



# LEADING THE WAY

achieving excellence through investment in  
post-secondary education

After several years of unpredictable funding and financial hardships, Alberta's post-secondary education system continues to face tough choices. This year we will see changing leadership and priorities for the Government of Alberta. As student leaders, we will be working to ensure that improving the accessibility, affordability, and quality of Alberta's post-secondary education remains a key priority within government and our broader communities.

## WHO WE ARE

The Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS) represents over 100,000 undergraduate students at MacEwan University, Mount Royal University, the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge.

As elected student leaders from all five 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 for a consistent, affordable, and predictable post-secondary education system. Our priorities reflect those mandates.

## 2014/15 PRIORITIES

### Tuition & Mandatory Non-Instructional Fees

Since 2010, an increasing number of Alberta's post-secondary institutions have used unregulated non-instructional fees to make up for fiscal shortfalls. Of the five institutions CAUS represents, students at four of them now pay annual Mandatory Non-Instructional Fees (MNIFs), which range from \$240 at Mount Royal to \$450 at the U of C in annual costs for full-time students.

These mandatory general fees are levied over and above tuition and often do not offer any discernible value or "service" to students. While students are not opposed to paying certain additional fees that fund services or projects they find value in, the lack

of transparency and shifting explanations for which services the current basket-of-services MNIFs are used to fund is troubling and should be addressed by establishing clear rules in provincial regulation.

Over the past year, the Ministry of Innovation and Advanced Education established a Tuition and Fees Stakeholder Working Group to examine the issues around tuition and fees, including MNIFs. Students hope to see tuition increases remain tied to CPI for all programs and feel that this offers an adequate amount of predictability for both students and the families that support them as well as institutions when planning for the future.

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

### Mental Health On & Beyond Campus

The mental health and wellbeing of all those who belong to our campus communities is becoming a key issue at Alberta post-secondary institutions.

We are now in the second year of funding that the Government of Alberta provided to the U of A, U of C, and U of L for improving student mental health. While the \$3 million over three years to each of these three institutions is an effective first step, there is still much work to be done. Both MacEwan and Mount Royal undergraduates face the same pressures as their peers at other Alberta universities yet they have not been able to benefit from direct government funding for mental health initiatives.

CAUS calls on the government to make a continued, long-term commitment to mental health funding for all of Alberta's publicly funded, brick and mortar universities. Additionally, CAUS encourages working with mental health professionals who are currently developing a province-wide post-secondary education mental health strategy to ensure that sharing best practices and collaboration is at the core of providing these critical supports to students.

### **Student Employment Opportunities**

The elimination of the Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP) leaves Alberta lagging behind other provinces in helping students gain valuable skills training and relevant work experience that aids in successful and quick transitions into the Alberta labour force; helping students to find roles related to their area of study upon graduation.

The time is right to establish a new student employment program - one that looks at the best outcomes for both students and non-profit employers, created with the direct input of students.

The focus of any student employment program should be to provide students with the opportunity to bridge the learning they do in the classroom with practical skills and experience that will enable them to become integral contributors to Alberta's economy post-graduation. CAUS believes that the new student employment program should be expanded beyond the scope of STEP and offered to students on a year-round basis to maximize the experiential learning opportunities, rather than limiting such experiences solely to summer employment.

### **Increased Targeted Funding for PSE**

Following promises of predictable 2% per year increases, the Government of Alberta slashed its funding to post-secondary institutions by 7% in 2013. The real effects of such a cut are felt system-wide, with reduced course offerings, larger class sizes, and pressure on institutions to place more focus on revenue generation over education.

Alberta's post-secondary education system performs best with clear expectations from society and predictable funding to do the job - something that students worry is missing from a situation where institutions are lurching from funding cuts to funding increases, back to cuts again.

CAUS advocates for increasing the amount of public investment in our institutions, but more importantly, making lasting and long-term commitments that our institutions can rely upon and demanding outcomes that our students expect in terms of the affordability and quality of education that they receive.

### **Student Financial Aid**

In the 2010 provincial budget \$54 million was cut from scholarships, bursaries, and grants and was offset by only \$30 million in additional student loan debt. While improvements such as eliminating parental contributions as well as RRSP and part-time earnings from loan eligibility criteria have been made since that time, Alberta's student aid system still prioritizes loans and scholarships over non-repayable up-front, needs-based grants. CAUS advocates for a return to a mixed system that offers a blend of loans, debt relief, bursaries, and grants.

The post-secondary participation in Alberta has recently fallen to under 17% and continues to be the lowest of all of the provinces in Canada.

CAUS recommends that the provincial government capitalize on the student financial aid review that is currently taking place, using this opportunity to establish new forms of non-repayable aid to bring the system back into balance and encourage greater participation.

### **HOW YOU CAN HELP**

CAUS has already begun advocating on these priorities to government, but we need your help to make them 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.

### **CONTACT US**

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