

January 1st, 2015

To: Students' Council

Re: Report to Council for January 6th, 2015 Meeting

Dear Council,

Happy New Year! The majority of this report will be my goals update. It is quite extensive, but you can read the highlights on the fourth page. There have been many files I've been working on this year and I hope you take the time to read what I have achieved and have yet to work on!

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Brief Report from End of December

Since my last Council report, a lot has happened in my portfolio. I had another monthly meeting with staff from the Department of Innovation and Advanced Education; I had a couple follow-up meetings regarding the Rally; worked on some internal issues for CAUS such as our strategic plan; and I attended the mid-year management and strategic planning meeting for the Students' Union. The following week, I was out of the country on vacation. Near the tail end of my vacation, **the decision regarding market modifier applications was announced – all proposals except one were approved**. This was incredibly disappointing and frustrating. I did many interviews while I was still out of town even though the Government released this at such an inconvenient time – not only was it released three days before Christmas, it was at the same time as the Wildrose Party's press conference regarding their new leader. Nevertheless, we received a lot of media attention, which I hope to capitalize on now that we're back in the office/in school!

It's almost election season – **for anyone who is considering a run for Executive, you should definitely consider meeting with the Executive** currently occupying the position you seek. It's also beneficial to meet with the rest of the team! As such, we are all setting up job-shadow days. Unfortunately, I don't have many interesting things scheduled for January, and therefore have not chosen a specific day for job shadowing. However, if you're interested in the External portfolio, **get in touch with me and we can set up a meeting(s)!** I'd love to show you the ropes!

Introduction to Goals Update

This has been a particularly challenging year for the external portfolio for a host of reasons; namely due to the chaotic provincial political climate in Alberta. If you refer back to my very first report for the May 20th meeting, you will see that I outline the role of the Alberta provincial government in post-secondary education. They regulate tuition and fees; provide core operating funding for institutions; provide student financial aid in the form of loans, grants, and scholarships; are responsible for the creation/regulation of internships and work programs; and they control legislation regarding residences.

At the start of my term, former Premier Hancock was Minister of Innovation and Advanced Education (IAE). However, in the wake of much political controversy and subsequently, a leadership race, Premier Prentice appointed Minister Don Scott for the portfolio of Advanced Education.

The large budget cuts to the Campus Alberta grant in 2013 set the tone for last year's executive team, but the effects have certainly lingered into this term. Those effects include a greater critical lens towards the Ministry, deteriorating teaching quality at campuses, such as courses being cut and options reduced, as well as tuition increases, particularly for international students and students in specific programs that received the differential tuition hikes.

While Minister Hancock was leading IAE, much of the Department's focus was on reviewing elements of the *Post-Secondary Learning Act*, which is set to expire in 2016. The PSLA is incredibly important to the existence and subsistence of the Students' Union as well as of students in this province. Thus, much of my time during the summer months was spent acting as a representative of the University of Alberta Students' Union (UASU) and the Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS) in internal committees.

Late July was a turning point in UASU's advocacy; this is when I learned that Minister Hancock was looking to re-open the opportunity for institutions to submit "market-modifier" proposals – proposals to increase tuition in a specific program of their choosing. The following months have been dominated by this issue, which finally saw a resolution on December 22nd. 25 out of 26 proposals were approved by now Minister Scott. This was an incredibly upsetting resolution for myself, the rest of the team, as well as student leaders across the province. We are angry and disappointed that the provincial leadership thinks it is appropriate to ask students to pay more whenever there are budget pressures. Especially when many proposals were not thoroughly consulted on, and even where students did not provide support, tuition was increased. **The Government has framed it as being "only 8%" of students that will be affected – that works out to 20,000 students in this province who will have to pay more next year.**

Despite our frustrations, it is not to say that our advocacy efforts had little impact. Maybe they did not influence the final outcomes of the tuition hikes, but **one metric of success I hold close to my heart is that the public – the parents of students and those removed from post-secondary issues – are taking interest in our cause.** This is incredibly important, since it helps make post-secondary education a "voting issue" in Alberta.

For the rest of the term, the key focus will be on fighting for the student voice to be heard, specifically regarding the upcoming tuition hikes. Combined with what will likely be a devastating budget for post-secondary education in this province, it is all the more important that we continue the fight, because that in itself is incredibly important.

Notwithstanding such a dominating narrative for the Alberta political climate, there were a number of opportunities where I was able to pursue my goals and make progress on them. While reading the following pages, **keep in mind the SU's five themes for this year: (1) student success; (2) Affordability; (3) Engaging Community; (4) Growing Partnerships; (5) Building a Better SU.** Each of my individual goals reflects one of these themes.

Goals-at-a-glance

When I ran for this position, I had four themes that captured my goals:

- 1. Improving financial assistance to increase access to PSE**
 - a. Advocate for the promised rural and Aboriginal bursary;
 - i. *Complete; results pending (provincial budget 2015)*
 - b. Reallocate inefficient funding towards up-front granting;
 - i. *Complete; results pending (provincial budget 2015)*
 - c. Strengthen and fully-fund the PSSSP for Aboriginal students;
 - i. *Complete; results pending (federal budget 2015)*
 - d. Start the discussion about reallocating funds used for tax credits;
 - i. *Complete; achieved*
- 2. Strengthen student participation in democracy**
 - a. Make it easier for students to vote in provincial and federal elections;
 - i. *Working on it; on track*
 - b. Engage the student body in a GOTV campaign for the 2015 federal election;
 - i. *Working on it; going slowly but well*
 - c. Commit to consistent student engagement via blog posts;
 - i. *Working on it; could do better*
- 3. Enhance employment and post-graduation opportunities**
 - a. Advocate for a new student summer employment program;
 - i. *Complete; results pending (provincial budget 2015)*
 - b. Exempt in-study income in the Canada Student Loans Program assessment;
 - i. *Complete; results pending (federal budget 2015)*
 - c. Increase Permanent Residence opportunities for international students
 - i. *Incomplete (did what I can); no longer working on it*
- 4. Close loopholes: ensure transparency and protect students' rights**
 - a. Regulate mandatory non-instructional fees (MNIFs);
 - i. *Results pending (IAE committee work); still working on it*
 - b. Regulate the international differential fee;
 - i. *Results pending (IAE committee work); still working on it*
 - c. Look into eliminating residential property taxes on dormitories;
 - i. *Complete; unachieved/results pending (completion of MGA review)*
 - d. Protect students' rights in residence through the Residential Tenancies Act
 - i. *Incomplete; working on it*

Over the course of the year, I added a few more items to my plate:

- a) Advocating on mental health supports;**
 - a. *Continuing advocacy efforts; results pending (provincial budget 2015)*
- b) Advocating for open educational resources**
 - a. *Complete; Results pending*
- c) A project about women in leadership/feminism on campus**
 - a. *Working on it; on track*

Goals In Depth

1. Improving financial assistance to increase access to PSE

1. a) Advocate for the promised rural and Aboriginal bursary – complete; results pending

Affordability

The goal here was to lobby members of the provincial government to fulfill their promise of implementing a bursary program for rural and Aboriginal students, in the form of non-repayable up-front grants. CAUS has made this a priority and has been discussing it quite consistently during our lobby meetings this year. There is limited traction with this ask, seeing as it was introduced when Premier Redford was in office. We will not know for certain until the provincial budget is released, but for now, I have pushed for this.

1. b) Reallocate inefficient funding towards up-front granting – complete; results pending

Affordability

I promised I would start discussions as to how Alberta can improve its financial aid system. Generally speaking, universal programs, such as the Completion Grant Program, are inefficient, and should be re-invested as up-front grants. CAUS has made this a priority, and we have and will continue to advocate that an up-front grant program replace the system of back-end grants. We await the outcome of the provincial budget, and I am hopeful to see something positive here.

1. c) Strengthen & fully-fund the PSSSP for Aboriginal students – complete; results pending

Affordability

My goal was to work with our federal lobby organization, the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) to advocate to the federal government to remove the two percent funding cap on the Post-Secondary Student Support Program in order to fully fund the program. Unfortunately, this request did not have much traction with many Members of Parliament that we met with during our advocacy week in Ottawa. However, we await the release of the budget.

1. d) Start the discussion about reallocating funds used for tax-credits – complete; achieved

Affordability

Tax credits are an inefficient and ineffective way of using taxpayer money to achieve the goals of access and affordability for postsecondary education. Both the provincial and federal governments use education-related tax credits. My goal was to work with CASA to discuss appropriate avenues for tax-credit reform. Prior to November 21st, 2014, CASA did not have a stance on federal education tax credits. Since the summer, I have been lobbying other members of CASA on a policy that advocates for the reallocation of funds used for tax credits towards up-front granting. I am really proud to say that during the plenary session of CASA's advocacy week, I got this policy passed. This means that in subsequent years, CASA members will be allowed to lobby on this point.

In addition to the above items, I helped reform Student Council's political policies regarding student financial aid – we now have one comprehensive policy as compared to four separate ones.

2. Strengthen student participation in democracy

2. a) Make it easier for students to vote in provincial and federal elections – working on it; going well

Building and Engaging Community

The goal was to work with relevant stakeholders to carry forward the success of the recent municipal election polling stations for the upcoming provincial and federal elections. In the summer, I met with a representative from Elections Alberta asking about the option of multi-constituency polls on campus. However, there was little movement, since changes have to be made to the *Alberta Elections Act* first. I will revisit this file in the winter semester.

Federally, I've been working with Elections Canada to set up multi-constituency polls at the University of Alberta campus for the upcoming federal election in 2015. I'm currently working with a representative to ensure they have all the support they need in making this happen. I will work more closely on this file starting in the winter semester.

2. b) Engage the student body in a GOTV campaign for the 2015 federal election – working on it; going slowly but well

Building and Engaging Community

My goal was to work with CASA to develop a Get Out the Vote Campaign/Strategy for the 2015 federal election. CASA is currently working on this, and as presented to Council at a former Council meeting, the University of Alberta Students' Union will be participating. The election likely won't happen during my term, and as such, it will require preparatory work this year and a strong transition to next year's executive.

2. c) Commit to a high level of student engagement – working on it; could be better

Building and Engaging Community

I committed to reaching out to the student body regularly through the use of social media and blog posts. I admit that I could do a better job on this. I've learned that blog posts may not be the best option, but I did publish one outlining what exactly a market modifier is and what it means for students, which did have a high readership. I do believe I've had a very strong presence on Twitter and other social media networks. However, reach here is limited. The monthly SU newsletter has also been really effective at reaching out to students about key initiatives. Finally, I have hosted federal NDP MPs on campus as well as our PC MLA for Edmonton-Riverview, Steve Young. I think there have been a number of opportunities for student engagement, but it is something I would like to improve next semester, particularly for the satellite campuses.

We hosted a rally, which saw a reported 300+ students in attendance, which is quite good given that we only had two weeks to plan and execute the event. I'm happy with the fact that students were engaged, but of course, it is not nearly enough given a campus of almost 30,000 students.

3. Enhance employment and post-graduation opportunities

3. a) Advocate for a new student summer employment program – complete; results pending

Affordability

I committed to working with CAUS to lobby the provincial government for a new and improved student summer employment program, since the previous program had been cut. Currently, Alberta is the only province in Canada without such a program, which is troubling. I have been lobbying on this file since the summer. The provincial government *is* working on a program, but from what I've seen thus far, it is not as good as it can be. We'll know more once the provincial budget is released. Prior to the drop in oil prices, they were quite certain that a new program would be released, but I'm not sure what we'll see moving forward.

3. b) Exempt in-study income in the Canada Student Loans Program assessment – complete; results pending

Affordability

The goal was to work with CASA to continue this conversation with the federal government, seeing as it has been a perennial ask. Fortunately, every single Member of Parliament that we lobbied was receptive to this, even the Conservative MPs. The federal government has made incremental improvements to the CSLP over the years so this is a logical next step. Furthermore, they appreciate that this helps students participate in the workforce.

3. c) Increase Permanent Residence opportunities for international students – incomplete; not working on it

Student Success

Though CASA has pushed for this in the past, it was not a priority this year. Therefore, I doubt we will see results in the budget. The goal was to push for an increased number of international students to be accepted as Permanent Residents. Furthermore, seeing as the upcoming months will involve a lot of work at the provincial level, I will not be dedicating more time to working on this file.

4. Close loopholes: ensure transparency and protect students' rights

4. a) Regulate mandatory non-instructional fees – results pending; still working on it

Affordability

As is the case most years, the SU as well as CAUS have dedicated a lot of time lobbying on this file. It has been a core part of our messaging, especially in light of the market modifiers announcements. Part of the internal government committee work throughout the summer involved discussing MNIFs at both a high level as well as at a nitty-gritty level. The results of this work are supposed to amount to a renewed and strengthened Guidelines document for all post-secondary institutions to follow. It was supposed to be out before the holiday break, but the Ministry said they need more time. I'm hoping we get results next month.

Internally, VP Hodgson and President Lau have started the conversation about potentially changing the structure of MNIFs at the UofA. I have been involved in these discussions to an extent, though most of my work has been on the external front. We did have some traction on this, especially due to former