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Conference Report: CASA Policy and Strategy Conference (November 24th – 27th)

What is the CASA Policy and Strategy Conference?

CASA's 2019 Policy and Strategy Conference is dedicated to setting the direction of the organization's advocacy and policy initiatives. Sessions at this conference are designed to discuss concerns and ideas of students across Canada. Membership then discusses and debates the decided issues and topics before identifying the top priorities that CASA will bring to Parliament Hill in February 2020.

Sunday, November 24th

The session on the Sunday was kept pretty light and pretty late – with a registration/meet and greet being held from 17:00 – 19:00. Because of this later start, Sunday was the day I decided to fly to Vancouver. The flight went relatively smooth and I was able to make it to Vancouver with plenty of time before the registration time. The meet and greet was a great time to see so many people that I haven't seen in a while. The last CASA conference was the GOTV conference held in Calgary back in August, which hosted most Western schools. Because of this, I hadn't seen many people from the East since our first CASA conference back in May. It was a great opportunity to catch up and see how everyone is handling their terms.

Monday, November 25th

Our first full day was filled with session and much discussion. Our day started with a wonderful welcome from an Indigenous elder, who spoke about the beauty of the land and the need to educate widely about indigenous history. We then got into a brief overview of the day and a quick run-down of the code of conduct. Given the importance of these conferences, having an update with regards to the guidelines surrounding the organization simply assures that we all are on the same page. We then had a presentation from Universities Canada, where they introduced a new program called the Outbound Mobility Program. The overview covered the ins and outs of the new program, including funding structure, goals of the program, and the current state of Canadian students who study abroad. It was very insightful to see the intentions of the government around this program, given how behind Canada is with students who study abroad. After breaking for lunch, we had an extremely lengthy discussion around our priorities for the year. I am thankful that so much time was allotted for this piece, simply given how critical these discussions were. Some important areas to highlight that came out of the discussion was Truth and Reconciliation with Indigenous Students, Student Financial Aid, and International Student Support. We then had a brief session on a GOTV wrap-up. It was interesting to see the numbers following the relatively recent federal election and how we can use those numbers to our benefit in meetings with government. The day then ended after that session. CAUS held a meeting following the GOTV session, simply given that most of us were present and there were pressing matters to discuss.

Tuesday, November 26th

The second full day began with a quick overview of the day before diving right into some CASA committee updates. A total of six committees presented their updates, with committees like National Advisory Committee covering the upcoming year and committees like Federal Policy Committee outlining the work that stands to be done for the organization. We then had a dedicated hour to an update on the Member Sponsorship Program (working title). This was an initiative which began planning last year, with the main goal of increasing Indigenous representation at the CASA table. This has been a long identified area of potential growth for the organization and seeing this come to light in this year was refreshing. There was a meeting which took place in October, and saw fourteen Indigenous students brought out to discuss where CASA could grow in the area of Indigenous advocacy and relations. A lot of useful feedback was gained through this and this update was a useful way to hear that ultimately, this is a great initiative, however there still stands to be a lot of work done. The financial reality of this program is that it requires investments from member institutions. CASA lacks the consistent financial reserves to hold this program beyond next year. We then wrapped up the day with a National Advocacy Committee Consultation session. The committee identified the lack of “transition” with regards to advocacy through CASA, and are therefore developing an advocacy guidebook to aid with this in future years. We were asked to brainstorm areas that this guidebook could cover in small breakout groups. I was thankful to be at a table with a lot of other schools I do not interact with, and our session around this initiative was proactive, positive, and constructive. The day ended a little earlier, which was much needed given the length of a number of the sessions.

Wednesday, November 27th

Wednesday began with a Board action plan for the rest of this academic year. It covered many initiatives such as greater collaboration with provincial issues, the membership sponsorship program, an equity audit, and a number of other smaller ideas. There was room for discussion around there and a healthy discourse began with regards to capacity and intentions. We then had a financial update, which was pretty status-quo as far as financial updates go. The staff members and observer institutions then had to leave as we held an in-camera meeting around membership recruitment. Obviously I cannot expand on what was said in this session, but I will say there was very robust discussion that I was happy to be a part of. The in-camera session ran a little late, so we took lunch and came back to cover the time in-between now and SuperCon (the next and final CASA conference for my term). We then held closing plenary for a number of hours, which I believe minutes for can be found online.

If you have any questions or concerns about my report, this trip, or anything at all, please feel free to contact me through email at su.president@uleth.ca or by phone at (403) 329 – 2221.

Best regards,

Andrew Gammack
President