

Date: April 13, 2021

To: Students' Union Council

Re: President 2020/21 Report #22 - **Final Report Extended Version**

Dear Council,

It is with a heavy heart that I write my final Council Report as UASU President, and after completing three years with the Students' Union, first as a Science Councillor, then Vice President Academic and finally President. My time with the Students' Union has been enriching, eye opening and a time of great learning and growth. I look back on my year as UASU President and consider the many challenges students have faced, and yet the exceeding resiliency I have witnessed among our campus body from faculty, staff and students. In my final report, I'd like to provide some reflections on the past year, highlighting just a few of the many happenings in 2020/21. It is difficult to write everything that occurred this year, so I will only highlight a few thoughts. You can find my full year updates in my previous reports.

Just over one year ago, the University of Alberta announced cancellation of in person classes due to the COVID-19 pandemic in light of health measures received from the Provincial Government. This pandemic has been the greatest crisis we have faced as the student body outside of wartime in our 112-year existence. No doubt it has posed a great difficulty to the campus body, campus life, health and safety, academic quality and overall morale.

After being elected in March 2020, May came around and it quickly became my duty as President to guide the organization through the exceptional year ahead of us, and to pivot our advocacy and efforts towards those directly related to the impacts of COVID-19. The Executive team needed to shift much of our regular functions and advocacy to ensure adequate capacity in dealing with the additional pressures of this pandemic. Throughout the year, I engaged in close communication and weekly university COVID-19 update meetings where student concerns were brought forward on a consistent basis regarding health and safety, online learning challenges, mental health concerns, international student issues among others.

Several concerns took the helm of our teams attention due to the pandemic. Health and safety was a priority of course, with limitations to in person gathering and with limited number of in person classes. We were quickly required to ensure that health regulations were abided by, while also choosing to keep the Students' Union Building open for the most part of the pandemic with limited hours, social distancing, and increased sanitary measures. Our facilities staff worked tirelessly to ensure health and safety was a priority for students who chose to enter SUB, the livingroom of campus. The vast majority of campus remained closed, with few exceptions. We needed to close our campus bars, RATT and Deweys due

to health concerns and lack of students on campus. Many of our services, businesses and cafeteria were suspended, or moved online.

Campus indeed was a ghost town for much of the year. What was once a packed main quad during Week of Welcome (WoW), where students enjoyed drinks while watching their favourite local artists on SUB Stage, was now an online series of events each participating from their respective homes. Events worked so incredibly hard over the summer months to ensure that WoW would be made possible in a virtual environment. I delivered my speech at the annual President's Address along with University President Bill Flanagan, and Alumni Association President Heather Raymond at the Myer Horowitz Theatre looking into an empty audience with a live streaming camera pointing to the podium, a stark juxtaposition from being on SUB Stage the year prior while I was VP Academic.

Despite the lack of physical bodies on campus, we adapted and remained flexible to ensure that we could make the best of what we had. This was certainly different from what occurred over one hundred years ago during the Spanish Flu in 1918. The Gateway archives convey this best: "During the Session of 1918-19 there was no issue of the Gateway until December 20th owing to the influenza epidemic, the University being closed during that period." During the 2020 pandemic, we were at least able to continue with the functions given the technological advancements, though this did not come with it's lack of difficulties, and lead to a large area of our advocacy as Executives.

One of the more pressing concerns was the quality and accessibility of online learning which the majority of students and faculty needed to shift towards. Never before in the UofA's history had there ever been such a sudden and mass exodus to online learning. With the shift to "zoom lectures" came the onset of additional unforeseeable challenges both on the student and faculty. Faculty were now required to turn their in-person lectures into an online compatible format, many of whom struggled greatly with online learning and the technology associated with it. Students struggled to make friends, study together which are all greatly difficult to do online. A proportion of students were without proper technology (laptops, tablets) and thus were left without ability to easily attend virtual lectures. Many students, particularly those in rural areas did not have access to proper broadband internet causing inconceivable challenges. Others had accessibility needs of which online learning was not conducive to a strong learning environment. International students who were stuck at home across the globe were often required to attend lectures at odd hours of the night, once again demonstrably not conducive to a strong learning environment.

As such, much of our focus this year pertained to the assurance that online learning be of high quality and accessible for all students. Advocacy was strong on topics such as online proctoring, asynchronous content, participation grades, concessions for students without laptops among others. Throughout this, we were grateful to have worked closely with University administration in working on many of these together, though we needed to push

hard to ensure adequate actions were taken for particular online learning issues primarily pertaining to International students and online proctoring.

Further, mental health took a sharp turn for the worse while students struggled in the privacy of their homes. We worked hard to ensure that our mental health services such as the Peer Support Centre were moved online, and worked closely with our health and dental provider to launch EmpowerMe, a mental wellness

In addition to the challenges imposed upon us by the pandemic which have been consistently reported on throughout the year, the University of Alberta witnessed additional large scale initiatives and disruptions. From Academic Restructuring, a Government wide Alberta 2030 PSE Review, crippling budget cuts to name a few.

Academic Restructuring

Chief among the non-pandemic challenges this year from an internal perspective was Academic Restructuring. This year the University of Alberta saw the largest scale academic and administrative restructuring in history for such a timeline. I was deeply involved and a member and sole undergraduate student on the Academic Restructuring Working Group (ARWG), where we proposed and further implemented the creation of three Colleges at the University of Alberta. Throughout this process it was my goal to bring student focused feedback to the table, and ensured the proposal included students' voices. The three colleges created and approved at the Board of Governors are the (i) College of Health Sciences (ii) College of Natural and Applied Sciences and (iii) College of Social Sciences and Humanities.

My critique of the process is multifaceted and pertains to the effectiveness, and inherent responsibility which lies in the bicameral governance structure here at the UofA, common in many universities across the country. I held the position early on and continue to hold the notion that any College Dean (or Executive Dean for that matter) must report to the Provost, and there must be a clear and transparent reporting structure by Faculty Deans to the College Dean. It is therefore inconceivable to me that the current approved model whereby each college will be led by a collegial council of deans, would be effective in achieving the desired outcomes set forth at the onset of this endeavour.

My hope is that the outcome of such transformations to the UofA will lead to further interdisciplinarity, excellence in teaching and research, improved collaboration, and accountable and efficient leadership to further increase quality and accessibility of student learning at this great institution. But this should not be a finished deal, I believe there needs to be further revisions and iterations to ensure the academic structure is of the utmost quality to lead this great institution forward. I remain excited to see this process unfold, along

with the Service Excellence Transformation (SET) initiative, of which I along with our Students' Council have been part of the early consultation process.

Here are just a few highlights from the 2020/21 UASU Executive Team:

- Lead UofA students through COVID-19 global pandemic
- Advocated strongly for online learning accessibility and quality
- Successfully pushed for and achieved an extended Winter break by one week
- Advocated for mental health resources during this pandemic. Successful launch of EmpowerMe, a mental health and wellness service available 24/7 yearly
- Shifted the Peer Support Centre & other services online
- Academic Restructuring leading to the creation and implementation of 3 Colleges
 - College of Health Sciences
 - College of Natural and Applied Sciences and
 - College of Social Sciences and Humanities
- Advocated extensively provincially and federally to MLAs, MPs and others regarding PSE issues students are facing
- Strong [contribution](#) and participation in Alberta 2030 PSI review / McKinsey successfully leading to likely deconsolidation, no sector level board, and lack of tuition deregulation
- Renewed emphasis on sexual violence prevention on campus, launch of new university website
- Integral in the International Students' Association becoming an SRA
- Got the University to hire the Sexual Violence Prevention Coordinator (SVPC) after years of UASU advocacy, through a \$1.50 MNIF increase, partly funded by the University
- Secured a guarantee that 15% percent of tuition will be set aside for student financial aid for the second year in a row
- Passed the Myer Horowitz renovation project, improving sustainability within the theatre, construction to commence in next few months
- Launch of the Sustainability & Capital Fund where student projects can receive up to \$10,000 in funding
- Free menstrual products dispenser installed in SUB
- UPass Referendum passes with 86% approval rating. Historic four year price freeze deal with ETS including expanded jurisdiction to Beaumont
- UASU Governance Restructuring Task Force report of recommendations for governance changes
- Implemented an alternative health and dental basic plan for cost-effective alternative to the comprehensive plan
- OER Advocacy: creation of Zero Textbook Cost signifier set to launch August
- Partnered with Kids & Company, for affordable daycare options for students
- Creation of the UASU Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Task Force (EDIT). Survey created, and final report to be completed.

- Launch of UASU Perks app on iPhone in addition to web and Android. Community grown to thousands of students

Though the year has been a challenging one, I am grateful for the opportunity to serve the student body at a time as such. I am grateful for the team I have had the privilege to work alongside who have been so good to me. I am thankful for the incredible staff who work for the UASU who keep the ship afloat. I am grateful for the many exceptional student leaders I have been able to learn from. I am grateful for the incredible work of UASU alumni who have carried the flame before me, of which I will pass on to my successor in just a few weeks. Though it is difficult to move forward to what is next, I move on knowing that the flame will continue to burn bright, and continue to carry the student heartbeat.

Thank you for allowing me to serve as your University of Alberta Students' Union President for the 2020/2021 year. It has been a deep honour and privilege, one that I will keep for life.

Yours Sincerely,



Joel Agarwal
University of Alberta Students' Union President