



REPORT

From the office of the...

Vice President (Education)

TO: Student Representative Assembly
FROM: Ryan Deshpande, Vice-President (Education)
SUBJECT: Canadian Alliance of Student Associations Review
DATE: September 20, 2017

Dear Members of the Student Representative Assembly,

Federal advocacy has always held a uncertain position within the MSU. We have joined and left organizations, and advocated on our own as well. This is partially because the value of federal advocacy has also been uncertain. Public universities are administered by the provinces. However, while there is no federal equivalent of the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development, the federal government impacts our lives as McMaster students in many ways including, but not limited to the following:

- Canada Student Loans, which integrates into OSAP
- Indigenous student support
- International and exchange student regulations
- Research funding through the tri-council agencies
- Copyright and Intellectual property, as it relates to research
- Data collection
- Election engagement

This is why, I am keeping our options open this year and making sure I figure out what avenue for federal advocacy is best for the MSU.

The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) is a federal advocacy organization for students association of post-secondary institutions - undergraduate, graduate, and polytechnic associations. Their mission, as per their website, is "Through its member-driven structure and grassroots approach, CASA's mission is to advocate for students using policy development and research, awareness campaigns, government relations, and partnerships with other stakeholders." CASA has an established presence in Ottawa, and the federal government maintains positive relationships with CASA.

In March 2015, the MSU voted to completely leave the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations after retaining associate membership status for the previous year. This was due to several issues at the time, which include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Membership coordination - geographic distance made it difficult for members to interact

- Voting structure – there was no proportional representation, nor any consideration given to the differing fees paid by different institutions
- Fee structure – there is a fee cap which limits proportional representation, yet still provides for a differing amount paid by each member school, with larger schools paying on the high end
- Policy process – poorly structured policies and a lack of member engagement in identifying policy directions

There was a mandate given, at the time we left CASA, for the MSU to continue observing CASA and evaluate the organization as an option for federal advocacy. Thus, on July 25-28 I, along with Chukky (President) and Urszula (AVP Provincial & Federal Affairs) observed CASA’s Strategy & Policy Conference.

The point of this conference was for the CASA membership to determine its advocacy priorities, foster relationships amongst the student associations, provide lobby training, and have working time amongst its committees. As an observer, this conference was incredibly helpful in understanding how CASA operates and how the MSU could fit in, should we decide to join. Also observing was FAÉCUM (University of Montreal’s student association).

This year, CASA’s priorities are as follows:

- Health & Wellness
- Indigenous Students
- International Students
- Financial Barriers
- Educational Materials
- Copyright Act

There is no doubt that these priorities align with the MSU’s. It is heartening to see that CASA’s advocacy has some overlap with the MSU’s advocacy, both provincially and federally. In addition, the Quebec Student Union has joined CASA as a member in a unique partnership, providing a Quebecois voice in CASA that hasn’t been heard before.

Review of Past Concerns and Considerations

Since 2014, CASA has had the chance to address many of the concerns brought forward by not just the MSU board of Directors, but also our counterparts in Western, Laurier, and other Ontario schools.

1. Member Coordination

An issue that was addressed in 2014, CASA has put an increased focus on member relations, through the Member Relations committee, which works to engage existing members. The plan for active recruitment, however, is limited to hoping “CASA’s membership will grow organically, attracting new member associations through organizational excellence...”

2. Voting Structure

This issue has not been addressed, where members are still paying differing

fees, but still having equal say in the policy directions of CASA. This is an issue in that larger schools, such as the MSU, are not able to use the fact that they are paying additional fees (although capped) to any particular advantage.

3. Fee Structure

Closely tied to the issue above, CASA's fee structure facilitates an awkward balance of member schools paying different amounts of money to CASA, but still receiving no differing benefit to the organization. While this is great for the small institutions who are part of CASA (who pay little into the organization, but get an equal amount of say in its direction), it is a disadvantage to larger schools.

4. Policy Process

There have been clear improvements to this in recent years, with an informal commitment to continuing along this trajectory. CASA has recently released a few full policy papers, but continues to develop "policies" of a collection of principles and recommendations on a highly specific issue – similar to a single page of an MSU policy. In addition, the approval process for these policies is not clear, and the power of CASA's large membership is not being effectively used to develop large, robust policy papers which can have large-scale influence on the federal government.

5. Structural Issues

CASA represents undergraduate students, graduate students, college students, and trade/technical school students. With the MSU only representing undergraduates, this leads to a diversion of priorities for CASA, and a sacrifice of undergraduate-specific asks for other types of students. For example, research asks are often very general, even though undergraduate research is not prioritized by the federal government. This tends to benefit graduate students only. In addition, CASA's committee structure puts emphasis on its graduate and college student members, having a Graduate Policy Committee and Tech & Trades Committee.

New Concerns

1. Lack of Ontario & Saskatchewan Engagement

Stemming from an Ontario exodus in 2014-2015, the only Ontario schools in CASA are the Brock University Students Union, and the Graduate Student Association, University of Waterloo. With Ontario's institutions making up a large majority of Canada's post-secondary landscape, this is very worrisome. From my discussions and the written year plan, there has been no active plan outlined by the CASA Board to recruit and change its fees or voting process to address Ontario schools' concerns. In addition, there are currently *no* schools from Saskatchewan represented in CASA.

2. Quebec Student Union Partnership

While I did highlight this as a positive, there are also implications of this partnership that are concerning. The ability of a provincial organization to join CASA as a member with a smaller fee than the MSU would be paying,

and the requirement to bring forward one priority every year indicates an incredibly fluid structure within CASA. If this is the route CASA would like to go, it would be in the MSU's benefit for OUSA, as an organization, to join CASA along with Canada's other provincial student organizations.

Through informal discussions with CASA's national director, chair, and various board members, it is clear that these issues are not being explicitly addressed. It is thus my recommendation, along with Chukky and Urszula, that the MSU *does not join* the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations. I will not be putting a motion forward for consideration.

Thank you for entrusting the Education Department to evaluate this incredibly important avenue for advocacy. In the coming meetings, I will be bringing forward an update report on the other federal advocacy initiative we are engaging in.

You know where and how to direct your questions!

Best,

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