

Blake Oliver

2015-2016

University Affairs
Commissioner

McMaster Students Union

MSU



BLAKE OLIVER



Dear Assembly,

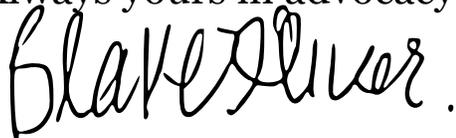
I am so excited to present to you my platform for University Affairs commissioner! It has been a pleasure thus far to start my term with you all, and it is with great passion and enthusiasm that I have put together these ideas to advocate for students.

It was less than two years ago when I moved here to Hamilton to start my university education at McMaster. I recall being overwhelmed by the sheer number of students - the population of undergraduate students here alone is larger than my entire hometown. In my small high school my voice was well-heard, but when I came here, I felt muted. I didn't know how to get involved and I didn't know how to make myself heard again.

This year, everything changed. I found the Advocacy Street Team and the External Affairs committee, where I fell in love with student advocacy, campaigns, and policy. I ran for my seat on this assembly and was overcome with support from students both in and outside of my program. I started to hear myself again, and I noticed that people were listening. I realized that I'm now in a position to make real change: I'm a student advocate, and you all are as well.

I decided to run for University Affairs commissioner this year because I hope to take this one step further and be a leader in student advocacy. My platform is truly made up of ideas that I believe will make this school a better place for students, and ultimately, a place where students feel heard despite the deafening sea of voices across campus. I want to hear your voices as well: for all of you who are considering running for the University Affairs committee, who have a project idea that involves internal advocacy, who are interested in any of these ideas - let's work together. Let's be louder, and let's make people listen.

Always yours in advocacy,



Blake Oliver

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Mental Health Campaign: Share Your Story

Over the past two years, large-scale mental health campaigns on campus have been successful in promoting conversations about mental health. With the very successful launch of the Student Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy this year coordinated with the #MacTalks campaign, I hope to this year continue raising mental health awareness on campus with a campaign called Share Your Story. This campaign would allow students to submit their own personal encounters with mental health anonymously. Stories would be posted alongside information for on and off-campus resources for mental health for all McMaster students to see. This campaign would allow students to feel more comfortable sharing their own issues as they would have the possibility of having their identity protected, and would work to reduce stigma on campus as it would highlight the many students that do struggle with mental health and illness. In order to reduce stigma and make student-readers feel more connected with the stories, I would encourage students to attach their year or program to the story, to promote community without revealing identity.

I would hope to coordinate this campaign with the launch of the Student Mental Health Network, a component of the Student Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy. As has happened in previous years, I would continue to collaborate with our MSU peer-support services (PSL, SHEC, QSCC, WGEN, etc.) as well as other various stakeholders on campus (like the Student Wellness Centre) during this campaign. However, I would continue to look for potential new collaborators. One in particular is one of our new MSU services, Spark. After speaking with Mike Gill, the incoming PTM for Spark, the service hopes to launch a similar campaign this year to highlight issues with the first-year transition to university, and would be very interested in collaborating with this campaign as well. By collaborating with as many MSU services as possible and providing students with an forum to anonymously share their experiences with mental health, I hope to engage the entire student body in a dialogue that highlights mental health and wellness, and raises awareness of resources on campus.

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Food on Campus

I'm very passionate about three different areas of on-campus food that I'd like to make a priority on University Affairs this year: sustainability, security, and nutrition.

Food Sustainability

This year as a member of the External Affairs committee, I had the opportunity to help write the University Sustainability policy that was recently passed by the SRA. Specifically, I looked into the principles, concerns, and recommendations surrounding food sustainability on campus. The amount of information I found was far greater than I had anticipated, and I started to become very passionate about the topic. I would like to use this policy paper as a tool to advocate to the university to publish what food is local, and to increase the amount of local food used by creating partnerships in Hamilton. Last year, University Affairs started a Local Food Day initiative by collaborating with MACgreen, Mac FarmStand, and Mac Bread Bin as well as other community organizations to host a day on campus celebrating local food in Hamilton. One outcome of local food day was the results of the Local Food Day Survey, where students were asked how much they value local food, how much more they would be willing to pay for local food, where on campus they would be more likely to buy local food, etc. The results of this survey definitely indicate that the student body is interested in having more local options on campus. Within that vein, our own food services on campus, Twelveighty and Union Market, already do a great job of being sustainability-conscious. However, I would also like for us to publish what amount and what foods we use that are local, and to continue expanding our own local partnerships to be as sustainable as possible, especially as the results of this survey indicate that a lot of students would like more local food options at Twelveighty. I would also like to continue the Local Food Day initiative this upcoming year.

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Food Security

Being food-secure, or having physical and economical access to nutritious and safe food, is something often taken for granted. However, being food-insecure is a large barrier to academic success and something I strongly believe that no student at McMaster should have to worry about. Mac Bread Bin is the current service operated by the MSU for students that are in need, and I talked to the outgoing coordinator Rachel Flemming Sullivan about food security on campus. We agreed that while Mac Bread Bin usage has been slowly increasing, it's difficult to conclude why as that information isn't collected from students - it could be due to an increase in food insecure students, an increase in knowledge of the service, or both. With that in mind, this year, I would like one of my major projects to be evaluating food security and insecurity on campus. This would take place via a school-wide survey, which would assess the proportion of students that feel food-insecure, and how effective the current services in both McMaster and Hamilton are at meeting the needs of students on campus that may be food-insecure. The results of this survey would be used to advocate to the university and Hospitality Services for lower food prices on campus, as well as increased support for food-insecure students if needed. As well, I strongly believe in MSU president-elect Ehima's dream for a community kitchen on campus. This year, I would like the University Affairs committee to explore possibilities for what a community kitchen would look like by looking at models that other universities use in addition to the data from our food security survey, in order to figure out how a community kitchen would best serve students at McMaster.

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Nutrition

Over the past two years, past University Affairs commissioners Alan Rheume and Rodrigo Narro Perez have worked and succeeded at providing ingredients and nutritional information for the food items on TwelvEighty's lunch and dinner menu. This year, I would like to continue with the spirit of this initiative by collecting information on TwelvEighty's new catering menu, as outgoing commissioner Alan Rheume suggested in his report. As well, to promote healthy eating on campus, I would like to work with Hospitality Services to lobby to lower prices on healthy food specifically, in order to allow more students to access nutritious food on campus.

In addition to this initiative, the discussion surrounding hiring a Registered Dietician (RD) for students has been brought up in the past without much success, due to other essential staff (for example, counsellors for mental health) being hired for students. This year, I would like to form a plan to get an RD on campus within the next few years, without sacrificing the personnel needs for our mental health support.

Focus on Policy

The MSU currently has 18 general policies that represent the organization's stance on several different topics. Policies are a powerful tool that can be used to advocate and lobby for the needs of students. With that in mind, I hope to run a University Affairs committee that emphasizes policy, by both collaborating with services, and continuing several projects that were successful last year.

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Collaboration with Services

Several of our MSU services include not only programming, but an advocacy-based component (QSCC, WGEN, MACgreen, Diversity Services, etc.). I would like to reach out to these services and collaborate with them to create new policies and modify existing policies in the MSU's general policy bank. This will be beneficial in two ways: firstly, the services will have a policy that they will be able to use as a tool when advocating for themselves; and secondly, the MSU will have a policy that better reflects student voices, as the policy will be shaped by students who are directly affected by the issue. In this way, the general policy bank will be able to grow and represent the MSU's stance on a larger variety of issues that affect student life.

Continued Advocacy

Last year, the University Affairs committee created a survey for International Students at McMaster with the hopes of creating an International Students Policy for the MSU. This is a project that I would love to continue in the upcoming year. As well, I would like to follow up on updating the MSU's current Aboriginal Students Policy Paper. Finally, one of the papers that University Affairs most recently passed was the Accessibility General Policy. I would like to start using this policy as a tool to advocate for change in the university (for instance, working with the Bylaws and Procedures committee to update the definition of an MSU member to encompass students with disabilities who take a reduced course load but who are not registered with SAS), and as well, I would like to hold another Accessibility Forum in the late fall to evaluate how the policy is working and if any changes need to be made.

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Evaluating Evaluations

Student feedback is the gold standard for advocacy and change within the university, especially when it comes to our actual courses. Across McMaster, different programs and faculties have different methods when it comes to both collecting feedback from students and implementing this feedback to change how our courses are taught. What I would like to do this year is to work with the newly hired University Affairs research assistant as well as MIETL to evaluate the effectiveness of course evaluations across all different programs at McMaster. From there, I would like to put forward recommendations to the university on how course evaluations could be better used to alter the classroom, and also, how course evaluations could be better administered (more frequently, at different times, etc.) to get the best feedback from students.

Supporting Projects

As the University Affairs commissioner, one of my main goals would be to support the Vice-President (Education)'s internal projects, as well as other advocacy initiatives put forward by the Advocacy Coordinator and the External Affairs commissioner. Some of the initiatives that I hope to support this year are:

MSU Course Wiki

The MSU's Course Wiki was launched earlier this year and is currently available on the MSU website, with "shells" for each course are ready to be filled out. It will be a priority to begin this process in the upcoming year to establish the Course Wiki as a valuable tool for McMaster students. I would also like to advocate for a space on the Course Wiki for students to upload documents, such as old course outlines and notes, to promote collaboration between students and increase use of the Course Wiki.

BLAKE OLIVER

A stylized eagle logo in shades of red and grey, positioned in the upper right corner of the page, partially overlapping the name 'BLAKE OLIVER'.

Federal Election

As outlined in the new Election Plan Operating Policy, it is the duty of both the External Affairs committee and the University Affairs committee to assist the Vice-President (Education) with elections awareness, outreach campaigns, and analyzing campaign points. As the federal election is occurring this year on October 19th, I would like the University Affairs committee to take on a leadership role in promoting this election, particularly in analyzing campaign points relevant to students at McMaster. I think that I personally am in an interesting position to promote this election, as I am also an incoming Student Success Leader for the Civic Engagement unit of the Student Success Centre (SSC), which will also involve a lot of promotion for the federal election. I think this position will allow me to collaborate well and bridge the gap between the SSC and the MSU when promoting the federal election.

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In Summary

Thank you so much for taking the time to read my platform. I've put together a quick list of my points for your reference:

Mental Health Campaign: Share Your Story

Food on Campus

Food Sustainability

Food Security

Nutrition

Focus on Policy

Collaboration with Services

Continued Advocacy

Evaluating Evaluations

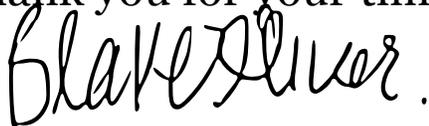
Supporting Projects

The MSU Course Wiki

Federal Election

The potential scope of University Affairs is so large and even in trying to narrow my sights onto a few projects, I have found myself struck by the possibilities that UA has to offer. I hope that while reading my platform, you got a sense of that possibility and potential as well. If you have any questions about any of these points or wish to discuss anything related to UA, please do not hesitate to contact me - I would be more than happy to hear from you.

Thank you for your time and consideration,



Blake Oliver

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