Each year, the costs of pursuing a university or college education in Canada increases. High costs are clearly a barrier to access, but the greater cost will be paid by all Canadians if responsible choices to make higher education more accessible are not made now. From November 14th-18th, I spent my time in Ottawa lobbying Members of Parliament on issues of post-secondary education. This was made possible through our federal lobbying partner, the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA). Our mantra is that Canada’s universities are the innovation engines of our society. They bring private and foreign investment, attract international talent and build global connections. Accessibility is the foundation on which a sustainable, high-quality post-secondary education system is built. We spent the week lobbying on these specific policy priorities, which were set by our membership this summer during our Policy & Strategy Conference, hosted right here at McMaster.

I will take this opportunity to highlight the week. First of all, pursuant to the Canadian Student Loans Program (CSLP), we asked for amendments that ensure that a student’s assets not include ownership of a vehicle, which will ultimately promote greater participation for rural and suburban students. Our research has proven that the median cost of a used car in Canada is $13,400 which essentially means that students with a car, commuting to campus, will be assessed for a lower loan amount because they own a vehicle over $5,000. This is problematic, as 42% of students who claimed a vehicle over the $5,000 limit, did not receive a loan. A total of 84,000 students claimed a vehicle in the 2009/2010 CSLP assessment. Our second focus was amending the CSLP to eliminate the expected parental income contribution through an annual reduction of 25% per year, over the next four years. Statistically, more than 1 in 3 students from middle-income families in Canada receive no parental support towards the cost of their education. This is an unfortunate expectation that parents will contribute to their child’s education, but that is not necessarily the case. It is important that the ability or willingness of parents to contribute to their child’s education not be taken into consideration for the purpose of loans. There was a relatively positive response amongst both government and opposition MPs with regards to this.

Copyright legislation was our third focus of focus. Our primary request of the government was to create a free market for academic materials. We want to end the private tax on books, thus saving students $30 million each year - a no cost to the government. Put simply, when we buy textbooks from a campus/Canadian retailer, the mark-up on our books is considerable, especially in comparison to online bookstores like Amazon. This is because Section 27.1 of the Copyright Act has made parallel importation illegal for commercial bookstores (i.e. bookstores like Tfoles and Chapters). The regulation currently states that if a Canadian copyright holder sells a book for a price less than 10% above the American retail price, it is illegal for physical bookstores to import copies of that book from the United States. This is why you only ever see a Canadian price and an American price on the back of a book. Books imported from outside of the USA must have a 15% mark-up, causing serious financial barriers for students studying in French, and/or other languages. Now, these rules were initially made to protect Canadian industry, but they lacked the foresight to take into account purchasing in international markets. This is especially true now, since many students have begun to purchase their books online through resources such as Amazon. There was a strong commitment from government on this issue, especially considering it puts $30 million back in students’ pockets and doesn’t cost the government a single cent.

In addition to these issues, we discussed aboriginal student funding and off-campus work permits for international students. The MSU met with all Hamilton area MPs, and we are happy to report that their responses to our requests were extremely positive. Our 115 meetings throughout the week included stops with the Prime Minister’s Office, the Minister of International Development and outgoing Minister of Environment, the Minister of Natural Resources, the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, and the Minister of Indian Affairs. As a result, we have a thing or two to learn from UWO. Despite these efforts, we often fail disconnected from a united campus community. This is precisely what is so unique about McMaster, and serves as an example of the type of community we have.

Congratulations to our Monreal trip winner, Andrea Coomb and congratulations to our kimo and ticket prize winner, Stephen Paterna.

A few weeks ago, I travelled with a large number of McMaster students to London to watch Mac play Western in the Yates Cup. Now, the game was fantastic and as we are probably aware, McMaster has now played their way into the Vanier Cup - for the first time since 1967 no less. What was truly amazing however, was the amount of Mac students and fans in attendance that day. I witnessed a cohesive McMaster community, on the road in another stadium. This is precisely what is so unique about McMaster, and serves as an example of the type of community we have.

Welcome Week does help to build a sense of community and throughout the year, there are different events and programs which foster cohesiveness. Despite these efforts, we often fail disconnected from a united campus community. This is precisely a result of how diverse our interests are and that realistically, no group can bring everyone together. But I believe that there is an appetite for more here at McMaster.

I believe that we have already begun to build this sense of community. One need only look to the amount of students who went to watch the Yates Cup or were at Teach/Lighty and Farrall Gym to watch the uTECK Bowl, and it is clear that Mac is turning with pride. With this kind of community, I believe there is the potential for a unified campus on a myriad of issues outside of our sports teams.

In an article that appeared in the Sil a few weeks ago comparing McMaster to Western, it was said that perhaps we have a thing or two to learn from UWO. I think that there is always the possibility to learn from other schools, but I also think that perhaps we ought to accept that we are unique. We are different and that is what makes this school so special.