

Presidents Discussion Series

Diverse Voices with a Common Goal?

Faculty, students, staff and administrators discuss their various approaches to advocating for post-secondary education.

The benefits of post-secondary education affect everyone; so, it is the responsibility of everyone to make the necessary changes happen.

The role of the administration is to advocate for post-secondary in its private meetings with the government. For this to be effective, University administrators cannot create adversarial relationships with the government by speaking against the government in the media. Administrators need to understand the political landscape and communicate within it and to build and sustain relationships in which administrators can continually reinforce the value of what MRU provides. The government needs to know what MRU is and why we need the things we are asking for. This is not always about a specific meeting or decision: it is a continual process of engagement with political staff and elected officials in formal and informal situations. While administrators' advocacy is not as visible as other forms of advocacy, they are working within their roles to support post-secondary.

Lobbying is important, but it is not the only form of advocacy: it needs to be supported by advocacy within the public sphere. Faculty, staff and students at MRU have done a lot of advocacy this year. Our job is to convince the public that PSE matters, that they need to put pressure on the government, and that there need to be ramifications for the government if it does not take citizens' concerns seriously. We also need to work more closely with our provincial and federal partners and counterparts at other institutions in order to lend weight to our arguments.

The distinction between advocacy and government relations is a good one. Administrators' roles are primarily in government relations and Associations' roles are more focussed on public relations. However, there is room for these to cross over. There are opportunities for Associations to engage in government relations and there are opportunities for administrators to be public advocates for PSE. We would not want the President to speak directly against the government in the media, but administrators could speak more publicly about specific issues. If an individual President or Board Chair spoke out, that could go badly for the institution, but if all the Presidents and Boards jointly produced a statement advocating for the government to support PSE that would be useful. They should speak out, not in a way that jeopardizes the institutions, but to let the public know the effects of the cuts. It is important for University administrators to make public statements because their comments are perceived differently than student or faculty voices which can be dismissed as special interest groups.

Moving Forward

- Communicate the value of PSE as an investment.
- Inform the public of e personal impact of these cuts (send your stories to the MRFA)
- The Associations and administration can work together to develop key talking points.
- Address public perceptions: students and faculty are not necessarily the 'privileged elite.'
- Work towards creating a student voting block.
- Establish and follow through on long term goals.
- Consider establishing a coalition of Calgary region institutes advocating for PSE.

Discussion Notes:

David Docherty

Advocating for PSE is important and for MRU in particular. It is important to recognize, however, that different people have different roles in terms of advocacy. People ask why the administration at MRU is not in the public more speaking on behalf of the University. This is because the administration's role is to negotiate with the government. They have to be able to have the trust of those on the other side of the table. University administrators and the government need to discuss things in a positive and constructive manner. The admin cannot speak against the government in the media and then expect to have their trust. A good relationship with the other side is important, that does not mean that disagreements don't happen, but with a good relationship the admin can get some traction on certain goals with this relationship. A couple of years ago we were successful in getting the promised funding for midwifery when it was going to be cut. This would have been more difficult to achieve with an adversarial relationship.

David applauds the advocacy work of the faculty, staff and students: it is important for the government to hear this passion from these voices: it would not do so well to hear it from University administrators.

Baset Zarrug

Baset sees this issue from the perspective of an immigrant from a different country with the thought of considering what PSE does for people and for citizens of the world. With education we can solve a lot of the world's problems. It is the responsibility of *everyone* to make the necessary changes happen. The government will only listen if there are masses of people speaking out.

Marc Schroeder

The MRFA has done a lot this year in terms of advocacy, and is following a multi pronged approach. There are members who think that lobbying is not effective. By itself it maybe isn't, but it is part of the advocacy process. Marc, Eric and Baset have met with several MLAs to discuss the issues. This is an opportunity to explain what the real situation is. These types of nuanced arguments are difficult to make in the media. However, there has to be other actions taken to support lobbying efforts. This week we held advocacy week - there is a letter writing campaign, we have been in the paper, Marc was interviewed by CBC etc. It is important that politicians know we are talking amongst ourselves, educating the public and following through with our messages: there needs to be weight and support behind what we say to politicians. Sometimes this means you need to rally and protest. If you do this you need to clearly plan what your message and purpose is. Sometimes rallying can be used to respond to a shock. We also need to work with our provincial and federal partners and counterparts at other institutions, and there is room for improvement here.

Erik Queenan

- We need to communicate the value of PSE. It is undervalued in the public perspective.
- We need to address perceptions: students and faculty are not necessarily the 'privileged elite.'
- We have an opportunity in the upcoming elections to create a student voting block. This is something we need to prepare for in advance.
- We are currently bogged down in a very bad fiscal situation in Alberta but we need to keep trying and we need to think of our advocacy efforts in terms of long term goals.
- We also do federal advocacy and CASA is starting to get some traction on this. We need to take ourselves out of the moment and realize we are part of something much larger.

Carole Simpson

This distinguishes the role of the administration compared to what the other MRU associations are doing. The key distinction is that the administration's role with the government is of them being our primary funder and we need to ensure that that funding continues at optimum levels. To do this, administrators need to build relations with the government. There is an advocacy role with the government but it is more about building

relationships. MRU's government relations plan is there to assist us in advancing MRU's goals and priorities and to ensure we have enough funding. We need to understand the political landscape and communicate within it and to build and sustain relationships. There is a hierarchy in the government and understanding who and when and what is to be discussed is important. Continually reinforcing what we bring to the table is important: we need to make sure they understand where we fit in the system so they can deal with us appropriately. This is a form of advocacy. They need to know what MRU is and why we need the things we are asking for. We take every opportunity to build relationships with the government. This is not always about a specific meeting or decision it is a continual process of engagement with political staff and elected officials in formal and informal situations. We need to present our positions clearly, with factual support, and provide solutions.

This year is the first year that MRU has sent the government a formal pre-budget submission. It was sent to the minister, the premier, and to Calgary caucus. This pre-budget submission is being used as supporting documentation and for talking points with the government. So, everyone is hearing the same message and that makes a big difference.

The administration met with Calgary caucus recently and talked about the problem of access. Limited access to PSE in Alberta and Calgary, and MRU in particular, and what could be done to improve it. The administration also meets with the city to let them know our plans and to ask for support. These are not necessarily advocacy activities but they are building the relations with the government,

Roberta Lexier

Communicating the value of PSE has to be the goal of advocacy. The public does not appreciate all of the numerous benefits provided by PSE. This is particularly difficult in Alberta. Alberta has the lowest participation rate. Some people say this is because they can go into the workforce. These types of arguments need to be countered. Even if people choose not to attend post-secondary, what we do here is still important and valuable to the general community. We need to get people on side with this message. However, even if we have public opinion it is still difficult to affect change due to the inability to hold the government to account. In other provinces when the government displeases the populace they are replaced with the opposition: elections in Alberta do not tend to work in this way. Regardless, our job is to convince students, faculty and the public that PSE matters, that they need to put pressure on the government, and that there need to be ramifications for the government if it does not take citizens' concerns seriously.

The relationship between the admin and the government is not a negotiation. Negotiation implies a relationship in which there is give and take. From our perspective we are not negotiating: we are begging. They say they will give us money then they don't. This is how it appears from the outside.

Panelists Responses:

David Docherty

- There is give and take in relations with the government. We have been saying consistently in meetings with the government that we have a common problem. There is an access problem and MRU can help, but to do so we need the governments' support.
- When there are across the board cuts the government is taking the easiest possible solution.
- Since becoming a University we have increased the turn away rate by 291% of qualified applicants.

Erik Queenan

- There are a lot of committees and associations provincially and federally that the students association has representatives on. It does feel like these groups are giving lip service to the issues. Students are the largest stakeholders here and they are not being listened to.

Baset Zarrug

- Political dialogue in this province is not very helpful. It seems people are afraid to talk about politics if they do not agree with the masses. We need to do something about this issue as well. We need to be able to look at alternatives, we need to consider our options. Open and free dialogue is necessary for democracy.

Carol Simpson

- Carol sees advocacy as a critical element to a broader government relations strategy. The admin needs to maintain their relationship with the government because they are the funder. The administration needs to ensure that we get the necessary resources from the government without appealing to student/parent/faculty groups influencing legislation. The administration needs to stay focussed on its main role and public advocacy is not part of this.
- A separate coalition of Calgary region institutes advocating for PSE would be useful.

Marc Schroeder

- The distinction between advocacy and government relations is a good one. Admin's job is primarily on the government relations side and the associations' is in the area of public relations. However, there is room for these to cross over as well. There are opportunities for Associations to engage in government relations and there are opportunities for administrators to be advocates. We would not want the President to speak directly against the government in the media, but the administrators could speak more publicly about specific issues. If an individual president or board chair spoke out then that could not go well for the institution but if all the presidents and boards got together to produce a statement advocating for the government to support PSE that would be useful. They should speak out, not in a way that jeopardizes the institutions, but to let the public know the effects of the cuts.

Discussion:

- The admin needs to talk to the government but the admin has multiple audiences. Admin can talk with different audiences about the general objectives and to increase the pressure for increased access. This can be done without jeopardizing relations with the government
 - When David does meet with the government, the city, parents etc. David does say that Alberta has a low participations rate. David is a strong proponent for PSE and will speak to this publicly. He can say that the government needs to invest in PSE because one of the ways to get a diversified economy is to have a more education population.
 - David also speaks to the fact that potential students in Alberta paying tuition in a different province does not make economic sense. These are common parts of David's usual conversations with the government
- We can talk about the value of PSE all we want but until Alberta has a more sustainable revenue stream we are still going to face cuts. Without sufficient funds we cannot increase the participation rate.
- We hear about some things happening at MRU through the Metro News or the Herald. We need some debate about this, members of the community would like to hear the voice of administration not only students and faculty.
 - The admin carries a weight in the public perception that faculty and students do not. When it comes out that the President of MRU says something the public pays attention. When it is someone else it does not carry as much weight. It would be helpful to have the admin play a role in public discussions for this purpose.
 - People do not understand what the MRFA is, and if they do they see us as a special interest group looking to protect our salaries. We are more easily dismissed than the President of the University would be
- In Alberta we have two major costs - healthcare and education. People see healthcare as an investment in their future as they will need it one day. K-12 is necessary as well. Conversely, the average Albertan sees spending on PSE as a cost not an investment. How can we change this perception: that post-secondary has an actual return? We need to state what is so valuable about it.
 - The advocacy committee structured advocacy week around the value of PSE. There is quantitative and qualitative data supporting this. The economic value is easy to quantify: people will make more money and pay more taxes, wealthier people are

healthier, and they are more engaged in their communities and democracy.

- Individuals see the value of education for themselves but see it as a cost to continue to put money into it for others. These messages are not convincing anyone of anything new.
- We do need to communicate that it is a value not a cost.
- There is the argument that we do not need to invest in PSE because we have migration of well educated individuals. When this influx stops we will need to invest in PSE.
- Parents and prospective parents should be concerned: tuition is increasing faster than the rate of inflation and access is decreasing. So, if you are going to be a parent it is in your best interest to keep access high and costs low. There is data on the amount of debt parents are accumulating to put their kids through school. This is not an Alberta problem only. Tuition in other provinces is increasing as well
- Part of this is a debt question also. If education is not a social responsibility then we are downloading the cost to students and parents. These debt loads are crushing and prevent graduates from fully participating in and contributing to the economy. This then affects our society which is based on consumer purchasing.
- This is an access issue: students can't get into PSE in Alberta so they go to other provinces. Alberta tuition is not a lot higher than other provinces. Ours is the lowest.
 - MRU is lower than other institutes
 - The comparison of tuition rates is flawed because MRU has higher student fees
 - Tuition at UofC is roughly \$150-200 more than at MRU
 - If we had a straight across the board tuition increase to get MRU to match UofC we would need a 10% increase to tuition across the board.
 - There was a study done by the Canadian Centre of Policy Alternatives which included student fees and it shows that tuition in Alberta is in the top 5.
 - You can look at the absolute dollar figures or you can look at the trend. In the 80s students could work in the summer and make enough to pay for all of the courses and supplies for the year. Students could complete their degrees in a timely manner and dedicate themselves to their studies and graduate with less debt. In the period since then government funding has gone down and student costs have increased.
 - This is why you need to determine if PSE is of value to society as a whole. Our economic and social health depends on higher education. Even people without kids should be contributing to it.
 - If MRU could they would increase tuition to UofC levels
 - Yes we would. We would have fees for higher cost programs specific to those programs but everyone with the same tuition. The model of smaller classes at less money is not economically possible. We have a better experience for our students at less money. The preference is for the government to support this model but without that the only alternative is to rely on tuition.
 - There is a personal betterment and it is a personal investment. There should be an investment on part of the students and the public through government funding.
 - If we want society to think of PSE as an investment then students need to see it as an investment as well
 - In the absence of government funding: this is true. This is where advocacy comes in: we need to convince the government that they need to continue to fund PSE and not cut it.
 - Shifting the expense to students is a purely political choice - it is not a matter of living within our means. Alberta pays the lowest percentage of its GDP on PSE than any other province. The government can do better than this.
- Access is the issue. Tax payers in Alberta are paying for part of the education for Alberta's students and parents need to pay the tuition for their kids to go to school in other provinces. It is not cheaper to send your kids to school elsewhere - it is a necessity for some.
 - Out of province students in Nova Scotia contribute \$300million to Nova Scotia's economy. This money should be going into the Alberta economy.
 - If we keep gutting and underfunding our institutions then we will not ever have the prestige that other universities have. MRU will not attract out of province students.

- PSE in Calgary is not even meeting the needs of local students. This is a local problem first. People want to go to school here and they cannot.
 - Calgary is the richest city in Canada: this is ridiculous.
- Ideology and propaganda are used by the government in Alberta: it is a discourse game and we need to change the discourse. We are not challenging the pervasive discourses in our society.
 - Government relations are connected to advocacy. We need to be tactful in building relationships but they need to be built on mutual trust. We need to be able to trust our government. Students see the costs increasing every single year and it is getting worse and worse. We do not need to radicalize to advocate we do need more creative strategies to address these problems.
 - Students are not getting the experience here they should be. There should be small class sizes and fees should be stable.
 - We want these stories. We want to hear the individual students' stories.
 - We know that students leave their studies for a year to make money so they can afford to finish
 - The MRFA has communications strategies to get these stories out. If you have students get them to send us their stories.
- Will students be ambassadors for PSE and MRU when they graduate or when members of the MRU community are away from campus?
 - This university is special. There is a community here that is supportive. Students do talk about University with others and get them to think about why they want to go to university and what should be expected of them. Being engaged is an essential part of being a University student.
- We cannot over generalize our specific positions for all Albertans. Some people can afford to send their kids out of province but the average Albertan cannot. We need to be more cognizant of what the average Albertan can afford.
 - There are some who can send their kids away. But this is a problem in Calgary because if it was not we would not be sending away so many qualified Calgary applicants. This is an access issue and it is fundamentally a Calgary access issue.
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- Overreliance on alumni donations is not the way to approach this. Elite schools in the States target affluent families, their students come, are given a great experience and then they become lifelong donors. This model is good for the school but not for the system as a whole. In Canada we want to avoid this.
 - We would never fundraise for operational funds it is for specific issues / scholarships
 - Money from alumni is not long term stable funding. We need stable funding.
 - We have been a University for 7 years. In 15 years our graduates will start contributing when they have their careers
 - We cannot rely on private donations either as these donations will decrease when resource revenues decrease.
 - MRU has very strict policies on private donations and we do not have the same problems here as at other Universities. Yet we still cannot rely on these funds.
- A fundamental tenant of advocacy is to bring value to the conversation yourself. Bring information from your expertise and bring that to the public. The public does not understand the issues we are talking about. Even the government does not understand the issues.
- Calgary has 55% of the demand for PSE yet we get 33% of the allocation of funds from the government. Edmonton is the reverse: they get over 50% of the funds and have 30% of the demand.
 - This is a good point. We do need to have some key speaking points that we can make available throughout the University and also to the citizens of Calgary.
 - Key data and speaking points can be provided by the administration and the Associations can share information and points with admin as well
 - This administration has been good about sharing statistics with the associations, and this has been very helpful.

