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Conference Report: CASA Foundations, May 21-25, 2018

What is CASA Foundations?

CASA is an acronym for the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, and it is the federal advocacy group of which the ULSU is a member. CASA is similar to our provincial counterpart, CAUS, as we advocate to politicians on behalf of students and student issues. CASA is a combination of many student viewpoints: member institutions vary from universities to polytechnic schools, and graduate students' associations are also members. The Foundations conference is the first CASA conference of our terms; this means it provides us with the opportunity to meet other members from across the country, learn about the organization, and elect our new board and committees. The two delegates we send to CASA conferences throughout the year are typically the President and the Vice President External; this year, it is myself and Victoria Schindler. For this conference, Victoria and I travelled to Ottawa, Ontario/Gatineau, Quebec from May 21-May 25, 2018.

Monday, May 21

The two of us travelled to Ottawa on Saturday, May 19 and spent two extra nights in the capital to sight-see. We paid for any incurred expenses out of our own pockets. On the Monday night, we were able to officially meet CASA staff, as well as many of the new members. We participated in fun icebreakers and had the chance to have conversations with students from across the country.

Tuesday, May 22

Tuesday was our first full day of sessions. To begin our day, we were welcomed by an Elder who acknowledged the Algonquin People, on whose traditional land our conference took place. Next, our first session of the day was entitled "What is CASA?". This brief session gave a quick overview of the organization, and what we can accomplish for students. We then discussed our Code of Conduct, which is expected to be followed at all CASA conferences. For each conference, we have Code of Conduct officers to ensure that participants have someone to whom they can speak if an incident occurs. After this, we discussed Robert's Rules. Robert's Rules is something that we follow here at the ULSU, and so it was nice to get a refresher. We were able to immediately use what we had learned as we then participated in the conference's opening

plenary. At this plenary, the Code of Conduct officers were officially selected, and we were able to see the minutes from the AGM conference that had been held in March. After this, we took a break for lunch and upon our return, our afternoon was dedicated to sessions about the CASA organization itself. This included going over the purpose and structure of CASA, as well as what our year will look like as members of the organization. Our last session of the day concerned the role of the federal government in post-secondary students' education. This session provided context for us in terms of the issues for which we can advocate to federal politicians.

We then took a dinner break and reunited for my favourite part of the entire conference. The Elder who had graciously welcomed us in the morning returned with her husband and friend to allow us to participate in a Blanket Exercise. This was incredibly moving, and it is something I would love to bring back to the U of L campus. The Blanket Exercise, led by our three guests, is an interactive experience that allowed us to re-learn the historical experiences of Indigenous peoples in Canada. There were three parts: 1) looking at maps of what is now North America; 2) the Blanket Exercise itself; and lastly, we participated in a talking circle for two hours. This exercise made me reflect very deeply about my own life, and I am very happy to have had the experience.

Wednesday, May 23

On Wednesday, we began the day by discussing student issues. I really enjoyed this part of the day, as we were able to engage with different issues both individually and as a group. To start, we sat in groups and discussed the topics at those tables. I was at a group that discussed sexual violence and safe spaces on campus. After we had spent time as a group, we were instructed to be totally silent for a period of time. During this time, we were able to walk around with sticky notes and write our own commentary and ideas about the issues that had been discussed previously. I liked being able to think critically about the issues individually as it gave us time to personally connect with and reflect upon how we might have experienced such issues on our own campuses. At the end of this session, all of the papers were filled with sticky notes. I believe that we were able to have a very insightful conversation about student issues that we may want to focus on during the year to come.

The rest of our day was full of sessions, much like the day prior. We discussed work that CASA had previously accomplished, and where last year's delegation left off. It was encouraging to see how much work has been done, and I am very excited about where we can go from there. After this, we had different guest speakers come in and talk to us about their individual organizations, and how they are trying to impact the post-secondary landscape, much like us. Firstly, we heard from Abacus Data. As a political science student, this was particularly interesting to me. The guest speakers presented us with polling data on post-secondary education priorities from across the country. It was fascinating to learn about what issues are resonating

with students, and it was a really informative session. Next, we heard from the Quebec Student Union (if any of you reading this are Francophone, it is actually l'Union étudiante du Québec). CASA has a very solid working relationship with the UEQ that began fairly recently. This relationship allows CASA to have better representation, as well as gives us the opportunity to learn about student issues that may be affecting our counterparts in Québec. Our friends from the UEQ explained their organizational structure, how CEGEP plays into the post-secondary environment in Québec, and how this partnership strengthens both of our organizations. After having the chance to speak extensively with a few of their representatives about their work, I can say I am so thrilled to have the opportunity to learn from them over the coming months. After the UEQ, another Québec-based organization spoke to us: Utile. Utile is an organization that focuses on student housing, and the devastating effects that high costs of student housing can create. Utile has focused on creating affordable housing for students, a commendable effort. It was very interesting to hear about their efforts and challenges that they have encountered. Our last presentation came from Our Turn, an organization that works solely on campus sexual violence. This was a very powerful presentation, and I learned a lot about the state of sexual violence policies across the country. Our Turn actually grades many campus sexual violence policies and, as a result, points out many flaws that are prominent in these policies. As the U of L is in the final stages of redoing its sexual violence policy, I felt that this presentation was particularly pertinent to our campus.

Thursday, May 24

Thursday was a very long (but productive) day. We began by engaging in advocacy and government relations. Representatives from Impact Public Affairs presented to us about best practices in advocacy. I really loved this presentation as the presenters were engaging, humorous, and I felt like I learned a lot about how to advocate. We then engaged in practical advocacy training. This was more of a refresher for me, as I had already experienced advocacy meetings during our advocacy days in Edmonton in April. That being said, it was still great experience to practice advocating for federal, student issues. After this, we took a lunch break and then reconvened for a presentation on the Canada Student Loans Program. I am less familiar with this particular program, and so I found it quite informative. The Canada and Alberta student loan programs can differ, and I feel like I have more knowledge now that I can use to better serve students. The remainder of our afternoon was spent on policy discussion. To begin, we pulled out the policy discussion sheets from the previous day. We reengaged with the material, and students read out some of the key comments for the sheets. As a result, we were all able to have a reflective, insightful discussion about how best to approach these issues. In order to continue along the same wavelength, we began to discuss how policies are formed at CASA. As with any organization, we want all policies to be updated with current research, as well as be pertinent to

students of the day. The presenter spoke to us about the importance of these policies, and how policies are created within CASA.

After our discussion on policies, we took a short dinner break before reconvening for the Board of Directors elections. While these elections are a lengthy process, it is incredibly important as these students lead us throughout the year and chair our committees. All candidates who put their names forward for a position did extremely well, and it was hard to choose for whom to cast the ballot. I am very proud to announce that our own Victoria Schindler was elected as the Director-at-Large, Policy. This is very exciting representation for the ULSU, and I know she will do a fabulous job. Overall, I am thrilled to work with the new board going forward, and I know we are in very good hands.

Friday, May 25

This was our last day of the conference. To begin, our outgoing Executive Director updated us on CASA's financial situation. After that, we learned about how to use our communication tools: Highrise and Basecamp. These are online resources that we use to update documents, and keep in touch with each other in an efficient manner. Then, we went over the many different committees of CASA, and the roles of each. We also spoke about the work that will need to be accomplished between now and our next conference, Policy and Strategy, in July. To finish our conference, we had one more round of elections. This time, we elected members to the committees about which we had spoken earlier in the day. On a personal note, I was elected to the Governance and Internal Review committee. I look forward to working with my fellow members over the coming year! After the elections, we finished the last of our business for the Foundations Conference 2018. Victoria and I returned to Alberta the next day (Saturday, May 26th). Overall, it was a great conference, and I look forward to Policy and Strategy.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this report of the conference, please feel free to contact me.

Very Best,

Laura Bryan
President