

The Government of Alberta's next budget is an important one for our province – it is following a general election and will set the tone for the government's mandate for the next few years and will lay the groundwork for our province in the coming decade.

The Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS), representing undergraduate students from the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, and the University of Lethbridge is pleased to offer the perspective of our students into key strategies that will help deliver the results both learners and the government are expecting from our post-secondary system.

STUDENTS RECOMMEND:

- Dedicating the Access to the Future Fund for matching scholarships for post-secondary students;
- Applying the principles of open data into our post-secondary system;
- Establishing the rural and Aboriginal student bursary promised in the 2012 election.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The 2013 provincial budget is an opportunity to reflect on our province's policies related to savings and endowment funds. This opportunity has been reflected in the consultation in advance of the budget to date. Our long-term strategy regarding the use of our resources is an important discussion and one that compliments the long-term value that investing in post-secondary education represents.

The Access to the Future Fund is a post-secondary education endowment fund that at \$1.35 billion is a significant asset though it has faced some challenges since its inception in 2005. Intended to match grants from private industry and individuals, the fund found itself overextended and overcommitted and funding drawing from the fund was suspended until the 2013 budget. With that

timeline coming to a close and the \$45 million in annual funding from the fund returning to Alberta Enterprise and Advanced Education's budget we suggest that the Access to the Future Fund change its funding formula to focus more on the learners of the system and to avoid future problems of overcommitting itself.

As of 2009, the Access to the Future Fund had used 24% of its funding towards scholarships. By focusing on students rather than more open criteria we can leverage more for the public dollars in the fund and cope with a fund that found itself more popular than the current levels of funding allow. Our conversations with current and potential donors and institutions strongly suggest that the fund will continue to meet its mandate by encouraging individual Albertans and private industry to donate to our post-secondary system and have their donations matched in part by the government. It would allow us to ensure that 100% of the funding goes to the most important part of our post-secondary system - students.

GETTING AND MEASURING RESULTS

Text Implementing the concept of results-based budgeting over the next two years in Alberta is an important step for public finances, and one that needs solid data in order to work. Unfortunately, Canadian public post-secondary education has been lacking exactly that for the past decade thus we have not been able to give decision-makers and stakeholders the tools they need to set the right goals and measure our progress.

Through last year's budget process CAUS along with other stakeholders called on the Government of Alberta to do more when it came to collecting and reporting on data in our post-secondary system. In response, the provincial government has begun the process of implementing greater degrees of transparency and open data, but we still have improvements that could be made, especially in the post-secondary sector.

UNLOCKING ALBERTA'S POTENTIAL

Alberta's Campus Alberta Planning Resource, an annual publication that highlights the enrolment goals for the entire system and reports on what extent those goals have been met, is a great example of improvement over the last five years. CAUS would like to see more data put out into the public realm from the Government of Alberta. We would like to see an expansion of the list of topics beyond just enrolment and include student financial aid use, public funding to institutions and the formulae used to establish those figures. Equally important is allocating more resources towards analyzing the return on our investment. We proposed an arms-length agency, similar to the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, to take the greater amount of publicly available data and turn it around to answer the question of what Albertans are getting in return for their investment, and where we need to be focusing our resources for even greater returns.

INCREASING POST-SECONDARY PARTICIPATION

In the 2012 provincial election the Progressive Conservatives made a promise to address our poor post-secondary participation rate, and to do so by directly reaching out to two groups underrepresented within our post-secondary education system: rural and Aboriginal Albertans. By introducing a new bursary starting with the 2013 provincial budget and spending \$18 million in the 2013/14 budget year we will have a powerful tool to encourage those not yet in our post-secondary system to enroll.

Through our research this summer we discovered what works and what does not when it comes to targeting a bursary for these two groups. We have several recommendations to ensure that the bursary meets the goals set out by the program and meets the results that Alberta Enterprise and Advanced Education is looking for.

Our recommendations for the bursary program include:

- Using the existing Student Aid Alberta application process to collect applications to the new bursary program;
- Establishing the criteria for "coming from rural Alberta" as students coming from communities with populations under 10,000;
- Allowing all First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students to self-identify as Aboriginal in order to apply for the bursary;
- Allowing students to be eligible for the bursary for up to four years of study in programs that are at least two years in length; and
- Setting the size of the award to \$2,500 per year for rural students and \$4,000 per year for Aboriginal students.

It is vital that the program is not too small to make a difference and does not take advantage of already existing programs that can be used to help provide this funding to students.

Our recommendations are based upon the research done in conjunction with the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation and our experiences with the Millennium Alberta Rural Incentive Bursary, which was a pilot program in 2006 to 2009. You can find more by reading Towards a Representative Post-Secondary Community, our paper on increasing access to rural and Aboriginal students in Alberta at www.caus.net/advocacy/access.

WHO IS CAUS

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.

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