

THE STATE OF THE USC

Delivered by

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Hello and welcome everyone!

Thank you so much for joining me this afternoon. I'm so happy to see many of our campus and community leaders in one place. I would like to extend a special welcome to colleagues from Western administration, City Councillors and my counterpart at Fanshawe College for being in the audience.

Your presence here means a lot, because that's exactly what an event like this is designed to highlight – the opportunities for everyone who interacts with this university to come together for a common goal. What are these goals? That's what I hope to make clear today.

But before I begin, I want to recognize my team of USC executives who, while having heard me speak about these issues enough, are here today and have already been busy working on some of what I'll be speaking about. Thank you for listening once more.

Now, this is usually the point in any address that you would be asked to put away your phone or electronic devices to remain engaged in the presentation; I'm not going to ask that. I'm going to ask the opposite.

Instead, I ask you all keep your phones out, because rather than a distraction I understand the ways you might use that phone to share an idea you've heard, to communicate with others who aren't here and to be present in both this moment and ones outside of the Mustang Lounge.

No student here has been spared from generational critiques. Columnists, politicians and maybe even sharply-tongued relatives have dismissed what they recognize as a limiting and over dependant relationship with technology. But what is limiting about transcending national borders in news, culture and information? And what is dependant about refusing to allow our ideas to stay contained, in single spaces and amongst certain people?

Imagine the first time a Western student used a computer on campus to find archived information. Now imagine when students began carrying those computers to class in their backpacks. Technology has created a modern student who is flexible, adaptable and hungry for new experiences.

In fact, I believe looking forward has always been a particular skill of students – driving change in institutions like Western. Since the university's origins in 1878, Western has evolved in pace with the tools at our disposal.

We started allowing women to enroll. We introduced academic and personal counselling support services. We started offering online courses. We even started sending students on exchange to countries around the world. We offered more residence beds, more scholarship dollars and more leadership development.

Behind each of these advancements were students coming together with a single purpose and a single voice. The University Students' Council has never faltered as a steadfast supporter of student interests and it continues in its attempts to speak as loudly and boldly as needed.

THE STATE OF THE USC

2

So what is the next evolution? What is the direction that we, as the student voice, need to step towards? The technology at our fingers is making it harder and harder to maintain a lateral progression from school into work. Students are reading blogs, starting companies, connecting with organizations and expanding their personal reach. Many of us are actively connecting to networks outside of the classroom – and perhaps that’s exactly where we need to go.

It’s called experiential learning. Broadly, it’s an educational process that derives value from lived experiences framed with reflection. In other words, students learn through a combination of studying course material and then applying that material in real-world capacities.

This year the USC is committed to advocating for students to access more than in-classroom learning. The university has done much to offer a quality academic education, but this is a call for Western to acknowledge different learning styles, different student objectives and different metrics of success. Every Western student should, at some point during their time here, participate in an experiential learning opportunity that is tied to credited work from our school.

We need course material to become tangible in ways it has never been before - where every student has the ability to link their class work to credited, relevant experiential learning opportunities. To accomplish this, we’re advocating to establish better training for our faculty members to incorporate these values in their teaching objectives. We’re also setting up a USC Medal of Innovation in Teaching to do our part to incentivize professors towards these new teaching methods. Instructors will still require support from the university to provide such programs as they make connections with local, national or even international experiential opportunities, and we want to continue to remind Western administration how important an investment in that support is.

But we also need to be diligent in ensuring that as experiential learning becomes a part of more and more classes, the university commits to centrally managing all faculties. We have been working with Western’s Student Experience portfolio to ensure that regardless of your degree, you will receive the same access to opportunities than your peers in any other discipline. The USC is also drafting advocacy papers on experiential learning in non-STEM faculties so we’re fully aware of faculty-based realities when it comes to what “out-of-class experiences” mean.

However, this isn’t just on Western. We’re preparing to work with the provincial and even federal governments to ensure they prioritize undergraduate opportunities and can provide adequate funding to the point where experiential learning becomes a goal, then a standard and then a norm in post-secondary education. The provincial papers we’re preparing hope to address policy on work-integrated learning, tuition, financial assistance and the funding formula for universities.

In the meantime, we refuse to forget current students and their access to experiential learning. Currently, a lot of the experiential learning opportunities on campus can cost students more than they can afford. The USC has already begun modelling scholarships and bursaries geared towards experiential or work-integrated learning. Earlier this year we created the Experiential Learning Endowment, granting students who need financial assistance resources to take advantage of experiential learning. No student on this campus should be denied a unique chance to demonstrate their leadership, passion and knowledge because they cannot afford it.

Of course, we can’t have a conversation about experiences outside of the classroom without talking about what happens off-campus. Though Western’s strategic plan has outlined the internationalization of our campus, we can’t forget about increasing opportunities for students to travel globally as part of their undergraduate degree. Not every student, however, can or will want to leave Canada to have industry

THE STATE OF THE USC

specific experiences. Global and national opportunities are great things to connect with students, but unless London becomes a culturally rich, world-class city, the number of locally-based experiential learning opportunities stagnates.

From City Hall to each business owner in this city, Western students are and can continue to integrate into the community through working in industry related ways - potentially setting down roots in a place that has given them a reason to stay. I can promise, though, that this won't happen without a reliable and efficient way to navigate London. We need a proper transit system that can work for a city this size. The USC has been pushing for new ways to approach transit issues, and just this morning the City of London announced the recommended mode of rapid transit that will be brought to City Council for approval. With the recommended hybrid of light rail transit and bus rapid transit system, students could hop onto a train from campus and be downtown in minutes. This is a huge step, and an equally large investment for the City, but it is an essential piece of making London a city that meets the standards that we set. By being a part of these conversations and being heard, students can develop a vested interest in revitalizing the city's core and consulting on changing infrastructure.

With the USC's long history of advocacy, we recognize that initiatives like this don't happen overnight. They take concerted effort from universities, communities and all levels of government. We're taking a multi-pronged approach - organizing with federal partners and our student colleagues across the country who face similar challenges at their institutions. Our work with the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance continues to make similar progress for emphasizing these needs to the provincial government. Finally, the City of London and the university have perhaps the most responsibility in making the connection between a student's academic experience and the ability to thrive in environments that enhance - rather than deter - their learning.

So what will a student, taught through the lens of experiential learning, look like? Well, I'd say that you're listening to one right now. When I came to Western I was confident in my academics, sure that I could take on the challenges thrown to me in the classroom. I quickly discovered, however, that the real challenges - the ones that would define me as a leader and as a person - came not from what I studied but what I accomplished.

Volunteer and work positions are what led me to stand in front of you today, having realized that my passions primarily lay outside of textbooks and exams. I can imagine some faculty members cringing at the idea of stepping away from such normative methods of teaching, but resist the temptation to judge. Just as it has in the past, the USC is encouraging us as a campus culture to embrace new teaching methods so that over time a president can stand before a similar crowd with a similar speech but instead talk about the intrinsic value their credited, experiential courses had on their skills development, career paths and personal growth.

So let's look at what we collectively need to do to get to that point. While the USC's advocacy efforts continue I ask students to start communicating with your professors on how you learn and what you want to achieve at university. Don't allow yourself to be intimidated by the unilateral direction of lectures - engage in discussions to fill gaps in our education that currently do exist.

As for Western staff, faculty and London decision makers, be receptive to these conversations. Listen to how we felt about an internship, a co-op, a workshop or an off-site lecture. Listen to what we learned from sitting on clubs, councils, leagues and teams. Listen to everything we're doing outside of the four walls of a lecture hall because there is an opportunity for curriculum to once again be at the forefront postsecondary education.

THE STATE OF THE USC

So adapt with us. Change with us. I focused on experiential learning today but the University Students' Council is working on a number of fronts to guarantee that advocacy stays at the core of who we are. Throughout the USC's history, we have often worked to fill gaps we've seen in student life. This has manifested into programming, service provision, and - more recently - a heavy focus on student development. In similar speeches, my predecessors have proclaimed that advocacy should remain at the forefront of our efforts as the USC. Let's now put our money where mouth, or mission, is.

Our mission focuses on the intersection of educational experience and quality of life for students, so we're growing our advocacy efforts to keep up with the demand of projects geared towards unique student needs. In this final moment, let's take a critical look at what advocacy is. It's asking for things backed by research and driven by fight. We've committed to getting the research together, so I ask all of you here - fight with us.

Thank you.



Sophie Helpard, USC President

