



Creating Opportunities for Albertans

Priorities for Strengthening Post-Secondary Education - July 2013

Post-secondary institutions in Alberta have recently been challenged with a series of financial hardships. In the wake of budget cuts, the future of post-secondary education in our province is uncertain as its leaders face difficult choices. As student leaders we look forward to aiding in the process of improving post-secondary education in Alberta.

WHO WE ARE

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

As elected student leaders from all three institutions we advocate on behalf of our students to university administrations, the government and the greater community. We also govern our individual students' unions in order to improve the services and the student experience at our own institutions.

Our students elected us on platforms advocating a consistent, affordable and predictable post-secondary education system. Our priorities reflect those mandates.

2013/14 PRIORITIES

Mandatory Non-Instructional Fee Regulation

Over the last several years, many of Alberta's post-secondary institutions have used unregulated non-instructional fees to make up for fiscal shortfalls. In 2010, the U of A and the U of C respectively approved \$290 and \$450 annual fees. During the 2012/13 academic year the University of Lethbridge approved a 300% increase to its Student Services Fee.

These new mandatory general fees are being levied over and above tuition and often do not offer any discernible value or "services" to students. The lack of transparency and shifting explanations for which services the fees are used to fund must be addressed by establishing clear rules in provincial regulation.

Students are not opposed to certain fees, when they are used to fund services or projects of value to

them. For example, our campuses have introduced fees to cover valuable services, like universal transit passes, and to help fund needed capital projects. However, each of these fees was implemented only after approval by student referendum. In keeping with this practice, we believe that students are still the best judges of the value received from any newly proposed fee or fee increase.

CAUS continues to call on government to regulate non-instructional fees, allowing for fee increases only after student approval either through referendum or, at minimum, a vote at our students' councils.

Non-Repayable Student Financial Aid

Since 2009, Alberta has shifted away from a mixed system of loans, debt relief, bursaries, and grants to a system focused primarily on financial aid in the form of loans and student debt. Additionally, Alberta currently has the lowest post-secondary participation rate in Canada at just over 17%.

In recognition of these problems, the Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta promised a \$17 million bursary directed towards under-represented rural and aboriginal Albertans during the 2012 election.

CAUS is committed to working with Alberta Enterprise and Advanced Education to ensure implementation of this promised program helps remove barriers for these under-represented groups. Further, CAUS recommends that the provincial government establish new forms of non-repayable aid to bring the student financial aid system back into balance and encourage greater participation.

Tuition - Stable, Predictable Model Needed

Current and future students, and the families that help support them, need certainty when planning for the costs of obtaining a post-secondary education. Since the early 1990's tuition in Alberta has nearly tripled in real dollars, controlling for inflation. In recognition of the impact of these significant increases, the province tied tuition to inflation in 2006, a policy commonly referred to as the tuition cap.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALBERTANS

While CAUS believes the tuition cap provides a fair, predictable model, in 2010, specific, one-time exceptions called “market modifiers” were allowed to account for discrepancies resulting from freezing tuition in 2004, and the loophole allowing future modifiers remains open. Following a strong commitment by the Premier to maintain a long-term tuition cap and to freeze tuition this year, the time has come to close the loophole on future increases beyond the cap.

Tying tuition to CPI is a clear choice for students and their families. Students are calling for the tuition cap to be put back into the Post-Secondary Learning Act.

Updating the Post-Secondary Learning Act

The Ministry of Enterprise and Advanced Education has indicated that the Government of Alberta will be reviewing the Post Secondary Learning Act (PSLA) in the upcoming year. It is imperative that the current standards outlined in the PSLA are maintained and that further advancements are made to ensure students have an affordable education and strong representation. CAUS is committed to making substantive contributions on behalf of students during the consultation process on the PSLA.

Student representation at our institutions is crucial for the protection of student interests as both key stakeholders and shareholders, and increasing student representation at the governing bodies of our institution is a necessary step in ensuring this. Additionally, in order to reinforce the legitimacy, independence and autonomy of our Students’ Unions – the sole respected voice of representation for students – administrative oversight from our institutions should be re-evaluated.

As stated previously, CAUS believes that the tuition and fees students pay should be addressed directly in the PSLA. CAUS calls on the Government of Alberta to make a lasting commitment to the existing tuition cap regulation by including it in the act. New rules surrounding the established practice of requiring student approval for non-instructional fee increases must also be firmly cemented in the act.

Student Employment

Prior to the recent cuts to Alberta’s Summer Temporary Employment Program (STEP), our

province proudly possessed one of the best student summer employment programs in the country. Since its inception in 1972, STEP provided hourly wage subsidies for students working in the public and non-profit sectors. STEP encouraged these sectors to create summer student positions which provided students with valuable experience. The application of academic skills in practical contexts through STEP positions made it easier for many students to enter the job market in a position related to their field of study after graduation.

The recent cuts to STEP leave Alberta as the only province without a provincial student employment program. While Alberta’s economy is strong, incentives are required to encourage employers to take on the investment of hiring students, for both temporary and full-time entry level roles.

CAUS believes that the province should create a new student employment program which extends beyond the summer months and is geared towards developing and implementing skills learned in study.

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 public post-secondary system. We encourage decision-makers from across Alberta to bring up post-secondary education when considering our province’s priorities. Together we can make a highly skilled workforce and an educated population where everyone has the opportunity to succeed at the centre of our economic and social strategies.

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