|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| MSU logo.jpg. | REPORT*From the…*Office of the MSU President |
| TO: | Student Representative Assembly |
| FROM: | Giancarlo Da-Ré, President |
| SUBJECT: | SRA 20N President Report |
| DATE: | February 7th 2021 |

Dear Members of the Assembly,

It is hard to believe we are already in February and there are less than three months left in my term as President. In the months since my last report, a lot has happened—not just in the office of the MSU President, but around the world. We all witnessed the fragility of democracy on Capitol Hill, only to be reminded of the resiliency of democracy two weeks later at the Presidential inauguration. I want to start this report by sharing a poem that has inspired me not just to be better in this job for the MSU, but to be better as a citizen and community member. The poem is by 22-year-old Amanda Gorman, our youngest inaugural poet, titled “The Hill We Climb”. The poem, performed at the Biden inauguration on January 20th, was something we all needed to hear.

*“When day comes we ask ourselves,  
where can we find light in this never-ending shade?  
The loss we carry,  
a sea we must wade.  
We've braved the belly of the beast,  
We've learned that quiet isn't always peace,  
and the norms and notions  
of what just is  
isn't always just-ice.  
And yet the dawn is ours  
before we knew it.  
Somehow we do it.  
Somehow we've weathered and witnessed  
a nation that isn't broken,  
but simply unfinished.  
We the successors of a country and a time  
where a skinny Black girl  
descended from slaves and raised by a single mother  
can dream of becoming president  
only to find herself reciting for one.  
And yes we are far from polished.  
Far from pristine.  
But that doesn't mean we are  
striving to form a union that is perfect.  
We are striving to forge a union with purpose,  
to compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and  
conditions of man.  
And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us,  
but what stands before us.  
We close the divide because we know, to put our future first,  
we must first put our differences aside.  
We lay down our arms  
so we can reach out our arms  
to one another.  
We seek harm to none and harmony for all.  
Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true,  
that even as we grieved, we grew,  
that even as we hurt, we hoped,  
that even as we tired, we tried,  
that we'll forever be tied together, victorious.  
Not because we will never again know defeat,  
but because we will never again sow division.  
Scripture tells us to envision  
that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree  
and no one shall make them afraid.  
If we're to live up to our own time,  
then victory won't lie in the blade.  
But in all the bridges we've made,  
that is the promise to glade,  
the hill we climb.  
If only we dare.  
It's because being American is more than a pride we inherit,  
it's the past we step into  
and how we repair it.  
We've seen a force that would shatter our nation  
rather than share it.  
Would destroy our country if it meant delaying democracy.  
And this effort very nearly succeeded.  
But while democracy can be periodically delayed,  
it can never be permanently defeated.  
In this truth,  
in this faith we trust.  
For while we have our eyes on the future,  
history has its eyes on us.  
This is the era of just redemption  
we feared at its inception.  
We did not feel prepared to be the heirs  
of such a terrifying hour  
but within it we found the power  
to author a new chapter.  
To offer hope and laughter to ourselves.  
So while once we asked,  
how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe?  
Now we assert,  
How could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?  
We will not march back to what was,  
but move to what shall be.  
A country that is bruised but whole,  
benevolent but bold,  
fierce and free.  
We will not be turned around  
or interrupted by intimidation,  
because we know our inaction and inertia  
will be the inheritance of the next generation.  
Our blunders become their burdens.  
But one thing is certain,  
If we merge mercy with might,  
and might with right,  
then love becomes our legacy,  
and change our children's birthright.  
So let us leave behind a country  
better than the one we were left with.  
Every breath from my bronze-pounded chest,  
we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one.  
We will rise from the gold-limbed hills of the west.  
We will rise from the windswept northeast,  
where our forefathers first realized revolution.  
We will rise from the lake-rimmed cities of the midwestern states.  
We will rise from the sunbaked south.  
We will rebuild, reconcile and recover.  
And every known nook of our nation and  
every corner called our country,  
our people diverse and beautiful will emerge,  
battered and beautiful.  
When day comes we step out of the shade,  
aflame and unafraid,  
the new dawn blooms as we free it.  
For there is always light,  
if only we're brave enough to see it.  
If only we're brave enough to be it.”*

I share this poem here, to bring our work into perspective. While it can feel like our community has been fractured in a number of ways, our resiliency will always prevail. During our darkest times, we have held onto hope. We all have the same goal of creating a more sustainable and equitable future, and I am grateful to be a part of a community where everyone has continued to do their part, big and small, to ensure we continue on that path forward. With that, I have shared below a noteworthy update on my work, and some of my plans before I leave.

In order, these are the themes I have chosen to report on.

1. President-Elect Acclamation
2. Campus Safety Work
3. International Student Task Force
4. General Assembly
5. Climate Emergency Polling
6. Sustainability Policy
7. Sustainability Advisory Committee
8. McMaster Sustainability End of Year Report
9. The Lotus Initiative
10. Clubs Progress
11. Ombuds Update
12. Accessible Academics

**President-Elect Acclamation**

For the first time in roughly 20 years, the MSU President-elect was acclaimed. Bylaw 7/A is quite clear that this is the correct direction to take when there is only one candidate. Naturally, many students felt frustrated by this outcome. It is traditional for students to have time to get to know candidates—their personalities, priorities, and vision—before a vote and release of the results. This year, that didn’t happen. There was no time period between the end of the nomination period and the release of results. The frustration we have seen is understandable, and I believe the best path forward is to have the Internal Governance committee conduct research into the bylaw and present recommendations to SRA. I look forward to being a part of those discussions before the end of my term.

All that said, I have already begun the transition process with Denver, and I look forward to assisting in his preparation prior to taking office on May 1st.

**Campus Safety Work**

I am proud to say that our advocacy on this front has been consistent over the past nine months. We have pivoted and adapted throughout the year, and we continue to put pressure on the university to improve the campus safety model, while simultaneously improving the data collection mechanisms present on campus. Specifically, I have continued to push the McMaster President to begin his process of a review of the security needs of the campus community, to spotlight the gaps students have been voicing for years.

At the time this report was submitted, the EIO campus climate survey has not yet been released. Along with the Vice-President (Education) and AVP (UA), I have been involved in the process of the creation of this survey which will capture the experiences of students with various campus services, and the difference of these experiences between different demographic populations. This will be a major step forward in determining which services and departments on our campus need to be further investigated. The MSU will be highly engaged in the promotion of this survey, and we hope to have a strong number of responses from undergraduates. As we near the end of the term, our Education team, under the leadership of Ryan, is planning for how we can best set up the next MSU team to continue this work in stride.

I want to thank all of the students and community members who have advocated for a future campus that is safer for everyone, and I look forward to seeing the developments of this advocacy over the next few years.

**International Student Task Force**

We began recruitment for the International Student Task Force in mid-January. While we have pushed promotions through various channels, clubs, and SSC networks, there has so far been low interest. In the meantime, I will be working with the SSC to begin the process of writing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the creation of an international student advisory committee that will exist long-term. I hope to have this complete before the end of my term.

**General Assembly**

Planning for the general assembly has sparked great creativity from members, and it has been exciting to be a part of this process during an online year. That said, it has not been without it’s hiccups—we have had long conversations about the right platform to use, and verification processes of student participants. Briefly, here are the concerns about the three top platform options.

MS Live:

* No opportunity for audience to engage beyond simply viewing content shared by the host. This is not satisfactory for a meeting when audience members should be able to speak to a motion if they so choose.

MS Teams:

* Capacity is only 300 people which is below quorum, which is 3% of MSU membership.

Zoom:

* SRA took a stance against the use of Zoom a few months ago.

Since we should always plan to hit quorum, this only leaves us with the Zoom platform. I will be asking SRA if this is the direction they wish to proceed, considering the stance they recently took against it.

**Climate Emergency Polling**

One of my projects this year has been a national poll of undergraduates to gauge their opinions on the climate emergency and the prospect of a Green New Deal. I have been working primarily with UCRU on this project. The survey was modeled after a 2019 national poll from Abacus by Seth Klein to see how Canadians feel about climate change and the prospect of a GND. This undergraduate audience version will be compared to the national poll by Abacus to understand where students fit among those national views. This survey has been created via Qualtrics, with an English and French version. Promotional materials and example timelines for students unions across Canada have all been prepared, and I the survey has officially launched. (can be found on across UCRU socials) This survey information will provide both the MSU and UCRU with data to support our climate justice advocacy efforts now and in the future. We will also gain province-specific data, which will be interesting when comparing provinces that are more progressive like BC with provinces that depend more on fossil fuels like Alberta. This is an urgent matter of national security, and it is necessary that we mobilize quickly, and all do our part.

**Sustainability Policy**

I have been working on a Sustainability Policy with our AVP Internal Governance, Michelle Brown, for the past couple of months. We have decided to split this work into two policies and hope to introduce them to the SRA before the end of my term. The final steps are consultations with staff members and campus stakeholders to ensure everyone is in agreement and on board with the language in the policy. This project has had two purposes: to combine outdated policies and to root MSU work in Sustainable Development Goals. This is only the first step towards aligning MSU work with SDGs, and we will need to continue that work over the next few years. I look forward to seeing the completion of this project, and the next steps taken by my successor to align the MSU with SDGs.

**Sustainability Advisory Committee**

While the Sustainability Advisory Committee of the university has at times felt directionless, I am excited to see the work of the committee over the next year. I have been pushing for the committee to focus on the three typical Rs, plus a fourth: research. One of the challenges has been that everyone is waiting to learn more about David’s vision as it relates to sustainability to ensure our work is in line with it. I have also noticed that we usually have similar membership across a number of task forces, steering committees, and advisory councils, and I think it would be beneficial to have more faculty members and students at the table. This would be helpful in breaking up what can feel like byzantine procedural barriers, and I hope the university accepts my suggestions to improve efficiency of our work.

It has always been a goal of mine to try and ban plastic bottles from campus. Unfortunately, this will not happen before I am gone, for a variety of reasons. I won’t list them all here, but I will share what the plan is instead. Coke has offered to work with our campus to improve our waste reduction sustainability strategies, and the sustainability advisory committee has been facilitating those conversations. My suggestions were that Coke, with their net worth of $80.83 billion, help us in two main areas: promotions and research. When we have larger social media campaigns over the next year and after, we will need to reach students where they spend the most time: social media. Instagram and Facebook ads are pretty cheap, and I suggest we get Coke to put money into those ads to make sure we are reaching as many students as possible. With regard to research, I think it would be most productive to have Coke pay for our research costs, rather than conduct research for us. This would allow more students to engage in research efforts, support faculty who are doing plastic-related research, and ensure we are able to hire consultants and pay for platforms like Qualtrics when we need to.

**McMaster Sustainability End-Of-Year Report**

I am also on a committee to develop the end-of-year campus sustainability report. This is a massive project, and the university has hired an independent consulting team to assist with the process. I have been pushing for this report to include goals of the campus community and metrics to achieve those goals. I think this will be tremendously helpful to provide direction for all the passionate students who want to engage in climate justice on campus. There isn’t any direction or clear goals that students can work towards that will advance our campus community in the fight against the climate crisis. I hope this report is one way we can improve that.

**The Lotus Initiative**

As a preamble, I felt it necessary to explain the purpose behind the name of this project. The Lotus flower blossoms most beautifully from the thickest mud, and as we look towards a brighter future, this project will hopefully provide great benefit to the campus community during a year of tribulations. It is to show that our campus community too, can find its greatest forward progression during times when we are tested the most. This is reflected in Amanda’s poem:

*“Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true,  
that even as we grieved, we grew,  
that even as we hurt, we hoped,  
that even as we tired, we tried,  
that we'll forever be tied together, victorious.  
Not because we will never again know defeat,  
but because we will never again sow division.”*

It gives me great pleasure to report on this project which has been incredibly important to me over the past few months. I noticed a few months ago that the MSU does not consistently produce the kind of long-term plan document every three or so years that we see from other students’ unions. (USC, WUSA, Laurier, UTSU are examples) Initial barriers to a project like this are threefold: 1. there is no outlined process for this so I would have to make one, 2. I don’t have time to do this WELL before I leave, and 3. there is a very fine line between providing recommendations of an organizational direction and telling the Boards after me what to do. This led me with the only option I have consistently been presented with during my term: pivot.

Naturally, I expanded the scope of the project to include all of campus student leadership, and along with the Board, designed a process that fits within the timeframe I have before I leave. I want to outline that process here so that it is documented for future teams to improve upon.

1. First, the Board made a list of student priorities for us to improve upon as a campus community.
2. Then, we developed a series of questions for each theme that would help us gain student insight on those priorities.
3. MacPherson Institute was incredibly kind to look over our questions and provide inciteful feedback. MacPherson also trained Ryan and I on how to conduct focus groups where we would facilitate conversations around those questions and themes.
   1. One obstacle we ran into was having too many questions and themes to discuss with 8-12 people within a two-hour duration. The two options this left us with was to either combine themes or ask focus group teams in advance to choose the top six themes they would like to use the focus group to discuss.
   2. I felt that grouping together major student priorities together would be a disservice to the impacts of those concerns on students, and whether that is the right decision or not to make, we have decided to proceed in this direction.
4. We will be conducting focus groups for each faculty during the month of February (Faculty Society members and SRA in the same focus group. (8-12 participants per group)
   1. The decision of who would attend was left up to each Faculty Society President, to ensure there would be a diverse range of perspectives at the table.
   2. We also plan to conduct this focus group with FYC members, and hopefully the International Student Task Force.
5. After the focus groups are completed by the end of February, we will analyze the information collected and turn it into a single document (roughly two pages) that will outline the major priorities of students, and some suggestions as to how we as a campus community can advance those priorities.

As I submit this document, we have just completed 3a of the above procedure. I want to be clear: I understand this process is not perfect. We are limited by the experiences and views of the individuals in these focus groups, and I recognize the hypocrisy of speaking to elected leaders about issues such as underrepresentation. This project will need to be improved in the future, and I suggest there be a multi-phased approach, with multiple forms of engagement. (town halls, surveys, focus groups) While there are some real limits to what we can do with this information, this Board felt it important to move forward with this pilot and start the work for future teams.

We originally wanted to have a campus-wide survey that would document the general student thoughts on these priorities, and then supplement that work with focus groups of elected leaders. We unfortunately do not have time to do that, and the next best option is to work with the student leaders who have been elected to represent various constituencies across campus.

There are **two key goals** to come about from this project. They are as follows:

1. Have a document that outlines which priorities our campus community should focus on. This is critical for the work of the MSU, since our purpose is to serve the changing needs of students. We have to have a way to find out what those changing needs are, and this document will serve that purpose. There will be some suggestions as how to how to improve on those priorities, but there won’t be promises that restrict the work of future teams. It will also ensure that all student leaders are able to work on the same priorities. When faculty societies, SRA, AVPs, VPs, and the President are all working on the same goals, chances are, we’re going to make more progress.
2. Have a document that new student leaders can look to when they are thinking about what how they can best serve the needs of the campus community. One barrier to student engagement in elections is that students don’t know what to put on a platform. This document serves that purpose, and can be helpful for all students, regardless of the position they are trying to be elected or hired for.

I look forward to reporting on the progress and hopeful completion of this project in my end-of-year report to SRA.

**Clubs Progress**

Our Clubs department have been rock stars this year—dodging punches and adapting during some of the largest departmental changes ever conducted. The gaps in these changes were clearly voiced by students, and we believe we have a solution that will fill of those gaps. I will not present recommendations yet as they are not finalized, but they will address both concerns related to membership minimums and membership fees. I am very proud of this clubs department for working through these problems with such stride, and for pushing forward to ensure we are supporting students the best way we know how. These changes will reflect exactly why the MSU continues to be a nation-leading clubs department. I look forward to the recommendations coming to SRA and for the discussion that it will no doubt launch. Thank you to all of the students who have voiced concerns. We have been listening.

**Ombuds Update**

Ombuds work has slowed down a little bit, not because we have been slacking, but because there isn’t a whole lot to do at the moment. After the new Terms of Reference that I authored were passed through Board of Governors, the Advisory Committee was created, and the first meetings are to happen during this Winter Term. The next steps that need to be completed for the Ombuds office are the executive assistant hire and office space changes. In order to avoid onboarding in a remote environment, the plan is to wait before we hire the executive assistant until there is a clear return to campus plan. Switching and trading of offices around campus for various departments also seem to never end, and so we have decided to halt on any final decisions for what will happen to the Ombuds office space until we are closer to the hire of that additional staff member. These will likely be two projects that my successor will have to work on in the Summer.

**Accessible Academics**

Lastly, I wanted to provide an update on Accessible Academics. Ryan, Brittany and I have been working non-stop to keep up with all the projects going on and to make sure the university is putting the needs of students first in all of these decisions. There are a lot of small projects happening so I will just be listing them in point form:

* Digital Learning Strategy to be developed that will guide the future of McMaster hybrid-model teaching and learning
  + A digital technology accessibility strategy will have to be created in tandem to ensure we are aligning all of these new efforts and projects with AODA standards
* There has been lots of progress to improve course feedback mechanisms (the end of the course surveys that professors say if 80% of the class fills it out everyone gets a 1% boost)
  + I was on a committee last year that looked at all of the problems and biases with the old process, and it is almost universally accepted that this process was useless
  + There is a university policy that says all of these feedback surveys has to include one specific question, and that those results must be published for all students to see
  + Not only do professors not follow this policy, but I also don’t think many of them know it exists
  + Rather than rescind the policy, the plan is to change it into something more productive, but still keep the spirit of transparency that should have been present all these years
  + We have also been pushing for mid-term feedback from students for instructors so that feedback can be implemented immediately and before the term is over
    - MacPherson sometimes did this for classes which was amazing, but it involved actually coming into the class and facilitating it in person which was very resource-intensive and not a sustainable model for all of campus
  + All this to say there is a MacPherson fellow that will be working on all of this during the Winter term, and we are looking forward to working with them!
* There was recently a great presentation at the McMaster Accessibility Council to explain how we can apply AODA standards to teaching and learning! While it looked a bit intimidating at first, it is incredibly exciting, and seems that we already have the mechanisms in place that will allow us to get a head start on this work.
* The T&L action plans for each Faculty are being developed, and I am still pushing for faculty society consultations to be prioritized so that the student voice is clearly reflected in these new directions.
* Conversations are ongoing for the future of proctoring software on campus. It seems there will be a committee created and opportunities for student feedback via focus groups before university decisions are made about whether to cancel or extend the contract. (the current 1-year contract ends in August 2021)

That is pretty much everything for now! Inevitably, I am sure things will come up between now and the end of the year, and those updates will be documented in my end of year report. I want to thank all of my supporters who have stood by me this year, and for the McMaster community, who has held onto the hope of a more sustainable and equitable future.

I promise to finish strong in this position, and I can only hope that my work will be sufficient-enough foundation for the incredible leaders to come next. If you’ve made it through this report, I’m talking about you.

Warm regards,



Giancarlo Da-Ré

President & CEO McMaster Students Union

president@msu.mcmaster.ca