

All around the globe societies are facing change at a faster pace than ever before, becoming more integrated and interdependent. Those changes are not just economical or technological, but also social. As baby boomers enter retirement age, and Canada's population becomes more diverse Albertans must choose the quality of life they would like to lead. Alberta has guided the country before with our well-embedded values of self-dependence and building strong interconnected communities. It is now time for Alberta to show the way again with a new social framework. Equal opportunity, entrepreneurship, and empowering those who are most vulnerable are some of the values we share.

Applying those values in our social policies requires more than just funding. Interpersonal relationships that start with parenting and continue through education are integral to any small or large community. From the experience we have seen from our members a post-secondary education is more than a degree that helps you in the job market; it transforms the way we think, what we believe, and how we act. Most importantly it shines a light on the importance of the diversity of people in our lives.

The benefits of post-secondary education are well documented, spanning from improved income and health, to increased participation in the community. Although higher education is a vehicle through which social mobility is possible, too often access to post-secondary education is blocked to those from the lowest income brackets. If we do not take a stand to ensure that society prioritizes post-secondary education, those currently under-represented and not in the system will continue to be shut out.

OPPORTUNITIES TO ATTEND

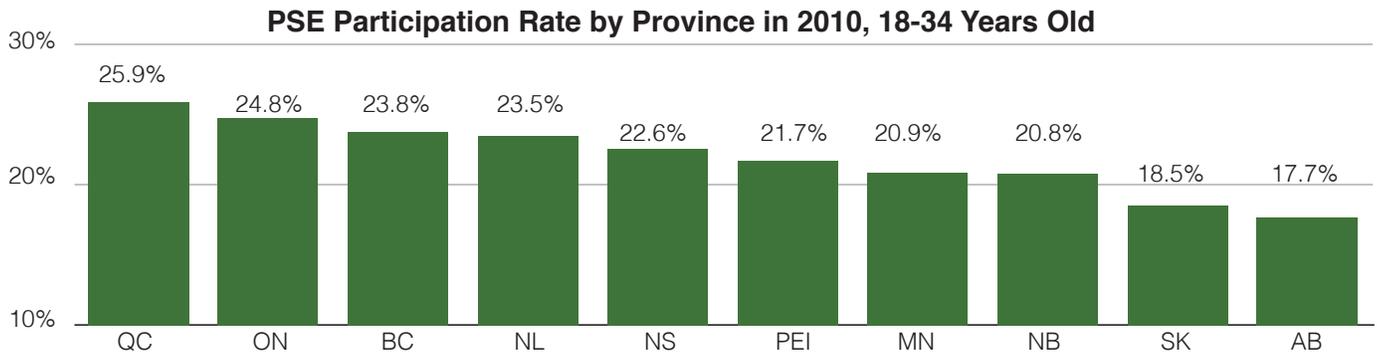
Alberta's Social Policy Framework needs to make education a cornerstone in addressing social challenges by offering opportunities to Albertans, especially those in poverty and other at-risk situations. Working with both Alberta Education, and

Alberta Enterprise and Advanced Education the Government of Alberta offers opportunities to both young and adult learners to obtain education and skills but in many cases we are missing out on the great potential in our communities.

Today, Alberta has the lowest post-secondary participation rate and the highest high school drop out rate in Canada - fewer Albertans go on to formal education than in any other province. To achieve our goals as a province - including gains in social outcomes like housing, employment, safety, and child care - we need to improve these dismal statistics by offering more opportunities and removing the barriers to Albertans to reach their potential.

Increasing opportunities in Alberta's post-secondary education system first takes planning, and we are taking the right first steps through infrastructure investment. Starting in 2004, Alberta began increasing capital investment on our campuses. From 2004 to 2008, matching that capital investment with operating funding increases that allowed capacity and enrolment to increase in the system. As a result enrolment jumped from 245,244 in 2003 to 267,373 in 2010. In 2018/19, a projected 14,445 more Full Load Equivalent (FLEs) will be entering our post-secondary system. But we are still dealing with a system that operates at near 100% capacity and still falls short in terms of offering a spot to every qualified Albertans who wants to pursue post-secondary education.

We need to do more than just create spots - we need to remove the barriers to accessing those seats. Academic barriers and financial barriers are the most often cited reasons for not attending by young Albertans who do not enroll in post-secondary education following high school, and often those barriers go hand in hand. We need to do a better job of dealing with those barriers early in young Albertans lives, especially those Albertans in at-risk situations.



Source: Campus Alberta Planning Resource, September 2011

CAUS has been proposing introducing a new system of upfront non-repayable grants to encourage new student enrollment and are pleased to see progress on that front with new initiatives designed to introduce bursaries targeting rural and aboriginal Albertans that are hoping to be introduced in the 2013 provincial budget. The natural next step would be looking at low income Albertans who are graduating high school and or looking at expanding bursaries and scholarships available to those Albertans under the guardianship of the province when they turn 18. Targeted upfront non-repayable aid continues to be the best tool we have to encourage enrollment and completion - better than back end tools such as tax credits or even universal tools like tuition relief, and when dealing with limited resources and specific social goals, we want to get the most for public funds.

In any case, focusing on education, from kindergarten to providing opportunities in post-secondary education needs to be a priority for Alberta's Social Policy Framework. The goal needs to be not just meeting the basic human needs for each member of our society but to offer each member the opportunity to meet their full potential and only education offers the solution.

OPPORTUNITIES TO SUCCEED

Being a post-secondary student and living in poverty is a cliché, often considered by many a right of passage, but it is also a major barrier to success and unnecessary in Alberta. Students at

our universities, colleges, and technical institutes come from a diversity of situations and backgrounds but all need to study in an environment they know is safe and secure and comes with the knowledge that they know that they will have the opportunity to complete their program without worrying where their next meal will come from or how the roof over their head will be paid for.

The current system focuses on a joint system of student financial aid provided by the federal and provincial governments and administered by the provincial government. For the most part, this system has served Albertan students well. Improvements over the past decade have increased access to student aid by increasing the amount of available aid, reducing the amount of resources that count against a student's award, and putting more of the application process online.

There also exists a system of non-repayable assistance - scholarships, bursaries, and grants - which we believe needs expanding in order to reduce debt loads upon completion as well as inspire entry into the system in the first place. As a result of the global economic downturn, our provincial system of debt relief, grants, and bursaries has been cut in favour of increased loans. This move has come at a cost of increasing debt and an overall increase in the cost of education that has in turn, discouraged many from pursuing an education.

The opportunity now is to rebalance that equation in favour of non-repayable aid.

It is also important that in implementing Alberta's new Social Policy Framework we keep what has been working in our system. Reviewing what has been drafted by Alberta Human Services in the Social Policy Framework development process to date discusses principles such as offering services under a single roof or even within a single government department. However, for Alberta's university undergraduate students the service of financial aid has been well-served being provided as a joint program by the Government of Canada and Government of Alberta through Alberta Enterprise and Advanced Education and any moves away from this traditional arrangement would need to be well thought out and come after careful study. However, ensuring that all Albertans have easy and direct access to student financial aid - regardless of their age and previous education is a necessary and important goal for increasing Alberta's post-secondary education participation rate and should be incorporated in our Social Policy Framework.

There is a hidden cost to poverty and other social issues on campus as well, as reflected in the services offered on campus. For example, we know from our campus food banks, currently being used at higher rates than ever before, that there is a direct correlation exists between the economic situation in the province and food bank use. There is also a direct correlation between the cost of getting a university education and campus food bank use. Another example is mental health services where we see the necessity of offering this crucial support service on campus and that service being provided from within the campus community. Here too we can see that a Social Policy Framework would benefit the campus and students by tackling greater social problems. that will reduce pressures on campus but it is crucial that we recognize the important, local, and vital role these services play on campus today.

OPPORTUNITIES TO CONTRIBUTE

Alberta's university students have an important contribution to make to Alberta's Social Policy Framework - namely, graduates. We will be the backbone of our community's future - and we are excited about being a part of the solution to the issues facing our society today.

The goals for Alberta's Social Policy Framework are ambitious, such as ending poverty in ten years. How are we going to meet such lofty expectations? It is going to take action in many different directions but one of the main thrusts must be post-secondary education. We need to educate individuals to help them reach their full potential, we are going to need smart individuals to develop, plan, and implement Alberta's social policy along the way.

By embracing the goal of increasing our post-secondary participation rate, we will be investing in Alberta's future. Today's graduates will become community leaders, mentors, and entrepreneurs for tomorrow's generation who in turn will inspire a new wave of prosperity and social equality for the entire community.

WHO IS CAUS

UNLOCKING ALBERTA'S POTENTIAL

The Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS) represents 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.

Based in Edmonton, CAUS is a non-partisan and active advocacy group looking to ensure an accessible and quality post-secondary education system in Alberta. CAUS is committed to:

- Representing, promoting and defending common interests of Alberta university students;
- Seeking a fully accessible, high quality system of education in Alberta;
- Promoting and supporting the provision of effective student services;
- Providing a forum for the exchange of information among Alberta post-secondary students;
- Representing Alberta university students to all levels of government with a united voice; and
- Promoting the importance of an accessible education system.

University of Calgary Students' Union

Raphael Jacob, CAUS Chair and VP External
Hardave Birk, President
403-220-3910 / suvpext@ucalgary.ca

University of Alberta Students' Union

Petros Kusmu, CAUS Vice-Chair and VP External
Colten Yamagishi, President
780-492-4236 / vp.external@su.ualberta.ca

University of Lethbridge Students' Union

Armin Escher, President
Julia Adolf, VP Academic
403-329-2221 / su.president@uleth.ca

CAUS Office

Duncan Wojtaszek, Executive Director
780-297-4531 / duncan@caus.net
www.caus.net
#2, 9908 – 109 Street NW
Edmonton, Alberta
T5K 1H5

MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS