Dear Council,

I hope you all had a restful winter break and a successful exam season. I hope you are refreshed and energized for the work of a new year. As we come into the last third of our terms, we are facing some of the most significant challenges yet, particularly as we face down yet another serious wave of COVID. Fortunately, there is one easy thing you can do to fight Omicron—get boosted. I got my booster shot last week at the AHS vaccination centre on Calgary Trail and it was fast, easy, and painless. By getting your third dose, you can make it easier for all of us to get back to campus in person.

Omicron Advocacy
As you all know, on December 20th we called on the University to move the first two weeks of classes online and take other safety precautions to ensure the Winter semester can proceed safely and mostly in person. To provide more detail, I distributed a separate briefing note to all of you by email on January 6th. But in brief, I believe we did the right thing by acting quickly and decisively. The rapid spread of Omicron, imposition of restrictions, and actions of universities across Canada confirm to me that we did not overreact.

Moving into the rest of the semester, we are focusing on two key priorities to make the best of this difficult situation:

- Supporting a return to in-person classes after the 23rd if at all possible, with improved masking, ventilation, and testing measures in place if necessary
- Supporting the extension of the add-drop deadline to the end of January to ensure students can experience a class in its final delivery form before having to make a final decision about whether to stay in it

As unfair and frustrating as yet another wave of COVID is, we must respond to events as they are and not as we would like them to be. We understand what a hard time this is for students, and we will continue to do everything we can to mitigate the impact of the ongoing pandemic on students. Public health is our shared responsibility and we must all be prepared to do our part to mitigate impacts on the health system and vulnerable community members.

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Exceptional Tuition Increases
VP Fotang and I will be meeting with the new Chief of Staff to the Minister of Advanced Education soon to discuss the ETI proposals. I believe we are in a strong position and that the approach we have taken so far is showing promise. The fact that approval of these proposals was meant to happen in July and has now been delayed all the way to January is in and of itself a substantial achievement, and demonstrates the effectiveness of our approach. Existing student advocacy has also already saved approximately $2.7 million annually for students even if the proposals were to successfully pass. We will keep Council informed of changes on this file and expect to have significant updates by the end of the month.

Meeting with MP Desjarlais
VP Fotang and I had the privilege of meeting Blake Desjarlais, the newly elected MP for Edmonton-Griesbach. MP Desjarlais is the first two-spirit person to serve in Parliament, is the only Indigenous MP from Alberta, and was himself a student leader at the University of Victoria. We had the opportunity to discuss federal student aid’s key role in Alberta given our poor provincial system, funding for Campus Saint-Jean, and immigration barriers for international students.

As always, please feel free to reach out to me if you want to chat about anything. I am looking forward to our next four months working together.
Happy New Year!

University of Alberta Students’ Union President
Rowan Ley

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