



REPORT

From the...

Office of the MSU President

TO:	Student Representative Assembly
FROM:	Giancarlo Da-Ré, President
SUBJECT:	SRA 20D Report
DATE:	July 12 th 2020

Dear Members of the Assembly,

It is with great pleasure that I submit my first SRA report to the assembly as an update of the work that I have done over the past two months. I feel it is not surprising for me to say that this continues to be a unique year of unexpected challenges. Our Board of Directors transitioned into a remote working environment, and many of the challenges we are working through were not on any of our platforms. As there is no book on how to lead an organization through a pandemic, we have been adapting and evolving as time goes on, and we are working with many partners and stakeholders across a network of University Students Unions to decide what the best steps are moving forward. That said, the intensity of the past two months has allowed us to dive into the details of how both the MSU and University operate as we navigate through the pandemic. This has been incredibly helpful to prepare us for the rest of the year as things continue to develop and change every day through University and government updates.

I have spent much of the past two months trying to gain a stronger sense of what the role of the President is and where I fit into different projects and networks. It is incredibly difficult to adequately describe the role of the President as it remains a fluid and malleable position, adapting to the changing needs of the student body and the organization. Over the last year, I have been able to meet with a number of stakeholders and collaborators to push forward ideas and projects, with some of them being implemented merely due to the nature of an online environment. I am learning though that many of these projects that I am interested in fall more directly into a Vice President portfolio, and so I have been working with the VPs to plan and strategize how our roles are integrated into different projects from idea to implementation. This role has an incredibly wide portfolio, and I find that every day I work to navigate a series of completely different projects or issues. I have also accepted that many people reach out to me in this role when they do not know who else to reach out to. This has also been helpful as it brings to my attention different projects happening around campus that I was previously unaware of. I am then able to connect individuals and groups together to minimize duplication of work and maximize results of project work.

This report outlines the progress I have made on my year plan as well as other challenges and successes that have arisen over the past two months. I tried to go into an appropriate amount of detail so that I am clear on the work I have done for accountability and transparency purposes, but I do not go into extreme detail as that would drastically increase the length of this report. Therefore, much of what I include in this report is related to bigger picture. Please feel free to reach out if any of you have questions or want to learn more about anything that I touch upon in this report, as I would be happy to explain in further detail.

I also want to thank everyone again for voting me into this position. I feel grateful every day for the opportunity to serve students in this position, and I will continue to hold myself accountable to McMaster students through my work. While my day-to-day work has begun to feel normal in a sense, I am constantly reminding myself that my influence on high-level decisions being made have large impacts on students, and that students are ultimately paying for the work that comes out of my portfolio.

PROGRESS ON YEAR PLAN

It has been an incredibly busy two months, and there has been lots of progress on my year plan and original platform. To put it concisely, ideas and projects have either been expedited or halted due to the pandemic. I find that many of these projects and ideas relate to conversations that have been put on the back burner for either the MSU or the University or both, and what might sometimes take a few years to happen has quickly happened over the past few months. It is a year of change, and I feel grateful to be a part of it. I have outlined below a number of these changes that I have been involved in.

PLATFORM UPDATES

AODA Compliant MSU Website

This project has going well! Jess has been the direct contact from the Board of Directors and Paula from The Underground has been the one directly communication with MPS on the progress of this project. The new website is projected to be completed and ready for the fall.

Course Accessibility

My platform point on course accessibility originally surrounded pushing for increased use of Echo360 in more courses, though this has evolved greatly after President Farrar announced that all courses would go online in late March. While McMaster has made the decision to deliver nearly all courses online for the Fall, there are still many concerns with regard to course accessibility; students have differential access to technology, are in different time zones, have differential access to internet and have privacy/accessibility concerns regarding the use of proctoring tools. I have been working with Fawziyah to voice these concerns to Kim Dej and am pushing for these concerns to be incorporated into the new Teaching & Learning strategy for the University, of which I sit on the Steering Committee.

MUSC Accessibility Audit

MUSC is independent from the rest of campus, and so when everything was pushed online, I had little concern for the progression of this project. I recently learned that we are much further along on this initiative than I or anyone in the MSU/MUSC administration believed; an accessibility audit of MUSC was actually completed late last year as part of a larger campus audit, though this was lost in communication between campus partners. I will be meeting with Anne Pottier and Lori Diamond in the near future to discuss high-level next steps for the campus and will be working with MUSC Board of Management for next steps with these recommendations.

Mental Health Support and SAP Improvements

As was originally anticipated, there are increasing concerns regarding the mental health of students during the Fall online term. Results from a recent EIO campus survey also support this. The Board has been planning how we can improve mental health support for students not just during the pandemic, but for the post-pandemic future as well. My direct contribution to these conversations has mainly been with Sean Van Koughnett - Dean of Students. Our team has also been working with We Speak Student to discuss improvements to our SAP for the coming year. These conversations are ongoing.

Rep Suit Rental Program

With everything pushing online, including welcome week, no rep suits will be purchased this year. This remains a goal for the future when rep suits are purchased again for an in person welcome week.

Financial Aid Support and Education

Financial aid has been an ongoing concern for our students, and this has only increased with the financial challenges of living during a pandemic. While there have been a number of initiatives to provide increased financial aid to students during the pandemic, there are students who fall in the gaps and the financial aid is not adequate for others. The federal Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB), will only provide support in the short-term (May-August 2020), and we have not seen any improvements to OSAP. Federal and provincial financial aid support for students in PSE remains a top priority, and we will be advocating for the extension of CESB. Our Board has also been pushing for reductions in student fees wherever possible. While tuition has unfortunately remained the same for domestic students, and increased for the vast majority of international students, we have spent a great deal of time focusing on fee reductions. We are working with the Communications team to deliver centralized messaging that includes fee reduction information for students. This will include changes to MSU fee, ancillary fees and HSR.

Our board will also be reviewing the Compulsory Ancillary Fee (CAF) agreement that we have with the University and are looking to better utilize the Student Services Advisory Committee (SSAC) subcommittees.

Phase Out of Plastic Water Bottles

This has been something I have spent a great deal of time on, and which I have voiced as a priority to a number of individuals within the University, including President Farrar. There are two main reasons why the University is hesitant to move quickly on this; the first being that there is not currently a strong business plan for the University to consider with the financial implications of banning water bottle sales on campus. The second is that there are concerns that students will begin purchasing more sugary drinks if water bottles are not available for purchase, which would be an unhealthy alternative and against the Brighter World goals. I have been in communications with the Director of Hospitality Services at Trent and representatives from the Sustainability Office at Queens, neither of whom mentioned this as an issue on their campuses. That said, the University would like stronger research on the topic before moving forward, which I have said I will assist in gathering. I have also pushed for this to be considered a water access issue more so than a sustainability issue; if this was a conversation about sustainability and plastic reduction, we should remove all plastic bottles including sugary drinks and pops from all locations on campus. Bottle filling stations do not currently exist in all residences, and there are a number of locations on campus that lack adequate water bottle filling stations and fountains. There are currently plans to put bottle-filling stations in residences over the summer and I will be following up on this progress with HCS & Facility Services. I am also hoping that the University can use this time during the pandemic to create a strong business plan to present to upper administration along with previously mentioned research, so that we can aim for serious movement over the next year.

For-Here Mugs in The Grind

While these mugs have been ordered, due to the constraints of the pandemic we will be unable to implement the use of these mugs until campus reopens.

Streamlining Waste Signage & Compost Bin Increases

Due to the University's response to the pandemic, there has been a reduction in the number of green bins on campus for the Fall term. I will be working with campus partners to improve signage and compost bin access as discussions begin for when campus will reopen.

\$1 Select Hot Beverage Initiative

Due to the pandemic, there will be changes to the operations of Union Market and students will not be able to use reusable cups and mugs. This pilot initiative has been put on hold until the future when it is safe to implement.

International Student Support

International students face very unique challenges, whether that be related to working opportunities, access to healthcare, tuition increases or any other range of barriers. These barriers have only increased due to the pandemic, and international student support has been identified as a priority for our advocacy, and the Board is working with SSC to plan how we can improve our international student support during the pandemic. It has been frustrating to see that international student tuition continues to increase even during the pandemic, and I hope to work with the SRA to improve our advocacy to faculty departments where those decisions

are made to increase tuition. This would supplement current OUSA advocacy efforts. I have also been collecting research with the help of our Executive Assistant on different models for international student advisory committees at other universities. (It seems this is not a committee many universities currently have) I have begun writing the terms of reference for this committee and am working with Ana Pereira from SSC on the project.

Consent Culture Module

With the shift to an online world, many trainings have also been transitioned to be delivered online, making this platform point quite timely. I have met with EIO multiple times and they have shown interest in developing a module that specifically identifies resources for survivors, support networks and paths for reporting.

MSU Internal Document Updates

There are still a number of MSU documents that are out of date and requiring of updates and revisions. Much of this work falls within the portfolio of the AVP Internal Governance, and so I am working with Michelle and Anika to see the progression of this as the new MSU website is developed for Fall delivery.

Board of Directors Social Media Presence

This platform point has evolved from increased Board of Directors online presence to increased communication with students. Our communications team has been fantastic at answering questions during the pandemic, and the Board has been working with the communications team to deliver organizational-relevant information to students. We will be delivering more content throughout the summer as conversations, advocacy initiatives and projects develop that we have heard students voicing concerns towards. There are still plans to increase the social media presence of the Board of Directors for the academic school year.

Financial Stability Planning of the MSU

As has been stated many times, we are currently going through quite a unique period of time, and the Board has frequent conversations regarding the financial state of the MSU. We will have more information about how SCI impacted this past year once the results of the audit are released. With everything moving online, both our revenue and costs are greatly decreased. Jess has been fantastic in working with our business units to plan for adapted delivery over the coming year.

INITIAL MEETINGS

In order to save both time and page count, I have only outlined the major stakeholders I have been meeting with and the high-level topics of those conversations.

Arig al Shaibah – AVP Equity & Inclusion

Our team has met with EIO to discuss a number of topics, including the EDI strategy, equitable hiring guidelines and best practices, campus accessibility improvement plans, changes to the SVPR office and trainings.

Chris Robert – Director of Hospitality Services

I met with Chris to discuss status of a plastic bottle ban, food accessibility on campus, sustainable products in hospitality sectors and plans for re-opening on campus.

Debbie Martin – AVP Facilities

Debbie has a very wide portfolio. We have had many discussions mainly through the Return-To-Work committee which meets twice weekly. Outside of those meetings, we have talked about campus construction projects, future of the Sustainability Council, recycling and composting on campus, safety of students on campus during the pandemic, and future residence construction plans.

Sean – Dean of Students

We meet between 1-4 times a week through either 1 on 1s or through committees that we both sit on. Sean and I have had many discussions surrounding ancillary fees, tuition, student code of conduct in an online space, athletics and recreation, mental health resources and residence plans. Sean is a strong supporter of reducing the density of people on campus as much as possible, as there is fear of a second wave of cases in the Fall.

David Farrar - President

David and I mainly communicate through email but have been able to connect on a few 1-on-1 calls. In these conversations we have discussed a number of student concerns including security services and financial aid. David is aware of these concerns, and we will continue discussions as we find time to connect throughout the year. We have also discussed the future of sustainability on campus; David is a strong supporter of climate action and is planning a sustainability strategy with a number of projects, initiatives and targets over the coming years.

Gayleen – AVP & CTO

Our conversations have mainly surrounded campus IT projects, the shift to online learning, the O365 Steering Committee which we both sit on, the decommissioning of the Wi-Fi network MacSecure and improving campus communication strategies for future advancement of technology. Gayleen and I also filmed a short video to get out a number of key messages out to students related to changes and advancement of technology on campus.

Kim Dej – Vice-Provost (Faculty)

Kim has been fantastic to work with. We mainly work together through the Teaching & Learning Strategy Steering Committee which I sit on, which Kim and Lori Goff have been spearheading. There are a number of improvements to campus teaching and learning that come up in these conversations and it I am excited to see the roll out of the strategy later in the Fall. We also discuss the plans for course delivery in the fall, including campus strategies for any courses that must be delivered in person and how to support students through the change. I have also been pushing for increased MSAFs for students in the fall, and these conversations are ongoing.

Rosanne Kent – Director of SWC

We have met with the team to discuss key objectives for the year and areas of collaboration. This includes support for student leaders who have roles that support a number of other student leaders, international student support and an integrated strategy for resources provided by SWC and by our SAP to students. We also have begun discussions surrounding SWC opening in the Fall and options for students looking to access healthcare.

Gina Robertson – Director of SSC

We have had great conversations so far with the team at SSC. The conversations that I have been a part of mainly involve international student support and addressing current gaps. These conversations will evolve as we learn about these gaps through student surveys being released in the summer.

Anne Pottier – University Librarian

Anne and I have been having conversations for roughly a year now regarding library projects, wayfinding and accessibility on campus. Current discussions mainly involve next steps from recommendations outlined in the latest campus accessibility audit, library initiatives and plans for opening, course accessibility and closed captioning improvements. Anne will be retiring at the end of the year and she will be greatly missed from the campus community.

Lori Diamond – Manager of MUSC

Lori and I have had great conversations surrounding MUSC plans for the fall, plans for clubspace, improvements to booking systems, MUSC 3rd floor feasibility study to be done this year and Ombuds.

Shawn Hercules – GSA President

Shawn and I have connected mainly to discuss how we can support each other throughout the year. We are facing some similar challenges and it will be helpful to continue our conversations. We also discussed GSA/MSU check-in meetings.

Campus Re-opening

This has been an interesting and evolving project that includes representatives from every corner of campus. I mentioned earlier that I sit on the Return-To-Work committee which is chaired by Debbie Martin and Wanda McKenna; this is where the majority of this work is channeled through. I have also set up biweekly meetings for all the Presidents from OUSA Students Unions, as well as a couple others that I meet with 1 on 1. These have been very helpful as we face many of the same issues from facilitating office dynamics in an online space to bus passes and financial aid support for students. There is always lots to talk about in these update meetings and we have started a pretty strong network that I look forward to working with as the year evolves. Much of the MSU re-opening has involved conversations with other Board members and our GM; the MSU has never had to navigate this problem before, but I am confident in the direction we are taking as an organization.

Meetings & Committees

I sit on and chair far too many meetings to discuss in detail in this report, but I will briefly touch on them. I chair Executive Board meetings (biweekly), MSU Inc. & CFMU Inc. (as needed), MSU BoD (weekly) & CFMU BoD (monthly), Presidents Council meetings and MUSC Board of Management (quarterly) meetings. The first Presidents Council meeting was incredibly helpful to share information about what is happening with campus as everyone navigates through the pandemic. The second Presidents Council meeting is being scheduled for mid-August where I will have more information for everyone surrounding Fall university operations.

Aside from these meetings, I was the guest speaker at the latest University Advancement all-staff meeting which had roughly 100 campus stakeholders. I was able to present MSU priorities for the year at this meeting and connect with a number of stakeholders who I look forward to working with throughout the year. I have also attended 3 Senate meetings and 1 Board of Governors meetings. These are very helpful to understand how the University operates and some of the major conversations happening at the highest level for the University. Aside from this, I have standing meetings for UCRU Board, UCRU Governance Committee, EDI Strategy Steering Committee, T&L Strategy Steering Committee, Wireless O365 Steering Committee, Closed Captioning Steering Committee, Committee on Multi-Modal Transportation for Healthy Communities, Student Services Advisory Committee & Presidents Advisory Committee on Community Relations (PACCR). There are also standing meetings for ad-hoc problems like HSR negotiations, Clubs Department support and organizational review recommendations planning.

Please feel free to reach out if anyone has questions about specific committees or meetings that I chair or sit on. I would be happy to provide more information!

Advocacy

This is mainly the portfolio of the VP Education, but I wanted to briefly touch on some of advocacy work I have been directly involved in. The first is the motion I moved which was passed with strong support by SRA at the June 14th meeting surrounding Security Services stance. Our Board is pushing forward these conversations with our University partners including the AVP Equity & Inclusion. I have also brought these concerns directly to David Farrar. We will firmly hold this stance throughout the year, and this will be reflected in our advocacy strategies and initiatives. I also have been working closely with Fawziyah on our advocacy priorities for the year, which are outlined in our year plans. With regard to provincial and federal advocacy, I attended the OUSA Welcome Conference and ran for the UCRU Vice-Chair position. While I was not elected for the UCRU position, I have already been pushing forward all of the platform points which I ran on, including student support during COVID-19, public perception, policy bank creation and organizational infrastructure of UCRU. I will be working to achieve these goals through my seats on the Board and Governance Committee as well as through my role as the social media coordinator for the organization.

Sustainability Progress

A large shared priority for the Board this year has been sustainability work. I have been working with Board members and campus partners to advance lots of work related to sustainability on

campus. For information related to campus water bottle ban project, see page 4. One of the first things I did related to Sustainability was changing the Operating Policy for the MSU Sustainability Education Committee. These changes are outlined in detail in my June 14th SRA memo and motion, but feel free to reach out if anyone has questions about this. I organized the first meeting and look forward to the work and research that comes out of this committee with the improvements to the operating policy. I have also been working quite closely with the Academic Sustainability Programs Office on a number of potential projects, and we have frequent conversations about the progression of campus sustainability work. I also sit on the Sustainability Council for the University; one of my summer goals for the council is ensuring there is a completed term of reference for the Fall that pushes our mandate towards SDG-relevant work. Despite the fact that the Council is almost a year old, this has not been finalized and I think this will greatly benefit the Council in the future.

One of my larger sustainability goals surrounds building infrastructure for students to get involved in sustainability conversations and work on campus. There are a lot of students who are incredibly passionate about sustainability work on campus, but few know who to ask questions to or where to find relevant information. (One of the issues is that we do not have a McMaster Sustainability Office – this is something I am speaking to President Farrar about) I am hoping that we will see strong progress in this over the coming year.

UPCOMING EVENTS, PROJECTS & ACTIVITIES

Now that I have spent two months really understanding how things work, I am looking forward to diving into a number of projects. A few are listed below, and many more are listed in my year plan.

Clubs Changes

One of the projects I am currently working on relates to supporting our Clubs department as they write the Clubs Manual and prepare for the centralized transitioning of Clubs bank accounts to the MSU Accounting Department. They will also be hiring an Assistant Clubs Administrator shortly to manage the Clubs Advisory Council. Jenna has been a star through all of this.

MSU Info Campaign

I have also been working with Communications team on an MSU Information Campaign to help students understand what the MSU is and how it operates. This is scheduled for release sometime between late August and early September.

Pantry Diaries

Another video project I am working on is related to food with the SSC and Hospitality Services called the Pantry Diaries - the project is developing, and we are hoping for delivery in September.

Abolition of Police Systems Panel Discussion

I am working with Fawziyah to plan a panel discussion in July called “*The Time is Now: Abolition and Defunding of Police Systems*”. I am looking forward to this panel discussion!

General Assembly

I have been having conversations with Rhea, the MSU Speaker, on plans and options for the General Assembly. There are large concerns for what an online General Assembly would look like, and we are continuing conversations to determine the best possible solution so that we are remaining accountable to students while following the constitution.

Ombuds

Work on Ombuds has continued for many years now. I have been in communication with Ombudspersons from across the country with regard to advisory committee terms of reference, and I have been writing many drafts for the McMaster Ombuds Advisory Committee. I am also working with the University Secretariat and Ombudsperson to hire an Executive Assistant role, which requires a shift in the location of the Ombuds office. We have had many discussions about this and I look forward to seeing movement over the next 6 months. It may be ambitious, but we are hoping to make any necessary MUSC renovations for space improvements over the Fall and to hire the assistant position in January 2021.

Organizational Review Implementation of Recommendations

Our board has had many discussions on the recommendations that came out of the organizational review last year. We are looking forward to following through on a plan for this year that will set up the next Board to continue implementing recommendations. We have last year’s Board to thank, as they set all of the groundwork for the much-needed changes outlined in the recommendations. A high-level overview of the recommendations from this report are available on the MSU website.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

The two largest challenges I have faced are time and online spaces. There are so many impromptu meetings, phone calls, emails and messages in the day that it is difficult to keep up with everything. It is even harder to take time for my own mental health and this is something I am still figuring out. I also try to respond to as many emails as possible, but sometimes this is not possible as my days are drowned with meetings and phone calls for time-sensitive problems. For online spaces, I have been trying to create a healthy working environment for all MSU staff, including Board members, though this can be difficult with the amount of video calls we have every day. (I average between 25-30 a week) It has definitely been a challenge to build a healthy community environment online, but we are constantly looking to identify new ways to improve the experience for our staff. This includes assisting full time staff with resources for work-from-home ergonomic improvements and following the University’s lead in extending the Canada Day holiday by two days. Our staff have been working incredibly hard through the pandemic, and it can be difficult to share gratitude with everyone in an online setting. I look forward to hopefully working with everyone in an in-person space before the end of my term.

Thank you for reading through this report, and I want to encourage anyone who has questions related to my work to reach out. I would be happy to provide further information on specific themes of my work and answer any questions folks have! I feel incredibly grateful every day to hold this position, and I will continue to hold myself accountable to the students who voted me into this position.

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Da-Ré', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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