

Alberta stands at a crossroads, politically and economically. We have just come out of the worst recession in nearly a century and have done so without losing the necessary tools to keep our province great. Our government remains debt-free, we are blessed with unparalleled natural resources and most importantly, Albertans are ready to do great things.

The choices we make in the coming months are going to be vital for the future of our province. Our universities, colleges, technical institutes and most importantly, the graduates of those institutions are going to be the driving force of our economy and society. We need to make sure that we are doing everything we can to get more Albertans into post-secondary education and ensure they complete their studies.

The Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS) believe the heart of our recovery starts with making our post-secondary system more affordable and accessible for students - as well as ensuring our students are free of barriers to participating in our society both during their studies and after they graduate.

To do that, we are suggesting four steps for the Government of Alberta to take in the coming months to accomplish those goals:

- **Regulate non-instructional fees to prevent institutions unfairly gouging students;**
- **Close the loophole around the tuition cap, guaranteeing the cost of education is predictable for Alberta's students and their families;**
- **Reduce student debt after graduation and offer more grants and bursaries; and**
- **Make it easier for students to vote by allowing them to identify their ordinary residence and having polling stations on campus.**

Setting the rules on tuition and fees

The rules around tuition and fees in Alberta have been eroded in the past year. As a result, students are paying more for their education than ever before, and face uncertainty on those costs moving forward. Tuition increases, initially tied to CPI, are going up in specific programs dramatically - in some cases as high as 70%. We need to re-establish reasonable, predictable limits on tuition increases. CAUS has always believed tuition limits belong in legislation which was removed in 2006. Since then, the limit has been removed not just from legislation, but now the Minister of Advanced Education can permit increases without cabinet or legislative approval. Such an important policy needs to be front and centre, open and transparent, for Alberta's families as they plan for post-secondary education.

Tuition in Alberta is above the national average. The average Alberta undergraduate pays \$5,318 a year in tuition - but it can be as high as \$19,630 depending on the program.

Those are not the only fees paid by students to their school - non-instructional fees have skyrocketed in Alberta during the recession. Students at the University of Calgary and the University of Alberta have seen new \$450 and \$290 fees respectively. The rules

What you can do to help

- **Bring up student concerns about regulating fees in your caucus or in committee**
- **Ask a question in question period on whether any tuition increases will be allowed beyond CPI for fall 2011**
- **Discuss policies that reduce student debt with your constituency association or political party**
- **Write the Minister of Justice saying you support changes to the Elections Act that make it easier for students to vote**

around non-instructional fees are slight, with only department guidance that these fees may not be levied for instruction. Items such as snow removal, air handling and registration services are now being charged for rather than being considered a part of operating a campus. This is wrong.

Institutions need government leadership to ensure fairness by requiring student approval before implementing these fees. Prior to 2009 our campuses all had a collegial tradition of sending new fees and increasing to existing fees other than tuition to referendum, a tradition that needs to be restored. To that end, we are proposing all fees be subject to either an affirmative vote by the student council or by referendum of the students affected, rules that would be established within regulation.

You can read more about the need to regulate non-instructional fees and how it would work online at <http://www.caus.net/publications/fees/>.

Reducing student debt

Alberta's student financial aid system was once among the best in Canada, offering a good ratio of grants and bursaries compared to student loans. The economic downturn has not been kind to the system with grants, bursaries and debt relief programs having been cut or reduced by \$91 million annually since 2009.

Student debt is too high in Alberta. When factoring in private debt graduates are leaving their studies with an average debt of \$24,305 and many will see debt as high as \$150,000 depending on their program.

CAUS believes our student financial aid system needs to refocus and focus on two areas to improve:

- Reduce a greater amount of debt upon graduation in a way that is offered to all who borrow and is predictable to all who enter the system
- Introduce more needs-based up-front grants that encourage enrolment and completion

Student debt deters many who otherwise would go on to university, especially rural Albertans. It also makes it less likely a student will finish their program - with the most indebted the least likely to graduate. Ultimately Alberta's economic prosperity will suffer if we don't replace our educated workforce as baby boomers retire.

Making it easier for students to vote

Casting a ballot in the next general election is the most basic and important way for Albertans to have their voice heard. Unfortunately for students there are more barriers to voting than other citizens. That contributes directly to the low voter turnout among Albertans under the age of 24. Only 37% of these Albertans voted in 2008.

Post-secondary students are identified within the Elections Act as being required to vote in their family's constituency if they are studying away from home. The reality is that most university students never return home after leaving to go to school and in any case they remain the best judge of where they consider their ordinary residence. The Elections Act should reflect that reality and allow students to declare whether they wish to vote in the constituency where they are studying or where they lived before university.

Getting people to vote where they are in their daily routines will also improve our voter turnout. For example a polling station was set up at the University of Calgary in the 2010 municipal election. At that station any Calgarian could vote in the mayoral and aldermanic races regardless of the ward they lived in. Such an opportunity on our campuses in the next provincial election would be a fantastic improvement and was among the recommendations of Elections Alberta following the 2008 election.

You can read more about the need to reform Alberta's election laws and make it easier for students online at <http://www.caus.net/publications/elections/>.

Who is CAUS?

CAUS represents the interests of over 70,000 university students across Alberta. We represent undergraduate students from the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge to the public, government and other post-secondary education stakeholders.

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