolving needs of students in the 21st century."**

The next day we were back at the Legislature for the following for Question Period for where the following question was asked:

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*Dr. Taft: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. During her leadership campaign the Premier promised new funding for postsecondary students. The harsh reality is that in the past two years Alberta students have seen millions of dollars cut from grant programs. Students, like all of us, are tired of empty promises. To the minister of advanced education: given the \$3 billion deficit and the already scarce funds in our postsecondary system where and when is the minister going to get this additional funding? Or is he going to break the Premier's promise?*

*Mr. Weadick: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to stand up and answer that question. You're right. This Premier has spoken often about her commitment to education, to postsecondary education, and to health, and we're pleased with that. This is a very opportune time to talk. We are in budget discussions right now. We're talking about how we can fund the budget into the future. We're also looking at how we can do student finance differently to make sure that we have finances available for those students that need it most as well. So it's going to be a combination of moving forward with new funding for growth within the postsecondaries, new funding for new programs, as well as student finance options.*

*Dr. Taft: Well, Mr. Speaker, a promise is a promise. So what precise timeline and amounts can the minister give us, other than the sort of vague reassurances we just got, as to the new bursaries that the Premier promised?*

*Mr. Weadick: Thank you. The budget will come out early in the new year, and all of those items will be included in the budget, the things that have been promised and discussed as well as some really exciting new things that I think everyone in the House here will be pleased to see. Postsecondary students are being consulted as we speak. We're working with our postsecondaries and looking for lots of great opportunities to continue to grow chances for both rural and urban students to get the best possible education they can.*

*Dr. Taft: Well, since Alberta literally is the richest place on earth, will the minister place accessibility first and restore the millions of dollars that were cut from student grants in the last budget?*

*Mr. Weadick: Thank you. I think you're probably referring to the access to the future, or at least as part of that, because that funding did flow through in support of grants and bursaries. Last year we also made some changes. We removed some small grants but also increased significantly the amount of loans that were available to students because they'd asked us to increase those numbers in both how much they could borrow for living costs and all those things. We've tried to respond to what the students have asked for. The new program where students can volunteer for bursaries that will help them to gain both the experience in the not-for-profit sector and get bursaries and grants that they can use for their education is a wonderful new program that's only new this year. So I think we're doing a lot of good things for the students and for their finances*

Finally, while remaining on the topic of Question Period, here's one Question from Thursday November 24<sup>th</sup> from Lindsay Blackett:

*Mr. Blackett: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I understand that the minister has asked that postsecondary institutions submit their formal policies for how students will be consulted whenever a new noninstructional fee is considered. However, as recently as this morning students were tweeting about the fact that student consultations on noninstructional fees is not enough. My questions today are to the Minister of Advanced and Technology. Are you going to listen to the students and address these concerns?*

*Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On this issue let me be perfectly clear. We do not support the use of noninstructional fees to circumvent the tuition cap for our postsecondaries in Alberta.*

*Mr. Blackett: Mr. Speaker, my next question is to the same minister. Students are concerned that consultations are really just a heads-up on an increase and not an opportunity for input. How will students provide input?*

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*Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've made it very clear to the postsecondary institutions that I expect them to seek ongoing and meaningful input from the students if they're considering any type of noninstructional fees. That means that the students will have the chance to ensure that fees are truly noninstructional, for real value, and the students get something in return for these fees.*

*Mr. Blackett: Mr. Speaker, my second supplemental is also to the same minister. As my colleague from Calgary-Mackay asked in this House before, why not just regulate noninstructional fees the same way as they do tuition?*

*Mr. Weadick: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have 21 publicly funded postsecondary institutions in this province, and these are very unique institutions. They're rural. They're urban. They cover a very wide cross-section. We don't believe one size fits all. We believe the measure of our success is finding a system that will work in each school, for each set of students, that will provide the opportunity for input and discussion around noninstructional fees.*

## **Student Finance Board**

While the Lindsay Blackett question was being asked at the Legislature, CAUS, ASEC (Alberta Student Executive Council), and AGC (Alberta Graduate Council), was at the Student Finance Board (SFB). The SFB serves as an advisory body to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology with regard to Student Financial Assistance. Each group presented to SFB its lobby priorities for the year, and SFB presented it's priorities to us. I'm glad to report that 2 of SFB priorities this year is increasing Non-Repayable Aid, and Increasing Debt Forgiveness in Alberta Student Loans.

## **Back to Federal Lobbying**

On Friday November 25<sup>th</sup>, I had to put down my provincial hat, and wear a federal one. I met with Minister Tim Uppal as well as Minister Rona Ambrose that day. Minister Ambrose was announcing a new grant for creative ways of prevent violence against women for students on campus. An Rory and I met with Tim Uppal in his constituency office, to lobby on the UASU priorities.

## **The Council of Alberta University Students**

On Tuesday the Council of Alberta University Students met in Calgary for it's 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting of this semester (4<sup>th</sup> total). We discussed some of the progress of GOTV on each of our campuses. Possible plans on how to move forward on Non-Instructional Fees. And we approved a new Job Description for Data Entry for GOTV.

Cheers,  
Farid