

Report of the Advocacy Committee 2013-14

The Advocacy Committee of the MRFA has met on at least on a monthly basis throughout the year in order to implement the Political Activity Policy of the Association. As it was only our second year of operations, we began the year by discussing our activities from the previous year, our priorities for the upcoming year, and possible ways to best distribute tasks amongst the members of the committee. We feel it is important to work in consensus and equity. Roberta Lexier acted as the official chair of the committee, but only to ease communications with the MRFA Executive and the membership. Each of the committee members took turns chairing the committee, compiling meeting agenda and completing the meeting minutes.

Listed below are some of our key accomplishments for this year:

1. In September, committee members worked with students to organize a protest rally timed to coincide with the visit of then-Premier Allison Redford and Minister of Innovation and Advanced Education Thomas Lukaszuk. In early September 2013, we learned that Premier Redford was going to visit MRU on September 25. Since the Premier had not delivered on her election promises to increase funding for post-secondary education in Alberta, and since her visit was being stage-managed so that dissenting voices would not be heard, we decided to organize a rally to ensure our displeasure with her government's education policies was made known to her and to the general public. The Premier hastily canceled her appearance, claiming she had a scheduling conflict. About 100 students and faculty assembled near the East Gate Lawn on September 25, to show that even though the Premier did not wish to meet those affected by her policies, we remained outraged by cancellation of several programs at MRU and the cutting of dozens of jobs. We designed and distributed posters and placards, continued the red felt campaign from the previous year, and disseminated information to MRU members. We ensured a media presence from several stations and were interviewed on the local news (See Appendix A)
2. We compiled a fact sheet and Powerpoint slides on post-secondary education funding. The information is intended to inform the MRU community about the impact of the 2013 Alberta budget cuts on students, staff, and faculty. Moreover, the fact sheet also explored the benefits of post-secondary education to society.
3. In November, we hosted a talk by Kit Dobson titled "Disciplining Knowledge: What Is University?" This discussion explored issues related to the purpose and value of higher education and kicked off our yearly seminar series, the Universities Matter series, on topics related to post-secondary education. Kit did an excellent job initiating this discussion and raising some key questions about why universities matter.
4. A coalition was formed between MRFA President (Gerry Cross), MRFA Advocacy Committee (David Ohreen), SAMRU (Sadiq Valliani), and Baset

- Sarrug (President, MRSA) to coordinate messaging and strategies to advocate for post-secondary education. As part of this strategy, we met with Linda Johnson (Chair, Progressive Conservative) on March 25 to discuss Mount Royal University's benefits to the community and answer any questions she had about our institution. This meeting was an excellent opportunity to provide Ms. Johnson with important facts about higher education and correct some misinformation she had about the sector. We hope to continue to build the coalition and continue meeting with government representatives to provide key information to better their treatment of post-secondary education.
5. We were guests at various department meetings around MRU to present information on post-secondary status in Alberta, the outcomes, both projected and realized, of the budget cuts and the prevailing political position on post-secondary education in Alberta. Our goal in attending these meetings was to provide information to faculty members and to try and engage more individuals from around the university in our campaigns. We also asked faculty members in attendance to identify issues of concern to them that the committee could address. We will continue this process and hope to have a great deal of input from MRFA members to help guide our activities.
 6. On January 14 and 15, 2014, the MRFA Advocacy Committee, in conjunction with SAMRU, the Office of the Dean of Arts, and the Arusha Centre, welcomed Harsha Walia to Calgary. Harsha Walia is a social justice activist and journalist who is best-known for co-founding the Vancouver chapter of No One Is Illegal. Walia's writings have appeared in over fifty journals, anthologies, and magazines, including Briarpatch, Canadian Dimension, Feministing, Fuze, Left Turn, People of Color Organize, Rabble, Z Magazine, and others. She has contributed essays to academic journals including Race and Class, as well as chapters in the anthologies Power of Youth: Youth and community-led activism in Canada; Beautiful Trouble: A Toolbox for Revolution; and Organize! Building from the Local for Global Justice. She is the author of the book Undoing Border Imperialism, which indigenous rights activist Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz has called, "the first extended work on immigration that refuses to make First Nations sovereignty invisible. Walia spoke to an overflowing crowd in Moot Court on the topic of social activism, as one of the keynote speakers for SAMRU's annual CREATE A Better Now event. She also visited three classrooms and participated in off-campus events while in Calgary. The Advocacy Committee also met with Walia as an opportunity to discuss potential strategies for further engagement with the community and ways to promote higher education in our local and national communities. This meeting was incredibly fruitful and provided a lot of suggestions about collaborations, coalitions, tactics, and communications.
 7. Advocacy Committee members contacted and through a subsequent telephone conversation on February 28th with Michele Mulder, Chair of Alberta's School Council Association, gathered information on possible collaboration between post-secondary and K-12 schools to promote appropriate, sufficient funding for education and discussed strategies for

MRU to promote its merits to parents, staff and the public via School Council meetings, ATA conferences and news bulletins. We hope to continue to build these relationships next year and into the future.

8. The committee continued to advocate for greater autonomy in relation to printing budget and other resources. The Advocacy Committee supposedly has budget for operations, but the MRFA Executive, which is not always supportive of the various activities we hope to undertake, must approve all expenditures. We will continue to negotiate with the Executive and membership to gain greater autonomy for the committee to be able to do its important work.
9. With MRFA President Gerry Cross the Advocacy Committee helped design a poster that highlights the fundamental problems caused by yearly budgetary cuts to post-secondary education and the detrimental effects this will have on individuals, as well as the wider society. This poster campaign will be launched shortly and will work to publicize the importance of higher education and the need for stable funding.
10. Advocacy Committee members compiled a list of media personnel who cover post-secondary news for the MRFA president, so that there can be easy dissemination of future press releases. Our external communications have been improving over the past two years but could be even more effective. The committee hopes to continue to work on this going forward.

ACTION ITEM: The Advocacy Committee calls for the creation of an ad hoc committee, comprised of the MRFA President, the Communications Officer, a representative of the Advocacy Committee, and potentially others, to develop a communications strategy for the MRFA. Advocating on behalf of our members and post-secondary education requires publicity and media coverage and, while the MRFA has been slowly improving this aspect of its operations, the committee believes it is important to develop a clear and effective strategy to ensure that our voices are heard outside the walls of Mount Royal University.

Appendix A:

<http://www.cbc.ca/player/News/Canada/Calgary/ID/2408615901/>

<http://www.cbc.ca/player/News/Canada/Calgary/ID/2408590434/>

<http://www.calgaryjournal.ca/index.php/news/1839-mru-students-staff-protest-education-cuts>