

December 9, 2021

Verbal Report to the Board of Governors

Holly Kletke and Mark Serebryansky

Thank you Mr Chair. We will be letting our written report stand and will not be speaking to it at this time. Instead, we feel it imperative to use our speaking time today to proverbially pass the microphone to the students, and illuminate to the Board of Governors the struggles that students are currently facing. By drawing attention to these unprecedented struggles, our hopes are that key decision makers like all of us here, will pause and reflect on the magnitude of our decision making power upon the university's arguably most important stakeholder, students.

I know that you're all aware that the UofL's provincial operating grant has been cut by a total of 21% over the last 4 years. Albertan students have faced the highest tuition fee increases in the country for the past two years. Alberta currently has the lowest provision of non-repayable student grants, and the lowest post-secondary participation rate in the country. The financial barrier to being a student in this province is unacceptable and unsustainable, and will not help recruit and retain students at this institution. The current scenario we are in is not viable if we want a strong Albertan economy and a province that's worthwhile to settle into, whether that's for a student who moves here to learn, or a graduate who stays here to start a career or even a family. Unequivocally, the provincial government is still the biggest threat to this institution as many of us here would agree. However, the provincial context is not the focus of our report today. We're here to talk about the experience of UofL students.

Tuition at the UofL has increased by 7% every year since 2019. Just moments ago we approved another 7%. Next year's increases will be tied to CPI, and in the current economy we will have to see just how much higher the price of goods and services continue to rise. We recognize that these increases are necessary with our current financial situation, but we want to call attention to the vacuum in which these decisions are sometimes made. We suspect that you have not had to directly interact with the students that the ULSU has spoken to this past semester. These are students who are accessing the food bank because they can not afford to pay their grocery bill, or students who struggle with learning disabilities having to work at a noisy cafe because they cannot afford wifi at home, or students sleeping in their car because there are no vacant rental properties that meet their budget. Mark, myself, and our team talk to these students, we help them find solutions, lately it feels like the onus of helping these students is falling increasingly on our shoulders as the UofL becomes less and less accessible. Donations to student services and aid, although greatly

appreciated, is not a sustainable solution on its own because tuition rises way higher than any potential offset from donations. Every time we approve an increase or a fee, it means more students next year will access our emergency grants, and more students will access our foodbank. What do we do when we don't have the capacity to support the increased volume of users? More students may have to consider leaving the institution. These decisions have consequences that our fellow board members may not directly experience, and as the voice of the students, we will continue to do our best to remind you of this. But, we need all of you to always remember the too often silent third party in the room, the students.

We'd also like to speak to the collision of issues that students are bringing to us, regarding structural changes, financial burden, and the deterioration of the student experience. Since returning from reading week, Mark and I have spent a lot of time listening to our peers. Listening to their struggles, their anxieties, their fears. Here is what we have been hearing; students have told us that their opportunities for independent studies are decreasing, as professors take on more of a workload and as we lose those professors to attrition. We've talked to students whose navigation of their program has gotten increasingly difficult as class offerings change. I personally have my own testimonials to give that exemplifies how my university experience has drastically changed from 2018 to now. This is probably the most engagement and mobilisation the SU has seen from individual students in years, *this* is the canary in the coal mine. Students don't typically mobilise in large numbers until situations get so dire they feel forced to act, and this is what Mark and I have been seeing since the start of the semester. Please tell me, fellow board members, how am I supposed to morally answer fellow students when they ask the question, "should I start looking for other schools?". How am I supposed to advise students whose fear about the future have caused them to ponder leaving the institution? This question from students always brings a sting to my heart, as I'm sure it does yours, because I do have love for this institution, and it hurts to see students wanting to leave.

You might be wondering why we are just speaking up about this now? How did we end up here? Could we have done something to mitigate this? Well, this is what happens when students are not part of the right conversations. Right now, we are using our precious reporting time to instead beseech the Board as ultimate decision makers of this institution to take a more courageous stance. In 2019, the ULSU and other university representatives were very suddenly removed from the Budget Advisory Council through decisions that happened behind closed doors. The reason cited was that "there were too many cooks in the kitchen", and everyone wanted a larger slice of the pie for their constituents. Some may call it ineffective, but for us, it was a very important forum and our absence has shrunk our reach and voice on this campus. For

the past two years the ULSU has requested to be reconsidered and a part of the BAC process at nearly every intersection we could think of, and the answer has always been no. I speak for my predecessors as well, it's incredibly exhausting to keep hitting that wall. As most of you are aware, BAC as a council filters and finalises recommendations from other governance bodies, and morphs our budget planning process. BAC is the last stop before ultimately coming here, to the Board for approval, and BAC is also the means by which we inform this organisation's most important guiding document, its budget. Currently, Mark has a seat on the Board Finance committee, and I the Board Governance committee, but we are shut out from a critical function of the governance model, the body at the centre of the governance flowchart. If we can all agree the budget is important to the operation of the University and students are vital, then it makes no sense why students aren't present at that table. This has to change. Our current year has been spent asking for the bare minimum, student representation and consultation often seem like an afterthought, that is if it's ever thought of at all. With the PSLA being open to review, how can we guarantee that student associations will be a part of the discussion? If the government doesn't mandate it, will bodies like the board still see value in including us on these decision making bodies? We really do believe that the ULSU and the administration is capable of accomplishing so much more, together. When channels are closed off from us, we lose the vital ability to push back on change and proposals that directly affect quality of education, it is a near impossible task when you're liminally involved in only the front and back end of decisions.

I hope the stories I have shared resonate with you. As we near adjourning this fall semester, typically a time for rest and relaxation, appreciation of family and hearthside conversations, not dissimilar to the meal and bonding we enjoyed over lunch earlier today— I plead that you use your holidays as a time for genuine contemplation. I would like to remind you of this, with earnestness and gravity, remember that not every student will have these aforementioned luxuries over their winter break, and their future at the U of L should not be something they spend their holidays worrying about.

I hope this message is interpreted for the call to action that it strives to be. We call on you to engage in a conversation with not just Mark and I, but our student organisations, the student representatives, and the broader student body, to help us find the solutions that will preserve and improve the student experience. We call on you to use your connections to demand that the provincial government sufficiently invest in the Post-Secondary sector. And we call on you to reflect on your responsibility to ensure that the standards for the U of L student experience are not just being met, but being exceeded, promoted, and cherished at every opportunity.