



REPORT

From the...

Office of the MSU President

TO: Student Representative Assembly
FROM: Giancarlo Da-Ré, President
SUBJECT: SRA 20E President Report
DATE: September 13th 2020

Dear Members of the Assembly,

It has been a long summer with many operational and structural changes to our organization as we have worked to adapt within such a unique year. I hope you have all stayed safe and well, and that you have an incredible year ahead. I want to thank all of you for your commitments to supporting full-time undergraduate students during the pandemic, and for all the work I know you will put in to make this year the best it can be.

Below, please find an update on my work since my last report in July. If you have questions regarding my work within this document or outside this document, please feel free to prompt me and I will happily explain in greater detail.

MSU Adjusted Operations for Fall 2020

It would be impossible to capture the collective efforts of all MSU staff and volunteers in a single report. Everyone has been working incredibly hard to ensure that we were ready for the start of the Fall term. There have been a number of adjustments to our operations in order to make this possible. I've outlined some of the main changes below.

- All peer support and first year services shifted to an online service delivery model
- EFRT not responding to calls due to health risks inherent to the pandemic
 - Hamilton Paramedic Services is aware, and students should call 911 if in an emergency on campus
- SWHAT is been paused for the Fall due to similar reasons
- MSU Campus Events is hosting social events, musical performances and more via social media accounts
- 93.3 CFMU continues to broadcast online and at 93.3 on the FM dial
- Main Office in MUSC 201 open to public starting September 8th 9:30am
 - Open Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays 9:30-11:30am
- TwelvEighty operating from 11am-5pm Monday-Thursdays

- The Grind Café open from 8am-2pm Monday-Thursdays
- Union Market open 10am-5pm Monday-Thursdays, 10am-3pm Fridays
- Underground Media + Design open by appointment only
- Enhanced safety and cleaning protocols at all MSU locations
 - Partitions have been installed at points of front-line customer service and physical distancing signage visible on floors
- Temporary pause to the HSR bus pass, operations beginning January 1, 2021
- Health & Dental insurance plans fully operational as well as MSU Student Assistance Plan (SAP)
 - In response to the pandemic, opt-out option of insurance plans if out of the country (this year only)

Paused Bus Pass

One of the largest changes made to the Fall term has been the temporary pause to the HSR bus pass. We have also received a number of questions regarding the process that took place to make this decision. I have outlined some context for this decision below.

The MSU tries to negotiate an opt-out agreement every time we meet to negotiate with the city for the HSR pass. One reason for this is commuter students who pay each year for a bus pass that many of them never use. This year, we again tried to acquire an opt-out model for the Fall given the nature of this year, but unfortunately this request was unsuccessful. This left our only options to be charging all students or no students. It was decided that we could not justify charging students living outside of the GTA, Ontario and Canada for a Fall bus pass that they who would not be able to use.

This is understandably frustrating for anyone who was hoping to use the bus pass at the discounted rate through the MSU agreement. For this reason, the MSU submitted a delegation to City Council for a meeting in mid-August requesting that they create a post-secondary student monthly pass, similar to the high school students and senior rates which are much lower than the adult pass. While Mohawk submitted a similar delegation to the MSU which increased the demand for a student rate during the pandemic, City Council ultimately denied our requests.

Health & Dental Insurance Coverage

Another change this year has been to allow students that are living outside of the country to opt out of our insurance plans. This is due to the fact that many of the benefits are not available outside the country. We were very adamant on this change and we hope it helps our international students living out of the country. We are also planning for the possibility that some of our international students who opt out may return to campus in the Winter. In anticipation of this, we are working to create an opt-in option specifically available for international students who

opt-ed out and who will be able to use the benefits of the plan in the Winter and Summer. More details on this to come.

Advocating for Mobile COVID Testing

The closest COVID testing location to campus is currently at the Main Street West Urgent Care Centre. Their website mentions that both an appointment and referral are required; while both of these requirements can be secured by students, they increase the difficulty of students going to get a COVID test. In prioritizing the safety and wellbeing of surrounding neighborhoods to campus, I have voiced my support for a mobile COVID-19 testing center on or adjacent to campus. This is already being done at Western University to ensure that it is easy for anyone near campus to get a test. We need to make it as easy as possible for students and community members to get a COVID test so as to decrease the chances of an outbreak. It is important that students and community members are getting tested for COVID rather than dismissing common flu or cold symptoms.

Campus Community Communications & Preparation

I have been working with the University on a communications strategy for the Fall term to ensure that we are promoting health and safety messaging to the McMaster community. They are using the hashtag #McMasterCares to unite a series of daily news articles, print posters, videos and website work over the month of September. I have been heavily pushing for this campaign to focus on providing tools for students and community members so that they can use them to ensure safety is a priority in their own lives. I believe this is more impactful and will be better received than simply telling individuals how to act. I have noticed increasing comments, articles and concerns from community members about the number of students returning to surrounding McMaster neighborhoods, and it is important to see students as the intelligent, responsible Hamilton community members that they are. Students are capable of making decisions for themselves that prioritize safety of the community, and it will be important to ensure that public messaging from the city and the university paint students as responsible community members.

Noticing that neither the University nor the city have accurate numbers for the percentage of students living in Hamilton, we put a 1-question survey in our email to all MSU members, asking where they will be studying from during the Fall. We are still accepting responses, but so far, of the 787 students that responded, 30% of respondents indicated that they would be studying in Hamilton.

Board of Directors Turnover

One of the challenges our Board has faced this year is the turnover of Board members over the Summer. We have had the Vice-President (Administration) and Vice-President (Education) positions turn over, which has been an added challenge to the pandemic. While there has not been a VP by-election in recent MSU history, we have experienced one and are currently experiencing a second. It will take some time to get the new Board member up to speed after

they are elected, but we will be able to continue planning for the year and afterwards once there are four Board members again.

Sustainability Work

One of my larger priorities has been Sustainability work on campus and within the Hamilton community. I also want to preface that Sustainability is an umbrella term, and we have been focusing on UN Sustainable Development Goals so as not to limit our work to Environmental Sustainability. I have outlined some of my major efforts in this work below.

- Drafting edits for the McMaster Sustainability Advisory Council terms of reference that anchor the work of the council in Sustainable Development Goals.
- Formalizing the work of the SRA Sustainability Education Committee so that there is a structure that can continue for years, operating under the Governance & Education portfolio of the MSU.
- Pushing forward conversations regarding water access on campus and campus plastic bottle bans, as well as improved recycling plans.
 - Increasing water access on campus through residence bottle filling stations
 - Plastic water bottle ban plan for Spring 2021, multi-year plan to eventually ban all plastic bottles. This multi-year plan will include improvements to our waste collection methods on campus.
- Recently joined accepted to sit on McMaster's Okanagan Committee.
- Discussing city long-term sustainability plans with Maureen Wilson, modelling after a Harvard study that shows the city financial consequences of less sustainable city transit strategies.

Zoom Statement Update

After the Zoom statement was passed at the last SRA meeting in August, AVP UA Brittany Williams and I met with senior university administration to discuss next steps. We were able to emphasize the legitimate safety and security concerns from students with Zoom, and the University agreed to send a memo to all instructors that would outline safety considerations for different teaching and learning platforms. (Zoom was not one of the recommended platforms in this memo with regard to safety)

While instructors cannot be forced to use one platform or another, it is important that they consider safety concerns of various platforms before they decide which platform to use. There will also be more information from the University to students regarding online learning platform safety and security, which we expect to be shared through a diverse set of communication channels.

Defunding Police Systems

Defunding police systems has been an advocacy priority this year for the MSU at different levels of government. At the university level, we have continued to have conversations with members of senior administration regarding McMaster's campus safety plan. More specifically, I have had numerous conversations with Arig al Shaibah (AVP E&I) as well as David Farrar (President) regarding these concerns. We also have had conversations with leadership at the GSA and CUPE 3906 to ensure that our advocacy is as strong as possible. At the municipal level, outgoing Vice-President (Education) and I have had conversations with Maureen Wilson regarding the defunding of HPS, and we have also sent in a letter of delegation on behalf of the MSU to Mayor Eisenberg and members of City Council voicing our support for the defunding of HPS. We also hosted a panel event that included Leo Johnson, Maureen Wilson, Shawn Hercules, Fawziyah Isah and me to discuss BLM and Defunding Police Systems. At the provincial level, the MSU signed on to a letter to Premier Ford calling on the Government of Ontario to 1. allocate funding to community-led public safety measures to make non-criminal incidental response the default to non-violent community calls in Ontario, and 2. to fund upstream, community-driven programs to reduce the need for incident response services and build healthier, safer communities in the first place.

The MSU will continue to push for change at each level of government regarding security and police systems and I look forward to strategizing with the new MSU Vice-President (Education) on this priority. This advocacy will undoubtedly continue past my term as President, and so I will ensure that we are setting up Boards after us to continue this advocacy in a way that is effective and that includes the voices of students.

Undergraduates of Canadian Research Intensive Universities

I have been heavily involved in UCRU work this year, specifically working as the Social Media Coordinator and as a member of the Governance Committee. We have drastically improved our social media presence and are now on Facebook and LinkedIn as well as Instagram and Twitter. There has been great progress to formalize the organization this year and we are finished our preliminary rounds of editing for our terms of reference. This is a huge step as we must have this document in order to formalize the organization. Senior leadership at UCRU will be attending a future SRA meeting to provide information regarding the purpose of UCRU and the future direction of the organization. This will also be an opportunity for members of the assembly to ask questions regarding UCRU. Since UCRU is not formalized, there is no fee or official membership. In the future, if the MSU wishes to officially become a member of UCRU after it is formalized, there will be a vote by the assembly. UCRU has also submitted its 2021 Federal Budget Submission, with the main priorities listed below:

1. Make sections of the COVID-19 student support package permanent to ensure students transition smoothly into the workforce.
 - a. Invest \$1.8 billion dollars per year to implement a 2-year grace period on all federal student loans for new graduates.

- b. Increase the 2019 Canada Student Grants by \$1200 per student for the 2021 federal budget.
2. Make \$20 million available to support Student Work Placement Program opportunities for both international and domestic students.
3. Invest \$15 million per year to expand the Undergraduate Student Research Awards Program to 3,400 students annually in health, humanities, and social science research, with priority given to projects that fulfill a 'future global challenge' as identified by the SSHRC.
4. Invest an additional \$100 million in funding to support Indigenous reconciliation initiatives, especially on university campuses through the Indigenous Languages and Cultures Program.
5. Ensure high-speed internet is accessible for all Canadians by 2030 and reduce the costs associated with cell and wireless services by 25 percent.

Course Waitlists Concerns

There have been a number of concerns over recent years regarding course waitlists. Many McMaster courses do not have a waitlist option, meaning students do not know when a seat is open for courses. Not to mention, when there is a seat available for a course that a student is interested in, there is no way for that student to be notified of the seat availability. This is understandably frustrating for students and these concerns have been voiced to a number of senior student and university leaders over past years. While the course waitlist pilot initiative in 2018 was deemed unsuccessful, it is important to continue pushing for this priority so that it is fair for students to who wish to fill seats once they become available, and so that mental stress can be alleviated from students when they are waiting to see if a seat will open for a course they are interested in. I have had conversations with the Dean of Students as well as the Vice-Provost (Faculty) regarding these concerns, and I am working with the Vice-Provost (Faculty) to address this concern in our long-term teaching & learning strategy. Students should be able to access a course if they are eligible to take it, and so ideally in the future, there is no need for a waitlist option because there is room in the course for anyone who wishes to take it. In the meantime, I am also working with the MSU AVP UA to continue pushing for short-term solutions that include a waitlist option given that these waitlists are common at other universities already.

Clubs Accounting Improvements

Over the past couple of months, I have been working with our Vice-President (Finance), HR Generalist and Clubs Administrator to ensure that our clubs can efficiently transition to an internal accounting system for our finances. While there were some hiccups along the way, we have been largely successful with the transition.

Ombuds Work

I have been working diligently to get the updated terms of reference for Ombuds completed over the summer months. Pending approval from the University, they are complete and just requiring

review by legal teams at the University and MSU. After this step, the changes will be sent to Senate and SRA for approval so that an Advisory Committee can be in place for Spring 2021. Additionally, there have been many conversations regarding the addition of a staff member to the Ombuds office and the office space changes that would be needed to accommodate an additional staff member. The plans for office changes will be finalized later in September so that we can move forward with renovation plans to be approved at the next MUSC BOM meeting. The current timeline includes having the additional staff member hired, office renovations complete and Advisory Council ready to go for Spring 2021.

International Students Tuition Advocacy

There have been many conversations over the summer months regarding tuition concerns, specifically the increasing costs of tuition for international students. This is a complex issue that requires advocacy efforts at the faculty, university and provincial levels. In order to maximize our advocacy efforts, I have been working with the outgoing Vice-President (Education) and AVP UA to create a document that would provide context to these increasing costs of tuition. The document would also provide recommendations on how SRA can work with Faculty Societies so that all of our advocacy efforts are complimentary. While this is a long-term goal, it will be very helpful to have everyone aware of the background context for these tuition increases so that we can all work together to cap increases to international tuition. This document has already been circulated to all SRA members as well as Faculty Society Presidents. Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions regarding this document or about future advocacy strategies.

Closing

As always, if anyone has any questions or concerns with anything I have presented here or with anything related to MSU work outside of this document, please feel free to reach out to me. We are working our way through this year together and I am happy to help with any projects folks think will be beneficial to students during such a difficult year. Thanks again for all you are doing.

Warm regards,



Giancarlo Da-Ré
President & CEO McMaster Students Union
president@msu.mcmaster.ca