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Conference Report: CASA Foundations
May 23rd, 2016 – May 27th, 2016

Introduction

The Canadian Alliance of Students Association (CASA) Foundations Conference took place from May 23rd to May 27th, 2016 in Ottawa. The CASA is non-profit, member-driven organization as well as a national voice for Canada's post-secondary students that advocates to the federal government.

A few subjects discussed include (but not limited to) were the general structure of CASA; *Creating your Workspace Culture and Environment*; *Indigenous Education Issues in Canada, PSE and the Federal Government, Political Climate Update, Research & Innovation or International Education in Canada, Campus Sexual Assault Prevention* by Founder Kathryn Marshall, *The Next Canada* (presented by CEO of Abacus Data, David Coletto), *From Here to Policy and Strategy* conference and *Building Tools for Effective Advocacy*.

CASA 101

As the first session, it set the base for the rest of the conference as it introduced the governance structure, organizational structures, how to be involved, roles and responsibilities of delegates and roles and tasks that are conducted by the Board of Directors and the National Advocacy Committee, Trades and Technology Committee, Policy Committee and the Graduate Committee.

CASA Home Office

Descriptions of each CASA staff member and what roles they play within the year along with what specialities each member has to offer to the CASA membership and the CASA staff team.

Discussion of Student Issues

The first facilitated group discussion that allowed delegates to brainstorm on issues of importance to them in the area of post-secondary education. There were several techniques that were used to conduct this discussion such as the Silent Discussion, World Cafe and Harvest. These methods allowed for equal rights of expression (especially with such a large group of delegates) while eliminating the aspect of a length discussion that may have occurred without this technique.

At the end of this session, the topics that were most prioritized include the following: social barriers to post-secondary education; economic barriers to post-secondary education; student employment; marginalized groups; student union capacities; student union autonomy; campus relations; campus life; student wellness; sustainability; and research and technology.

Creating your Workspace Culture and Environment

This facilitated discussion permitted delegates to express and explain their perspectives of a professional workspace culture and environment. This session created a discussion between roles and responsibilities and the aspects that followed these factors such as respect, accountability, physical presence, empathy and professionalism.

Financial Assistance at the Federal Level by Canada Student Loans Program (CSLP)

Public servants from CSLP were invited to speak on behalf of the program in order to brief students on the program, the recent changes that have occurred, the difference between provincial and federal jurisdictions and how to take these issues to advocate for them in the future.

A few things that can be noted on this program include the change that allows low-income graduates to defer their student loan payments until they start earning more than \$25,000 a year.

Indigenous Education Issues

This session was presented by Jarrett Laughlin, Senior Research Analyst of the Assembly of First Nations who delved into how Indigenous education relates to the federal government. Laughlin spoke about many factors such as issues faced by Indigenous people and First Nations youth, and post-secondary in terms of accessibility, affordability, and quality of education in Canada.

Laughlin stated that some barriers to post-secondary education identified by First Nations living on reserve included: lacking the money/government funding (27%); problems with alcohol/drugs (14%); post-secondary education is not encouraged (14%); not use to living out of the community (10%); lack of academic qualifications (8%); not very interested (7%); not prepared for post-secondary education (7%); too far away and other reasons (2%).

He also states that due to the backlog of students who currently need funding, there would need to be \$424 million required to fulfill all of the current needs for this issue. Laughlin continued to affirm that even though there is funding allocated for First Nations education, there has been no mention for funding for First Nation students for post-secondary education.

International Education in Canada

This session allowed delegates to have summarized reasons why the CASA membership should be advocating for issues such as: accessibility, quality, innovation, recognizing excellence and need, employment, post-graduation immigration process, international branch campuses and many others.

Advocating on behalf of international students in the federal jurisdiction is an extreme must as the CASA is the only voice for international students. There are more than 33,000 international students (that has been increasing rapidly) that improve the international education experience for undergrad and post-graduation, recognize international student excellence and feed (grants, bursaries, and scholarships) and remove barriers to work for international students.

Campus Sexual Assault Prevention

Leading this session was Kathryn Marshall, Founder of *Say Know More* to discuss the persistent problem of sexual violence across all post-secondary institutions in Canada. In discussion is the lack of consistency and clarity in how institutions respond to these issues following by methods of prevention and identifying key changes to need to occur throughout post-secondary campuses across Canada.

Post-secondary institutions need to take this issue seriously in order to take action and make it a priority. There needs to be revisions and implementation of effective, transparent, sexual violence and harassment policies that are victim focused. According to legislation, British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario and Nova Scotia are mandated to have stand-alone sexual violence policies by January 2017.

There also will be a hard launch of the *Say No More* Campaign in September in order to further the acknowledge of the current problem.

The Next Canada

In February 2016, CASA commissioned Abacus Data to do an online survey of 1,000 young Canadians in order to learn about voting trends and priorities for the new government. This session was presented by David Coletto (CEO of Abacus Data).

In the 2015 Canadian Election, there was a total of 2.8 million Canada who voted along with the increase of an 38.8% of new voters. Results from the survey showed the highest turnout increased the most for age groups 18 to 24 which decidedly increased 15% of voter turnout in the age group of 18 to 24 in post-secondary educations.

The study also determined the top current challenges that young people are currently facing: rising cost of food, the cost of post-secondary education, cost of housing, debt, availability of good paying jobs and saving to buy a home. Coming from the results, the current government should mainly focus on these top five priorities that include creating better job opportunities for young Canadians, making post-secondary education more affordable, growing the economy, improving Canada's healthcare system and making housing more affordable.

With the Get Out The Vote (GOTV) campaign conducted nationwide by post-secondary educations and the help of CASA, youth turnout increased and proved that young voters can and did make a difference to the outcome.

Media and Government Relations Training by Summa Strategies

During this discussion, there were many tips and strategies recognized by Summa Strategies that would focus on the work of the CASA member to ensure delegates can perform in their roles in CASA and in their own institutions. A few tips include the following: understand your brand and promote it, identify priorities and stick to them, understand your environment and then establish relationships before making your ask.

According to previous interest form the delegates combined with the data collected from the Abacus studies, there are a few key targets that CASA should advocate to that include the Finance Committee, HR, Skills and Social Development Committee, Parliamentary Secretaries and the CASA Caucus.

In addition to these targets, targets within the Ministry include Justin Trudeau (Minister of Youth), MaryAnn Mihychuck (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour) and Bill Morneau (Minister of Finance).

Advocacy and Media Practical Training

After the session presented by Summa Strategies, delegates had the opportunity to mock lobbying and media interviews that were conducted and enacted by the CASA staff. Shown were examples of lobbying techniques and interviews set in a student advocacy environment.

Example: The delegates would like the Member of Parliament to write a letter of support to the Ministry of Employment in regards to being more innovative and increasing employment. The young Member of Parliament has several restrictions to the immediate acceptance to writing a letter which therefore demands that the delegates follow the steps in order to persuade the Member of Parliament into accepting their ask.

Post-Secondary Education Themes at CASA

This session allowed delegates to further explore and refine ideas () raised during the student issues discussion. This allowed the opportunity to begin thinking about what areas delegates would want CASA to prioritize for the next annual year of 2016-2017.

Conclusion

The experience obtained through this conference has been unfathomable as it has undoubtedly improved student leaders as a whole. Throughout the week, the topics that were covered were important to discuss thoroughly with one another as this allowed viewpoints from post-secondary representatives across Canada. Issues such as Indigenous education, international education, campus sexual assault, and media and government relations were discussed to great degree. Overall, there is no doubt that this conference was necessary to move forward into the next steps of advocacy.