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2023/2024

Key Priorities

COUNCIL OF ALBERTA
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Introduction

Representing over 114,000 post-secondary students across Alberta, the Council of Alberta University Students serves as a coalition of student leaders, speaking directly on behalf of student needs. We represent undergraduate students from the University of Alberta, the University of Lethbridge, Mount Royal University, MacEwan University, and Athabasca University to the public, government and other post-secondary education stakeholders. Based in Edmonton, CAUS is a non-partisan and active advocacy group driven by our members looking to ensure a fully accessible and high quality system of education in Alberta.

Our Values

CAUS is a values-driven organization, and we strive to ensure both our internal operations and our external priorities reflect our guiding values.

01. Student-focused

Grounded in student needs, and ensuring that work being done serves to benefit students collectively.

02. Research-driven

Basing our actions and advocacy on data, contextualizing our research within future-oriented framing, and noting the role of bias within research.

03. Adaptable

Proactive, resilient, and oriented towards ensuring we adjust to long-term changes within the post-secondary landscape.

04. Innovative

Working to ensure we consistently look for new ways to advocate for student needs.

Our Values

05. Transparent

Bridging the gap between advocacy and student awareness, and ensuring that CAUS's work is readily accessible and understandable to our stakeholders.

06. Future-thinking

Casting our aim towards the long-term future of advanced education, and always considering the bigger picture.

07. Rooted in justice, accessibility, equity, diversity, and inclusion

Ensuring our actions uphold our commitment to honouring treaties, advocating for accessibility, and advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion within the realm of post-secondary.

Advocacy Priorities

For the 2023/2024 year, the advocacy priorities selected by the CAUS Board fall into 4 primary categories:

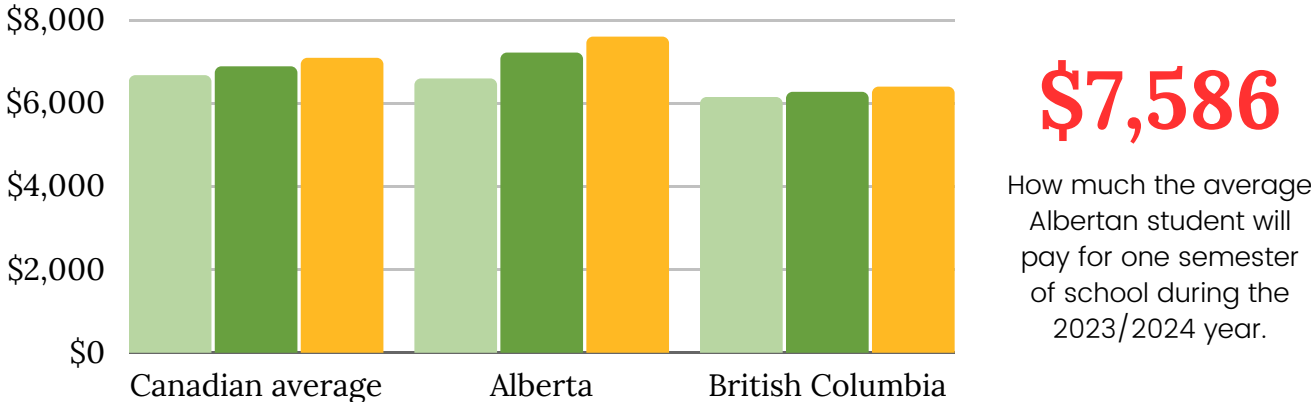
- Affordability
- Mental Health
- Honouring Treaties
- Reducing Sexual and Gender-based violence

These issue areas were selected to reflect both broader CAUS values, and above all, key student needs, as identified by various consultation processes across each of the CAUS institutions.

Affordability

Within Alberta, students have been highly impacted by the cost of living crisis. With inflation continuing to rise, various trends have been documented that speak to the burden students are facing. These trends include an increased reliance on campus food banks, with the University of Alberta alone noting a 30% increase in food bank usage; [1] similarly, student housing precarity has also increased significantly, particularly within Alberta’s urban centers. [2]

While the cost of living crisis is a widespread, national issue, Alberta’s students have been particularly impacted due to Alberta having disproportionately high increases in tuition. Alberta's student's have seen the highest rates of rising tuition fees in Canada for domestic undergraduate students.



The average cost of one semester of tuition for the years 2021-2022, 2022-2023, and for 2023-2024. Data via Statistics Canada. [3]

24%

The rate at which Alberta’s tuition rose from the 2020/2021 school year to the 2023/2024 school year. Alberta’s neighbours, BC and Saskatchewan, saw increases of 6% and 12% during that same time frame, respectively.

Recommended Actions

With Alberta students increasingly relying on food banks, and living in unsafe housing situations, the need for action on affordability is critical. Long-term, Alberta's post-secondary system is becoming increasingly more expensive than that of other provinces, leading us to lose our competitive edge in attracting and retaining our students.

01. Increase Funding Options

Currently, via the New Beginnings Bursary, the government provides up to 1,000 bursaries of \$5,000 each, which are awarded to low-income students in select programs. Expansion could look like:

- Increasing the total number of bursaries available;
- Increasing the amount of funding the bursary provides. \$5000 would not cover the tuition of a single semester at MacEwan University, which has the lowest tuition of Alberta's publicly-funded universities;
- Increasing the eligible programs, as right now, primarily S.T.E.M programs are the focus.[4]

02. Support Student Summer Jobs

Previously, Alberta's Summer Temporary Employment Program (STEP) provided valuable training to Alberta's students, and supported local businesses in meeting key labour demands.

Originally introduced in 1972 by Peter Lougheed, STEP supported thousands of Albertans for generations by providing funding to municipalities, small businesses, and nonprofits to hire students. [5]

- Each summer, roughly 3000 Albertan students benefited from STEP. Introducing a similar program would support students in receiving job training, help fill labour demands, and create the opportunity for students to gain extra income.

Supporting Indigenous Students & Honouring Treaties

The Government of Alberta is currently the signatory of three different agreements with First Nations: The Protocol Agreement between the Government of Alberta and the Stoney Nakoda-Tsuut'ina Tribal Council for Discussions on Matters of Mutual Concern, the Protocol between the Government of Alberta and the Blackfoot Confederacy for Discussions on Matters of Mutual Concern, and the Relationship Agreement between the Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations and the Government of Alberta. All three legally binding agreements note the importance of cooperation on education, and two of the three agreements explicitly note that the two parties support the calls to action outlined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which in turn, has specific and actionable asks relating to post-secondary. [6] More broadly speaking, the number treaties that remain binding throughout Alberta similarly speak to the value of education and the requirements that settlers must honour to support access to education for Indigenous peoples.

Given that we are all treaty peoples, residing on the traditional lands of Indigenous nations, CAUS asks for Indigenous learners are grounded in a commitment to upholding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Actions within a provincial context.

With significant disparities still prevalent in regards to the educational outcomes relating to post-secondary for Indigenous peoples, compared to the settler population, CAUS recommendations also seek to support more equitable access to post-secondary education for Indigenous peoples.

To quote Elder Miiksika'am, the spiritual advisor at Mount Royal University in Calgary: "Education is the new buffalo from which a good life will be attained." [7]

Recommended Actions

CAUS seeks to build upon existing efforts around reconciliation by the Government of Alberta, centring equitable access to education for Indigenous peoples, upholding the TRC Calls to Action, and honouring existing treaties on these lands. With these goals in mind, CAUS recommends:

01. Supporting the TRC Call #62, II & IV

- "Provide the necessary funding to post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms." [8]
 - This call could be supported via policy work from the ministry and/or extended funding for undergraduate teaching programs to ensure future teachers are well-versed in Indigenous knowledge and teaching methodologies, coupled with efforts to fund and advocate for Indigenous teaching methodologies to be incorporated more broadly into PSE curriculums overall.
- "Establish senior-level positions in government at the assistant deputy minister level or higher dedicated to Aboriginal content in education."
 - This call can be supported by increased high-level civil service positions in Advanced Education to increase Indigenous representation. [8]



Recommended Actions

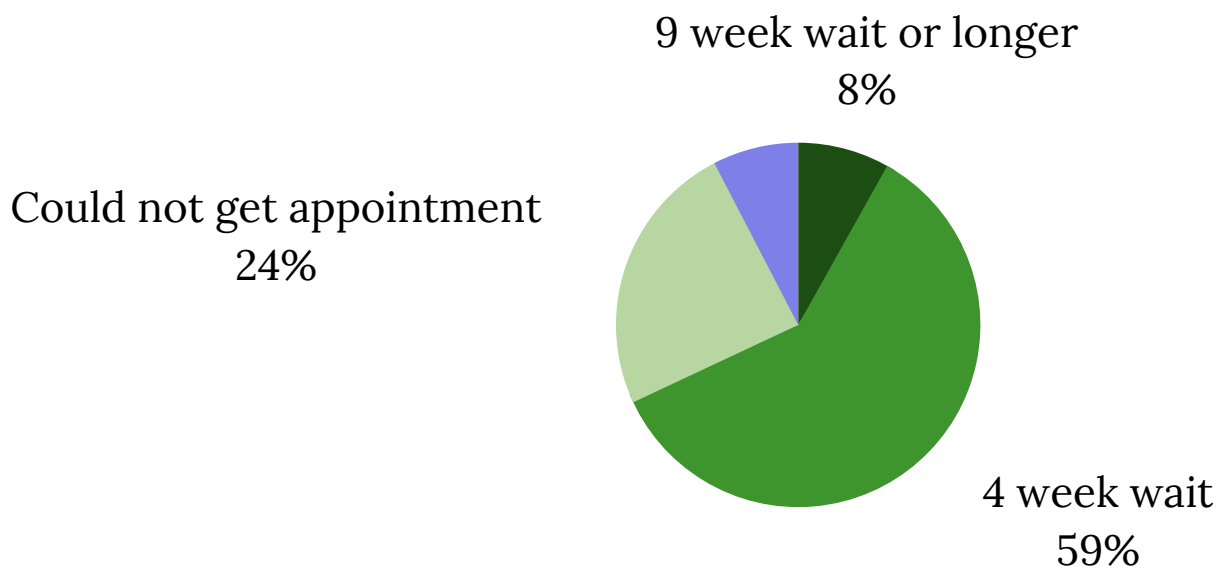
02. Increase Funding for Indigenous Students

Given disparate outcomes in post-secondary educational attainment between settlers and Indigenous peoples, CAUS proposes two targeted funding allocations to better support access to post-secondary for Indigenous peoples at the provincial level.

1. Create additional scholarships for Indigenous students not eligible for band funding, focusing on bursaries and scholarships for self-identified Indigenous students, with wider eligibility in regards to programs/disciplines of study, and eligible schools.
 - a. While students who are status First Nations are often eligible for federally-allocated funding via their First Nations Bands, non-status individuals are unable to access this central funding stream. There exist designated bursaries for Indigenous students to attend post-secondary within Alberta, funded by the Alberta government, but this funding often comes with stipulations around course-load, which program students are in, which school they attend, or where they reside. Increased funding, with wider eligibility requirements, would support equitable educational access for a broader number of Indigenous peoples within Alberta.
 2. Extend eligibility for the Advancing Futures Program.
 - a. Serving as a support program for those who have been in foster care, of which 74% are Indigenous, the Advancing Futures program offers a maximum of \$40,000 for current and former youth in government care aged 18 to 24. Notably, however, the age restriction, coupled with the requirement that youth have "been in the care or custody of Children's Services for at least 546 days (18 months)" create barriers for those interested in applying. A removal of the age cap, and a decrease to the required time spent in care, would expand the accessibility of this program, and would allow increased access to post-secondary for a marginalized population.
- [9]

Mental Health

Even prior to COVID-19, mental health services for post-secondary students were not able to keep up with the high demand. Post-pandemic, the need for mental health supports has risen further, particularly for groups such as international students, LGBTQ2+ students, and BIPOC students. The need for culturally appropriate care continues to increase with growing diversity on Alberta's campuses.



Average wait times for students at the University of Alberta when accessing mental health services. [10]

95%

The percentage of students who reported feeling overwhelmed and exhausted in a national study on post-secondary mental health within Canada. [11]

Recommended Actions

Given the prevalence of students needing access to mental health services, coupled with rising rates of enrollment overall, and increasing needs for culturally relevant and appropriate mental health care, student advocates recommend the following:

01. Increase mental health funding commitments to \$188 per FLE at each institution

The University of Lethbridge was granted \$147 per Full Load Equivalent (FLE) in 2013, in accordance with the Campus Mental Health Grant, and drastically reduced the waiting lists for their services. Similar funding, adjusted for the current inflation rate and tied to CPI, guarantees timely and effective mental health access across Alberta's PSIs. While increased funding for increased access to services may not fully solve systemic mental health issues, it plays a significant role in supporting students during times of crisis. [12]

02. Renew the Indigenous Post-Secondary Student Mental Health Grant

In 2017, the Government of Alberta approved a set of seven actions as Next Steps to Improve Post-secondary Student Mental Health. This included funding for a targeted program, the Indigenous Post-Secondary Student Mental Health Grant, which sought to "ensure more Indigenous students have the option to use, and have available, culturally appropriate mental health care and literacy opportunities that acknowledge the historical, colonial, assimilative, and socio-economic factors that impact them. The Grant will also improve Indigenous students' access to traditional ways of maintaining and healing their mental health." While this grant is not currently active, its renewal would work to support efforts around reconciliation. [13]


Reducing Sexual and Gender-based Violence

Though not one of the formalized three priority areas for CAUS, the issue of gender-based violence within Alberta's post-secondary institutions is both pressing and critical to our students.

Per the "Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Alberta Post-Secondary Education" report, sexual and gender-based violence is a rampant issue among all 26 of Alberta's post-secondary institutions, indicating a highly systemic issue.

50%

Since attending their post-secondary institution half of all students have reported experiencing some form of sexual or gender-based violence. [14]



Sexual harassment is the most common form of sexual and gender-based violence that students experience, being noted by 45% of respondents. [14]

Recommended Actions

01. Support the creation of a Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Alberta Post-Secondary Education Working Group

- With student representatives from post-secondary institutions across the province, including representatives from the Council of Alberta University Students, the Alberta Students' Executive Council, and the Alberta Graduate Provincial Advocacy Council, campus sexual violence response coordinators and/or frontline service providers of specialized sexual assault-specific support as well as community-based organizations, such as a representative from the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services.
 - Such a group could be modeled after the 2016 Advisory Panel on Post-Secondary Mental Health, which was created by the Ministry of Advanced Education. Given the importance of adequate representation, it is paramount that a similar group working to issue long-term recommendations for Ministerial actions on sexual and gender-based violence include student representation, representation from the Ministry, and representation from relevant community stakeholders.

Recommended Actions

02. Dedicate sustainable and long-term funding to support survivors of sexual and gender-based violence at Alberta's post-secondaries

- Such funding would be distributed to support:
 - Existing on-campus sexual assault responses and/or services, particularly those with identified needs for increased staffing and/or resource-based support;
 - Enhanced access to such services with appropriate funding for coordination with specialized sexual assault services and/or staff at institutions who have expressed a need for their development;
 - Digital programming with accessible, easy to understand language on effectively supporting survivors, managing disclosures, and utilizing trauma-informed practices, to be distributed to institutions across Alberta for use by faculty, staff, and students;
 - Funding for community-based sexual assault supports and centres in contexts where post-secondary students primarily rely on community resources for such care, such as at smaller institutions and rural institutions.

Recommended Actions

03. Support consent education

- We request that the Government of Alberta sponsor a province-wide campaign around consent education at Alberta's post-secondaries. Such a campaign would highlight what consent looks like in a variety of different contexts, using easy-to-understand language, and would also highlight the fundamental importance of consent more broadly.



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