June 9, 2020

Erica Seelemann, Vice President, Academic and External

Consultation Report: Reject the Three Campaign

This report outlines steps that were taken to consult DSU members about the Reject the Three campaign launching June 9, 2020, as well as the process by which the campaign was developed and implemented. The report serves to both inform Councillors and community members about the process taken to develop this campaign, and to serve as a resource for future campaign development.

Background

Since midway through the Winter 2020 semester, a pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus COVID-19 has disrupted DSU members’ lives and learning in a number of ways. As concern about the spread of the virus increased, Dalhousie moved to cancel classes for the week of March 16, and to then transition to online learning beginning March 23.1 On March 19, the University announced that students would need to vacate residences and that Summer 2020 courses would also be taught online,2 and the following day all non-essential research activities were suspended. Another update on May 20 announced that classes would be taking place predominantly online in the fall.3 Amidst all of this, students lost jobs both on- and off-campus; had summer work programs cancelled; and had their graduation ceremonies postponed and moved online. These changes disrupted students’ abilities to learn and caused financial hardship for many. The DSU received communication from students about the ways they were being affected and responded in multiple ways, which are detailed below.

On May 27, Dalhousie University President Deep Saini announced that in the 2020-2021 budget, tuition would be increasing by 3%; that the University would double financial aid bursary funding; that some student fees would be waived or modified; that $1 million would be invested in technology development for online learning; and that tuition for international students would increase by an additional $1473. The Reject the Three campaign was formed in response to all of these factors and the ways we have heard from our members that they are being impacted.
Advocacy Already Undertaken

Recommendations to Senate

On March 24, the DSU Senate Caucus submitted the Dalhousie Student Union Recommendations for COVID-19-Related Academic Adjustments to the Dalhousie Senate. The document noted some of the ways that students were struggling academically due to changes to learning and offered recommendations for how to better accommodate students’ needs. Recommendations included transitioning to alternative grading to allow for a pass/fail option; extending add/drop deadlines for classes; and adding a note to all students’ transcripts to indicate the strange circumstances of the semester.

On March 26, the University introduced an alternative Pass/Ill grading option in response to these recommendations. The withdrawal deadline was also extended, and the University has agreed to investigate transcript notes.

Financial Resources

Students quickly expressed concerns about the financial impacts of COVID-19. On March 25, Council voted to allocate funds from the Student Accessibility Fund to provide bursaries to those members affected by job losses or other financial hardships due to COVID-19. At Council on April 8, the Vice President, Internal reported that due to the restrictions on the use of the Accessibility Fund, the distribution criteria could not in fact be modified in the way Council had authorized. Instead, efforts were made to promote the fund and to encourage students with disabilities whose financial needs were exacerbated by COVID-19 to apply.

Support for #DontForgetStudents and Calls for Expansion of CERB

In response to job losses, the Federal Government introduced the Canada Emergency Response Benefit on March 25. Advocacy group Don’t Forget Students joined with student organizations across Canada to criticize the gaps in the program, and to call for its expansion to include all students and recent graduates. On April 22, Council voted to sign on to the open letter; to sign the associated petition; and to continue to research ways to advocate for better student supports during the COVID-19 pandemic.

On April 29, the Government of Canada announced the creation of the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB), which responded to some of the concerns in the open letter, but fell short by offering less money than CERB and continuing to exclude international students.
Support for No One Is Illegal – Halifax/K’jipuktuk

The DSU heard from students and community the need to specifically support and advocate for international students, who were by and large the most heavily disadvantaged by COVID-19 restrictions and measures. As part of responding to the specific needs of international students, on April 22 Council voted to sign on to an open letter by local migrant rights organization No One Is Illegal – Halifax/K’jipuktuk and to join their call for the Nova Scotia government to extend full healthcare access to all, regardless of immigration status.11

Reject The Three Campaign

Input from Members

Shortly after taking office, the Vice President, Academic and External began receiving input from members through various channels including email and social media, raising some of the many concerns regarding how Dalhousie has responded to COVID-19. Architecture students specifically noted that they were unable to access on-campus labs but were still being charged their full schedule of fees. Some graduate students identified difficulties with funding and with the process of finding second and third readers for their theses; while others had research stalled by the halting of non-essential research. International students reported being stranded, unable to travel home due to the virus and forced out of residence into insecure housing situations. Across the board, students expressed frustrations with online learning and the challenges it posed. A number of informal online petitions popped up, with students calling for tuition reductions and refunds. Coupled with the direction that had already been given by Council, this input clearly indicated a need for a focused campaign.

On May 14, the VPAE assembled key staff to begin planning the campaign. The Director of Research and Outreach, Communications Coordinator, Graphic Design and Campaigns Coordinator, and Policy and Governance Coordinator met with the VPAE to identify next steps. While much feedback had already been received in less formal ways, the team agreed that further consultation was needed. Stakeholders were identified as all students, and International students in particular, and the team developed a survey to send out to members under the guidance of the Communications Coordinator. The survey can be found in Appendix A.

The survey was open between May 15 and May 29, and received 526 responses. The link to the survey was shared multiple times on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and larger societies were encouraged to repost it and to encourage their members to
participate. On the whole, they survey showed that students have concerns about the value of online learning and about access to financial resources. A visual summary of the responses can be found in Appendix B. At the meeting on May 21, the VPAE reported to Council on the work that had been done already on the campaign and asked them to complete it themselves and circulate it to constituents.

Survey Analysis – All Students

The survey shows that students believe remote learning is of a lower quality than in-person classes. Of those surveyed, 89.9% indicated that remote learning does not have the same value as on campus learning. This is a crucial statistic because it directly contradicts the University’s actions and statements. Dalhousie chose not to reduce the cost of tuition for the Winter and Summer 2020 semesters despite the switch to online learning, suggesting that they think there was no difference in the value of the systems. Students, the ones actually using online learning, found quite the opposite: in their responses, students detailed difficulty with concentration and focus during online learning; a lack of hands-on engagement; loss of lab work; professors being inaccessible and hard to communicate with; lack of quiet space to work on schoolwork; missing the interpersonal relationships and connections with other learners; and the loss of discussion and engagement that in-person classes offer. Students with learning disabilities stated that the online learning environment made coping with their disabilities harder, or in some cases near impossible, and stated that adequate alternate supports simply did not exist for remote learning.

Concerns about online learning came from a broad range of faculties and disciplines. Simultaneously, the survey confirms that finances are a key concern and students are struggling. Nearly 90% of respondents had accessed some kind of financial assistance, indicating that a vast majority of students have had their income impacted in some way by COVID-19. Students, however, also reported difficulties accessing financial supports. Of those who accessed financial supports, 68.4% had some kind of difficulty: ranging from not meeting specific criteria, to missing deadlines, to lacking proper documentation, to simply being halted by long and confusing application processes. Some noted that they were not aware of financial resources offered by Dalhousie or the DSU. These responses make it clear that while students are experiencing financial pressure, convoluted financial aid systems are not the best way to support most.

These results also support the direction given by the DSU Strategic Plan 2020-2021: Building our Equitable Futures Today. Strategic priority #1, “Our Education: Our Priority” states that the DSU seeks to minimize barriers to education and advocate for “accessible, equitable, and quality education,” including through the elimination of tuition fees and international student differential fees.
Survey Analysis – International Students

The survey highlighted particularly pressing key areas of concern for international students, including concerns related to travel, living expenses, and online learning. 64.2% of international student respondents indicated that they are currently unable to travel home, due to either travel restrictions, immigration status concerns, sanctions, or financial barrier. In written comments, international students noted that being unable to see their families had led to exacerbated mental health concerns, homesickness, and depression. For some, this also led to unexpected increased rent and living expenses, which could be exacerbated by their home country’s economy failing during the pandemic. Overall, 92.6% of international student respondents accessed some kind of financial aid. 65.4% of international student respondents were aware of specific international student financial aids available to them, but a smaller 46.9% accessed these specific aids.

The concerns raised by international students in this survey echo the Report of the Committee on International Student Issues that DSU Council received on April 22, 2020. At that meeting, Council voted to consult this report when making "decisions that pertain to or directly impact international students.” Among other recommendations, the report called for the DSU to advocate for the reduction or elimination of international differential fees, noting that "International students are concerned that their tuition fees do not reflect the real value of education at Dalhousie University, but are rather being used to fill funding gaps in the University budget.”

From both the concerns that have been raised by International students in the past and the responses received in this survey, it was clear that financial accessibility for international students must be a campaign priority.

Campaign Development

Following the end of the survey, the campaign team met again on June 2nd and 3rd to discuss the results and how best to advocate for students moving forward. The team identified the themes that had emerged from the survey, including:

- Students feel that they are paying more and getting less
- Financial assistance programs are harder to access than simply decreasing tuition up front
- The University’s justifications for maintaining and the increasing tuition do not hold up when we look at the actual value of online learning to students
International students are facing compounded struggles: both financial and personal, and many cannot bear an additional differential fee increase on top of the regular tuition increase.

- The Winter and Summer 2020 semesters were charged at the same rate as the Fall 2019 semester, but were of a lesser value.
- Students that make use of on-campus facilities such as labs for their studies should not be charged for the use of these facilities when they will be inaccessible.

Out of these themes, the team identified three key demands for the University:

1. Rescind the decision to increase tuition for domestic and international students in the 2020-2021 academic year;
2. Decrease tuition and remove ancillary fees connected to on-campus experiential learning, campus infrastructure and department specific resources for the 2020-2021 academic year; and
3. Issue partial refunds to students enrolled in the Winter 2020 and Summer 2020 semesters.

Because the budget was approved by the Board, this is the body that has the power to change it. Working to represent students in this moment means making it clear to the Board of Governors that the approved 2020-2021 budget does not work for students and that it must be revised.

The recommendations listed above emerge from consultation with students in line with the DSU Consultation Policy. At their meeting on June 18,

The campaign could then be divided into goals, strategies, and tactics:

**Goal:** The University accepting and implementing all three demands.

**Strategy:** Pressuring the Board of Governors to amend the budget by accepting and implementing the demands.

**Tactics:** Organizing around the June 23 BoG meeting, coordinating an email/letter-writing campaign; using strategic social media posts to engage members and to get them to write emails to key decision-makers; reaching out to other student unions and community partners to seek solidarity and support; coordinating with the Board of Governors caucus to ensure we have speaking time at the June 23 meeting.

**Specific action items identified:**

- Write letter to University Board of Governors and decision-makers
- Create email templates for students and community members to use when emailing the BoG
- Create graphics and social media posts to communicate the survey results and campaign direction to members
- Draft a motion for DSU Council on June 18 regarding this campaign
- Publish campaign materials on June 9, 2020

Next Steps

On June 9, 2020 the DSU Executive will submit these demands to the Board of Governors and will simultaneously publish campaign information and materials on the DSU website. This consultation report will be circulated to Councillors for information. Further feedback and direction on the campaign from Councillors can be directed to the Vice President, Academic and External (dsuvpae@dal.ca). At the next meeting of DSU Council on June 18, 2020, the VPAE will bring forward a motion to sign on to the letter to the Board of Governors. If Council votes in favour, the letter will be updated and re-circulated to the Board of Governors.

Students and community members are encouraged to send their own letters using the templates provided on the DSU website, on the dsu.ca/reject-the-3 page that has been set up for this purpose, and to post on social media about the campaign.
Appendix A: COVID, Campus, and Costs Survey Questions

COVID, Campus, and Costs: How has COVID-19 affected your learning?

Got 5 minutes? We want to hear how COVID-19 has affected your learning and finances, and how we can support you.

Don't worry—we'll keep all your information confidential and anonymous. The data we gather will be brought to Council to inform our advocacy around student fees, especially during COVID-19.

If you'd like a chance to win a $50 gift card to a local business of your choice, enter your name and email below!

This survey will be open until 3:30 pm on May 29, 2020.

B00 Number *

This information will be kept confidential and will only be used to confirm you are a Dal student.

https://airtable.com/shrpSsgOr4m48g4KU
Appendix A: COVID, Campus, and Costs Survey Questions

Name
Your name and contact information will be kept confidential and will not be stored after this survey is complete. We will only use this info to enter you into our draw to win a $50 giftcard!

Email
Your name and contact information will be kept confidential and will not be stored after this survey is complete. We will only use this info to enter you into our draw to win a $50 giftcard!

Does remote learning have the same value for you as on-campus learning? *

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [ ] Unsure

Please explain.

What changes have been made to your program due to COVID-19?
How has COVID-19 affected your access to student resources?

Are you aware of the following financial aid sources? *

(select the applicable options)

☐ Government assistance (e.g., CERB or CESB)
☐ Dal assistance
☐ DSU assistance
☐ Other

Have you been able to access financial aids from the following sources? *

(select the applicable options)

☐ Government assistance (e.g., CERB or CESB)
☐ Dal assistance
☐ DSU assistance
☐ Other
☐ I don't need financial assistance

If you've experienced difficulties accessing financial aid, what were those challenges?

☐ Didn't meet the criteria
☐ Missed the deadline
☐ Didn't have the necessary documentation
☐ Application process was too difficult
☐ I did not have any difficulty
☐ Other
Are you an International Student? *  
Appendix A: COVID, Campus, and Costs Survey Questions

- Yes
- No

Are you able to get home?  
(whether for financial reasons or because of closed borders)

- Yes
- No

Are you aware of the following financial aids?  
(select the applicable options)

- Dal International Student Fund
- DSU International Student Emergency Fund
- Other

Have you been able to access the following financial aids?  
(select the applicable options)

- Dal International Student Fund
- DSU International Student Emergency Fund
- Other
- I don't need financial assistance

Additional Comments:
Do you consent to us using your written statements as testimony? *

If you consent, your information will remain confidential and anonymous. If you're uncomfortable consenting to this, no problem!

☐ Yes
☐ No

Submit

Never submit passwords through this form. Report malicious form.

https://airtable.com/shrpSsgOr4m48g4KU
Appendix B: Graphics Summarizing Survey Results
Consultation Report: Reject the Three Campaign
Dalhousie Student Union Vice President, Academic and External

Set 1: Remote Learning Does Not Have the Same Value

#RejectThe3
REMOTE LEARNING DOES NOT HAVE THE SAME VALUE

- Does remote learning have the same value for you as on-campus learning?
  - 4.56% Unsure
  - 5.51% Yes
  - 89.92% No

“There is very limited to no access to resources like technology, libraries, and instructor office hours. The efforts to replace these are hampered by technological issues, and communication with instructors and other students is slow and far less effective.”

Data collected from 526 domestic & international Dalhousie University Student Respondents to the DSU survey Covid, Campus, and Costs.

#RejectThe3
REMOTE LEARNING DOES NOT HAVE THE SAME VALUE

- In our Covid, Campus, & Costs survey, students indicated serious issues with online learning.
- 89.92% said that they do not feel like remote classes are worth as much as on-campus classes.
- This contradicts the University’s previous claims that they have the same value.

Regardless of the University’s one million-dollar investment in remote course development, there are some components that cannot be replaced with online learning.

Things like...

Data collected from 526 domestic & international Dalhousie University Student Respondents to the DSU survey Covid, Campus, and Costs.

(Continued next page)
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#RejectThe3
REMOTE LEARNING DOES NOT HAVE THE SAME VALUE

...Environments where students with different learning abilities can engage meaningfully

"Online learning poses many issues for students living with ADHD. The physical transition between classes, social interaction, and ability to learn in an environment engaging all senses are critical in maintaining attention and comprehending information. Additionally, due to the lack of ability to leave our homes, many of us have no separation of work and rest which is a dangerous combination to leave unseparated."

#RejectThe3
REMOTE LEARNING DOES NOT HAVE THE SAME VALUE

...A focused space with all the amenities needed

"My living circumstances do not allow me to focus on the lectures some are synchronous and can't be reviewed at my own time. Also, my living circumstances make it difficult to follow class scheduled lectures early in the morning with everyone else in the household."

#RejectThe3
REMOTE LEARNING DOES NOT HAVE THE SAME VALUE

...Experiential programs where students gain practical skills

"I'm in nursing and much of what we learn is through in person, hands on experiences that you can't learn through a screen. I'm paying tuition to get that experience in the simulation lab and I feel not getting that impacts my learning and future abilities going into the work force."

#RejectThe3
REMOTE LEARNING DOES NOT HAVE THE SAME VALUE

...Face to face engagement

"We do not have the same experience of being able to collaborate with our peers, being able to ask the professors questions and listen to our peers’ meaningful questions."

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REMOTE LEARNING DOES NOT HAVE THE SAME VALUE

Tell @dalhousieu we #RejectThe3!

- Share this post and tag @dalhousieu
- Email @dalpres with your concerns
- Head to our website for an email template and more info!

dsu.ca/RejectThe3

DSU
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Set 2: Reduced Fees Not Just Bursaries

#RejectThe3
REduced Fees
Not Just Bursaries

- 88.63% Students attempted to access financial aid (from Canadian Government, Dalhousie University, DSU, and/or other sources)
- 11.37% Students did not need access to financial aid
- 54.34% Students had difficulty or were unable to access financial aid.

“Students are struggling financially during this pandemic and asking us to pay the same amount of fees while providing less services and less opportunities is wrong. Students have received very few supports from governments during this pandemic, and academic institutions have a social responsibility to help make their services more accessible and affordable during this crisis.”

Data collected from 526 domestic & international Dalhousie University Student Respondents to the DSU survey Covid, Campus, and Cost.

#RejectThe3
REduced Fees
Not Just Bursaries

- Though bursaries can help some students, they do not benefit all. By only providing bursaries, Dalhousie University is only able to assist a handful of students.
- By reducing tuition fees, the University can provide financial relief for all students studying at Dalhousie.

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- Share this post and tag @dalhousie
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Data collected from 526 domestic & international Dalhousie University Student Respondents to the DSU survey Covid, Campus, and Cost.
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Set 3: Domestic & International Barriers to Financial Aid

#RejectThe3
DOMESTIC & INTERNATIONAL BARRIERS TO FINANCIAL AID

- Financial assistance programs such as CERB, CESB and those offered by Dalhousie University were implemented to provide students and community members with support. However, many students have faced barriers when accessing these programs.

#RejectThe3
DOMESTIC & INTERNATIONAL BARRIERS TO FINANCIAL AID

“I was unaware of all the financial aids and still am not aware of how to access them.”

The criteria for receiving financial aid from Dal is much too strict, because there are people like myself who could actually benefit from it but don’t qualify.”

#RejectThe3
DOMESTIC & INTERNATIONAL BARRIERS TO FINANCIAL AID

- Of all those who sought to access financial support, 68.44% had difficulty: ranging from not meeting specific criteria, to missing deadlines, to lack of documentation, to simply being halted by long and confusing application processes.

- Only 31.75% of the student respondents were aware of financial aids offered by Dalhousie.

- Even the students that were aware of the temporary financial aids are very clear that bursaries do not compensate for the increase in tuition.

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DOMESTIC & INTERNATIONAL BARRIERS TO FINANCIAL AID

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Set 4: International Students

#RejectThe3
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Are you able to return home? (Whether for financial reasons or because of closed borders)
- 64.20% Was unable
- 35.80% Was able
- 3.70% No Response

Data collected from 81 Dalhousie University International Student Respondents through the DSU survey "Covid, Campus, and Costs."

#RejectThe3
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

- As the University Administration and Federal Government develop resources to support domestic students during this global pandemic, international students continue to live in greater financial uncertainty with few resources available to them. Many also have no way to get home.

Data collected from 81 Dalhousie University International Student Respondents through the DSU survey "Covid, Campus, and Costs."

#RejectThe3
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

"Big part of the students at Dal are international students and the situation in our hometowns are not very good, and many of us who cannot return to our homes we are going through difficult times financially and emotionally and that they add one more stress knowing that they would increase the tuition by 3%, it seems really absurd to me."

Data collected from 81 Dalhousie University International Student Respondents through the DSU survey "Covid, Campus, and Costs."

#RejectThe3
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

"As an international student, I really appreciate Dal is trying the best to help, but the problem we’re facing is the high tuition, cannot go back home or really hard to get home, rent is high, and it’s hard to get a job ... also, some students lost their co-ops. Since the quality of lectures won’t be as good as in-person classes, the tuition doesn’t make sense to be raised."

Data collected from 81 Dalhousie University International Student Respondents through the DSU survey "Covid, Campus, and Costs."

#RejectThe3
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

- In addition to the 3% increase all students are facing, International students who begin their degrees in the fall of 2020 or later will bear an additional $1473 increase to their fees.

- These students do not have access to CESB, CERB and health care in the same capacity as domestic students, yet Dalhousie expects these students to pay a significantly higher increase in tuition.

Data collected from 81 Dalhousie University International Student Respondents through the DSU survey "Covid, Campus, and Costs."

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