

A Transition Report Prepared for the President & Chief Executive Officer of the McMaster  
Students Union

Submitted by Mr. Teddy Saul  
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## **Preamble**

I'm not sure how much of a difference it would make if this document were one page or a hundred. Regardless of what I write, you will be the president that you were elected to be. If and when you need advice, there will be a long list of more qualified sources at your disposal through the McMaster network that you are about to build. I am always willing to talk about anything you need—whether it's related to the overview that follows or not—and please know that you now belong to a family of (perhaps disgruntled) former McMaster Student Union (MSU) board members that are waiting on the sidelines for you to reach out.

Also, this report is not exhaustive. You will discover other elements of the role that I have not mentioned here, and projects that I worked on without mention, but this is the bulk of it.

Do what you will, and all my very best,

Teddy Saull  
President & CEO, McMaster Students Union, 2014–2015

## **The President on Paper**

*The following section outlines core responsibilities of the role and a few of my most relevant, related thoughts.*

The role of the president is highly complex but also quite simple: make things better. The MSU exists to enhance the quality of student life at McMaster, and you are responsible for everything that happens under that purview. Every staff member decision, every incident at the club, every hike through Cootes, and every tweet from our accounts can be traced back to you. Do not underestimate this responsibility. If you are to stand a chance at strengthening, or at least maintaining the reputation and effectiveness of the organization, you must practice ethical and rational judgment on all matters, at all times.

**Chair of the Board of Directors.** In most organizations and hit television programs, vice presidents serve at the pleasure of the president. That is not the case in the MSU. As the president, you chair board meetings—guiding the conversations and setting the tone—but your input is no more valuable or binding than the other members of the board.

With that said, I think the president bears particular responsibility for the wellbeing of the team and should be looked to for matters related to conflict management, team bonding and team dynamics. Furthermore, the president should work towards the vision they promised students at large; at times, this can provide guidance to board thrusts.

Board meetings are the glue that keep the potentially divergent paths of board members' together, and should be treated with reverence when trying to balance competing schedules. Make a concerted effort to have every single member of the team present at every meeting. There were a few times in our term where the Vice President (Education; VP Ed) missed multiple meetings in a row because of conference conflicts, and by the time he got back into the loop of meetings the rest of us were miles ahead in our thinking, and consequentially entrenched in an opinion, on a variety of initiatives. This is obviously strenuous on team dynamics and detracts from the strength of team decisions. Standing strong on this point will sometimes mean you and the other members will have to sacrifice opportunities, and when the cost of missing those things is paramount, will require flexibility and a willingness to reschedule on your end.

**Chair of the Executive Board.** The Executive Board (EB) is a great place to keep up to date on the struggles and successes of our part-time services. The president is an arm's length away from the day-to-day activity of the services, and necessarily so—to be overly involved could undermine the authority of the Vice President (Administration; VP Admin) and confuse the staff about their reporting structure. Use EB to understand where staff are struggling and could use a boost, what is going well that you can use in your lobbying efforts, and to get a sense for what the VP Admin is dealing with. I always found EB to be a reliable litmus test for the VP Admin's stress level.

I was new to the MSU this year, and EB taught me a very important element of the culture of this place. Part-time managers feel a pressing sense of ownership and responsibility for their

services. In some ways, this is a good thing – it is nice to have staff that are invested and actually care. You can always hire talent, but passion for the service and an instinctive understanding of its impact on student life is harder to find. The serious drawback, however, is that one of the primary roles of EB is to provide strategic direction for the services. This process begs critical questions. I found that when bringing these up with the staff, they could be personally offended and take my feedback as out of line and hurtful (note my point above about being only vaguely aware of their regular business). In other instances, I brought things up with the EB and without the part-time manager, only to receive unhappy responses from the managers who felt cut out of the process. This was not something I ever spent much time trying to change. I just noted it and allowed it to inform my approach. Perhaps you'll do the same, or maybe you'd like to shift the culture of ownership. You might even want to further cultivate it, but I would strongly suggest that you do not.

While on the note of critical feedback, I have a few passing thoughts on the future of our services. At the time of writing, we offer (or intend to offer) peer support at the Student Health Education Centre, Peer Support Line, Queer Students Community Centre and the Women and Gender Equity Network. It also appears that there may be an Abilities Service on the horizon, and I expect there would be an appetite for peer support there as well. I think that in the next few years, these services should evolve into a single space—the Peer Support Centre—with a professional staff member able to assist with their coordination. I think it is important that each service preserve its autonomy, as this helps with our advocacy initiatives, but things are eventually going to get (if not already) confusing for students who just want to check in with a peer. Wouldn't it be easier as a student to know there was a safe(r) space on campus to talk to a peer about anything, especially when we consider the intersectional nature of many of the things students could be expected to want to discuss? The space itself could have wings where peers from the specific services can offer more specific support, but I think it would just make things easier for the uninformed student. Consider this idea with future governing bodies, especially as new space on campus becomes available (e.g., the basement of MUSC should have vacancies when the Living & learning Centre opens).

I think that Creating Leadership Amongst Youth (CLAY) should strive to be a zero cost service for the organization, if it continues at all. Those that benefit from the service should bear the cost—indeed, it is an investment in professional and personal development. Those that require financial support should receive it from the institution sending them, not from McMaster student fees. The Student Community Support Network is a powerhouse and represents a beautiful collision of advocacy and service provision. The impact of the Maroons on campus life should never be underestimated. Mac Bread Bin should evolve into food bank with a soup kitchen. The source of our community's collective efforts to raise thousands of dollars every Welcome Week should be carefully considered—why is it Shinerama by default? Why not rotate? Why not have charities compete through a proposal process, pitching what the money would do for their organization? Why aren't we focused on supporting community initiatives? We strive to be good neighbors in Hamilton, imagine what the injection of \$150,000 annually could do for our reputation and the community in which we live.

The EB is a great place to embody the attitude you would like to see from the organization. I always tried to be upbeat and welcoming, but also efficient and critical. As chair of the meeting,

you do have a lot of influence on the atmosphere in the room and should be intentional about that impact. Remember that for the services, this is the primary interface with the institutionalized and thus potentially daunting or disheartening “MSU”.

Lastly, this year we thought that the EB should be discussing our advocacy initiatives as well as our services. This makes sense for a lot of reasons. The most compelling is that any of our governing bodies ought to at least acknowledge that advocacy and service provision exist on a continuum, and focusing explicitly on one end and not the other can tempt us out of that way of thinking. Second, it would be a wasted opportunity to have a group of eager elected representatives together on a weekly basis and not to tap in to their thoughts on advocacy initiatives of the day.

**Chair of McMaster Students Union Incorporated.** There’s not really much to this one, you just sit at the front of the room and wield that commanding gavel. I used the gavel at every shadow of an appropriate opportunity, and encourage you to do the same. Also, I used first names while calling the roll to keep things hip and fresh. There was some debate about whether or not the chair of these meetings should engage in the discussion. I did not shy away from guiding things with my input or answering a question. You’re not the speaker of the house, so I don’t think it makes sense to expect the chief executive not to provide input to corporate decisions, regardless of whether or not they chair the meeting. That said, if I was bringing forward a motion I would decline the chair and let the VP Admin play with the gavel.

**Chair of the Student Services Committee.** The Student Services Committee exists to oversee all services funded through the compulsory ancillary fees. The president co-chairs this with a delegate from Student Affairs, and it makes sense to meet briefly before each meeting to go through the agenda and plan an effective meeting. The Committee does not meet often; perhaps 6–8 times annually.

This year, we worked with the Dean of Students to re-write a Compulsory Ancillary Fees Agreement. I cannot overstate the importance of seeing this revision through to completion. Currently, undergraduate students fund a disproportionate amount of the student affairs budget. These services (student success, student wellness, athletics and recreation) are integral to the student experience. Without sufficient financial resources, cuts will eventually have to be made to reconcile the current annual deficit of \$1.6M. The new draft policy takes significant strides forward, bringing us at least \$0.8M closer to a sustainable model, by redirecting the vast majority of Student Life Enhancement Funds to core operations and collecting several hundreds of thousands of additional dollars from graduate students. Additionally, we secured a fund matching by percentage agreement with the University, which is a clarifying step forward for the agreement. Furthermore, the new policy will clarify feedback structures for the various departments in Student Affairs, allowing for student feedback to be more easily incorporated into the strategic direction of the services. These are all wins, and are worth pursuing adamantly.

Our work on the CAF Agreement solidified what we hypothesized at the beginning of our term: large committees with a huge mandates can easily run astray, aimlessly striving for unsynchronized benevolence, so you have to be willing to pick one manageable bite and work on that for the year. As the president and co-chair of the committee, it is on you to propose

directions and to encourage the Committee to focus. This year, your focus should be on completing the CAF update and seeing it through implementation for the first time. You can then provide recommendations for the team that comes after you to hone the process. This will put us in a good spot about 2–3 years from now to actually start drilling down on the services and assessing their value to undergraduate students. Before we get into that, though, the structures must be clarified and the financial health of that integral limb needs to be in tact.

**The Student Representative Assembly.** The Student Representative Assembly (SRA) is a ripe breeding ground for talent, passion and hard work. Cultivate it. I didn't, and probably should have. It is made up by a group of committed individuals that are just dying to make an impact. However, the nature of their roles leaves all but the exceptional few under-resourced and partially informed at best. You could do a lot by just meeting with Members and helping them complete their projects. In many cases, it will be as easy as making an introduction to somebody at the University or directing them to a place in the organization they didn't know about or think to consult.

As the president, and really as the Board, you need to lead by example and set the tone at the Assembly. Do not let ridiculous things come to the floor, or marginally relevant conversations span hours long. Also, be very careful about the extent to which you allow the Assembly to micro-manage the activity of the Board. You have been elected by students and should be trusted to act in good faith. Having the SRA motion every time they want you to go talk to somebody at the University or in government will shackle your creativity, judgment and tact.

**Full Time Employees.** You are responsible for the performance and wellbeing of all full time employees that work with and for the MSU. This is a really interesting phenomenon because you are also, in many ways, a short-term guest in their place of work. The balance is delicate and requires that you treat everybody with respect. Recognize that you are rarely going to be the expert and will always have something to learn, but that at the end of the day many decisions rest with you and the board. This means you need to actually listen to people, so that their ideas can guide the way, or when yours have to trump, you will at least have a thoughtful explanation for why you didn't follow through with theirs.

The full time staff were our refuge this year, especially when things got tough politically. We tried to build personal relationships with everybody, but also to understand the position they were in with their career and with the organization. Plan staff socials, provide opportunities for everybody to share their thoughts, and be ready to adapt your approach if and when you learn that it is not working.

Your only direct report is the General Manager (GM). This is a position that experiences great stress, though the current occupant of the role never shows it. The GM needs to balance three main priorities: support for the Board, management of the full time staff, and continuity for the University and MSU relationship. Hang on to John for as long as possible. If you are ever in the position to fill this role, I would suggest that you commission the help of a search agency to ensure a highly capable and competent crop of candidates are interviewed. I cannot imagine the case where you would hire somebody with less than 5–10 years of relationship and business management experience.

**McMaster University Senate and Board of Governors.** The president sits on these governing bodies as an official observer. There are elected student representatives on each board as well, and they can vote and are expected to bring student perspectives to the board decisions. As an observer, however, you will be asked to share the opinion of the student union and student body at large. I think that these meetings could be great places to make advocacy impacts, and I never tapped into this potential because I couldn't really see the forest through the trees.

**University Administration.** University administrators are highly capable executives that work at McMaster because they care about higher education and our institution. You don't need to trick them into helping with your projects, you have to help them see why you believe in them and listen to their feedback. Life is a lot easier when you are on good terms with the University and work towards common goals. Remember that for you, a year in office is a long time (it's all of your time, really). For the University, a year isn't very long; they can wait you out if you are difficult to work with or if you are being ridiculous. I would, if I were in their shoes. Keeping this in mind was what helped keep me on track, purposeful and grounded in my approach.

It makes most sense for the Board to split up working relationships with the administrators. For example, the president should be the primary contact for the Office of the President and University Advancement. This year, it made most sense for the VP Ed to take the lead on the relationship between the MSU and the Provost's Office, but I suspect there would be years where the president wanted to take this on as well. Splitting things up like this helped ensure that the University wasn't hearing different messages from the student union, and also allowed the primary contact for each office to form stronger relationships.

You should have monthly meetings with the President. I used these meetings to highlight challenges and successes of the student union, to ask for advice on our approach to high level challenges, and to provide something of a report card to the president on how members of the university were in their interactions with the student union (this was always a very positive report and served to energize us all). I was always careful that updates I brought to the President would not put those working for him (read: every person at the university) in an awkward position, unless that was my explicit intention. For example, it is not fair to discuss something with the President that you haven't already tried to solve with the Dean of Students.

The kindhearted nature of our current President may tempt you to use these one-on-ones as therapeutic reminders of all that is good about the world. There were times where I gave in to this impulse and came out feeling like I had just rediscovered my very soul, but for the most part I would encourage you to resist these personally fulfilling conversations and bring focused agendas to get the most out of your time together. The president is the busiest person on campus, and to have an hour of their time every month is a gift worth its weight in gold. Use it wisely.

Outside of our monthly meetings, I would also meet with the President, the Senior Advisor to the President (effectively his Chief of Staff), or both to discuss pressing issues or to get time sensitive advice. I only asked for these meetings for urgent matters, and would always move things around if the Office of the President reached out to me—there is no relationship more important than this one, both symbolically and practically.

**University Departments.** You'll notice rather quickly that any conversations you have with University Administrators about practical changes you're looking to make actually trickle down to the departments they supervise—the worker bees, if you will. I tried to engage as many as possible, and I will give you a brief outline of those that will mostly likely creep in to any president's year.

Alumni Advancement is a key hub for your activity. On the Alumni side, you'll meet a department with a very similar mandate to the MSU related to the enhancement of student life. From their perspective, happy students are going to be engaged alumni when they graduate. Leverage their investment in student life to build momentum on campus-wide initiatives, and listen to their ideas about community building in return. Together, you are capable of great things. Advancement will invite you to wine and dine with members of the McMaster community, and you should always make an effort to go, to look professional and to speak with pride about the students. Government Relations is wonderful for coordinating visits with elected representatives, and it is helpful for both the MSU and University when we speak in unison about things we agree on. Public Relations serve as a filter for the voice of the University, and can be used to promote some of the successes of the MSU. There is plenty more to say about each of these groups, but you'll pick it up from them because they will be very eager to work with you. Enjoy these relationships and cultivate them to your liking!

The Student Success Centre (SSC) is also a place where everybody genuinely wants students to succeed (no shock). I worked with the SSC to launch a leadership conference for faculty societies and to explore our options for the Peer Tutoring Network. There is a lot of potential for collaboration with this department. The MSU can and should look for ways to work with the SSC, both to align the efforts of SSC with student needs and for us to learn a different approach to student support.

Parking and Security Services are good to get to know, as many of our large-scale programs require consultation with these folks. Sometimes things come up with our business units or services that Security can loop in on. Also, they are delightful. In a similar vein, you'll also want to get acquainted with the risk management folks for the same reasons.

**Government Relations.** Dealing with government officials and their staff can be quite daunting, especially if, like me, you are not well-acquainted with the political landscape municipally, provincially or federally. This is not only understandable, but also expected and prepared for. Through the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA), along with full time resources in the MSU, there are plenty of training opportunities to get you ready for lobbying government. At your first OUSA conference there will be training, and before your lobby week there will be chances to do mock lobby meetings to gear up for battle. In the MSU, the Student Life Development Coordinator can help ensure your points and strategy is clear and plays to the strength of you and the VP Ed. These meetings can actually be quite fun when you get into the swing of things and see how you two compliment one another's approach.

I will make a few suggestions for your interactions with government. First and foremost, remember that government folks are human beings. Any interpersonal skills you have acquired

up to this point will work with them as well. I think most are dying to be treated like regular people, rather than stuffy decision-makers or important politicians. You can be respectful and personable at the same time, and I wouldn't shy away from doing so. Just think how you'd like to be approached by your constituents, and let that calm your nerves (if any!). Second, as with the University Administrators, be purposeful with the time you spend with politicians. Be sure that you know what you're asking for before you ask it, why it is important, and what it means to your constituents. Last, always try to connect with the assistants or policy advisors that come in a politician's entourage – they are the real key to staying connected and getting results. The politician will meet with 20 versions of you in a day, all asking for different things, and it is up to their staff to keep their commitments organized and time functionally allocated.

On a final note, government officials, as many others that do not intimately understand the structure of the MSU, will gravitate to the president because your role as the advocate for student needs is embedded in your title. Let this happen when it is getting you in the door with somebody, and use it to make timely introductions to your VP Ed when it makes sense to do so.

**Communication with the Student Body.** The president is expected to stay in touch with students. This can take many forms. I received occasional emails from students, was regularly sought out on social media and would be approached in person, sometimes on campus and others directly in my office. I always found that students really appreciated if I took the time to talk to them or to respond to an email, even if there was nothing I could do to resolve their (sometimes ridiculous) requests. It's important to remember that most people don't understand the scope of your role, and so they may ask you for things as petty as where they can get a new sticker for their student card to things as absurd as asking for free parking, or a refund of their student fees, or to force professors to make all of their tests multiple choice. Just roll with the punches and connect with people where you can. The response is generally positive.

For more broad sweeping communication—things where you are trying to notify the masses—I'm not really the best person to provide advice. First, I have no experience in communications or public relations, so I don't know how to effectively reach 22,000 people (beyond trying to get elected). Second, I actually had no interest in doing so this year. Generally speaking, I didn't think students cared what I was doing. I sure didn't when I was a student. For every minute spent strategizing a communications plan, writing an article or putting together a video, I lost a minute available to spend pushing projects forward and liaising with partners to see my vision through to fruition. I cared less about getting credit, as an organization or as an elected representative, for the projects I was working on that I did about actually plowing through as much as I could during the short presidential term. Also, when it comes to consulting with students when making decisions, when was the last time your local member of parliament reached out to ask what you wanted them to do on issues related to foreign affairs, transportation, health care or education outside of their campaign? They don't, probably because it is inefficient but also because most people don't have a clue how these things work. The topics are complex beyond the capacity of the public's attention span or interest. Instead, we elect representatives we trust to make decisions in our best interest and with the entire context considered. The same should be true of the MSU president, in my opinion. Frankly, I didn't lose a lot of sleep not knowing exactly how students felt about various projects I was working on because I already knew that (1) they voted for the vision I promised and (2) that I knew more about the nuances of

the project intricacies than they did—after all, that’s what they were paying me for. I know that everybody will approach this differently, and many disagree with my perspective, but that is how I see it and you will figure out what feels best for you.

## **Platform and Projects**

*The following are projects that occupied my time in office.*

**Year End Celebration.** At some point in the summer, during Frost Week planning, we realized that there is a major gap in student life during the second academic term. This idea quickly snowballed into the realization that our campus should coordinate a farewell celebration for those completing their year, and for many, their story at McMaster. This year, we ran the year end celebration as a block party. There were a few major components, including a carnival, live music, buskers and a firework show. Unfortunately, due to weather, we had to cancel most of these components. Despite that turn of events, we still had an estimated 6000 students attend the event. I think this is all the evidence needed to justify the continuation and further development of the year end celebration. With proper planning and better luck with the weather, next year we could expect a crowd of 10,000 students.

The MSU has already budgeted \$40,000 to Campus Events to run this event again for next year. The primary partner on this project is the Alumni Association, who also sponsored the event for \$40,000 this year (though, when all was said and done, probably more). The SSC was also a great partner, and they ran a \$30,000 keynote speaker event that was included as part of the project. The planning committee was co-chaired by the Director of Alumni and I. In years to come, I could see a board member continuing to chair this with Karen, if not the Campus Events Director.

**Frost Week.** Frost Week is a seedling we planted this year that really needs to be watered with attention and resources if it is to be successful in the long run. We began planning for the week in May at the Student Relations Committee (SRC). The SRC has multiple campus partners represented, including Residence Life, Student Success, SOCS, Maroons, Campus Events and Alumni. The Student Relations Officer in the Alumni Office chairs the committee. Below I suggest a timeline:

- *Early summer:* meet as a committee, build interest and buy-in for Frost Week, map out a vision and overarching goals, get a sense for what each office will be responsible for, create a detailed timeline for the year including meeting schedules.
- *Late summer:* slow down as a committee while many people gear up for Welcome Week.
- *Late September:* meet regularly to plan programming
- *October:* get the faculty societies and residence life in for a conversation about how reps could be involved.
- *November:* have a complete draft schedule to go through with risk management
- *December:* on your last president's page in the Sil, pump out an advertisement about what is waiting for students when they arrive back in January.

There are a series of detailed documents on the server that I have left with recommendations about programming and a draft schedule for you to build on. To drift away from details, I think Frost Week is a huge opportunity for student engagement that we cannot afford to miss. It is possible to bring that Welcome Week magic back to campus in January; we just have to keep at it until it is a regular part of the student life culture.

**Homecoming.** Homecoming was a project I inherited from the MSU president before me. The planning process for this event was fairly straight forward because all of our partners had worked through it the year before. I came in and added a few new ideas (Ferris Wheel, for example) to try to enhance the already strong program. At this point, Homecoming should be getting to the point where it plans itself with our staff and partners.

I want to take this opportunity to stress how important it is for each of us (MSU presidents) to work on each other's projects until they're successful. Although I didn't run on a platform point about Homecoming, the president before me did – that means that the majority of at least half of the students still studying during my term supported the idea a matter of months before. It was therefore my responsibility to continue working on this project, just as it will be yours to keep going on the things that I have started, and it will be up to the person who follows you to continue on with yours. If we all buy in to this concept, the MSU will get a lot more done in the long run and we can give each other a realistic hand as we implement projects that take years to form proper roots.

**LINK Conference.** On my first day in office, we had to do a press release detailing our response to the University's investigation on the Redsuits. In short, there was a report detailing unacceptable elements of the Redsuit culture. The University responded to these findings by implementing a series of sanctions and remedies, including increased University involvement in Welcome Week planning and a series of restrictions on non-academic programming offered through the McMaster Engineering Society. Although we understood the nature of these restrictions, we worried that they might be the first of a series of slippery steps ultimately leading to the removal of student group autonomy. We thought we should try to be part of the solution, acting as a bridge between the student groups and the University, and thus LINK was born.

*Note:* the MSU is different from all other student groups. Our existence is legislated by the provincial government, so the University cannot simply step in and take our privileges away. Other groups, faculty societies for example, exist as extensions of the University. Similarly, clubs exist as extensions of the student union. Anyways, I am just skimming the surface of a more complex description that I don't even fully understand, so I will stop before I make too many false claims.

We ran LINK as a one day, optional conference. All the executives of the faculty societies and the Inter Residence Council (IRC) were invited (more on the IRC to follow). We had invited just over 100 people, and approximately 60 showed up. Concurrent sessions were run on different topics that we thought most relevant to the different executive positions—finances, event planning and volunteer engagement, for example. Overall, the conference ran well for a first time thing. We learned a lot from feedback sessions with the faculty society presidents, and that has formed the plan for next year. Below are a few points worth considering as we move forward with this initiative:

- The University should be paying for this, and it should be built in to the Student Affairs operational budget. Funding for this conference should not depend on special project funding each year, because this is not a special project. It is not a *nice to have*, it is a

*must have.* The University cannot commission an expensive, external investigation on the activity of our student groups only to make recommendations for which they will not take responsibility.

- The University and student groups should plan this conference together. Beyond funding the conference, the University should ensure that the many experts at their disposal are brought in to the process to ensure effective training is provided and the bases covered. Students should be involved so that the content and structure of the conference stay relevant to their positions and meets the needs of the leaders on their teams.
- I think this conference should be obligatory and offered in May, in conjunction with the Welcome Week Planners Retreat. It could be built into faculty society executive volunteer descriptions and contracts. I don't think the MSU or University has a place in mandating this training, but the faculty societies themselves do. The key, then, is to work with these groups to show the benefit of free training and to have them see how important it is to the health of their student groups. I don't think this is tricky on our behalf—indeed, I don't see how or why the faculty societies *wouldn't* want this. It makes sense and it helps mitigate risk and prepare for liabilities they inherit with their positions.

As a final note on LINK, can I just say that this is exactly what the MSU should be expected to do. The University wanted to make the campus culture a healthier process. We agreed with this. They wanted to do it in a way that we thought threatened student group autonomy. We disagreed with this. Rather than yelling at them, we came up with a thoughtful solution, something nobody else had thought of, and worked with the very students this report condemned (I co-planned this with the past president of the MES, who really did most of the work) to make it a reality. This conference diffused a lot of tension on campus and gave opposing forces a project to rally around—it just so happened that the MSU got to shape it as well, and act as the mediator.

**Clubza.** My campaign team and I saw an opportunity to ease the process by which students access our extensive clubs. There are so many, which is great because there's something for everybody, but it can also serve as a barrier for entry into the system. We had an idea for how we could make things a bit easier for students. Early in May, I met with the Network Administrator, Clubs Administrator and Student Life Development Coordinator to describe my idea. Together, we morphed it into something that would fit our backend web system and the needs of the clubs department. From there, the Network Administrator liaised with our web development company to make it happen and the Underground drafted up a few logos. Just like that, the project was done and Clubza was functional for the year.

Now that we have taken a stride forward on the front end of student interactions with our clubs, the next step is to do more on the backend to ensure that the department is adequately resourced. A second clubs assistant was hired for next year, and it will be up to you and your team to figure out how to maximize on that extra support. I would suggest crafting the two roles into different niches, based on feedback from the Clubs Executive Council.

*Note:* there's a lesson to be learned about politics from Clubza, one that I am only realizing at the time of writing this report (which is unfortunate, I really could have used some political points this year). There was a running commentary this year that our board did not care about clubs. This narrative neglected the fact that I had launched, on time and as promised, a project that

specifically targeted student engagement in the clubs system. However, this was a project that was completed in August when very few students are around. Also, anything you do (or don't do) in the summer is diminished by the excitement of Welcome Week and the perception that nothing happens at university during the summer.

**Participatory Budgeting.** This project was actually a lot of fun to work on, and I suggest you keep it going. It started with the identification of a large sum of money that either (1) is not always used each year and (2) is not well known by students. I am speaking, of course, about the Student Life Enhancement Fund (SLEF). Each year, the Student Services Committee allocates roughly \$0.4M from the Student Affairs budget to new projects that will have a direct impact on student life. The projects typically funded through this pool of money came from budget managers in either student affairs or the MSU. The Vice President (Finance; VP Finance) and I worked to get student input, ideas and voting into this process.

The project began with a revamp of the SLEF website. We built a module with Student Affairs that would allow for a multiple stage process to unfold. First was the idea submission step. Here, students would go on to our site and leave a cool idea that would enhance student life. They could give as much or as little thought to the idea as they wanted, and we saw a range of responses. From there, the VP Finance and I went off and pursued the feasibility of every idea submitted. This was a large investment of time. We had to consolidate the ideas into similar concepts, create packages for each university department they impacted, meet with the relevant university staff, and have them assess what could be done and provide initial quotes for the ideas that were doable. For example, where we had ideas for outdoor climbing walls, we would bunch all of these submissions into one and have a conversation with the Athletics and Recreation department. Once we had completed our feasibility analysis, we narrowed the ideas down to the biggest – a list of about 7–8 projects that would each cost between \$100k-\$200k. We then brought these ideas (in December) to the Student Services Committee and asked for an allocation that would allow us to promise funding for the top ideas. We settled on funding the top two ideas, as voted by students. That meant that in December, the Committee had already approved funding at least two of these projects (over half of the available funds!) for student submitted ideas.

At presidential elections in January, we opened our website up for the second major stage, which was voting. Each of the major ideas was showcased on the website and students could rank their preferential votes for the list. We promoted this voting heavily, linked it to presidential voting (because so many people vote for president), and saw almost 2000 student responses! This project was a huge success and is ready to be replicated in years to come.

For future iterations of the participatory budgeting process, you may want to scale down the size of projects brought to the student vote. We brought six-figure projects because we had a lot of money to spend, and because it was the first year running the program so we wanted to gauge interest on large impact projects. With fewer funds available, you might want to consider bringing a final list of projects in the \$10,000 range to students to vote. Regardless of the future of SLEF, and how much money is available in that pool, I think you should always use this system to get student feedback. It served as an excellent place for us to point students who wanted us to work on random projects they found to be important or pressing. It allowed us to

deflect political pressure about funding, because we could always say “this process is open to all students with an idea, so take it off the SRA question period and bring it online”. Lastly, and most important, this was an amazing compass for student needs. By watching what ideas came in through the site, we could see student interests. This was especially helpful during the voting period. I learned, for example, that despite the running commentary about how expensive our Athletics and Recreation department is, students still want more! An incredible number of ideas that came up had to do with increasing the type of programming offered, and student voting solidified this notion.

Before departing from this point, I just wanted to highlight the advocacy impacts this project had for us. What does it say about a student union that prioritizes the student voice in university funding decisions? And, what does it say about the university that is open and willing to listen to it? McMaster is in a great spot, one where a project like this could be successful, and I think it is important to keep this “students should be involved in funding decisions” mentality up.

**Peer Tutoring Network.** There is a niche for affordable, peer-based tutoring on campus. Initially we conceived of this as a new MSU service, but upon reflection it became clear that this should be something run through the University. The SSC already has a peer tutoring website, and the idea we had just built upon that. To that end, I spent the year working with the SSC to muddle through what this could look like, how it should run, where the funding will come from and how its impacts can be measured.

This summer, the Student Affairs web design team should be working on the development of a new site that I worked with SSC to conceptualize. It will operate much like an online dating website. Tutors will sign up to have their name, contact information, qualifications and teachable courses advertised in a central, controlled, online environment. Students seeking a tutor will then be able to go online, find a tutor that they think is a good match, make contact with them and set up a tutoring “date”. These dates are intended to be \$15/hour. Each tutor will have a profile, similar to a LinkedIn profile, and students will have an opportunity to go on and rate their tutor after each lesson. This ensures a free market, where good tutors will be rewarded with strong ratings and thus are more likely to receive business in the future.

The Student Services Committee provided seed funding for this project through SLEF. This money is meant to cover web design costs, a part time staff to deal with administration of the service under the full time academic resource staff member at the SSC, a pool of money to advertise the service during its launch, and a subsidization pool for students who face financial barriers but need assistance. The website should be ready to launch in September, and I suggest you and your team follow up with the SSC regularly this summer to stay in the loop. Once it has launched, the MSU should stay involved to assess its effectiveness, but should leave its administration and oversight to the professional staff at SSC who can make it their own.

Although I did not launch this service during my term, I hope that you will keep an eye on it for me to ensure it does get off the ground. The most important piece is that students are able to access affordable tutors. Almost everything after that is window dressing that can be edited and changed as people see fit. I define affordable relative to what other options students have on campus for hiring a private tutor, which often runs hourly rates over \$30/hour. When speaking

with the Provost about this, he expressed clear interest in seeing it through. To quote him almost directly, “\$20,000/year to offer students a potentially unlimited number of hours of academic assistance is a great investment for the University, one that we should actively pursue.”

**Off-Campus Safety.** This was probably my most successful and fulfilling project to work on, and unexpectedly so! It served as a lesson in community relations. I started by meeting with various members of the University to ask their advice—what opportunities they saw for increased safety off campus, with whom I ought to speak to, things like that. From there, I began to build a relationship with our local crime manager. We spent a few months discussing opportunities, making videos, and getting acquainted with what our organizations could bring to the table. From there, we met with a large group, including the chief of police, and discussed projects that could ultimately work towards a shift in the perception from students that police are only ever here to deal with parties or to get us in trouble, but never to keep an eye out for us and watch our backs in the regular, potentially dangerous situations we find ourselves in.

As you continue building this relationship, I suggest the pursuit of a campaign aimed at educating students how they can make themselves difficult targets of crime (e.g., property theft, assault, muggings). This campaign can be cheeky if it comes from the MSU, and should be balanced with whatever PACBIC ends up rolling out for the sexual assault campaign they are planning to run next year. I have a left a long list of project updates and proposals for you on the server, so please access that for a more detailed account of where we have been and where we might be able to go.

**Exam Upgrades.** During my campaign, I had promised students three major changes during exams. They are listed below, along with the progress we made on them. As a general point, when you are trying to get things from the University departments, I suggest thoughtful proposals and delicious lunches funded through your expense account. Here is what we did:

- *Library Hours:* the 24h library hours previously offered were only available during the exam period itself. This schedule neglected the students preparing for an exam on the first or second day of the exam calendar. Accordingly, we asked the library to adjust their schedule to allow the 24h study time to begin a few days before the first exam. They happily did so, and just based off of social media response and what I observed in those few days, I believe it was effective. In the future, I would suggest that you continue to meet with the library to see that their services meet the needs of the modern student.
- *Gym Hours:* in years past, the gym reduced its hours during the exam season. We asked them to open the facility and its amenities back to regular hours through the exams, and they agreed. Their reason for doing so was not only because we had asked, but because a survey they ran the year before confirmed that students wished it was open at that time. The lesson here is that wide consultation from students has its place in advocacy, and surveys are one great way to do that.
- *Later Food Options:* this was the trickiest point to realize. Hospitality Services has to balance their responsibilities as a student service and ancillary unit of the University, meaning they want to meet student needs but also have to make money. In the end, we got to a point where the Reactor in Thode stayed open later to accommodate students studying in that space. We were unsuccessful at attempts to have Mini Mac or La Piazza

open for 24h, but perhaps with more effort and a thoughtful, collaborative plan you will be able to do it.

These were small changes (a few hours here, a day added there) that had large impacts on the student body. I remember walking home one night in April, before exams had started, and seeing Thode packed at 2:00 am, thinking, “this is what it’s all about.” I hope you’ll find those moments as well.

**Student-Centered Student Center.** The McMaster University Student Centre (MUSC) must be an ongoing priority for the MSU. This year, because of the work put in motion by my predecessor, the MUSC Board of Management had about \$1.0M to allocate. We were given a list of potential projects to fund by an architect that had been commissioned the year before. We decided to fund projects that increased first floor seating and rerouted foot traffic through the food court area.

**A New Student Center.** In the years to come, we need to give some serious consideration to new student space. The MUSC is at capacity, evident I’m sure by the number of students sitting on the floor during business hours because there is no other central location for students to hang out, eat and study. This year, we discussed the prospect of building a new Alumni and Student Centre as an addition to the current Alumni House. This would draw students over to the other side of our growing campus, give alumni and current students a hub for relationship and network building, and allow us to showcase the beautiful Cootes Paradise. We did not move forward with this project because the likelihood that we would be given access to the land without a plan for a large-scale building was very low. To continue this conversation, I suggest you give a lot of thought to a wide student survey aiming to gather information about what exactly students are looking for from new student space, and whether or not they are willing to pay a small fee to see it through. You can bring this information to the campus plan committee, which will be gearing up in the fall of 2015. We will need a significant amount of new, unprogrammed space for students in the next decade.

**Perspectives on Peace.** This year, knowing that tensions would be high on campus related to the conflicts in the Middle East and exacerbated by what I expected to come forward at the General Assembly, I felt obliged to explore opportunities for the MSU to engage in challenging conversations on campus. The way I saw things, it wasn’t the role of the student union to engage in political debates that would leave some members of the community feeling detached from the organization, but it was our role to ensure that where students were interested in having these conversations that we played some role in helping them do so in a respectful and safe manner. I shared these thoughts with the President, and as it turned out he too had an interest in taking some sort of action. We spent the summer brainstorming what role the MSU and University could play in handling contentious conversations on campus. We worked with Human Rights and Equity Services to develop a tentative plan for the campaign, wrote a joint letter, and filmed a video together to launch things.

The role of the MSU in an initiative like this is quite simple – we need to figure out a way to engage students in the conversation. I had hoped this would happen in two ways. First, Diversity Services could shape some of their programming around the goals of the campaign.

Second, we could have student representatives at the committees that oversee the activity of the campaign. This panned out with limited success this year. In years to come, the extent to which the MSU is involved in this campaign is up to you. If you see potential, pursue it and maybe you have ideas for how to make things better. If not, I expect the campaign will continue to run through the University and it will probably evolve with each year until it hits its stride, which it certainly did not do in its pilot year.

## Emerging Opportunities

*The following section outlines miscellaneous thoughts of mine that don't quite have a place in the sections above, but that warrant a note and could be seen as opportunities for us to move on.*

**Risk Management.** Before September 2015, we need to complete a contract or memo of understanding with the university related to our risk management practices. I will briefly outline what I think needs to happen, but lean on the General Manager and your good judgment while searching for the full picture.

- *MSU Incorporated:* we should not go to the University for approval of our events, especially the high-risk programs. It is up to our team to assess risk and approve events accordingly, and with our insurance we have the authority to do so. However, the Board does not have training in risk management. Therefore, I suggest that for all high-risk events, the MSU seek the opinion of the University experts and use that feedback while making decisions. A major decision ahead is whether, in this contract being drafted, the University should have veto power over our approval. The reason this is an issue is because of liability. In the past, MSU sanctioned and approved events that have resulted in litigation have resulted in settlements where both the MSU as the host and the University as the location hosting it have been found liable, which really isn't fair if the University had absolutely no say in the way the event was run. A plan needs to be agreed upon where the liability is clear. This gets murky when we collaborate with University partners (e.g., Welcome Week, Year End Celebration, Frost Week), and that needs to be spelled out in the contract.
- *Clubs:* full time staff structure should be altered according to the conversations we have had at board meetings with you and your team. The new structure should reflect a full time position with risk management training. When a club wants to run an event, they should fill out a form online. The Office Clerks should approve all of these events (and should be trained accordingly). From there, the Clubs Administrator and their supervisor should filter through and approve everything as well (which will be a very quick process since they have already been approved by the clerks – just a glance for any red flags). Where there are high-risk events, the MSU should pass the approval over to the University. This should be as simple as, “if box x, y or z are clicked, it is a high-risk event that needs University approval/consultation.”

It is so important that this be cleaned up and figured out in the months to come. Right now there are too many areas of exposure and under-training that leave us inadequately prepared to assess, mitigate and defend decisions about risk.

**Inter Residence Council.** I'll keep this brief, but I think the Inter Residence Council (IRC) should be combined with the First Year Council (FYC). The IRC has two major mandates. One is programming for the first year residence population. That is something the Residence Life Staff can provide with more resources, training and expertise. When a Community Advisor runs a program, it is still a peer-based activity – it just has the support of a healthy department behind it. The second mandate is advocacy, something that the MSU has a lot of power to do. To make my point, consider a scenario where something egregious is happening in residence that affects

the entire system – perhaps a new rule that says students aren't allowed to study in the building. Who has more influence when they pick up the phone to call the Dean of Students (or anybody) to discuss this issue: the IRC representative, or the MSU president? I'm not saying that it has to be either or—of course the MSU president could help in that scenario if the IRC brought it up to them. But my point is that we already have strong advocacy structures in place, so why not rely on the MSU to speak for all students?

If there is not an appetite to blend the IRC into the MSU, serious consideration should be given at the very least to its fee structure. Right now, the IRC collects a massive student levy (something like \$46/student) and the return on that investment for students is questionable at best. Cut the yearbook, the clipboards and honorariums. Save a small pot for some programming and training expenses, and give students their money back. They already pay into their faculty and the MSU for advocacy and programming, and their residence fees are very high to ensure a holistic experience there.

**Presidents' Council.** I used this as a place to bounce ideas and to attempt to stay up to date on what student groups were up to. I suggest you use it as a place to get updates and hear feedback, rather than trying to do actual projects (I also tried this with limited success). It is nice to be able to go to the SRA with a motion or an idea having already garnered feedback from a table that truly represents all students. The presidents are quite busy, so getting anything out of them is difficult, but use it for political leverage and to keep them informed about what the MSU is doing. They're also a group of wonderful, committed people that want to be in the know, so why not help them out where you can? If I were running a second term, I would have biweekly meetings for an hour without minutes. I would provide food at each meeting with my expense account and I would use I as a time to talk about whatever it is you all want to talk about.

**Your Campaign Team.** This might seem a little random, but it also might click in to place later in your term. Banking on the small chance that happens and you think to look back to this document, I wanted to let you know that I felt a measurable amount of guilt through my term for my campaign team. A group of about 15 committed individuals surrounded me, along with hundreds of volunteers (many who I didn't even know), and all of them worked tirelessly to get me elected. During the campaign, I was in no place to express my thanks, and at that time it would have been premature. When all is said and done, though, your campaign team doesn't win the presidency. *You* do. You get the fancy meals, the corner office, the business card, the access to powerful people, the salary and so much more. They don't. I felt very uncomfortable with this at different points of the year, and never really knew what to do about it. I still don't. I share this note so if it happens to you, you know you're not alone. The best therapy for this guilt was writing reference letters for those who needed them, but that was about it.

**University Budget Submission.** You should do one. The University will pass a budget, just as we do, and I think it would be very wise to submit a report detailing what the MSU thinks ought to be priorities during the planning process. It would be a good place to talk about additional training for Teaching Assistants, more funding for the Student Affairs budget, more forceful thrusts for accessibility and things like that.

## Closing Thoughts

I'm just going to fire off a few final thoughts in bullet form, take them with a grain of salt:

- *Nobody is going to remember you for what you do in this role, but they will remember how you made them feel.* Remember that when dealing with difficult situations, or when getting down about a failed project or anything, really. The projects will fill your time, but they are not the most important component of the job.
- *You will never feel like you've done enough.* The nature of the role is that there are always things to do. You could always attend one more club event, send another email, join another committee, or host another roundtable. For the first seven months of this job, I worked at least 70h/week. I would wake up, go to the office, and stay until it was time to go to bed, every single day. My 9-5 was booked solid, so much so that if somebody wanted to meet with me they would have to wait at least 5–8 business days to find a slot. Only after I had a serious failed project did everything click—it would never be enough, and I would never feel “done”. So, I scaled back, balanced a social life into the equation, and made it through to the end of the term. I could not have done the full year at full speed.
- *Be very conscious about what conversations you are starting, and how you're carrying yourself everywhere you go.* You are in a leadership role that carries with it significant influence on the direction of many things on campus. By speaking about something, whether in an email, at a meeting or in the newspaper, you are making it a priority. You are directing people's attention to that topic. Use this influence to advance your vision. Also be aware that there should be a pattern or some continuity between what conversations you are starting. Let people label your thoughts with a theme, because then you'll be able to rope in a whole bunch of things rather than one-off projects.
- *Don't take yourself too seriously.* There are a lot of cool parts about this job. Most notably and attractive, I think, is that you do wield some power. The thing is, though, you will only ever have a 12-month lease on that. Your next job, no matter how exceptional you are, will not be to lead a \$15M organization. It's important to come to terms with that sooner than later. If you allow the role to inflate your sense of self, and dominate your identity, ask yourself what will be left when you have to pass the torch to the next person in April.
- *Get away from it all when you need to.* There were times when I really started to resent projects or details of the job, and that would trickle into everything I was doing. When that happened, I tried to get away from everything. I would leave campus, delete my email account from my phone, and completely divorce the job. I found these breaks to be rejuvenating and suggest that you do the same.
- *Have fun!* This is the coolest job for a young person to have, so live it up! The coolest cats surround you for the year, and your job has such a positive objective. Enjoy it while it lasts, and have fun.

That's all from me.