



BUDGET
SUBMISSION
2015/2016

SEPTEMBER 2015

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS) represents over 100,000 undergraduate university students in Alberta. Unlocking the potential of every student represents our single best hope in ensuring a bright and prosperous future for our province. Today's students will go on to become the health care workers who look after our elderly, the engineers who build our infrastructure, the entrepreneurs and innovators who create jobs that don't yet exist using technology yet to be developed. In short, they are the ones who will create and fill the jobs in Alberta's diversified, 21st century economy.

For too many years, Alberta has balanced its budget on the backs of our most vulnerable citizens, including students. While significant challenges are presented by falling oil prices and the recession, sustaining an affordable, high-quality post-secondary education system is a critical piece of the solution to create opportunities and ensure fairness for all Albertans.

While Bill 3 took several important steps toward stabilizing post-secondary education funding, our institutions absorbed the largest cuts to the post-secondary system in the last twenty years. The cuts resulted in: fewer class offerings, larger class sizes, increased reliance on sessional instructors, staff layoffs, and recently, failed schemes to raise tuition and mandatory non-instructional fees. In order to fully reverse the cuts made by the former government, there is still work to do.

Over the long-term, students are thrilled at the opportunity to work with the Government of Alberta to address many of the critical issues affecting post-secondary. In the short-term, students recommend seven solutions which will make a big impact but suit the current economic climate. By making better choices we can begin to move in the right direction once again.

For Budget 2015 / 2016, CAUS recommends the following:

- Finalizing the removal of loopholes in the Public Post-Secondary Institutions' Tuition Fees Regulation that allow for market modifiers.
- Utilizing the two-year tuition freeze period to create a lasting, legislated framework for tuition and mandatory non-instructional fees.
- Ensuring that institutions are held accountable for how they originally proposed to spend the funds received as a result of cancelling market modifier tuition increases.
- Providing ongoing support for student mental health through per-student funding for services, programs, and initiatives provided on the campuses of all publicly funded Alberta universities.
- Fulfilling the NDP campaign promise to establish a Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP) that includes key changes to improve the program's effectiveness.
- Increasing non-repayable student financial aid through upfront grants.
- Establishing an arms-length research agency to better understand the unique opportunities and challenges of our post-secondary system.

TUITION & MANDATORY NON-INSTRUCTIONAL FEES

The passing of Bill 3 during the first session of the 29th legislature was a strong signal of the government's commitment to post-secondary education. Students were delighted to see: the 1.4% cut to institutions proposed in the 2015 PC budget reversed, funding for institutions increased by 2%, all market modifiers approved in 2014 cancelled, and institutions directed to freeze increases to mandatory non-instructional fees during the two-year tuition freeze period.

While students are supportive of these initial steps, large questions remain in their minds about what will happen to tuition following the freeze. Students worry that we could see large tuition increases as was the case in Saskatchewan and British Columbia after they lifted their tuition freeze. Looking at the history in our own province, a period of tuition freeze is what institutions used to justify the need for the introduction of the original market modifiers brought in in 2010.

When the previous government allowed institution to put forward proposal for market modifiers, institutions made certain promises to students in their proposals in an attempt to make it look like the increases to tuition were going to be to the great benefit of students. In light of the cancellation of all 2014 market modifiers, students now call on the government to ensure these promises for increasing financial aid, hiring faculty, support for international students, and faculty-specific experiential learning opportunities are upheld. Ensuring institutions use the money government provides them to cover the amount of cancelled market modifiers in the manner in which they originally outlined it would be dispersed, instead of seeing this funding go directly to central administration, is important for both accountability and transparency.

During the two years that tuition is frozen, CAUS believes post-secondary stakeholders and the government should thoroughly discuss how the system is funded, including: the post-secondary funding framework, the tuition and fees regulation, and the rules for mandatory non-instructional fees. Important policy changes to increase the stability and predictability of post-secondary funding for institutions, and tuition costs for students and the families that support them, should be made at the end of the tuition freeze period. The scope of these changes means that discussions and consultation with key stakeholders should begin immediately to determine the social policy goals of the tuition framework and how best to achieve them. Since the removal of the tuition cap from legislation in 2006, CAUS has been advocating for tuition to be placed back into the Post-Secondary Learning Act. We hope this topic will also be part of the discussion moving forward.

CAUS RECOMMENDS:

Removing the loopholes in the Tuition and Fee Regulation that allow institutions to establish market modifiers and mandatory non-instructional fees, or increase existing tuition and fees.

Utilizing the two year tuition freeze period to collaborate with students to create a lasting, legislated framework for tuition and mandatory non-instructional fees.

Holding our institutions accountable to ensure that the market modifier funding received through Bill 3 is used to deliver on the commitments made for how the funds would be used to enhance the student experience.

MENTAL HEALTH on CAMPUS

In January 2013, a funding allocation of \$3 million a year for a period of three years was made available to the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, and the University of Lethbridge. MacEwan University and Mount Royal University were later granted similar funding, but at a lesser amount of \$250,000 a year for three years. This funding initiative is set to run out on June 30, 2016. Without a renewed commitment to mental health funding, many of the improvements Alberta's most at-risk university students have benefited from will fall away, leaving support systems little better than they were before the initiative started and causing critical ground to be lost in the fight to improve mental health care and support for young Albertans.

CAUS proposes funding for on-campus mental health supports be distributed to our universities through a per-student funding allocation based on FLE enrolment numbers. Ideally, enough funding would be made available to bring all of Alberta's universities up to the level of support The University of Lethbridge received through the three-year mental health funding initiative.

Taking the \$1 million dollars per year received by the U of L and dividing it by the 6,772 FLE count for graduate and undergraduate students attending U of L in 2014/15 works out to roughly \$148 per FLE in funding for mental health supports. In order to sustain funding to the University of Lethbridge at this rate while bringing funding for MacEwan University, Mount Royal University, the University of Alberta, and the University of Calgary up to the same level the total program cost would be roughly \$13.8 million per year. While this may seem like a large increase in funding, the return on investment is much larger.

Most individuals who experience mental illness will begin to develop symptoms between the ages of 18 and 34. While not all of these individuals will be attending post-secondary institutions, campuses across Alberta play a key role in ensuring young people have access to timely, affordable, professional assistance in addressing issues of mental wellbeing. The ability of students to care for their mental health and wellbeing is important not only to their academic success, but also to their resilience and success following graduation. There is no better place for us to reach our young citizens and assist them in identifying and seeking assistance for the mental health challenges they may face than the many campuses across Alberta.

Students recognize that due to the current budget climate, the funding amount proposed above may not initially be possible. As a starting point and a way to ensure that ground is not lost, CAUS recommends allocating \$5 million per year and distributing this funding to the five campus-based universities based on an FLE weighting.

Current Funding for Campus Mental Health Initiative Compared to CAUS Proposals for Future Funding

	2014/15 FLEs	Current Funding	FLE Weighted Distribution of \$5M	Funding at Current U of L Rate
MacEwan University	11,838	\$ 0.25M	\$ 0.64M	\$ 1.75M
Mount Royal University	9,837	\$ 0.25M	\$ 0.53M	\$ 1.45M
University of Alberta	36,299	\$ 1.00M	\$ 1.95M	\$ 5.36M
University of Calgary	28,341	\$ 1.00M	\$ 1.52M	\$ 4.19M
University of Lethbridge	6,772	\$ 1.00M	\$ 0.37M	\$ 1.00M
TOTAL PROGRAM COST PER YEAR		\$ 3.50M	\$ 5.00M	\$ 13.75M

According to data collected by the National College Health Assessment Survey, one out of every ten students has seriously considered attempting suicide in the last twelve months. On a campus of 30,000 students; 16,200 felt hopeless, 19,200 felt lonely, and 390 attempted suicide in the past year. Campus mental health is an incredibly serious topic and while our institutions are doing the best they can, they have limited resources to deal with an incredibly high volume of individuals seeking assistance. Students benefit most by the ability of our institutions to put government funding towards existing mental health services; allowing them to offer more counselling sessions, hire more psychologists, and decrease the wait times for students to be seen by mental health professionals.

The three year pilot project, and the extension to Mount Royal University and MacEwan University, has demonstrated superb value on the investment made by government, and should be expanded. Services have expanded and wait times have been reduced - by abandoning the pilot project we will lose those gains.

Our student associations continue to be strong partners in working on decreasing the stigma associated with mental health, providing feedback and support for university run mental health programs, as well as providing programs and services ourselves. Peer support counselling, student food banks, events focused on decreasing stress while increasing awareness of mental health are all important parts of student association operations - but more needs to be done on all of our campuses to improve mental health for the entire community. Student associations are prepared to do their part, and with government support, we know institutions will improve their capacity as well.

CAUS RECOMMENDS:

Providing ongoing support for student mental health in the form of per-student funding, based on FLE numbers, to all publicly funded Alberta universities.

STUDENT EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

On June 12, 2015 CAUS submitted a set of recommendations to the Minister of Innovation and Advanced Education that we hope the government will take into consideration when following through on NDP platform promise to “restore the successful Summer Temporary Employment Program (STEP) job creation program for Alberta youth.”

The full paper submitted by CAUS, *Experiential Learning in Alberta's Modern Economy: A Student Employment Program for Alberta*, is attached to this submission and can also be found on the caus.net website. The core recommendations from this paper form our current budget recommendations.

CAUS RECOMMENDS:

Ensuring that private, public, and non-profit employers are equally eligible to offer jobs through the student employment program;

Reviewing and expanding the application process criteria, in collaboration with employers and academic institutions, to better match the skills students require for various employment opportunities with the skills acquired through post-secondary;

Using a hybrid model application process (based on Saskatchewan's differentiated pool model and Ontario's job bank model) that would allow students to search and apply for specific jobs, and for employers to approach candidates they feel meet their employment needs;

Extending program support for STEP beyond the summer months; and

Introducing a Nova Scotia model of \$7.50/hour wage subsidies for employers using STEP that would be matched or exceeded by private, public, and non-profits employers.

In the Alberta New Democratic Party platform for the recent 2015 election, \$10 million a year for STEP starting in 2015/16 was proposed. CAUS believes that using the recommendations students have put forward, a revised version of STEP could be brought in at the previous funding level the program received (\$7.4 million) and still be of great benefit for students. Of course, at the NDP proposed level of \$10 million a year, STEP could not only be revised but also bolstered to help even more students make the important transition from acquiring theoretical knowledge and skills in the classroom to putting their understanding and abilities to practical use in Alberta's economy.

STUDENT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

CAUS is currently undertaking an extensive review of Alberta's Student Financial Aid system and is heartened by the renewed collaborative relationship with the Ministry of Innovation and Advanced Education. Working together, CAUS will propose long-term financial aid solutions to enhance and maintain the affordability and accessibility of Alberta's post-secondary system.

Students believe immediate steps can be taken to address the accessibility of post-secondary education. Alberta has the lowest post-secondary participation rate among 18-34 year olds in Canada at 18%, well below the national average of 24%. Many factors have contributed to this outcome, but there is one factor that can be addressed immediately by removing the barriers to participation in the system by underrepresented groups, specifically rural and aboriginal students.

In the 2012 provincial election, the previous government pledged to create a bursary program for rural and aboriginal students, initially funded at \$18 million per year and eventually ramping up to \$25 million per year. While this promise went unfulfilled, CAUS still believes that providing non-repayable student financial aid for these students would help remove the barriers to attending post-secondary and open up a world of opportunity for aspiring rural and aboriginal students.

Before its shortsighted discontinuation by the previous government, the Alberta Student Finance Board provided a formal way for the Student Aid

RESEARCH on POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Division of the Ministry of Innovation and Advanced Education to liaise with stakeholders and to ensure a collaborative approach in making changes to Alberta's financial aid system. CAUS believes that the government should explore reformulating the Student Finance Board to formally and permanently reestablish this consultative relationship.

CAUS RECOMMENDS:

Creating a non-repayable student financial aid program valued at \$18 million annually, targeting rural and aboriginal students.

Investigating the reformation of the Alberta Student Finance Board..

A unique opportunity exists to establish a data collection project for post-secondary education unlike anything that has been done in our province to date. Over the past decade, access to information at both the provincial and federal levels has become more and more limited. Federally, the end of the long form census has had a large impact on the data that is available and provincially, the Campus Alberta Planning Resource (CAPR) has cut available information that can be used to gauge whether changes to our system are having a real and measurable impact for students, the government, and all Albertans.

CAUS would like to see more data shared in the public realm from the Government of Alberta. We would like to see an expansion of the list of topics currently covered in the CAPR beyond just enrolment to 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 propose an arms-length agency, similar to the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), 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.

As a first step, CAUS suggests the government conduct a feasibility assessment with input from key stakeholders to determine: what data is being collected but not made publicly available, what data is currently unavailable, what information sets would be most helpful in determining whether our system is moving in the right direction, and the costs associated with setting up an arms-length research agency for the post-secondary system.

CAUS RECOMMENDS:

Conducting a feasibility study on the establishment of an arms-length agency to develop research on our post-secondary system to better understand our unique opportunities and challenges.

ABOUT CAUS

The Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS) represents over 100,000 university students across Alberta. We represent undergraduate students from MacEwan University, Mount Royal University, 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, affordable, and high-quality post-secondary education system in Alberta.

MISSION

To ensure a high quality, affordable, and accessible post-secondary education for Alberta undergraduate students through strong research based advocacy.

VISION

University students are active collaborators in developing a high quality post-secondary sector that is accessible and supportive to all students regardless of background or financial means.

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COUNCIL of ALBERTA UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

