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Conference Report: CASA Supercon 2020 (February 16th – 22nd)

What is CASA Supercon?

CASA Supercon is the largest CASA conference of the year and brings together delegates to discuss important post-secondary matters with elected officials on Parliament Hill. Supercon is a combination of CASA advocacy week and our Annual General Meeting. This means the days are often packed with plenty of key learning sessions, important meetings, and thorough discussions. This was also my final CASA conference for, well foreseeably at least, ever. This was a great opportunity to say goodbye to the multitude of connections I had made over the past year and make plans following my presidency to keep in touch with those people. It has been a great experience representing the student voice at the federal level and advocating for genuinely positive change for post-secondary across the country.

Sunday February 16th

I had arrived in Ottawa quite late the prior day as my flight to Toronto had been delayed and therefore; I had to catch a later flight to Ottawa. This conference was structured in a way to allow for delegates to catch up on some rest and explore the city prior to registration at 5pm. I spent the day walking through the streets of Ottawa and catching up on some much needed school work. The registration was relatively standard, with most of the time spend catching up with those people I have not seen since November. After getting my schedule of meetings throughout the week, I talked with some delegates for a bit before closing off the day in anticipation of an early start the next day.

Monday February 17th

Monday acted as a day for foundational information prior to the true start of everyone's meetings. After a powerful welcome from a First Nations elder, we began with our opening plenary which went pretty standard. We then spend around half an hour going over our code of conduct to remind everyone of proper conduct to exercise throughout the week. We then had a very informative presentation from the research and policy analyst, as well as the government relations officer about policy and fact review. We covered the advocacy document in great detail and dove a little deeper into the research backing up much of our claims. As this is far from CASA's first rodeo, we then covered common pushbacks and questions we can expect in these meetings. I found this session extremely useful as it outlined many areas in which I had not previously considered through my prior readings. Following that session, a professional government relations firm shared some common do's and don'ts of advocacy meetings and engagement on Parliament Hill. After lunch, the day was filled with an interactive session going over some of what was covered by the GR firm prior to our break. We then covered a much needed training session on social media and Highrise, the widespread application used by CASA to take notes on advocacy meetings. We closed off the day with some practical lobby trainings and trial runs of common encounters.

Following the official day schedule, I spent a decent amount of time further researching the advocacy document and how to best frame it to each major party I had meetings with. I also spent some time looking into each of the MP's I had meetings with, in order to best ensure I knew what I was getting into and how to most effectively push the asks CASA was pushing. Admittedly, this was a long day filled with much learning and many informative sessions. I, again, called it early on this day in anticipation of many meeting the following day.

Tuesday February 18th – Thursday February 20th

I wanted to group these three days together as the structure of them was exactly the same. Morning introduction/Q&A session, afternoons filled with advocacy meetings, and then some sort of event in the evening for debriefing. Over the course of these three days, I had seven meetings with several Members of Parliament: MP Damien Kurek, MP Blaine Calkins, MP Mike Lake, MP Jasraj Singh Hallan, MP Adam Vaughan, MP Rosemarie Falk, and MP Alex Ruff. Despite my meetings being only with MP's from the Conservative and Liberal Party, CASA as a whole did meet with a variety of MP's, Senators, Ministers, Stakeholder Groups, and staff members across all major political parties. During these meetings, myself and my colleagues pushed six major asks.

The first is for an expansion of the Canadian Student Grant program by 40% from \$3000 to \$4200 per academic year. This is to account for the increased cost of living, tuition, and rising inflation students have been subject to since the last program expansion in 2016.

The second ask is for an extension of the interest-free grace period on Canadian Student Loans from six to twenty-four months. This is based on large amounts of research which finds the income levels of post-secondary graduates generally sees a substantial increase between 2-5 years after graduation as well as the statistic of graduates taking an average of four months to find a job following graduation.

Our third ask was for a grace period of anywhere from one to five years for new parents on their Canadian Student Loans. This immediate repayment period often stops graduates from pursuing major life milestones such as buying a house or having children.

Our fourth ask comes forward from the Indigenous Student Delegates of CASA and is calling for the ratification of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Despite Canada officially becoming a signatory of UNDRIP back in 2016, there is actually no binding for the country to follow through on the critical asks in the document. The document is quite robust (I sincerely encourage you to explore this document further) and has multiple asks specific to post-secondary education. Our main approach with this ask was to reconcile the glaring gap that exists with Indigenous peoples' access to higher education. According to the Assembly of First Nations, while 7 in 10 (70%) First Nations youth identify an eagerness to participate in post-secondary education, only 48.4% of Indigenous peoples have a post-secondary credential. In addition to the post-secondary elements within the declaration, CASA is calling upon the Canadian government to adopt the document in its entirety.

The fifth ask of the federal government revolves around co-op and internships for International students. As it currently stands, International students must apply for a work permit to pursue work-integrated learning. This application can be quite convoluted and requires annual reapplication, impacting International students and their access to these critical opportunities. Our ask to the government is quite simple; allow international students to register these co-op terms

under their already existing study permits. This helps to smooth over the entire process while continuing to represent Canada as a destination country for post-secondary education.

Our final ask to the government is for mandated student representation on the three governing bodies of Canada's Granting Agencies; the Social Sciences Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), the Natural Science and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). As the research money determined on these bodies affects students in a very substantial manner, having students present on the boards helps to bring a greater perspective to these committees. Additionally, it allows students to have some say in the strategic direction of the governing bodies which allocate publically-funded dollars in ways which have large impacts on students.

Overall, I was really happy with how these meetings went. Admittedly, Canada's tight financial reality was brought up by several members of parliament, however; there was also substantial support with regards to many of these asks. I am looking forward to the Government of Canada moving forward with several of these asks and creating a brighter future for all post-secondary students in the country. If you have any questions whatsoever about any of CASA's asks or any of my various meetings, please reach out! I would be more than happy to expand on anything covered here as I recognize my ability to type out robust descriptions of each individual meeting is limited.

Friday February 21st

The final weekday of the conference returned to a more traditional conference structure. With all the advocacy meetings complete, we were able to focus on a few other things as an organization while we were all present in person. As it is Supercon, our Annual General Meeting officially began at 8 in the morning. This also allowed those who showed up on time (a rare occurrence with 8am starts) more time to input meeting details into the application Highrise. Highrise is an application used by CASA for a number of years to track meeting details with various government officials. Not only does this help to keep notes in order, but it also provides an accessible platform for members to see notes about prior meetings with government officials. This can be instrumental when planning the approach for these meetings. Following this working time, we dove into some updates with regards to the board, some committees, and the working of home office. As CASA does not have the opportunity to meet in person that frequently, this was a great opportunity to ask questions and understand strategic intentions and directions planned. After a brief break, we reconvened to discuss the fee structure charged by CASA. In an attempt to address and understand the Ontario Student Choice Initiative, CASA asked for feedback around a potential new fee structure that would be indexed to each institution's membership as effected by the initiative. There was no formal vote for this motion, merely a discussion and feedback period. If you have any questions about the fee structure charged by CASA, please reach out to myself or Jordan Miles (su.finance@uleth.ca) for more information. Following lunch, we had a short friendly session around life after student leadership. Led by Annie Sherry, this session covered answers submitted by former student leaders around what they wish they knew leaving the position. We then had a closed discussion around our partnership with the UEQ and the re-approval of their annual agreement. A formal motion would be put forward at the next day's plenary. The day ended with a very in-depth session around the future of the Indigenous Student Advisory Group. As this was

the first year CASA had this group implemented, it was a great opportunity to cover what went well and what could be improved upon. Huge shout out to everyone that helped with the group, not only does it make us stronger as an organization, but it also further strengthens the voice of resilient Indigenous leaders across all member's campus. The ULSU will be specifically considering reserving money to put forward an Indigenous leader from our own campus next year to ensure this voice is heard louder. The day ended around 4:30/5:00 and ended with an unofficial CAUS dinner at a very nice East Indian restaurant.

Saturday February 22nd

The final official day of the conference! The past week had been a great opportunity to further connect with the great members whom I had come to know over the past year. Additionally, I really appreciated the opportunity to advocate alongside those members across multiple meeting in which a difference would actually be made. The day began with an overview for the activities of the day followed by a financial update from the CASA Treasurer Gurvir Gill. He wonderfully answered some questions from membership and assured us all that the books were in order. After a very short break, we reconvened to discuss updates that we as delegates, who have previously attended the conference, would make to upcoming Foundations. Foundations, being the first conference most CASA delegates attend, represents a critical moment in most delegates federal advocacy paths. Consequently, there is a key importance with this conference in that there is a lot of room for professional development. Myself, alongside several other delegates and a CASA board member, sat down and went over every session that we attended back in May of 2019. This was quite a lengthy process but did shed a lot of light onto areas for re-structuring the days and the sessions. I look forward to seeing what Home Office does with all the feedback and how the conference can evolve in a way that better suits new members. Right before lunch, we had a brief discussion on the time between now and Foundations, specifically; with regards to how we can best approach transition. The afternoon was dedicated entirely to our closing plenary. Overall, it was a good meeting with a lot of productive discussion around proportional representation and how CASA can improve in a number of areas. The day, and subsequently the conference, officially ended following the session.

Sunday February 23rd

Sunday was, unfortunately, entirely dedicated to travel. I flew from Ottawa to Winnipeg, Winnipeg to Calgary, and Calgary to Lethbridge. Overall, I spend just over 12 hours travelling which allowed me to catch up on some work.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at su.president@uleth.ca. Thank you for taking the time to read my travel report.

Best regards,

Andrew Gammack
President