April 16, 2020

Within the last few weeks, our campus community has found itself moving through uncertain times due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We are supportive of the measures that have been made to protect everyone.

Though these are uncertain times, we are grateful to all from our community who have made efforts to help flatten the curve. We look forward to the day we all can return to our campus.

Despite the circumstances, on March 25th and 26th, students voted in the USSU General Election 2020 on PAWS electing an incoming executive team who will take office effective May 1st, 2020. This team includes:

- Autumn LaRose-Smith (President-Elect), from the SUNTEP Program in the College of Education, made history by becoming the first Indigenous woman to be elected in the President’s role and will be the 6th Indigenous President of the USSU. She previously had been elected as Vice President of Student Affairs for the USSU, through a byelection held in October 2019. She has served as the President of the SUNTEP Student Representative Council, as a member for the Ness Creek Board, and is an Ambassador for the We Matter National Campaign. She was successfully elected in an election of three candidates for the President position.

- Jamie Bell (Vice President of Operations and Finance-Elect) is no stranger to university governance. The Edwards’ School of Business Student was the incumbent VP Operations and Finance serving in the 2019-2020 USSU Executive Team where he worked diligently alongside our many campus groups to ensure success of their respective organizations. He was successfully elected for a second term with one other candidate in the running.

- Kiefer Roberts (Vice President Academic Affairs-Elect) is a member of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band and comes from Stanley Mission, located in Northern Saskatchewan. The Political Studies Major was successfully elected by students, running unopposed, and brings a wealth of knowledge having served as a Member of Students’ Council representing the Indigenous Community in the 2017-2018 Academic year, and, again in the 2019-2020 Academic year.
• Jory McKay (Vice President Student Affairs-Elect) ran in an election that saw three candidates vying for the VP Student Affairs position, and was successfully elected into this role. Jory has been an effective advocate in his previous job as USSU Pride Centre Coordinator, helping to build a sense of community for students accessing the support and services provided by the centre.

The incoming executive will begin their year term facing challenges brought by the pandemic. We are confident in the skills and experience of this incoming team, and we are confident our community will prevail.

Our outgoing executive team, including Vice President Operations and Finance Jamie Bell, Vice President Academic Affairs Carlos Muñoz Pimentel, Vice President Student Affairs Autumn LaRose-Smith, and President Regan Ratt-Misponas, continues to be proud of the work we accomplished in the 2019-2020 Academic year. We established a vision plan of the four components to Promote Education, Revitalize Community, Decolonize Systems, and Facilitate Leadership that may help direct future executives in the work they have ahead.

In our efforts to Promote Education, our team lobbied university administration and all levels of government to ensure post-secondary remained affordable and accessible for students. We continued to build partnerships through the Saskatchewan Students’ Coalition (SSC), which brought together the student unions and associations of the major post-secondary institutions in the province and was chaired by Vice President Muñoz Pimentel. Our Executive Team met with many other student organizations from Western Canada in Edmonton, Alberta, to build relationships with one another and to discuss the goals of each participating student union. President Ratt-Misponas joined our student union counterparts in Ottawa to advocate on the behalf of our peers for affordable and accessible education. This was done alongside our national partners known as the Undergraduates of Canadian Research-intensive Universities (UCRU) that included the student unions of the U15. We hosted a Rally for Students on February 27th to lobby the provincial government and university administration to include an increase to unrestricted institutional funding, a subsidy for Open Educational Resources from the Saskatchewan Advantage Scholarship, offer financial supports for International students, eliminate interest on student loans, provide a Tuition Waiver for Students from the Foster Care System, and have a reasonable/predictable tuition policy in their budgets.

To Revitalize Community, the USSU was able to travel to Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, to connect with students as they prepare to move to the new campus being built. We visited our peers in the North to ensure they knew the work our organization was doing. University Students’ Council (USC) voted in favour of providing new furniture to our USSU Centres. As each centre provides a safe space for diverse communities, we were happy to invest in them to ensure a renewed and comfortable community space come September 2020. In VP Bell’s work, the USSU hosted a number of lively events to highlight the community offered by various campus groups.
This gave students a chance to see which groups they might like to join during their time on campus, as these vibrant groups offer so much to the student experience. The Association of Constituency Presidents (AOCP), which includes the Indigenous Students’ Council, the International Students’ Association, and all College Student Associations and Unions, continued to be engaged with the affairs of their Student Union. The AOCP met almost every month to discuss how the year was going for their respective organizations and for their constituents. This bridge to each college and community on campus allowed for good partnership and relationships. We continue to do some work in providing a report highlighting the experiences of students in their first year of studies. This report will allow our campus community to understand the perspectives of students attending post-secondary for the first time. We were pleased to continue our insurance coverage for our Health and Dental Plans with StudentCare earlier this year.

Joseph Naytowhow, who served as our USSU Indigenous Knowledge Keeper, was a huge factor in guiding our organization towards our goal to Decolonize Systems, a movement that will take more than one year, and one executive, to accomplish. Through Joseph’s stories and support, all students were able to better understand the history of colonization and the negative impacts it has on Indigenous people (including how it may impact Indigenous Students going through a colonial education system). Joseph’s work included going to ceremony to receive permission to use the logo and colours of our vision plan. We were happy to expand the Indigenous Knowledge Keeper program, initiated by our predecessors, so that students from the College of Engineering could spend a day with Joseph listening to the extensive knowledge he has to offer our community. We have also been able to start the process of creating a partnership with Métis Local 126 in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding, a process that will continue with the next executive. In October 2019, we hosted, for the second time, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two Spirit Awareness Week emphasizing a systemic issue we need to continue addressing. In partnership with the Indigenous Students’ Council (ISC), we hosted a meeting for Indigenous student leaders and community members to think about the long-term and short-term goals the community had moving forward. This provided space for Indigenous Students to speak to issues most concerning them. Throughout the year, the USSU had been advocating the university to be a leader in Canada and to recognize the role the institution played in the disenfranchisement of Indigenous people seeking post-secondary. As Status Indians are ‘wards of the state’, this federal law was enacted to make Status Indians give up their Status rights if they wanted to go to school. It was an assimilation tactic used by the government and universities were bystanders while these laws were put in place. The most progressive step forward for the university would be to apologize for these actions, something we have continuously advocated for this past year.

We saw the importance of providing opportunities for students to build their leadership skills. To Facilitate Leadership, we offered a number of programs that would help develop their capabilities and strengthen their communities. Some of these programs,
including two conferences geared towards developing student leaders and equipping student organizations, were hosted on campus in partnership with many university departments and community relations. Our executive made the collective effort to build our organization’s reputation of being leaders in sustainability among our student union counterparts by working with administration to create the Student Sustainability Coalition and setting things in place for future growth in sustainability. Through VP LaRose-Smith’s work, the USSU looked at multiple ways to alleviate barriers that prevented students from taking on leadership roles, especially within our organization. There is much more work needed to be done in this area, but we were encouraged to see more interest in executive positions through the number of candidates who ran in the general election, and a slight increase in the number of students who voted despite students moving to remote and online class formats. At our Annual General Meeting, students voted to make it more affordable to run in USSU general elections and returned the elections of Member of Students’ Council (MSC) to student associations/unions. We were pleased to see excellent engagement come from the University Students’ Council (USC), proud to make history by having the first woman of colour serve as the chairperson for USC.

Lastly, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, University Students’ Council unanimously supported dedicating money from our reserve funds in order to provide some income for student and part-time employees. The executive voted in favour of investing in a program known as Empower Me provided through our Student Health and Dental Plan. The program offers 24/7 services allowing students to have access to consultants, counsellors and life coaches remotely.

Our Executive team penned an open letter to the University of Saskatchewan highlighting ways that will ensure financial security for students through this pandemic and in the recovery from the crisis we face. These requests include:

- No tuition increase for the 2020/2021 academic year.
- That all students be given a pass/fail option.
- Reimbursing students for forced withdrawals of classes they would have otherwise been able to complete before the closure of the university.
- Extension of tuition deadlines for Spring, Summer, and Fall terms to account for financial hardships that students may face due to loss of employment opportunities.
- Waiving late payment fees on tuition for Spring, Summer, and Fall terms.

We released this letter after students reached out to us and took to social media explaining the situations they were suddenly faced with. All this while having very little to no financial security, many left without work. With no foresight of what lies ahead, especially as we approach the end of the semester, we will continue to urge the university and government about the need to act on these requests. Now, more than
ever, we call upon our university and government to be what students need. The copy of our open letter has been sent along with this report, or can be found on our USSU Facebook Page.

These are initiatives our USSU Executive Team has been proud to take on. We thank students for giving us the opportunity to serve them and do this work on their behalf.

We send our appreciation to all members of the University Council and wish you all the very best. Take care!

2019-2020 USSU Executive Team
Regan Ratt-Misponas (President)
Jamie Bell (VP Operations and Finance)
Carlos Munoz Pimentel (VP Academic Affairs)
Autumn LaRose-Smith (VP Student Affairs)