

University Student Council 2015 Budget Submission

Introduction

This report was created in accordance with the University Students' Council's (USC) mission statement "To enhance the educational experience and quality of life for all undergraduates at Western University." As the organization that represents the interests and voices of all undergraduate students on Western's campus we have identified four key priorities of our students.

The USC recognizes that the University is currently in their four year budget cycle planning process and would like to submit the said priorities for consideration in the annual budget on behalf of all undergraduates at Western. Students are stakeholders in the University and it is the University Students' Council's desire to partner with Western to work towards enhancing the educational experience and quality of life for all students on this campus.

The USC will be looking to submit key priorities as identified by students on an annual basis to the President's Office for consideration in the budget process. The top priorities identified by the University Students' Council on behalf of students in accordance with Western's strategic plan have been enclosed in this report in order of importance to the student body.

The identified priorities include:

1. Maintaining the best student experience by focusing on mental health supports, creating an operating budget for the Associate VP (Student Experience) portfolio, and develop a business plan for a "No Wrong Door Approach" model for student support delivery.
2. Continuing to provide a world class academic experience by improving academic counseling, expanding experimental learning offerings, and creating learnings outcomes.
3. Reinvesting in the bones of Western's campus by allocating funds for maintenance and retrofits of physical infrastructure, and the construction of new buildings on our campus.

Maintaining the Student Experience

Western University prides itself as having the best student experience in Canada, but with the Mcleans rankings no longer around this title is no longer confirmed. As a university community we must always be striving to maintain and protect the title of “The Best Student Experience” in Canada. Outlined in the following section is the USC’s recommendation to help protect this distinction.

Mental Health Support

As is well documented across our culture mental health is a trending topic and for all the wrong reasons, as rates of reported mental illness are increasing. Unfortunately, university students are not immune to this and some studies show that one in four post-secondary students will suffer from a mental illness or addiction at some point during their academic careerⁱ. Specific to Western University the Student Development Centre has seen a 115% increase in Psychological Services since 2009 and Student Health Services has seen approximately 3000 more visitors for mental health services in 3 years. It is clear that both of these numbers are staggeringly largeⁱⁱ.

Another set of unfortunate stats is the timing of when these mental illness first show themselves, and the University Environment.

- On average most people have their first encounter with mental illness between the ages of 18-24, is also the average age of students at Western Universityⁱⁱⁱ.
- University is both a high stress environment and costs a great deal of money meaning the compound pressure of both these burdens forces students to work more than then usual^{iv}.
- Finally for most students being away from home for the first time is stressful, and their typical support systems are gone making the process to deal with mental illness even harder.

Further compounding this problem is the fact that funding for mental health services on campus has not increased with the increase in service demands. In the August 2014 reports for the Student Services Committee (SSC) the Student Development Centre notes that an increase in front line staff and contract workers put that unit into a \$43000 deficit. This chronic lack of funding is preventing students from receiving the support they require in a timely manner.

The USC recommends that the University commits in each year of its four year budget plan matching funding equivalent to the yearly increase for mental health services that the SSC committee approves.

Operating Budget for the Associate VP (Student Experience)

The USC appreciates the University’s commitment to students in the form of a Associate VP (Student Experience) being created at the end of the last academic year. We are also happy to see that the Associate VP (Student Experience) portfolio continues to grow as its role is being defined, and the USC will continue to work collaboratively to help shepherd this growth.

The one area where the USC is concerned is with the lack of a budget for this position, and the USC recommends the creation of such budget to be included in the four year budget planning.

The No Wrong Door Approach

For years the USC has been advocating for a No Wrong Door Approach to student services on campus. The concept is students would go to one building to receive all the student supports they need, and this idea can further be improved by considering the addition of a triage area in this building where a student is greeted and then “diagnosed” to see what service they truly need. Then this triage service can direct them to the service within the building for support. At Western University, the various support services are spread out across campus, and if a student seeks service at the incorrect unit for what they require they are told to walk to the other building. The problem is the fact that that student has identified they need support and is being told to leave. This thinking must switch to a No Wrong Door Approach where if you show up at International Student Services for mental health support you receive them before you have to leave the building.

The USC’s final recommendation within the Student Experience is that the university commissions a business plan for the implementation of a “No Wrong Door Approach” at Western university.

The Academic Experience

It must be recognized that at its very core the USC is an organization that was founded on the principals of improving the academic experience for all undergraduate students. In recent decades, the focus has slowly expanded to take on other part of the post-secondary experience, but still to this day the academic quality that is provided at Western is the priority of the USC. Below are 3 recommendations to continue improving that academic experience.

Academic Counselling

In a recent survey of students the second priority for investment after financial assistance was student services^v. Specifically students who left their programs early significantly under used student services, particularly counselling services^{vi}. Academic counselling is part of this student service experience that needs to be improved, and particularly so in Social Science. The first hand stories that the USC receives from its’ students are many that highlight an uneven service level, and a particular challenge to receive timely service. Both of these issues must be addressed. We realize that counselors have huge caseloads leading to difficulties in service, and we commend the effort each counsellor does put in, but it is time to provide improved support to both students and counsellors.

The USC is recommending that the University make a significant investment into academic counselling across the board to reduce wait times, and thus reducing the case load for each counselor so they can better support their students.

Experiential Learning

Traditional forms of learning will always have a place in the classrooms of tomorrow, but long gone are the days where learning can only take place in the classroom. In the modern class room learning occurs in the community, while working in real life environments, and through hands on learning opportunities otherwise known as Work-Integrated Learning^{vii}. This learning is crucial for the students of today who are expecting a high quality and diverse educational experience. Furthermore, experiential learning allows students to start the job development process much earlier, which will help them navigate a

competitive job market.^{viii} Western has started to embrace the idea of experiential learning and this is a great first step.

While Western's efforts to expand experiential learning opportunities are great, there are a few pieces of the puzzle missing that can greatly enhance the experience. First off the number of potential experiential learning opportunities presented to students is limited, but the USC realizes that in the last few years the number of opportunities has increased greatly. The other area of concern for the USC is the fact that a vast majority of the current opportunities available to students are in the form of unpaid internships. As stated earlier, students are under a great deal of pressure to finance their education and paid co-operative and internship opportunities are a great way to lessen this burden. According to a 2014 study 63% of students felt that internships should be paid, meaning there is a great deal of student appetite for compensation for their work^{ix}.

The USC recommends that Western includes in their four year budget cycle increased financial resources to help develop increased internship and co-operative education opportunities for students and that these opportunities must be paid where ever possible.

Learning Outcomes

Similar to a contract someone might sign in a business relationship the idea of exchanging money for an education is not much different. Yet in the case of a university education typically there are many guidelines and expectations that a student must follow to maintain their end of the deal, but there is very little the educator must adhere to. This is where learning outcomes could provide a student with a better understanding of what they will learn from each class, which would be an integral part of any student class selection process^x.

Western has been particularly slow at the creation of learning outcomes, and the USC is pleased to see Learning Outcomes included in the Strategic Plan that was just passed by the university Board of Governors. The USC hopes that this focus, as directed by the board, will be used to create learning outcomes that not only hold the student accountable, but also the professor to provide a high quality learning experience^{xi}. These learning outcomes should not just be a placeholder in the syllabus, but valuable resource students that will impact what classes enroll in.

The USC recommends that the University allocate in their budget funding to provide the human and create the infrastructure needed to develop learning outcomes for all of their classes at Western.

Capital and Infrastructure

There would be no Western without the beautiful ivy covered buildings built almost 100 years ago, but there also is not a university campus without the many buildings that were built some 40 years ago. Whether they are 100 or 40 years old the need for a focus on maintaining our infrastructure on campus is starting to show its ugly head. Listed below outlines not only that the USC is aware of the infrastructure crunch, but also our suggestions for dealing with it.

We know that the differed maintenance payments from the government are large, and that there is only \$500 million over the next 5 years to give out to all the school in Ontario which is not really enough to pay for the needs of just Western let alone the whole province. Given that reality the USC will continue to advocate to the provincial government to pick up their portion of this problem through the upcoming budgets, but given the realities of the province's financial situation it is highly unlikely anything will change.

The USC recommends that the Western continues to increase its yearly incremental increase into the Maintenance, Modernization and Infrastructure Fund to \$1 Million from the current \$750,000 thus allowing Western to continue to be a Canadian Leader in Deferred Maintenance.

ⁱ Pin, Laura and Martin, Chris. 2012. Student Health: Bringing Healthy Change to Ontario's Universities. Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance.

ⁱⁱ Student Services Committee, Reports August 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pin and Martin, 2012.

^{iv} Berger, J., Motte, A., and Parkin, A. (2009). The Price of Knowledge: Access and Student Finance in Canada, Fourth Edition. Millennium Scholarship Foundation: Montreal, QC

^v Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, What Students Want Toronto: 2010.

^{vi} Educational Policy Institute. Access, Persistence, and Barriers in Postsecondary Education: A Literature Review and Outline of

Future Research. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2008.

^{vii} Martin, C, Saeed, H & Pin, L. (2013). Youth Employment: Re-imagining the link between learning and labour. Toronto: Ontario

Undergraduate Student Alliance.

^{viii} Sattler, P., and Peters, J. (2013). Work-Integrated Learning in Ontario's Postsecondary Sector: The Experience of Ontario Graduates. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

^{ix} Madden, S. (2014). Beyond the Traditional Classroom: Teaching and Learning in Contemporary Higher Education. Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance.

^x Gonzalez, J & Wagenaar, R. Introduction to Tuning 2. The Tuning Project. 2007

^{xi} Woolcott, Donna. Quality Assurance Framework . The Council of Ontario Universities. 2012