



# *University Students' Council*

Western University, Room 340, UCC Building • London, Ontario N6A 3K7 • Tel: (519) 661-3574

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**Monday April 19th, 2021.**

## **Response RE: Proposed 2021-2022 Western University Operating & Capital Budgets**

To the Undergraduate students, University Senate and Administration at Western University,

Over the course of the 2020-2021 academic year, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused unforeseeable complications for many of our students, our institution, and our society as a whole. Students have shown great resilience throughout this challenging year, but in many cases, have turned to the University Students' Council (USC) and Western for increased support. Looking ahead, as the University rebuilds from this global crisis, it is critical that we do so in a way which prioritizes the future success of our institution and particularly, our students.

This year, the USC Executive underwent a restructuring which resulted in the introduction of a Vice President University Affairs portfolio. The UA role has expanded our capacity for institutional advocacy, especially in areas related to academics, student experience, equity and sustainability. As a result, the USC was also able to establish a dedicated process to voice student priorities and influence the university budget.

Starting in the Summer of 2020, the VPUA began to identify themes for the university to prioritize in the upcoming budget planning process. This list was narrowed down to four themes; Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI); Student Financial Aid; Sustainability; and Work-Integrated Learning. These themes were then presented to, and approved by USC Council at the September meeting.

Following this, the VPUA underwent various meetings with university administrators to begin advocating for these themes to be prioritized and included in divisional budget plans. At the same time, the UA portfolio began conducting research and developing the specific asks within each outlined theme. The finalized specific budget asks within each theme were then presented and approved a second time at the November USC Council meeting.

With council approval, the VPUA and USC President were able to outline the importance of these budget themes and specific areas of investment in a consultation with Western's Provost and budgetary team in late November. This dialogue was critical to the USC's understanding of the



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university budget process and allowed us to present a set of final recommendations that were both student-facing and feasible.

After the proposed 2021-2022 budget presented to the Senate last Friday highlighted investments in EDI, Sustainability and Student Financial Aid, it is clear that the UA portfolio has a strong positive impact on the USC's ability to influence university processes and elevate the student voice within our own campus community. While we recognize not all of our asks were adopted in this budget, we believe that having the UA portfolio dedicated to engaging with this process year over year will allow for more consistent prioritization of student-facing priorities in budgets to come.

As for this budget cycle, the enclosed brief includes the USC's formal response to the proposed 2021-2022 university budget. In our view, a comprehensive strategy to strengthen Western's competitiveness and recover from the impacts of the pandemic includes the prioritization of the aforementioned themes from our submission. We recognize this budget as student-facing, with entire sections dedicated to EDI, Indigenization and Sustainability for the first time in recent memory. We appreciate the many Western administrators who engaged with the USC throughout this process and urge them to continue considering Western's fundamental belief in creating, disseminating, and applying knowledge for the benefit of society in the execution of this budget and all other future-facing endeavors.

If you wish to review the USC's final University Budget submission from November, you can do so here.

Sincerely,

**Victoria Barroso**

Vice-President University Affairs



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## ***Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI)***

EDI was heavily prioritized in the USC's university budget submission where in addition to investing in overarching efforts, we outlined three specific asks: create an Associate Vice President (EDI) Office, establish a centralized reporting tool for discrimination and misconduct, create and mandate anti-racism for all faculty members.

In the proposed budget, we see Western establish a senior role of Associate Vice President (EDI) whose office's initial budget will total \$420,000. Additionally, a sum of \$1M in one-time funding is recommended in support of developing new and improving existing university curricula to operationalize institutional equity, diversity, and inclusion goals.

With respect to the centralized reporting tool for discrimination and misconduct, based on joint recommendations from the USC's Ethnocultural Support Services (ESS) and VPUA Western has created an online form for incident reporting. This tool allows students to specifically identify racist incidents and has the option of reporting an incident anonymously, meaning that students are able to notify Western of instances of racism without triggering an investigation (this was something that often deterred students from reporting incidents before). Students are now able to access this form through the [Office of Equity & Human Rights](#).

The USC is pleased to see investment in the creation of an EDI portfolio at Western and commends Western for listening to students on this file. Although there is more that needs to be done to address Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, this is a great start. The USC believes that this new AVP role should be provided with the freedom to recommend and implement changes across campus. It is imperative that we work together to ensure everyone feels welcomed on Western's campus, and this will likely include wide-spread, nuanced conversations in the months ahead.

## ***Indigenizing Campus***

The USC is pleased to see the university respect and incorporate Indigenous knowledge through \$1M in one-time funding that has been specifically allocated for Indigenizing



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curricula. Institutional resources will be crafted by the Office of Indigenous Initiatives, supported by a new Indigenous Curriculum Developer role, and made available to all faculties and programs at Western. Since the funding of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was released, Western University has invested in Indigenizing campus initiatives, and it is important that this work continue.

A key finding of the TRC was the need to have a self-directed approach to reconciliation where the Indigenous actors in a system are put in a position to create the change they need to be successful. This recommendation holds true to Western's campus, and as such the USC continues to recommend that the university listens to the Indigenous leaders on campus, students, faculty or staff to direct this work.

## ***International Tuition***

In response to the increases made during the 2020-2021 academic year, the cost of international tuition and affordability for international students remained an advocacy priority for the USC at both the institutional and provincial levels. This year, our University Affairs and External Affairs portfolios authored a policy paper on tuition to specifically outline the USC's stance on these recurring increases and pushed for the university to adopt these recommendations when approaching tuition in this 2021-2022 budget. The USC also advocated to the provincial and federal levels of government, asking that international students are included in financial support packages, including CESB, job creation, and job retention in post-COVID economic recovery, recognizing the strained financial situation these students are in due to COVID-19.

After experiencing more than a year of a global pandemic and witnessing the financial impacts it has had on many vulnerable populations, including students, the USC is disappointed to see the University propose increases of 8% and 4% for incoming and returning international students, respectively. One of the USC's core values remains that post-secondary education should be accessible and affordable for all students, regardless of their country of origin. We believe that the university's decision to increase tuition disregards the consistent public opposition of the student body, and ignores the sustained financial strain placed on the international student population through travel



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and quarantine restrictions, VISA complications and increased costs associated with extended stays for the duration of the pandemic. Not to mention that social isolation was only exacerbated for international students by lectures, academic resources, wellness supports and extra-curricular opportunities being predominantly offered in different time zones.

However, it is important to note that at the April Senate meeting, the university publicly committed to this 4% increase being in-cohort. The benefit of this is that incoming students will have predictability for the foreseeable future that their tuition will not increase more than 4% over the duration of their degree. While the USC stands firmly by the recommendations outlined in our tuition policy paper and has advocated on such throughout the year, we recognize that this commitment will allow students to reasonably estimate and better budget for the holistic cost of their education. This predictability is something we are glad to see the university prioritize, although we remain disappointed in the rate at which tuition is increasing, and disagree with the decision to increase tuition overall given the current economic climate.

## ***Student Financial Aid***

Early into the 2020-2021 academic year, the USC made a number of recommendations to the university regarding the need for increased financial aid as a result of the global pandemic. The university responded to this request by developing a number of new programs focused on providing financial support to students through bursary and work-study programs. As a result, it was confirmed at the April Senate meeting that 100% of financial aid requests submitted by students this year were met.

These investments in students' financial aid were welcomed at the time, and the USC is pleased to see that a number of programs have continued for the 2021-2022 academic year. In 2021-2022, the university projects a sum of \$9.4 million from fundraising for student financial aid. The USC is appreciative of this fundraising focus and requests that the university continue to build this fund to support student financial aid.

Additionally, as a result of higher enrolments, Western's spending on scholarships and



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bursaries is estimated to be higher in the 2021-2022 academic year by about \$2.1 million.

Western University has long focused on using fundraising as a source of financial aid for students. The USC supports this approach and believes that the university should continue to develop funds focused on making education more affordable and accessible for Western University students.

## **Sustainability**

The USC has been a vocal advocate for sustainability on campus and is pleased that an entire section of the one-time funding allocations was devoted to sustainability initiatives. Many of the investments being made at this time such as \$1.5M to the President's Advisory Committee for the Environment and Sustainability (PACES), focus on providing committees with financial support to operationalize their work. Additional investments include \$10M to support various campus-wide sustainability initiatives including Deep Energy Retrofit projects. While these long-term investments are necessary and welcomed, there are also many short-term highly impactful projects that can be implemented simultaneously to accelerate the university's growth in this area.

For example, paper towels previously accounted for 17% of our campus waste. However, this year Western's administration and Sustainability teams worked collaboratively with the USC to launch the *Paper Towel Bin Pilot Project* we requested in our university budget submission. We are proud to share that there are now 37 bins labelled as 'paper-towel only' in the UCC, including in every bathroom. The USC hopes to see this project continue to further reduce our waste production by expanding it to all buildings and bathrooms across campus.

Climate change is going to reshape the global economy in unprecedented ways. All the research explains that significant changes and investments need to be made now in order to reduce the long-term impacts of climate change. The USC believes that the university must be more ambitious with its climate targets, and specifically must change its net-zero target from 80% by 2050 to 100% by 2050.



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## **Work-Integrated Learning**

The USC has indicated repeatedly that the university must focus on creating a more effective approach to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). Our asks for this budget included; developing a robust WIL framework; funding initiatives to establish local, provincial and national networks to increase the creation of WIL opportunities; and investing funds towards reorganizing the WIL portfolio.

While this budget has only one mention of WIL, the USC understands that the University President has identified WIL as a focus of Western in the coming years. In the meantime, we are pleased to see Western join as a member of the *Business and Higher Education Roundtable (BHER)*. In line with our second recommendation, this will allow Western to establish partnerships to achieve the goal of having 100 per cent of post-secondary students accessing some form of Work-Integrated Learning experience as part of their education. The USC is hopeful that an extensive WIL plan will be part of the 2022-2023 budget.

## **Support for Academic Advising**

The USC has consistently advocated for improvements to the Academic Advising available at Western over the last decade, and most recently in two Mental Health Policy Papers published this year. We are pleased to see the formation of a working group dedicated to the long-term improvement of Academic Advising in the proposed budget. Notably, we are excited that this group will receive funds in order to operationalize their recommendations, as this will be key to its success. Students at Western have long complained about Academic Advising, and it is the USC's hope that with this well-funded working group, all students will have positive experiences with their academic advising offices moving forward.

For this to be successful, the USC feels it is crucial that there is a strong student presence within the working group. Students are the main users of the academic advising system and as such, are in the best position to provide honest feedback on potential expansions and improvements to the system.