Ongoing / Continuing Work

1. Board of Governors

BOG has not met since last meeting.

2. Sustainability

Last week I held a consultation session with the Assembly of Club Executives (ACE) and Board of Senior Sticks (BOSS) regarding the sustainability strategic plan, and specifically the green events guide. We discussed the existing UofM guide and brainstormed anything to add to an UMSU guide, as well as going over ways to incentivize student clubs and associations to implement these ideas in their events.

We have a sustainability working group meeting this Wednesday, where we will begin brainstorming ideas for the campaign week in March.

3. U-PASS Update

I will have a full presentation on this matter at the board meeting but here is a quick summary of what to expect;

i) After reviewing the ERM, it has become clear that we must adapt the dates of the referendum to the 12-14 rather than 10-12 due to a need to have it on a Wednesday through Friday

ii) We met with the public service and they have come back with a recommendation of our summer proposal at a rate of $237.90 for a January – August pass. This is a very competitive rate in our view and quite close to what we originally proposed. At an added cost of $77.15 you get 4 extra months of transit eligibility. We are recommending including this option at referendum, though this still requires council approval.

iii) We have drafted two referendum question options for the board to consider. I will do a presentation on these and make a recommendation at the meeting but I would encourage you all to look at the question attached in the package and consider which you prefer, or if there is another option you would like to propose.

iv) The executive is recommending that the BOD take a stance in support of the U-Pass program. It’s our belief that the U-Pass is an essential service for many students on this campus
and for UMSU’s goal of sustainability in its services for the campus and city of Winnipeg. We look forward to a fruitful debate on this, but regardless we promise to carry out the will of the board in a referendum campaign and we do expect board directors to be involved in whatever the campaign stance is.

V) After speaking with the CRO and reviewing the ERM, this would be the most likely campaign schedule:

FEB 3-7: NOMINATIONS FOR SIDE REGISTRATION

FEB 10-11: CAMPAIGN PERIOD

FEB 12-14: VOTING (social media campaigning only)

Our plan is to begin broadcasting information on the U-Pass program within the next few weeks regardless to help inform the voters on the issues ahead of this crucial vote no matter what stance we take. If we do support the ‘YES’ side, we would not enact a flood of information on that until FEB 10.

4. UCRU

VPA Sarah Bonner-Proulx and I are preparing for our Feb 3-7 Advocacy week for UCRU with items focusing on Indigenous student support, International student support and Financial Aid. Sarah is sitting on the advocacy committee, while I sit on the governance committee, and as soon as ask drafts are finalized they will be sent out to all of you.
CONFERENCE REPORTS

CASA POLICY AND STRATEGY CONFERENCE

Between November 25-27 I attended CASA’s Policy & Strategy Conference (PSC) alongside VPA Sarah Bonner-Proulx, who will also be presented a report to you based on her experience. Below is a summary of CASA as an organization and my experience at the conference.

I. What is CASA?

“CASA is a national voice for Canada’s post-secondary students. Established in 1995, CASA is a non-partisan, not-for-profit student organization composed of student associations from across Canada. We represent undergraduate, graduate and polytechnic associations.”

Beyond the quote above – taken from their website – CASA is a pan-student federal advocacy organization that’s primary focus is on achieving policy change at the federal level through evidence-based lobbying. In scope, it is comparable with CFS (our current federal advocacy organization) based on its number of full-time staff, home office in Ottawa, and recognition on the national stage.

What is different though, is that CFS is primarily conceived as a ‘movement-based’ advocacy organization while CASA is a ‘lobbying-based’ organization. This means that CASA’s primary focus is building relationships with government, crafting policy papers and briefs, providing input on government panels and committees and typically keeping its work limited to direct interaction with government. The theory of the case is that through consistent, thorough lobbying work, CASA becomes as likely to be sought out by government as it is to seek out government when education policies are being enacted. The pillars of CASA’s year is the annual budget submission and lobby week that is attended by all member associations.

CFS in contrast is far more likely to devote significant resources to cross-national student campaigns, and mobilization efforts such as rallies and demonstrations. The theory of the case for CFS is that a large, grassroots movement of students will ultimately push the narrative in society towards more student-friendly policies being enacted in government.

This is not to say that CASA does not run campaigns (we’ve participated in two), or that CFS does not engage in lobbying (they run a federal lobby week every year), but there is simply no debating that CASA is better received by a majority of government officials, nor is there any
debate that CFS has a significantly larger network of mobilization partners and would be much more likely to fill the steps of a legislature.

The difference in style also extends to the type of policies that are advocated for. While there are areas of overlap, (both consistently lobby for decreased student loan rates and increased grants), the CFS is much more likely to take on issues of societal justice (minimum wage, pipelines etc.), while CASA is laser-focused on issues that are exclusively related to students. CFS also is committed to an ultimate mandate of free tuition, and all other measures it takes on are generally related to this goal. CASA’s mandate is a combination of “accessible, affordable, and high quality” education, and while it would almost assuredly endorse a policy of free tuition, its policy papers are generally focused on immediately achievable goals.

II. Context:

In addition to this conference, I’ve gotten the opportunity to work with CASA on a number of occasions over the past two years at the 2018-19 PSC (attended alone), the 2019-20 Foundations conference (attended with VPFO Mbuli Matshe), and hosted a CASA presentation to UMSU’s board in the 2018-19 term. In addition, Sarah worked with CASA on the #StudentsLetsAct campaign during our mental health week in 2018-19 and both of us worked with them for the federal election Get Out The Vote campaign this year. We have broadly discussed the possibility of UMSU joining CASA during last year’s board term though a motion has never been made to this effect.

III. Conference Report:

Before going into the more broad discussion of future action with CASA I want to recap the most recently attended conference with them; 2019 PSC. The full schedule is linked here: https://www.casa-acae.com/policy_and_strategy_2019_schedule

It took place over the course of three days, with sessions including an opening and closing plenary, a brainstorm sessions for their national advocacy’s strategic plan, a roundtable to discuss asks relating to this year’s lobby week priorities, a feedback session regarding a nationally funded exchange program, and a recap of activities related to CASA’s fledgling Indigenous Member Sponsorship Program (IMSP). Overall, the main goal in this conference was to recap and generate feedback on the process that led to the choice of lobby week priorities, and to work on ideas for specific asks within each of those.
Lobby Ask Determination Process
PSC was essentially step three of four with regards to how CASA determines its lobby asks each year. So I’ll list a summary of the full process below followed by a more in depth recap of what happened in step three.

Step I: Brainstorm (Foundations)
Everyone brainstorms a number of major advocacy areas
After major themes are agreed on, folks place notes of more specific areas under each topic that could be addressed

Step II: Review & Survey (Between Foundations and PSC)
The viability of each theme and suggested ask is considered and then all topics are sent back to the membership
Membership votes on which the prefer and the Board agrees on 2-4 topics as recommended priority

Step III: Topic Selection (PSC)
A recap of the survey results is presented to membership as well as a rationale for how many and which topics were chosen
A more in depth and fully noted discussion is held regarding the generation of specific policy asks within each topic
The final topics are then ratified by the membership once agreed upon.
Membership may vote to amend the board’s recommendations

Step IV: Ask Finalization (Between PSC & Lobby Week)
Feedback from members on more specific asks is taken into consideration and reviewed by the board and policy committee.
Eventually 1-2 asks are determined for each topic and an advocacy brief is created and approved by membership
Approved briefs are used on parliament hill at lobby week and distributed to politicians and stakeholders

This year the final three topics recommended were Indigenous students, International Students, and Financial Aid. While these recommendations were approved, this was a transitional year as major CASA asks had been granted in the previous year; specifically the ask regarding work-integrated learning, the reduction in student loan interest, and the increase in PSSSP funding that was the cornerstone of CASA’s Indigenous student asks in previous years.
In terms of financial aid, major asks discussed were the increase of funding dedicated towards upfront student grants, and the possible re-allocation of funding for loans and tax credits towards grants. There has also been a push for increased tri-council funding, and improved financial accommodations for students living with disabilities and student-parents. For International students, a major priority has been the elimination of the separate work permit for International student to participate in Co-op programs. Other ideas that were discussed were including co-op hours towards permanent residency, lifting the cap on provincial nominee programs, increased funding for affordable student housing as it relates to international students, and a desire to explore ways to impact international healthcare costs on a federal level through transfers.

Regarding Indigenous students, this conference was deeply fortunate to feature representatives from the IMSP that brought a much needed Indigenous perspective to the discussion that CASA has too often lacked in the past. The discussion largely centred around the fact that PSSSP increases are only one small step towards funding, supporting and decolonizing post-secondary education for Indigenous students. Ideas that were brought up included reforms to how PSSSP funding is allocated to ensure equity for applicants, the use of tri-council funding towards the study of Indigenous languages, and federal grants towards institutions that incorporate Indigenous language programs. The policy committee also committed to allowing the IMSP representatives to take the lead on drafting this year’s final recommendations.

This is by no means a full recollection of all discussed ideas, but I look forward to updating you all upon the announcement of the finalized asks. For reference, below is the 2020 pre-budget submission from August, and here is a link to CASA’s issues page on their website; https://www.casa-acae.com/our_work

- Recommendation #1: The federal government create an upfront, non-repayable Canada Student Grant for graduate students with high financial need, at an estimated cost of $58 million.
- Recommendation #2: The federal government remove the requirement for international students to seek an additional work permit to pursue co-op opportunities when it’s not a mandatory part of their program, and instead automatically permit this work under their existing study permit.
- Recommendation #3: The federal government create a targeted stream of the Repayment Assistance Plan for those on parental leave.
- Recommendation #4: The federal government reduce financial barriers to apprenticeships by expanding the Apprenticeship Incentive Grant to cover all years of study at an estimated cost of $72 million.
The topics that were considered but ultimately not included – in no meaningful order - were (i) Open Educational Resources, (ii) work-integrated learning, (iii) student organization autonomy, (iv) infrastructure, (v) sexual violence prevention, (vi) mental health, (vii) student research and (viii) student housing. While these won’t be part of focused briefs this year, CASA has often published policy papers regarding topics that don’t make it into the lobby brief and has representation on government and stakeholder panels dealing with some of these topics specifically.

**Indigenous Member Sponsorship Program:**

The other significant takeaway from this conference was getting to hear the update on the IMSP. Feedback we’ve heard from members, and a criticism that I’ve brought forward directly to CASA’s board on numerous occasions has been a lack of direct consultation with Indigenous students during their conference cycle and in the ask development process. While I would definitely not proclaim that they have solved this issue (I imagine neither would they say so), there has been some significant progress made in the past year and I believe they are moving in the right direction.

This year was the inaugural year of IMSP, in which CASA was able to provide full funding for any member to bring an additional Indigenous delegate to the foundations conference, and to attend a standalone conference exclusively for Indigenous students. From there, the attending students were able to nominate a group of students to attend the remainder of the conference cycle and all the Indigenous students that participated have the opportunity to work with the policy committee on briefs for the lobby week taking a clear lead on the Indigenous students brief.

There was a presentation by these students reflecting on their experience at the standalone conference and beginning work on ideas for CASA to adapt its practices to better serve Indigenous students. Funding for the program, soon to gain a different name chosen by this years’ students, will be approved at the AGM to continue next year out of reserves, and as it evolves and grows, a more permanent funding strategy will be considered in 2020-2021. From the presentation that was given, and the individual conversations I was able to have with participants, the feeling seemed to be that this year’s trial was well-intentioned, though not entirely well organized. That being said, there was universal agreement among participants that the program should continue, and a recognition from the CASA membership that any calls to action presented by this year’s delegates can and should be implemented.
Summary:

In whole, this conference was a positive experience for me and left me with further confidence in CASA as an advocacy organization. Their lobby ask development process is member driven and thorough, their asks are well researched and have been well received by government, the conference was a highly productive and welcoming environment, and I believe there are positive steps being taken to address the organization’s biggest weakness; a weakness nearly all student organizations share to some extent, certainly including ours.