

Alberta is facing an exciting and interesting year politically and economically as our province will see new leaders for many of its political parties, a new Premier and their government, a recovering economy and the chance of a provincial election on the horizon.

It is an interesting year at Alberta's universities as well, with increased enrolment, exciting research and education opportunities. There are also challenges for our students, with ever-increasing costs putting at risk the opportunities many Albertans will have to attend a post-secondary institution and complete their studies.

Most importantly, this year represents an unparalleled opportunity for our province and our post-secondary students. The economic challenges have reinforced the need to invest in post-secondary education and its students in order to have a diverse, knowledge-based economy that can thrive in a global marketplace.

There are also more opportunities for students to get involved in their communities with the potential election and other political developments. Now represents the right time for our students to take notice and have their voice heard in deciding our future.

## Who we are

The Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS) represents the over 70,000 undergraduate students at the University of Alberta, University of Calgary and University of Lethbridge to the government, the public and to other stakeholders.

We are elected student leaders from all three institutions, who run in elections and govern our individual students' unions in order to improve the services we provide students. We are also advocates on behalf of our students, to university administrations, the government and the greater community.

Each of our executive members was elected on an election platform that speaks to the need for investment in our institutions. This year's priorities reflect those mandates.

## How we set priorities

Each year our members gather at the beginning of our terms to talk about what priorities we have for the year, based on our platforms and what is going on at our individual campuses and within the greater Alberta post-secondary system.

Our executives looked at their priorities and their election platforms and noted the common elements of the opportunity to advocate for substantial change but as well building on the work of past years to address some long standing issues that our students have.

Making the case for increased investment and making a long-term commitment to Albertans in regards to post-secondary education is certainly not a small-task, and is one that CAUS will need to mobilize as much support as possible from our student body as well as in our communities to make post-secondary education a priority.

## Increasing Alberta's post-secondary participation rate

### Increase affordability

The cost of attending a post-secondary education institution is a major barrier for many and is a reason for our poor post-secondary participation rate. Financial barriers can take many forms, from concerns over the final debt load after graduation to worries about how a student will make ends meet and pay tuition while they are in school.

With the goal of improving Alberta's post-secondary participation rate - indeed, we believe that we should set the goal of leading Canada in our participation rate within the decade - we need to overhaul our student financial aid system to provide more upfront grants as well as take the necessary steps to lower the financial costs of going to university, college or a technical institute.

It makes good financial sense for the provincial government as well, decreasing our reliance on importing skilled labour and increasing the available resources from income taxes into the future.

### **Encourage completion**

It is not good enough just to encourage students to enroll in post-secondary education, we need to do more to ensure that students have the resources necessary to finish their programs successfully.

Today only 63% of undergraduate students will successfully complete their bachelor's degree in Alberta. The loss felt by not finishing their program is not just felt by the student who leaves but from the lost investment by the province who contributes directly to the education of the student as well.

We are proposing encouraging completion by offering greater debt relief to successful graduates than is presently available. Far too many students graduate with high debt loads and far too many are leaving before they finish because they are unwilling to take on more debt. Offering debt relief as an incentive for successfully getting a credential is a direct way Alberta can improve our post-secondary completion rate.

### **Our immediate priorities for 2011/12**

#### **Regulate non-instructional mandatory fees**

Starting last September, the University of Alberta and University of Calgary began collecting new non-instructional fees to avoid large budget shortfalls.

These new arbitrary fees were done with scant student consultation and outside of the current government regulations covering educational costs. We continue to demand that the Government of Alberta close this legal loophole and allow students a direct say in what non-instructional fees are levied either through a referendum or approval by students council.

#### **Increase non-repayable grants**

Non-repayable grants are the best tool to reducing financial barriers available to government, and they allow new money to be targeted, to easily measure results and ultimately they work.

With drastic cuts to grants and debt relief in the 2010 and 2011 provincial budgets students are facing unprecedented debt levels upon graduation and we fear many more are choosing to not ever attend in the first place. That is why we are calling for the restoration of grant funding in a program that is upfront, needs-based and substantial.

### **Improve Alberta's *Elections Act***

With a record low turnout in the last election we need to be doing everything we can to encourage Albertans to vote. Unfortunately our Elections Act and the policies governing elections are long overdue for changes.

CAUS has put forward five ideas to improve our system:

- Allow students to choose between their home during studies and their family home to be their ordinary residence;
- Establish advance voting stations on campus;
- Permit advance voting for all electoral divisions at any advance voting station;
- Select returning officers earlier; and
- Have Elections Alberta work with students unions to encourage voter turnout

### **How You Can Help**

CAUS has already begun advocating on these priorities to government, but we need your help to make these priorities a reality for our system.

We are also beginning the work necessary for organizing students to vote in the next provincial election. It is important that the over 250,000 students in Alberta stand up and be counted and CAUS and we are ready to do its part in getting students out to the polls in the next election.

Other interested stakeholders - institutions, faculty, support staff, K-12 stakeholders, and other student groups - need to join in the call to protect access to and the quality of our public institutions.

### **Contact Us**

Zack Moline, Chair  
403-329-2221 / su.president@uleth.ca

Farid Iskandar, Vice-Chair  
780-492-4236 / vp.external@su.ualberta.ca

Duncan Wojtaszek, Executive Director  
780-297-4531 / duncan@caus.net

#2, 9908 - 109 Street Edmonton, AB T5K 1H5  
www.caus.net