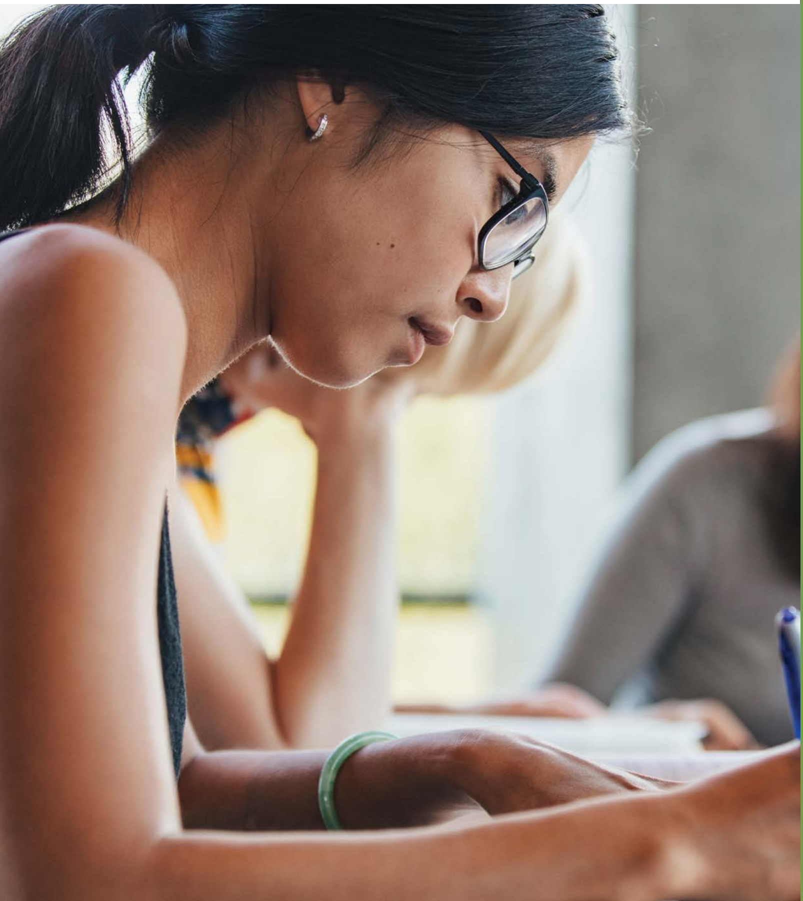
CAUS
Council of Alberta University Students

BUDGET SUBMISSION

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Budget 2019, CAUS recommends the following:



Student Employment

- Addressing the minimum wage increases and increasing the subsidy provided to employers through STEP
- Expanding STEP through a year-round enhancement of available employment opportunities and changing the name from "Summer Temporary Employment Program" to "Student Temporary Employment Program"
- Reviewing and expanding the application process criteria, in collaboration with employers and academic institutions, to better match the skills students require for various employment opportunities with the skills acquired through post-secondary education
- Ensuring that student placement with STEP is coordinated to maximize degree relevant experience received by students

Tuition and Fees

- Rolling back tuition to 1992 levels, increased by CPI for each subsequent year, and capping all future increases to CPI
- Placing the regulation of tuition back into the Post-Secondary Learning Act
- Regulating the international student tuition differential to offer more stability and predictability for international students
- Removing all existing market modifiers, and removing Section 5.1 from the Tuition Fees Regulation, 'Market modification for tuition fees for specific programs'
- Eliminating the 'basket of goods' mandatory non-instructional fees, if they aren't transparent, or have not been subjected to a student-based approval mechanism

Student Financial Aid

- The complete reallocation of tax credits into up-front, targeted grants for low and middle-income students, administered on a sliding scale model to those with demonstrated financial need
- Increased investments into non-repayable student aid through scholarships, bursaries, and grants
- Increasing the Repayment Assistance Program (RAP) threshold to an annual income of $30,000 to reflect the increases in costs of living and minimum wage

Mental Health

- Providing ongoing support for student mental health in the form of per-student funding, based on total student enrolment numbers. This funding should be allocated at the per-student level for all five publicly funded universities to match that of the University of Lethbridge, amounting to $113 per student, at a total of $13.2 million per year.
- Ensuring that mental health supports remain on campus where they are most accessible and effective
- Ensuring that student associations are continually involved in consultation on decisions related to post-secondary mental health funding and supports

Institutional Funding

- Ensure stable and predictable funding is being provided to institutions on a formula that seeks to support educational outcomes, provided on a rolling three-year basis
- Reinstate the Lights On Funding for ongoing and and upcoming projects at the University of Calgary, University of Alberta, University of Lethbridge, Mount Royal University, and MacEwan University
- Providing funding to institutions equivalent to 10% of their total deferred maintenance liabilities while simultaneously addressing outstanding projects in a strategic and sustainable manner

STUDENT
FINANCIAL AID

Over the past decade, the costs of post-secondary education in Alberta has risen over 40%[1], adding unparalleled pressures through concurrent rising debt levels for students accessing financial aid. Socioeconomic pressures are compounded for the average post-secondary student as both academic and non-academic costs present the most significant barrier for those seeking to access, attend, and complete their education in a timely manner, despite a large portion of students who have chosen to continue working throughout their degree.

> The Government of Alberta has historically played a critical role in mitigating financial burdens through the administration of student financial aid through repayable loans, non-repayable grants, bursaries, scholarships, and other such programs – many of which have gradually increased access to enrolment and targeted expenses including direct academic expenses like tuition and textbooks, as well as indirect costs, which include food, housing and other costs of living.

Over the past decade, the costs of post-secondary education in Alberta has risen over 40%, adding unparalleled pressures through concurrent rising debt levels for students accessing financial aid. Socioeconomic pressures are compounded for the average post-secondary student as both academic and non-academic costs present the most significant barrier for those seeking to access, attend, and complete their education in a timely manner, despite a large portion of students who have chosen to continue working throughout their degree.

The Government of Alberta has historically played a critical role in mitigating financial burdens through the administration of student financial aid through repayable loans, non-repayable grants, bursaries, scholarships, and other such programs – many of which have gradually increased access to enrolment and targeted expenses including direct academic expenses like tuition and textbooks, as well as indirect costs, which include food, housing and other costs of living.

In 2010, the Government of Alberta chose to reduce the amount of funding available through debt relief, grants, and bursaries and instead, steered the financial aid system to focus more on repayable loans, which has resulted in a dramatic increase in the amount of student debt accrued across Alberta. Currently, undergraduate borrowers in Alberta complete their education with an average of $26,680 in student loans[2], and while this alone raises concerns, data shows that the majority of student borrowers belong to further underrepresented communities, including those from rural Alberta[3], students with disabilities, and from low socioeconomic backgrounds[4].

CAUS believes that we can and must improve our current financial aid programs by focusing on and increasing targeted investments through non-repayable grants and bursaries. We have long advocated for creating and increasing the amount of up-front, needs-based grants as the ideal approach, following the footsteps of provinces such as Ontario[5], which boasts a larger percentage of post-secondary enrolment despite the disparity in population[6].

Students cite financial concerns as the primary barrier to entering post-secondary education, and concurrently, Alberta already struggles with having the second lowest post-secondary participation rate across Canada (for 18-24 year olds enrolled in post-secondary programs)[7]. Those worried about student debt, or affordability in general, are not encouraged by back-end supports such as tax credits, as they only benefit those who have already completed their education, and are dependent on post-graduate income levels.

Consider a 17-year-old Albertan who has just graduated high school and preparing to enter university – a tax credit will, at most, provide an incentive to complete their degree, but an up-front grant could address the more immediate concerns of relocation, food, and housing that can often be overwhelming to balance with a full-time course load.

The Government of Alberta currently spends approximately $200 million on financial aid through tax credits, however, in many cases, these tax credits are not utilized by those who would benefit most.[8] As it stands, tax credits, or back-end completion incentives, have yet to prove their policy objective, and are considered largely ineffective at addressing the root causes of financial instability for a variety of reasons. Tax credits are only returned to individuals upon filing for taxes, and due to the challenges of balancing academic with non-academic workloads, including part-time student employment, or those looking for stable, gainful employment upon graduation, many do not receive the full benefits offered by such programs.

CAUS calls for the complete reallocation of tax credits into up-front grants for low and middle income students, administered on a sliding scale model based on demonstrated need.

Non-repayable grants, which can be targeted towards those with the most financial need, provide a sensible, cost-neutral alternative and a more effective use of funding dedicated to student financial aid. Similar programs have been implemented across other provincial jurisdictions, including Ontario and New Brunswick, as well as through federal complements, which have resulted in increased support for students who are desperate for financial assistance.

The Canadian University Survey Consortium's 201 Graduating Student Survey notes that 50% of participating undergraduate students have accumulated student debt through the course of their education. 32% of those students have over $20,000 in school-related debt.[9] For these graduates, the repayment threshold is an important factor to consider as they enter the next phase of their professional careers and seek gainful employment. Currently, the Repayment Assistance Program (RAP) thresholds are based on the income of the borrower, which begins after the individual begins earning a gross annual income of over $25,000.[10] However, with the increases to minimum wage, recent graduates are more likely to consider precarious employment conditions to achieve a living wage while simultaneously repaying their student loans and financing their living costs, which vary based on geographical location and unfavorable economic realities. As the average income and minimum wage rises in Alberta, students expected the threshold for the Repayment Assistance Program would also rise with it. A stagnant threshold does not reflect the costs of living across various urban and rural municipalities, which can create additional challenges upon graduation. Therefore, CAUS recommends that, in light of the increases to the minimum wage, the repayment threshold for student loans be increased to at least $30,000, which would then reflect the gross amount earned at minimum wage in Alberta for an individual working 40 hours per week. These changes would then allow borrowers to pursue meaningful employment opportunities without being concerned about financial pressures associated with their student debt.

Finally, CAUS also calls for increased investment into other forms of non-repayable financial aid programs administered through scholarships, bursaries, and targeted grants so that students can reduce financial stressors throughout their degree, and dedicate their efforts to their academic pursuits, professional development, and skills training to become effective members of the Albertan economy.

CAUS RECOMMENDS

- The complete reallocation of tax credits into up-front, targeted grants for low and middle-income students, administered on a sliding scale model to those with demonstrated financial need
- Increased investments into non-repayable student aid through scholarships, bursaries, and grants
- Increasing the Repayment Assistance Program (RAP) threshold to an annual income of $30,000 to reflect the increases in costs of living and minimum wage

TUITION AND FEES

CAUS has long stood for a post-secondary system built on predictability – which can be most demonstrably implemented through tuition rates for all post-secondary programs across Alberta.

In 2015, the Government of Alberta announced a tuition freeze as a temporary measure while they engaged in a comprehensive tuition review.[11] While the tuition freeze will continue into a fourth academic year, students are becoming increasingly concerned about the result of tuition and fee rates in Alberta once the freeze ends. As demonstrated in other provinces who implemented similar measures, students were met with substantial increases to their tuition once the freezes were lifted. For example, when the Government of British Columbia lifted their tuition freeze in 2001, undergraduate tuition fees rose by more than 25% from 2001 to 2003, and continued to rise by 30.4% in 2003 to 2004.[12] Students in Saskatchewan also experienced large tuition increases when their freeze was lifted.[13] Furthermore, looking at the history in our own province, a period of tuition freeze was used by institutions to justify the introduction of market modifiers in 2010.

Further, when examining the history of Alberta's post-secondary sector, a period of tuition freezes was used by institutions to justify the introduction of Market Modifiers in 2010.[14] In our current economic reality, students face incredible financial burdens associated with the cost of their education, and are unable to plan for their futures effectively. CAUS remains concerned about the unpredictable nature of tuition costs, and the detrimental effects it may have on students' ability to successfully access and/or complete their degrees.

CAUS believes a long term, stable, predictable tuition policy, cemented in legislation needs to be implemented in order to serve the needs of all stakeholders involved, including government, institutions, and students. By implementing and communicating the year-to-year costs of post-secondary education, students and their families can successfully plan for their futures.

Specifically, we recommend that the Government of Alberta use the 2019 Budget to spearhead legislative changes that reflect stable and predictable tuition costs for students, and showcase their commitment to affordability and accessibility through these important policy changes.

Since the removal of the tuition cap from legislation in 2006, CAUS has continually advocated for tuition regulation to be placed back into the Post-Secondary Learning Act, and calls for a reduction of tuition rates to those that were enjoyed by previous generations of students, indexed by the Consumer Price Index (CPI). We strongly believe in a post-secondary system that exemplifies the underlying principles of accessibility, quality, and affordability, and are eagerly looking to the Government of Alberta to commit to and fulfill their promises.

Reductions in tuition must also come alongside a commitment to ensure funding that supports and guarantees a quality education, and hope that the Government of Alberta continues to prioritize a holistic experience for all students across the province. Predictability and sustainability are crucial pillars that uphold the integrity of post-secondary education, which must include confidence in the costs of education for students for years to come. Additionally, predictable tuition and fees for international students in Alberta will incentivize international student enrolment and work in our favor to diversify and enrich our province's cultural milieu.

The provincial budget also presents an ideal opportunity to act upon the Government of Alberta's commitment to address program-specific tuition increases and Mandatory Non-Instructional Fees (MNIFs). Following the provincial election in 2015, the Government of Alberta immediately froze MNIFs alongside tuition, including those that were allotted as program-specific tuition increases, commonly known as Market Modifiers, as they launched an in-depth review of the current tuition and fees model.

As discussed, tuition rates have seen arbitrary and erratic increases over the past two decades. Upon examination of historical trends, 1992 was the last year that students enrolled in post-secondary education were able to rely upon predictable tuition rates. Since then, costs of tuition, alongside the addition of ancillary fees and differential program fees, have risen to levels that now act as barriers to entry. CAUS champions a stable, predictable tuition model that would roll tuition rates back to those in 1992, are adjusted for inflation by CPI, and ask that all future increases be tied to CPI, allowing students equitable access into the system.

While these temporary measures have opened a few doors for current students, those who have yet to complete their education, as well as future students, continue to be concerned about the future outcomes once these measures are no longer restricted. If Market Modifiers and MNIFs are left unresolved prior to the end of the freeze, accessibility to post-secondary education will be forced into narrowed, financial constraints, rather than the equitable nature of a post-secondary system we've strived to achieve, becoming detrimental to the overall future of our provincial economy.

MANDATORY NON-INSTRUCTIONAL FEES

It is also important to note that Alberta has the highest Mandatory Non-Instructional Fees (MNIFs) for university students across Canada – largely as a result of fee increases implemented at various institutions following the government cuts to operational funding in 2010. These fee increases were brought in to cover a wide manner of supposed services unrelated to the core academic mission, including, but not limited to provision of transcripts, security, landscaping, and other such costs that were used to offset the costs typically covered under the operational grants provided by government.

Dramatic examples include the University of Calgary's 'Student Service Fee' of $225 per semester[15], or the University of Alberta's 'Common Student Space, Sustainability, and Services' fee of $145 per semester (2015/16)[16], which has now been updated and increased to a 'Student Academic Support' fee of $252.18[17], without much transparency as to which services these fees support and whether they include those that should be covered by the costs of tuition. These mandatory fees amount to over $1000 in additional charges over the course of an entire degree, and is compounded further when paid for through loans, challenging fundamental principles of accessibility and affordability if left unaddressed.

We all share an understanding that certain fees are justifiable, and are implemented to provide essential services to students across campus – dedicated fee services range from services such as health and dental plans, universal transit passes, capital acquisition or improvement projects, and more. Still, these fees, many of which are administered by our own student associations are only implemented after they pass a referendum, including detailed information regarding the specifics of funding allocation and service provision. Thus, these 'basket of goods' fees should be eliminated if they do not serve specific and valuable purpose that are not otherwise addressed through resource allocations such as tuition, or institutional operating grants.

Without transparency from institutions regarding the use of funds collected through these fees, it is difficult to understand or justify the additional financial burdens that students are asked to carry. Ideally, regulation of such fees would involve student approval, through referendums, or transparent fee schedules that specifically break down funding assigned for recognized services. In addition, fees that fall outside of those parameters and are not specifically dedicated for approved uses would be eliminated, moving toward both an internal and external institutional review of the operating grant and subsequent resource allocation.

Regulating these ancillary fees through the provincial budget provides an opportunity for the Government of Alberta to further investigate levels of funding provided through institutional operating grants, and provide a predictable and sustainable experience, for students and administrators alike, without resorting to loopholes that ultimately add to students' financial burdens.

MARKET MODIFIERS

While MNIFs remain a concern, a more insidious fee model, mimicking principles of differential tuition, was proposed in 2010, and again, in 2014[18] – some of which were overturned by the Government of Alberta in 2015.[19] These proposed increases - labelled "market modifiers" due to an unproven assertion that more 'valuable' or 'coveted' education should be reflected as such in its program costs - were used to justify enormous hikes in program-specific tuition to match rates implemented in other provincial jurisdictions or institutions. For example, students enrolled in Pharmacy at the University of Alberta saw an increase of $3,375 – a 65% increase in a single year.

In 2014, the University of Alberta increased the Law program's fees to $15, 995, totalling a 56% increase per year.[20] These increases fall well outside the realm of predictability and erode any progress in increasing accessibility to post-secondary education in Alberta. We continually worry that Market Modifiers will be utilized by institutions to further burden students if they are not dealt with simultaneous to the regulation of tuition and prior to lifting the tuition freeze.

A simple and effective way to address the issue of Market Modifiers is to simply remove the clause contained in Section 5.1 of the Post-Secondary Institutions' Tuition Fees Regulation, which currently allows for them to exist. The predictability of tuition and subsequent increases should be established for every student in Alberta, and not be subjected to difficult choices imposed as a result of varying institutional or program-specific desires. The Government of Alberta supported students by overturning some of these proposals in 2015, and we call upon them to further support students by addressing any outstanding market modifiers and closing these existing loop holes.

CAUS RECOMMENDS

- Rolling back tuition to 1992 levels, increased by CPI for each subsequent year, and capping all future increases to CPI
- Placing the regulation of tuition back into the Post-Secondary Learning Act
- Regulating the international student tuition differential to offer more stability and predictability for international students
- Removing all existing market modifiers, and removing Section 5.1 from the Tuition Fees Regulation, 'Market modification for tuition fees for specific programs'
- Eliminating the 'basket of goods' mandatory non-instructional fees if they aren't transparent, or have not been subjected to a student-based approval mechanism

INSTITUTIONAL FUNDING

Our technical institutions, colleges, and universities all rely upon public funding support alongside student tuition and it is crucial that the funding strategies for our institutions be approached thoughtfully, with a long-term vision, and recognize the realities of teaching and research in Alberta today. While we believe in a system where students have a financial stake in their education, the entire system cannot be funded on the backs of students.

A critical need to mitigate these growing deficits include addressing deferred maintenance and allocating resources needed to maintain, upgrade, and protect our province's investment in physical infrastructure on campuses. These physical structures are integral to students' academic experiences, and while the Government of Alberta has made sporadic investments in the upkeep of these spaces, CAUS has identified gaps that, if left unaddressed, can greatly impact the quality and efficacy of the post-secondary experience and subsequent outcomes of campus productivity in areas such as research, instructional environments, and physical capacity.

Currently, the Government of Alberta partially funds maintenance at universities through the Infrastructure Maintenance Program (IMP), which is meant to target required operating and facility costs at these institutions. The Campus Alberta grant, although not specific to maintenance, also may go toward maintenance, based on internal budgetary decisions by institutions. However, using Campus Alberta funding for addressing maintenance issues means those are dollars not going towards other programming and service areas, and IMP funding is often insufficient to meet the maintenance needs of institutions.

One of the biggest challenges facing the infrastructure of universities in the province as of this moment is that of deferred maintenance, which refers to maintenance work that is badly needed but has been deferred for a number of reasons over a period of several years.

During the 1990s, the provincial government's infrastructure maintenance investment for post-secondary institutions was reduced in Alberta. During this time, maintenance funding was eventually rolled into operating grants, and universities were left to determine allocations towards infrastructure internally.[21] Since then, funding levels have remained relatively stagnant until 2006[22], and while any additional funding has been appreciated, a significant amount of deferred maintenance remains, compounding in costs for every year that they remain unaddressed.

A recent report from the University of Alberta Students' Union highlights the overwhelming impacts of deferred maintenance on the student experience, calling into question the safety, accessibility, and functionality of existing infrastructure, all of which students rightfully expect throughout their education.[23] Concerns range from outdated building facilities, such as washrooms and temperature control, to safety concerns and security standards that cannot be rectified due to lack of available resources. It is estimated that the current deferred maintenance bill at the University of Alberta sits at nearly 1 billion dollars[24], which remains a pressing concern for students, whose quality of education is impacted on a daily basis[25].

The University of Calgary, currently holding deferred maintenance liabilities of over $500 million, was only granted $14.4 million from the IMP last year. Coupled with institutional allocations, the university budgeted $27.2 million to address deferred maintenance, falling very short from the required $45 million needed to strategically deal with the outstanding issues created by deferred maintenance on their campus.

It also has a direct impact on the experience in the classroom. The University of Calgary Students' Union has looked at a direct link between student satisfaction and the level of investment in campus maintenance and infrastructure. Through the National Survey of Student Engagement there was found to be a direct correlation between student engagement and the increased investment in campus infrastructure the past three years.

Across the province, a limited number of initiatives are currently underway to address certain priorities before they become completely unusable: The MacKimmie Redevelopment, a large multi-year project addressing major deferred maintenance and space issues in the MacKimmie Complex at the University of Calgary campus will secure not only the value of that facility but also free up space in other buildings, and has a price tag of over $270 million – set to be completed by 2022. Projects like the MacKimmie Redevelopment are far from inexpensive, but they have a dramatic impact on the sustainability of a campus and ensure our public spaces are safeguarded for cohorts of students and generations of Albertans to come.

Between the University of Lethbridge, University of Calgary, and University of Alberta, the deferred maintenance bill approaches $2 billion, with U of A alone making up for almost half of that sum. A long term, sustainable government commitment is a necessary step in ensuring that the deferred maintenance problem is dealt with, and prevented from further accumulating. Understanding that a one-time $2 billion investment is not within the parameters of feasibility, CAUS calls on the government to fund ten percent of the total deferred maintenance bill in the province's post-secondary institutions per year, until the enormity of deferred maintenance costs have been sustainably managed across all campuses.

In addition to supporting older buildings by providing adequate funding to maintain standards that encourage and facilitates student success, new buildings, too, must be supported in order to flourish. In the past, the Government of Alberta has provided one-time funding, known as 'Lights On Funding', for institutions opening new buildings on their campuses.[26]

This funding has been used to kick start the running of these buildings, providing support that is crucial to ensuring these spaces serve the needs of students and of the broader campus community. Unfortunately, the last budget cycle saw no funding allocations for Lights On Funding, resulting in a lost opportunity for institutions currently undertaking construction projects for new buildings and negatively impacting the utilization of these otherwise functional and innovative spaces. Where institutions could previously rely on Lights On Funding to offset some costs, they are now being forced to turn to other funding mechanisms, including increased mandatory fees for students.

At MacEwan University, the absence of Lights On Funding has impacted the student-led, student-oriented Students' Association (SAMU) building, slated to open in Fall of 2019. SAMU provides crucial services to the students of MacEwan University, ranging from providing opportunities for peer-related programming and crucial services that aim to meet the basic needs of students who may be in crisis. The SAMU building is intended to provide a permanent home for these services, led by a students' association whose sole mandate is to serve students. As a project paid for exclusively by student dollars, the SAMU building is a space students have invested in significantly, and a commitment from the Government of Alberta to providing Lights On Funding would acknowledge and support this crucial investment. No longer having access to the expected $400,000 in funding, the SAMU building is now left with uncertainty regarding how this gap will be met without severe negative impact to students who are eagerly looking forward to making use of this space.

Similarly, the University of Lethbridge is left in limbo with the Destination Project, a new building which the university describes as "a place for community engagement and outreach; a place with innovation laboratories where undergraduate and graduate research opportunities develop; where knowledge moves from the lab to industry; a place that fosters the next generation of researchers, innovators, entrepreneurs and leaders."[27] This building, which is meant to house science disciplines, among others, has also been left out of consideration with regards to Lights On Funding, losing out on potential enrichment of the student experience, research outcomes, and community contribution. Internal estimates at the University of Lethbridge suggest $3 million in Lights On Funding would be required per year for the Destination Project in order to fully serve the needs of the campus community.

As these spaces remain part of the public domain in our province, it is important that the Government of Alberta prioritize the maintenance of these assets before they become completely unusable and accrue increasingly monumental costs to remain functional. CAUS strongly believes that investments must be made in order to protect and enhance the use of these spaces, allowing students to maximize their educational experience without drawing on them as a source of revenue to address these issues. By prioritizing deferred maintenance on our university campuses, the government has the opportunity to increase physical capacity, incentivize and accommodate increasing enrolment, and provide a world-class quality educational experience for students and other members of the campus community.

With Advanced Education making up a significant portion of the provincial budget, it's imperative that the Government of Alberta and Albertan taxpayers are given the opportunity to have their investments in education be maximized to their full potential and plan to preventatively maintain existing infrastructure to prevent future loss at this magnitude.

The quality of a student's post-secondary educational experience is dependent upon adequate funding for their institution of choice. In collaboration with the Government of Alberta's Funding Framework Review, CAUS recommends that a funding framework be based on the principles of affordability, sustainability, and predictability. These principles allow institutions to budget accordingly so that there is a consistent quality of education and no fluctuations in tuition fees. Understanding that diversity across academic disciplines creates a robust, knowledge-based economy, CAUS further advocates for a funding framework that is primarily motivated by educational outcomes and allows all stakeholders to effectively plan for the long-term fiscal health of their institutions, provided on a rolling three-year basis.

CAUS RECOMMENDS

- Ensure stable and predictable funding is being provided to institutions on a formula that seeks to support educational outcomes, provided on a rolling three-year basis
- Reinstate the Lights On Funding for ongoing and upcoming projects at the University of Calgary, University of Alberta, University of Lethbridge, Mount Royal University, and MacEwan University
- Providing funding to institutions equivalent to 10% of their total deferred maintenance liabilities while simultaneously addressing outstanding projects in a strategic and sustainable manner

MENTAL HEALTH

In January 2013, a funding allocation of $3 million per year for a period of three years was made available to the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, and the University of Lethbridge. MacEwan University and Mount Royal University were granted similar funding in 2014, but at a lesser amount of $250,000 per year for three years. 2017 saw funding levels renewed at the 2013 levels for the U of A, U of C, and the U of L. MacEwan University saw an increase to $360,000 per year, while Mount Royal University saw an increase to $280,000 per year. Funding for MacEwan University and Mount Royal University is still far from the levels of funding of each of the graduate institutions.

Following the 2013 funding announcement, the Alberta Mental Health Review Committee released 25 recommendations to improve our services for addiction and mental health in 2015. This proposal followed months of consultation and research and all 25 points were accepted by the Government of Alberta, including a recommendation to "create healthy and supportive post-secondary campus environments through health, promotion, addiction and mental health campus services, and community partnerships".[28]

After an announcement to renew funding in 2017, students remain encouraged by the dedication to improve access to mental health services on campus. This funding supports the retention of vast improvements made toward services available on campus, while continuing to support those who are most at risk. Without a long-term commitment to mental health funding, many of these services may cease to exist or be relocated off-campus, reducing accessibility and increasing the burden on both students and healthcare providers to maintain existing levels of support. While continued funding has provided ongoing support for existing services, the allocation of funding has not kept pace with the increasing student population in Alberta and the growing need for services as mental health awareness increases.

Students across Alberta face similar need for mental health supports, regardless of the size or location of their individual institutions, and CAUS wholeheartedly supports funding for on-campus mental health supports to be distributed to Albertan universities on a per-student allocation based on total student enrolment numbers Ideally, funding would be allocated to bring all university institutions in line with the level of support originally provided to the University of Lethbridge in 2013.

In January 2013, the University of Lethbridge received a commitment of $1 million per year: Dividing $1 million dollars per year by the head count of 8,820 for students attending the University of Lethbridge in 2014/15, each student was allocated approximately $113 in funding. This has resulted in dramatic improvements, including the hiring of new counselling staff, as well as a significant reduction in wait times, allowing students increased access to seek proactive supports in a timely manner.

CAUS believes that the quality of wellness services available should not differ based on each institution, and in order to achieve similar results for MacEwan University, Mount Royal University, the University of Alberta, and the University of Calgary, increased funding must be made available as soon as possible. The total program cost to do so would be approximately $13.2 million per year.

Most individuals who experience mental illness will begin to develop symptoms between the ages of 18 and 34. While not all of these individuals will be attending post-secondary institutions, campuses across Alberta play a key role in ensuring young people have access to timely, affordable, professional assistance in addressing issues of mental well-being. Investing in accessible, on-campus services for students ensures their ability to care for their mental health and wellness, while also prioritizing their academic success and resilience following graduation.

The return on investment from mental health funding, particularly among the dominant demographic within Alberta's post-secondary community, is high. Holistic investments through primary intervention provide long-term dividends of both a fiscal and social nature. While demand for services might momentarily increase as a result of reduced stigma and increased awareness, providing access to primary interventions such as health promotion programming, counsellors, and other such programs also build strong foundations for our future society, including direct savings in resources required to address not only mental health on and off campus, and additional costs incurred by our human services, health care, and justice departments.

The Canadian Institute for Health Information and Canadian Policy Network's report on mental health promotion and mental illness prevention notes the return on investment within the 18-25 year old cohort as second only to adolescents, and projects a return of investment of up to $4 for every dollar invested – that compares to a return of $2.78 for congestive heart failure prevention and $0.71 for diabetes.[29] The accumulated economic evidence supports the conclusion of the Alberta Mental Health Review Committee's recommendation to increase supports for mental health and addiction and to prioritize post-secondary campuses as a key area of investment.

According to the National College Health Assessment Survey, in the last twelve months, 13.1% of students seriously considered suicide, 57.5% of students surveyed felt hopeless, 65.0% felt lonely, and 2.1% attempted suicide.[30] To put that into tangible statistics, on a campus of 30,000 students, 3,930 seriously considered suicide, 17,250 students felt hopeless, 19,500 felt lonely, and 630 attempted suicide. Campus mental health is an escalating concern, and while our institutions are striving to support students, they have limited resources to address an incredibly high volume of individuals seeking assistance. Students benefit most by the ability of our institutions to put government funding towards existing mental health services; allowing them to offer more counselling sessions hire more staff, and decrease the wait times for students to be seen by mental health professionals.

The sustained mental health funding to all five CAUS institutions in 2017[31] has demonstrated superb value on the investment made by government, and should continue to be expanded to meet the current demand. Services have grown and wait times have been reduced - by maintaining and expanding mental health supports on campus we ensure our ability to maintain progress.

Our student associations continue to be strong partners in working on decreasing the stigma associated with mental health, providing feedback and support for university run mental health programs, as well as providing programs and services ourselves. Peer support counselling, student food banks, and events focused on decreasing stress while increasing awareness of mental health, are all important parts of student association operations - but without additional supports required to improve mental health, these can only provide limited improvements for the entire community. Student associations are the legislated representatives of students at every post-secondary institution in Alberta and play a critical role in consultation and planning regarding mental health. Student associations are prepared to do their part, and with government support, we know our institutions will improve their capacity as well.

CAUS RECOMMENDS

- Providing ongoing support for student mental health in the form of per-student funding, based on total student enrolment numbers. This funding should be allocated at the per-student level for all five publicly funded universities to match that of the University of Lethbridge, amounting to $113 per student, at a total of $13.2 million per year.
- Ensuring that mental health supports remain on campus where they are most accessible and effective
- Ensuring that student associations are continually involved in consultation on decisions related to post-secondary mental health funding and supports

STUDENT EMPLOYMENT

Maintaining employment throughout enrolment in post-secondary education has become more common amongst students for a variety of reasons. Deviation from the “traditional” schedule of primarily finding employment during the summer months is no longer the norm, as the student demographic has diversified greatly to include those who are returning to studies, supplementing their professional experience or education, single parents, and mature students, to name a few.

As previously mentioned, the costs of education, including tuition, fees, and the costs of living, have substantially increased as well. Coupled with rising financial burdens, students also seek employment in their field of study to remain competitive as they enter the workforce upon graduation. Work experience has shown to make a student almost twice as likely to be hired than those without work experience.[32]

CAUS is grateful for the renewal of the Summer Temporary Employment Program (STEP)[33], as it supports the ability for students to seek and find employment during their studies, and hope to see the program expanded to better serve the needs of all stakeholders involved.
Since the inception of the program, students have been clear about the need for a revision and expansion of STEP in order to best accommodate both the needs of employers and their own. CAUS recommends that STEP be expanded to offer opportunities year-round, providing an incentive for employers to more consistently and efficiently strengthen certain job markets, especially through entry-level career positions. Additionally, targeting STEP opportunities to include positions that are relevant to their field of study better enhances outcomes for students seeking career-relevant work experience.

Thus, an overhaul of the program should support student needs today. As work opportunities are limited to the summer alone, students interested in working during their degree do not receive the same support as other learners. This works to the detriment of students from low-income backgrounds, who are more likely to work their entire degree to pay for their education. Moving STEP to a year-long program, and renaming it the Student Temporary Employment Program, would help more students reap the benefits of finding meaningful work experience regardless of their financial background. Data on current work opportunities can also be used to tailor experiences closer towards a students’ field of study. Students should be aware of what opportunities in their field of study are supported through STEP, so they can find employment that will best prepare them for the workforce. CAUS advocates for data collection on which organizations use STEP, to track the progress of the program and ensure that it reaches its policy objectives.

Similar initiatives are reflected through hybrid model application programs in Saskatchewan (Canada Saskatchewan Job Grant)[34] and Ontario[35], which allow students to search and apply for specific jobs related to their education, while allowing employers to approach candidates they feel are best suited to meet their organization’s needs.

Finally, the subsidy provided by STEP has not been adjusted in accordance with minimum wage or inflationary increases; employers have to pay more to hire students even through STEP. With minimum wage rising to $15/hour in 2018, the employment landscape has changed substantially to adapt to wage deviations and associated costs of living. In spite of the progress made in quality work available to students, we still need to ensure that students remain competitive in the job market and that employers remain willing to invest in student employment through paid employment and experiential learning.

Student employment has increased from approximately one in four students to almost one out of every two students over the past few decades[36], driven by the fact that income from employment is ranked second to personal savings as the primary source of income for those pursuing post-secondary education.

CAUS calls for the subsidy provided by STEP to be increased correspondingly to the changes in the minimum wage, so that organizations are supported for promoting student employment. Beyond STEP, students often work as research assistants over the summer through Alberta Innovates grants in health innovations and clean futures[37].

These grants have been around since 2004, but have remained flat at $5000 since then. With the minimum wage increases, students now make less through these positions than they would working full time at minimum wage over the summer. Indexing these grants to the minimum wage increases would help promote affordability for Alberta's brightest learners.

CAUS RECOMMENDS

- Addressing the minimum wage increases and increasing the subsidy provided to employers through STEP
- Expanding STEP through a year-round enhancement of available employment opportunities and changing the name from "Summer Temporary Employment Program" to "Student Temporary Employment Program"
- Reviewing and expanding the application process criteria, in collaboration with employers and academic institutions, to better match the skills students require for various employment opportunities with the skills acquired through post-secondary education
- Ensuring that student placement with STEP is coordinated to maximize degree relevant experience received by students

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