

SU moves to join national lobby group

Membership with the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations under works

Ryan Heise, Deputy News Editor Wednesday, 19 March 2008

The University of Alberta Students' Union is now on the cusp of joining a federal student lobby group after approving the 2008/09 budget principles on Tuesday, 11 March.

This year's SU executive had been looking into rejoining the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA)—an organization it helped found in the early and mid-'90s, but left in 2003—for most of this year, but the passing of next year's budget principles moves them significantly closer.

As Vice-President (External) Steven Dollansky explained, membership is contingent on approval from next year's Council.

“The 2008/09 Council will approve acceptance upon the successful implementation of several improvements to our business and rental operations, which we expect to have in place prior to July 1st,” he said.

CASA currently represents over 250 000 students from 19 student associations. The cost of joining the organization will be around \$50 000 a year, including associated conference fees. As Dollansky pointed out, this money will come from a restructuring and re-evaluation of the SU's businesses and operations, though these talks took place in camera and specifics could not be provided.

Though joining the organization is pricey, SU President Michael Janz said that the membership is worth it to broaden their advocacy efforts.

“I think for me, what it came down to was that the most important role student unions play for students is to be their spokesperson,” he explained, adding that issues such as loan reform and federal scholarships and grants need to be addressed at the national level.

“We can't neglect the role federal advocacy has to play for our organization.”

Though the SU has opted to join CASA, a second federal PSE advocacy group, the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), was also available for the SU to join. However, Dollansky explained that the decision was fairly easy based on the operation of the two organizations.

“CFS has a number of questionable practices that we haven't looked in to fully, but we felt wasn't a good fit for our campus,” he said. “We like the fact that CASA is very member-driven

and isn't a dedicated fee. CFS hasn't contacted us since we first came into office, and we've worked very close with CASA and have been very impressed with what we've seen."

CASA national director Zach Churchill said that he's excited to have the U of A rejoin to the organization.

"I'm so encouraged and happy that the U of A Students' Union decided to return to [CASA] as a member. The U of A helped build this organization. It's been too bad that they've been absent from the table for this long, but it's beneficial for everyone now that they're back at the table," Churchill stated.

Churchill went on to explain that, though there's often a misconception that the federal government doesn't play a large role in postsecondary education, there's actually a very strong relation, and it's especially visible in Alberta.

"We see clear correlations between federal spending and what happens in the province of Alberta for students," he explained. "When the federal cuts first happened in the early '90s, Alberta's tuition rose the fastest in the country, and since then it has increased 275 per cent since [...] '93.

"Debt rose at a really fast rate in the province, too. Now over half the students in Alberta who graduate have over \$20 000 of debt," he added, noting that the U of A SU's established advocacy department will be a huge asset for the organization—a sentiment that Dollansky agrees with.

"CASA is a good step forward for our advocacy department," he said. "It's providing a tool for us to carry out some of our advocacy efforts to the federal government."