



AUGUST 2016

2016-06 COUNCIL RETREAT REPORT

ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' UNION
www.ausu.org

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Executive Summary

AUSU does not have a history of face-to-face planning events, the last having been in 2003, but the council took a leap of faith in the recommendation during the budgeting process in September of 2015 and the retreat was planned.

The timing of the event was designed to be early in the two-year council term and to coincide with the goal setting and budgeting process for the next fiscal year. Unfortunately, only five of nine councillors were able to attend the event, although all indicated they were available during the planning stages.

The overall objectives of the retreat were threefold:

1. Get to know each other and create a team that will be working together for the next two years;
2. Ensure everyone is on the same page about where we are now and where we are going with respect to the work of AUSU council.
3. Set the direction and start the planning for the coming council year.

Two topics related to how AUSU dialogue can be framed were introduced early in the proceedings. The first topic was Creating a Cohesive Council, including those councillors with and without executive roles. The second was The AUSU Umbrella, aimed at fostering a cohesive vision of all of AUSU's components, including the membership, councillors, committees, and staff.

The first part of the agenda focused on ensuring that councillors were on the same page about AUSU's current activities and position. This included a final council orientation session for new councillors, reviewing the current financial situation, a progress report on the current council goals list, and a report on the current state of the AUSU bylaws.

Those councillors present at the retreat noted that they were becoming comfortable in their roles and the orientation process was reasonable. The majority of the 2015-2016 goals were complete and the remainder were in progress and on track for completion. The most recent financial variance report with projections for the 2015-2016 year-end revealed an improving financial position and highlighted areas that need continued planning including deficit reduction, reserve fund management, and long term planning for membership fees.

The report on the AUSU services survey was circulated just prior to the retreat and was reviewed in order to provide additional context for the advocacy, goals, and budgeting discussions to come later on the agenda.

The remainder of the agenda was centered on guided brainstorming activities in key areas of AUSU planning for the next fiscal year and the creation of high-level action plans for each area. These areas included council goals, budget, bylaws, and advocacy priorities.

In discussing the current and potential position policies it was observed that advocacy and positions are two distinct but related things. This is a new way of looking at advocacy for AUSU and provides a solid framework for addressing the fact that there is no end to possible advocacy initiatives but a very distinct limit to time, money, and other resources to act on them.

Annual goal setting is a process that has been well developed at AUSU. At the retreat, the focus was on engaging the whole of council early in the process to encourage ownership of the goals by everyone.

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Due to the limited time and number of councillors in attendance, the focus for AUSU bylaws was on an action plan to complete the review between now and the stated deadline of the end of 2016. A basic action plan was developed.

The final session looked at the 2016-2017 budget in the context of current finances as well as advocacy initiatives, goals, and other items identified in the previous discussions that may need resources. An overall strategy direction was developed for the budget.

Several informal social activities were scheduled during the retreat to facilitate the team building aspect of the retreat.

To wrap up, each participant was asked to comment about their experience. The response to the retreat was overwhelmingly positive and several great suggestions were made for the next retreat which, finances permitting, may become an annual, or at least a bi-annual event.

In conclusion, all of the fundamental goals for the retreat were met. The planning process for the 2016-2017 year was kick-started in a way that allowed for maximum participation, open brainstorming, and team building.

Most importantly, the beginnings of a systematic process of consultation, discussion, prioritization, goal setting, the creation of action plans, and implementation of those plans took place. If this systematic approach is continued, it will result in an organization that is responsible to its membership, proactive, and which achieves success, and continues to grow, learn, and increase its effectiveness.

Introduction

As early as the interview leading to the hiring of the current executive director almost one year ago, the idea of a face-to-face council retreat was floated. Understandably, there was a debate about the value of this fairly expensive undertaking which the organisation had operated without for many years. There was concern that a retreat could be viewed as an extravagant perk for councillors rather than a strategic operational event with value to the membership. However, the retreat was included in the 2015-2016 budget, plans were made, and the retreat took place.

Considerable efforts were made to keep costs as low as possible and make good use of participant's time. The retreat was planned for early in a new council term, after councillors had time to get orientated, and coinciding with the goal planning and budgeting process for the coming fiscal year. The third week in June was a little later than hoped, but the dates were chosen because all councillors indicated that they were available to attend. Unfortunately, life is less than predictable, particularly for those balancing school, work and other life commitments, and four of nine councillors were unable to travel to Edmonton to participate. President Shawna Wasylyshyn, Vice President External and Student Affairs Brandon Simmons, Vice President Finance and Administration Kim Newsome, Councillors Scott Jacobsen and Julian Teterenko, Executive Director Sarah Cornett, and Communications and Member Services Coordinator Donette Kingyens attended.

The council retreat took place over a three-day period and included working sessions the afternoon of Friday, June 24th, all day Saturday, June 25th, and the morning of Sunday, June 26th. In addition to the working session, the group got to know each other with two dinner events, had a tour of the AU Edmonton Learning Center, hosted a members' meet and greet at the AUSU offices, and held a face-to-

face public council meeting. A face-to-face executive council meeting was held at the AUSU offices the day prior to the retreat to take advantage of AUSU's long distance VP, Kim Newsome from Nova Scotia, being in Edmonton.

Objectives

The objectives of this retreat were ambitious but designed to result in a very productive term of council, ensuring that each councillor finishes this two-year term with a sense of accomplishment and pride in what AUSU is and what it can do for its membership.

The overall objectives of the retreat were threefold.

1. Get to know each other and create a team that will be working together for the next two years.
2. Ensure everyone is on the same page about where we are now and where we are going with respect to the work of AUSU council.
3. Set the direction and start the planning for the following:
 - a. completing 2015-2016 council goals;
 - b. creating the 2016-2017 council goals;
 - c. creating the 2016-2017 AUSU budget;
 - d. complete AUSU bylaw review; and
 - e. ongoing and new advocacy priorities.

Preparation

In order to meet these objectives, each participant was asked to prepare by reviewing the following list of documents.

Retreat Agenda (*On Google Drive in Council/Finance/2016 Finances/ folder*)

Retreat Backgrounder (*On Google Drive in Council/Finance/2016 Finances/ folder*)

Council Orientation Materials:

- 2016 Councillor Manual (*On Google Drive in Council/Councillor Orientation folder*)
- Booklets on council responsibility and effective committees (*Mailed in March*)
- Governance training video (*Certificate of completion required*)

AUSU Bylaws <https://www.ausu.org/governance/bylaws-policies/>

AUSU Policies, particularly: <https://www.ausu.org/governance/bylaws-policies/>

- 4.06 Planning and Council Schedule w/ Appendix
- 6.03 and 6.04 Expense claims and Travel Related Expenses
- 9.01 to 9.22 All Position Policies

2015-2016 AUSU Council Goals List <https://www.ausu.org/governance/strategic-documents/> and most recent status report (*On Google Drive in Council/Meeting Packages/2016 Meeting Packages/2016-06 Council Retreat folder*)

AUSU Budget 2015-2016 (*On Google Drive in Council/Finance/2016 Finances/ folder*)

Most recent variance report (*On Google Drive in Council/Finance/2016 Finances/2016-05-31 Finance Package folder*)

AUSU Budget 2016-2017 first draft framework (*On Google Drive in Council/Finance/2016 Finances folder*)

AUSU Services Descriptions <https://www.ausu.org/services/>

AUSU Annual Report 2016 <https://www.ausu.org/governance/annual-reports/>

Executive Compensation Review Committee Report <https://www.ausu.org/governance/strategic-documents/>

Forensic Audit Committee Report <https://www.ausu.org/governance/strategic-documents/>

AUSU Services Survey results (2015) <https://www.ausu.org/governance/strategic-documents/>

AUSU Services Survey results (2016) – will be distributed as soon as possible

Framing AUSU Dialogue

Two topics related to how AUSU dialogue can be framed were identified early in the proceedings. These are items that Executive Director Sarah Cornett had observed in the AUSU terminology that may be unconsciously contributing to an "us and them" atmosphere in the organisation and inhibiting a positive, collaborative environment.

The first of these topics is creating a cohesive council and the second is the AUSU umbrella.

Creating a Cohesive Council

Because of the structure of AUSU, where the executive councillors spend 30 plus hours per week on AUSU business and are the AUSU representatives on AU committees, a disconnect can grow between the executive and non-executive councillors. It is in the best interest of both council and the membership that all councillors are aware of this potential disconnect and work to mitigate its effects. All nine elected councillors comprise AUSU council and are equal members of that council representing the AUSU membership. Executive councillors have a significant and specific role, often for only part of their terms on council

Recommendations: Creating a Cohesive Council

Institute informal council discussions immediately prior to regular council meetings for a maximum of one hour. These will be open unrecorded discussions for planning, brainstorming, and conversation with input on topics from any and all councillors. Start with a council discussion before every council meeting to see how they work and then reconsider frequency, duration, and other guidelines as needed.

Use the term "executive councillor" to denote the individual members of the executive council so as to emphasise their councillor role.

The AUSU Umbrella

The Athabasca University Student Union is a body comprised of all undergraduate students at Athabasca University. It has a number of component parts or subsets of the overall membership including the council, various committees, the executive council, The Voice, etc., but these are all parts of AUSU. Occasionally it can seem like the council is AUSU, rather than a component of the larger organisation. There is an identified risk that this could lead to an almost adversarial relationship between the council and other components such as the membership or The Voice.

Recommendations: The AUSU Umbrella

Those representing AUSU including councillors, committee members, and staff keep the idea of the AUSU umbrella in mind and use language that expresses this. For example, if the subject is the council,

use the term council or AUSU council rather than AUSU. A note on this should be included in the councillor, executive councillor, and staff manuals.

Council Orientation Conclusion

Objective

Tie up any loose ends in council orientation and answer any questions about councillor roles, responsibilities, basic processes, and policies.

Outcome

The retreat succeeded in its objectives for those in attendance.

Discussion Summary

Council orientation had been progressing since the nominations were confirmed for the election, and although it is a continuing process, at the time of the retreat each councillor should have been starting to feel confident in their role, aware of their responsibilities, and familiar with the governing documents and the basic process of AUSU council.

The retreat provided an opportunity to ask questions and fill in anything that may have missed. Joining AUSU council has a steep learning curve with lots to absorb so councillors were encouraged to ask for clarification on any issue.

The second objective of this discussion was to identify ways to improve the next council orientation process.

Those councillors present at the retreat noted that they were becoming comfortable in their roles. The following materials provided to date were deemed useful.

- Basic Governance for Board Members; Udemy.com on-line course; aimed at governance rather than leadership, had good content and appropriate length.
- Robert's Rules of Order in Brief; paperback published by Da Capo Press; useful for all attending meetings.
- Duties and Responsibilities of Directors of Not-for-Profit Organizations, 4th Edition, paperback published by CSAE; essential to understanding basic role of a councillor
- Enhancing Committee Effectiveness: Handbook for Committee Chairs, Staff Liaisons, and Committee Members; paperback published by CSAE

It was noted that the goal of providing these resources was to educate councillors for future roles outside of AUSU as well as for their current role with AUSU.

Recommendations: Council Orientation

Continue to use the resources provided to this council.

Councillors to provide further critique to the executive director to improve council orientation.

2015-2016 Goals List

Objective

Know where the council is on the current goals list and ensure there is a plan to complete the identified goals.

Outcome

The retreat succeeded in its objectives for those in attendance. Ideas were generated for internal advocacy and The Voice goals.

Discussion Summary

A recent status report on the 2015-2016 council goals list was circulated prior to the meeting. The group reviewed the report briefly noting that the majority of the goals were complete and the remainder were in progress and on target for completion.

There was a discussion about the internal advocacy goal of continuing to foster a positive working relationship between AU and AUSU through regular meetings and discussions with AU executives. While the goal was determined to be on track and ongoing, several ideas were generated which are outlined in the recommendations below.

The importance of the invisible ties that are created by having executive councillors interact in person with AU representatives at meetings and events was stressed.

The conversation turned to a general topic of connecting executive councillors and non-executive councillors to create one cohesive council. This is reported in the section of this report entitled "Framing AUSU Dialogue".

There was a discussion of The Voice goal that noted how The Voice needed to be a priority of AUSU as it existed under the "AUSU Umbrella", is the single largest AUSU expense, and is an important service paid for by all AUSU members. It was noted that councillors and members needed to be more aware of The Voice and the role it plays in the AUSU budget. Importance was placed on ensuring the joint committee being created is supported, and that a structure is in place to allow for editorial freedom without compromising the role of The Voice as part of AUSU.

Recommendations: Internal Advocacy Goal

Formally articulate to AU representatives at regular meetings that AUSU council would like to know what AU may want from AUSU. This may include such things as research, feedback to plans or initiatives, or input from memberships.

Encourage interested councillors to attend AU General Faculty Council and Board of Governors meetings as observers.

Recommendations: The Voice Goal

Instill an understanding in councillors and in members that The Voice has the following attributes:

- it exists under the "AUSU umbrella";
- it is AUSU's largest single expenditure;
- it is an important service and priority of AUSU;

- it is funded, and in effect owned, by AUSU members;
- it has editorial autonomy and freedom, which is not the same as management autonomy; and
- it is the management responsibility of council, on behalf of the membership, that funds it.

Ensure the Joint Council/Voice Action Plan Committee is supported by council and staff.

Pass on the ideas generated in the discussion and documented in the retreat transcript to the joint committee.

Draft 2016-2017 Budget Discussion #1

Objective

To know where AUSU is with respect to finances and the current 2015-2016 budget, and to start the budgeting process for 2016-2017 fiscal year which begins on October 1, 2016.

Outcome

The retreat succeeded in its objectives for those in attendance.

Discussion Summary

The group reviewed the most recent variance report with projections for year-end. Points noted in the discussion included the following.

- AUSU is on track to have a significantly lower deficit than budgeted at the end of September 2016. The budget projected a \$121K deficit and the projected deficit is approximately \$75K.
- A deficit budget is not sustainable forever but there is enough in reserve that there is no immediate crisis and there is no reasonable way to balance the budget immediately.
- Reserve amounts need consideration in the medium term to decide what is enough and what is too little or too much. Higher reserves can be a revenue source but can also cause member concerns that there is not enough being spent on services or too much being paid by members.
- Membership fees are the primary source of revenue and have not changed since at least 2005. Fees need to be reviewed in a strategic manner in the medium term.

The draft template for the 2016-2017 budget was reviewed briefly noting that the fixed expenses (e.g. administration, staff, honoraria, contracted services) had been input as a starting point but that discretionary budget lines were left blank, pending discussion.

Recommendations: Draft 2016-2017 Budget

Make a plan to consider reserve amounts and membership fees in the medium term. No decisions are needed for the 2016-2017 budget year.

Member Services Survey

Objective

Ensure member input is considered for the advocacy, goals, and budgeting discussions to come later on the agenda.

Outcome

The retreat succeeded in its objectives for those in attendance.

Discussion Summary

The report on the AUSU member services survey was circulated just prior to the retreat and was reviewed. The following general observations were made.

- Awards, services, and advocacy are priorities for members.
- Many do not understand the distinction between AUSU and AU, particularly with respect to communications and awards.
- Members want more information in general, and specifically information about AU and things that are relevant to them as AU students.

Recommendations: Member Services Survey

Refer to the results of the survey in all goal setting and budgeting processes in order to ensure that the voice of the membership informs council priorities.

Investigate ways to target messages to specific sectors of the membership.

Continue to advocate for AU to increase communications and awareness of services to students. We can help with this, but our priority is to communicate AUSU services.

Advocacy Brainstorming Session

Objective

Engage all of the council in the primary mandate of AUSU and set the direction for continuing and potential new advocacy issues.

Outcome

The retreat succeeded in its objectives for those in attendance.

Discussion Summary

Advocacy Based Organizations

A brief discussion about the various advocacy centred organisations for students' unions noted the following:

CASA AUSU is a member of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations and has been for one full year now. The decision to join was based on the previous executive councillors attending two conferences and agreement on the value of the offerings by the council in place at that time. The current executive council has found it a valuable resource. VPEx Brandon Simmons was recently elected to the CASA board and both President Shawna Wasylyshyn and VPFA Kim Newsome are on CASA committees. A pan-Canadian accord focusing on consistent tuition and transfer credits across Canada is a current priority at CASA and relevant to AUSU members.

ASEC AUSU used to be a member of Alberta Students' Executive Council but its membership is now colleges and technical institutes rather than universities, so ASEC is less relevant to AUSU. Its website currently shows 16 members representing 105,000 students.

CAUS AUSU used to be a member of the Council of Alberta University Students but left some years ago. The possibility of joining CAUS was explored within the last few years but did not result in AUSU becoming a member. Recently, an informal invitation to be an observer at CAUS has been received. Current council may decide to explore this option again. Current CAUS initiatives include adult learning, mental health, and student employment. The membership fee would be substantial. CAUS website currently shows MacEwan University, Mount Royal University, the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge as members representing 100,000 students.

Brainstorming on Current Position Policies

A silent conversation brainstorming session covered all of the current AUSU position policies. Participants circulated the room putting comments, questions, and ideas on poster-sized pages for each position using sticky notes. All of these notes are contained in the retreat transcript document for use in developing specific action plans for these position policies moving forward.

Policy 9.01 – Tuition and Fees - Exemption of Distance Education Funding

Several ideas on how to collect more background information on the topic of distance education funding were generated in brainstorming this position. It was noted that Minister Schmidt expressed an interest in finding out why out-of-province students come specifically to AU and AUSU may be in a position to help him get that information. There is a significant number of out of province students in AUSU's membership and this may be a position that deserves more work.

The beginning of an action plan was developed which includes gathering information from the membership, researching other schools, gathering demographic information, and further developing either the position or an advocacy plan.

Policy 9.02 – Tuition and Fees - Exam Invigilation Fees

The current status of AU's ProctorU online invigilation project, how exam invigilation fees can cause barriers to education, what other institutions do regarding such fees, and even the necessity of examinations themselves, were noted in the brainstorming session of this position.

A key question - What have we done? - was asked in the silent conversation that illustrates the need to differentiate between an advocacy plan and positions for AUSU.

The beginning of an action plan was developed which includes gathering information from the membership, researching other schools, and further developing either the position or an advocacy plan.

Policy 9.05 – Technology and Infrastructure - Web Services for Students

Several points were made related to this policy including the age of the AU systems, the financial challenges to improving the systems, the library portal, and library access.

It was suggested that AUSU researches the AU library policy for accessing books.

It was noted that this is an example of how AUSU could either tailor its positions based on the situation or tailor its positions to what students need and want. Does AUSU lower its ask based on AU's current financial position, or does it ask for the best student services regardless of AU circumstances?

Policy 9.06 – Government Funding – Technology and Infrastructure

It was noted here that this topic is key to AU's sustainability issues and is related to policies 9.01 and 9.05 in this respect. Comparisons to IT infrastructure at other institutions, funding issues, IT partnerships, and the government's recognition of AU's IT infrastructure as capital infrastructure were all noted.

Policy 9.07 – Government Funding – Base Operating Funding

This was identified as the number one priority for advocacy in the membership survey. Issues of the government funding formula, how the government views AU, and the potential to become the leader or replace and expand on the E-Campus Alberta initiative were explored.

The relationship of technology at AU to sustainability as in 9.01, and 9.06 was noted.

Policy 9.10 – External Relations – AU National Presence

CASA's initiative on a pan-Canadian accord, and partnerships with First Nations which receive federal funding were noted as avenues that might be leveraged for this position.

Approaching other provincial/territorial governments and the federal government to advocate for AU's ability to provide education to First Nations and rural based Canadians was suggested.

Policy 9.12 – Academics - Course and Program Development and Maintenance

It was noted that there have been lots of comments from students about outdated course materials, incorrect info, errors in exams, etc. and that the GFC recently adopted a policy for regular course maintenance.

It was suggested that AUSU could encourage course review articles in The Voice or put them in the Newsletter including certain criteria (relevance of course materials, how up to date, etc.) and offer a prize for students who do reviews. This could highlight to AU where courses are falling behind and provide an incentive for upkeep.

Policy 9.21 – Member Services- Career Services

It was suggested that a statement about paid research opportunities for undergraduates could be added to this position.

Research could be done into what other universities are offering for career services that may be possible suggestions for AU to offer.

Clarity is needed about what exactly AU does currently offer for career services.

Suggestions for advocacy action based on this position included the following.

- Press AU to improve their website to be clearer on what their "Career Counselling" involves.
- Research other universities and put together a report for AU on what services are usually offered.
- Insist that AU give preference to AU students for research opportunities.
- Ask for AU to provide research, conference symposium, etc. at the undergraduate level.

Policy 9.22 – E-Text Choice and Cost Savings Sharing

This was the number two priority for advocacy from the membership survey but it was noted that more research is needed in the following areas.

- What do students want and what are their suggestions?
- What e-text programs have the greatest reach across platforms?
- Exactly what commitments did AU make and what if any have been met?
- What options can be offered and with what conditions e.g. hard copy mailed at a cost?

The beginning of an action plan was developed which includes gathering information from the membership, researching other schools, and further developing either the position or an advocacy plan.

Brainstorming on Potential New Advocacy Topics

Many ideas for potential topics for either positions or advocacy initiatives were identified in the silent conversation brainstorming session. They include the following:

- Possible development of awards specifically for out of province students, potentially funded by out of province alumni;
- Suggestions for improving AU communication with its students;
- Request that AU take on a larger and leadership role, province-wide, and in conjunction with all other Alberta institutions, essentially becoming E-Campus Alberta (this is on the provincial government's mind and AUSU should consider if or how to get involved in the discussion);
- A pan-Canadian accord that facilitates a level playing field for tuition and transfer credits for post-secondary students across Canada;
- Better access to paid research positions for undergraduate students;
- AU sustainability;
- Faculty of Health Discipline retroactive changes to programs, course pre-requisites, and GPA calculation;
- AU to meet promised standards with marking times, communications, etc.;
- RAP, student financial aid, non-refundable grants;
- Better access to the AU support centre and better trained staff;
- First Nations focused recruitment;
- AU focus on students;
- Market modifiers related to fees and funding;
- Suggest practicums for AU IOT students to work with AU IT department; and
- an interlibrary agreement for AU library with other post-secondary institution libraries.

It was noted that before AUSU tackles any new advocacy initiative, strategies and tactics need to be developed. This led to a discussion of just that.

Brainstorming on Advocacy Strategies and Tactics

It was observed that advocacy initiatives and positions are two distinct but related things.

Positions are documents describing where AUSU stands on an issue. Position policies provide information primarily for our own understanding and use, so that all AUSU representatives can speak to

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an issue and send a consistent message whenever or wherever a topic comes up. Council can continuously research and refine positions in the background and as information becomes available. They should be reviewed regularly for relevance but do not absorb significant resources or have specific action plans.

Advocacy involves a specific action plan developed and implemented to promote certain priority positions at a given time. They do not negate AUSU positions, but are in a distinct category of requiring resources and action. The AUSU advocacy plan identifies the top priorities for pro-active advocacy and requires action plans to achieve desired results. The plan needs to always keep AUSU members first and be specific, proactive, and focused.

AUSU can have multiple position policies but needs a more focused advocacy agenda to act on.

Advocacy priorities should be decided considering the following.

- What's hot? (i.e. the timing is right and/or the issue is immediate.)
- How much can AUSU have on its plate and still be effective?
- Is there "low hanging fruit"? (i.e. some things that can be done quickly and easily with positive results.)
- What has the biggest impact on the most members?
- Are reasonable results possible with available resources?

It was noted that AUSU should play a leadership role, helping to set the tone and influence priorities at CASA, the government, and AU itself.

In discussing the university, the group discussed whether AUSU positions and advocacy initiatives should be independent of AU issues. Should AUSU change its priorities or "asks" based on AU's problems or issues? Or, should AUSU advocate for the best services for our members based on our members' priorities and not on AU's finances or ability to provide?

In order to be effective at advocacy, AUSU must be a part of AU consultation on all changes to student services and continually strive to be aware of where AUSU can offer service, ideas, and communication.

Research is needed, even on our current position policies, so that representatives can articulate exactly what AUSU wants and why. Information is needed from AU, for example from Institutional Studies at AU, and from the membership through surveys and focus groups.

AUSU has an opportunity coming soon but will need to be well prepared for the question, "What do student's want?", coming from the new president, the new board chair, and the permanent VP academic at AU. We need a package of asks that are researched, prepared, concise, and specific.

Some specific ideas to consider when building the advocacy plan included the following:

- With AUGSA having two executives located in Edmonton, there may be stronger opportunities to discuss common interests.
- As part of CASA, a federal advocacy group, we have access to other members and could leverage those connections, particularly at the provincial level.
- Researching the demographics of our student population can show MPs and MLAs that we have members in their constituencies and gain their ear in our advocacy efforts.

- Developing a relationship with Jessica Scott, Director, Partnerships and Student Recruitment, would help to identify resources and partnership opportunities. What partnerships does that department have? What can we do to help? What can we ask of them?
- It's all about information, communication and leverage which can be achieved through meeting with key government officials (Infrastructure Minister, Advanced Education Minister, and others).

Recommendations: Advocacy

Advocacy Based Organizations

Continue to be actively involved as a CASA member.

Look into observing CAUS for a year or more, and connecting with their executive, to gather information needed to assess the value of membership and/or potential partnerships in the future.

Current Position Policies

As time allows over the remainder of the council term, and specifically during the scheduled position policy review process, review the notes on current position policies that are contained in the retreat transcript document and use to developing specific action plans for these position policies moving forward. This may include research, making positions more specific or targeted, developing advocacy initiative around the position, or a variety of other actions.

In the interim, the positions stand and will be reviewed according to the AUSU policy review schedule.

Relatively quick and simple recommendations specific to individual positions included the following.

- Possibly repeal and consolidate 9.06, 9.01, and 9.07 to have a single position on sustainability.
- To support Policy 9.12, encourage course review articles in The Voice or put them in the Newsletter including certain criteria (relevance of course materials, how up to date, etc.) and offer a prize for students who do reviews. This could highlight to AU where courses are falling behind and provide an incentive for upkeep.
- Add a statement to Policy 9.21 about paid research opportunities for undergraduates.

Potential New Advocacy Topics

Look first at developing the process noted in the next section on advocacy strategies and tactics, and then apply the process to the potential new advocacy topics suggested during the retreat.

Consider compiling a "wish list" of non-urgent advocacy or position topics that can be fleshed out when possible by executive or by a councillor interested in a particular topic.

Advocacy Strategies and Tactics

There is likely no end to possible advocacy initiatives but a very distinct limit to time, money and other resources. Setting priorities, focusing on the achievable, and not overextending resources will be key to success.

There are already indicators as to the first priority issues based on what is timely (e.g. the FHD retroactive changes) and what members want (e.g. funding and e-texts as revealed by the members' survey)

An essential step to building advocacy plans is to develop a defined process that generates ideas, guides prioritization, crafts the position, develops action plans, implements the plans, checks outcomes, and repeats for each initiative and each issue. Resist the urge to just charge ahead.

Draft 2016-2017 Goals List

Objective

Engage all of the council in setting council goals, collect ideas, and set council direction for executive councillors to continue development of 2016-2017 goals list.

Outcome

The retreat succeeded in its objectives for those in attendance.

Discussion Summary

A silent conversation brainstorming session was held to generate ideas about the goals for AUSU council for the 2016-2017 year. Poster sized pages with general categories were posted around the room to provide a framework for generating ideas across the spectrum of AUSU work. Each participant used small sticky notes to express their comments, questions, ideas, etc. in each category. The categories were the following:

- Administration at AUSU;
- Governance at AUSU;
- Internal Advocacy (To AU);
- External Advocacy (Not AU);
- Communication (Members);
- Communication (Other than members);
- Committee Related – MECC;
- Committee Related – Finance;
- Committee Related – Awards; and
- Member Services (New, Existing, etc.).

The retreat transcription contains all of the notes made under each section.

After everyone had a chance to post notes, and then to read through everyone else's notes, the group looked for common themes and clustered related notes. To get a quick, if unscientific, look at possible prioritization, each participant was given thirteen star stickers and asked to place them on the clustered notes to indicate which they thought were most important for 2016-2017 goals.

While there were several areas that received a high level of support in the prioritization exercise, it was noted that there are many good ideas that should not be lost or disregarded based only on the number of stars they received. Some items will be covered under initiatives other than the 2016-2017 council goals such as the staff's ongoing efforts to improve administration processes and policies, the executive's commitment to strategic and responsible fiscal planning and oversight, and the current

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2015-2016 council goals. There are others that may inform future goal lists or committee level discussions.

Recommendations: 2016-2017 Goals List

Goals must be based on actual reliable information that AUSU has or can access.

Three general concepts should be considered in setting goals and priorities.

- Council goals and priorities should be based on what the membership services survey revealed, in addition to previous council commitments and council's regular mandate.
- Developing a comprehensive communication plan is necessary to support all other activities and priorities.
- Financial sustainability and long-term fiscal planning will be key to providing the services that the membership wants and expects.

In considering AUSU membership fees, the following was recommended.

- A membership fee increase is very likely to be needed in the next year or two.
- Council should continue to prepare for a fee increase by reducing administrative and operating related expenses and maintaining or increasing member services. This will make a solid case for the value of AUSU to the membership.
- Council needs to consider the membership's point of view regarding the balance between reserves and revenue from fees.
- Council should continue financial transparency for the membership.

Resources needed to achieve goals must be considered in setting realistic goals. Resources include staff, council, expertise, and money.

It is recommended that the following list of the silent conversation results, those that received the highest number of stars, considered in further development of the council goals list for 2016-2017.

★★★★★★★★★★ (12) **Internal Advocacy (To AU):** Look to membership for direction and priorities for internal advocacy issues.

★★★★★★★★★★ (11) **Finance:** Consider raising member fees, not this year but in the near future.

★★★★★★★★★★ (9) **External Communication (Other than members):** Develop detailed communication strategy. Note: This could apply equally to members. An organisation's communication strategy should cover all stakeholders.

★★★★★★★ (7) **External Communication (Other than members)/Advocacy Internal and External:** Create advocacy documents X 3 – AU, Provincial, Federal with distribution and follow-up plans. Note: This would be included in a detailed communication strategy and also be part of the advocacy plans detailed in that section of this report.

★★★★★★★ (7) **Internal Communication (Members):** Facilitate member discussions and sense of community. Note: This would be included in a detailed communication strategy.

★★★★★(6) **Internal Communication (Members):** Continue to work with The Voice, particularly to increase relevance to members and readership. Note: This was originally posted under external communications but since The Voice is a student (i.e. member) publication, it is more appropriately classified as member communication. See Theme - The AUSU Umbrella.

Note: Working with The Voice is a 2015-2016 council goal but can, and likely should, be continued and even expanded through 2016-2017.

★★★★★(5) **AUSU Governance:** Comprehensive Bylaw Review. Note: This is a recommendation of the Forensic Audit Recommendation Committee that has been adopted by the previous council.

★★★★★(4) **Member Services (New, Existing, etc.):** Continue to develop, improve the mobile app.

★★★★★(4) **Internal Communication (Members):** Increase member awareness of AUSU services. Note: This would be included in a detailed communication strategy.

★★★★★(4) **Advocacy Internal (To AU):** Advocate to AU to better communicate their services.

★★★★★(4) **AUSU Administration:** New office space. Note: New, less expensive, office space has been included in the 2016-2017 draft budget currently under consideration and is part of the mandate of the executive director.

Review all of the input on goals to identify other pieces that may not be a specific council goal but may inform or direct committees or staff in their ongoing work. There are many good ideas in the transcript of this brainstorming session.

While the development of the goal list is led by the president, and started at the executive council level, all of the council should be included in the whole process so that ownership and buy-in for the list are achieved.

Bylaw Brainstorming Session

Due to time constraints, the original agenda was amended to combine the two planned bylaw sessions into one session on day two of the retreat.

Objective

Review the current bylaws, identify problem areas, make note of ideas for revisions, and create a high-level action plan to complete the work needed for a full review and revision of the bylaws.

Outcome

Councillors reviewed the bylaws prior to attending the retreat and several submitted specific notes on problem areas and ideas for revisions. Due to the limited time and number of councillors in attendance, the focus was on an action plan to complete the review between now and the stated deadline of the end of 2016. A basic action plan was developed.

Discussion Summary

The discussion centred on three areas: specific goals of the review, problem areas or suggestions for improvements, and how to get the work done.

Specific goals included the following:

- compatibility with the governing legislation (PSLA);

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- clarity and consistency;
- an appropriate level of detail – not too much or too little; and
- maintaining the membership as the focus.

A number of problem areas were identified and are captured in the transcription of the retreat notes.

Some of the more significant issues identified included the following.

- Do the current objects accurately reflect the vision, mission, values of AUSU and what the membership wants or expects of AUSU?
- Expanding the size of council to eleven would help spread the workload, provide more opinions, increase access to the membership, and provide more people to work in key committee roles.
- The definition of membership is tricky because of how the PSLA defines members, how it can be described in bylaws, and how AUSU receives data from AU to use in identifying members at any given point in time. (i.e. The working definition of membership.)
- Rather than specifying the actual membership fee in the bylaws, it is more appropriate to specify how fees can be set.
- Does AUSU have the ability to take membership away or to take membership rights away in light of the PSLA?
- Options for items such as proxy, limited terms, and others, should be considered.

This is not a comprehensive list and several councillors noted that they have ideas that they will submit to the working group.

In discussing how the work would get done in time to meet the deadline of the end of the calendar year set by the Forensic Audit Recommendation Committee recommendations, the following was decided.

- All of the council should participate actively in the bylaw review process, rather than convening a committee.
- A small working group of the council will be created to steer the process.
- The mandate of the bylaw working group will be to steer the process by identifying tasks, finding people to complete the tasks, compiling information, circulating information to all of the council for feedback, and generally ensuring that the review and revision process moves forward.
- This group will not be the executive council.
- VPFA Kim Newsome, Councillor Julian Teterenko, and Executive Director Sarah Cornett volunteered.
- One other councillor will be sought to be part of the group.
- Titus Gregory, who has significant expertise in bylaws and governance structures of student associations, will be asked if he can provide consulting services to the working group. The services are para-legal in nature and the budget for legal fees can be used to pay any consulting fees.

Recommendations: Bylaw Review

Have the full council actively participate in the review and the revision of the bylaws.

Create a working group of the council will help to steer the full council.

Seek a consultant (Titus Gregory) to provide expertise and use the legal fees budget to pay for the consulting fees.

Have all councillors send specific goals, areas of concern, and suggestions to the working group.

Draft 2016-2017 Budget Discussion #2

Objective

Look at the 2016-2017 budget in the context of advocacy, goals, and other items identified in the previous discussion that may need resources.

Create the next draft of the 2016-2017 budget.

Create an action plan for ongoing consideration, drafts, and ultimately the final 2016-2017 budget.

Outcome

The retreat succeeded in its objectives for those in attendance.

Discussion Summary

The group discussed three specific categories of items in the budget.

- There are fixed and continuing costs that cannot be changed quickly but that need to be evaluated for necessity and efficiency in the longer term. They are such things as staff, telephone system, postage meter, office lease, etc.
- There are member services with contractual commitments that are set for the length of the contract. These include Lynda.com, LifeLine, and the mobile app.
- There are variable items that need to be prioritized, primarily in the member service areas. These are awards, The Voice, promotion, advocacy, and member programs such as Smart Draw.

Priorities were discussed and identified.

Right Now

- Respond to the member survey in setting 2016-2017 variable cost items.

Last year and Next Year

- Reduce administration and operating costs.
- Be fiscally responsible.
- Be member focused.
- Define the right level of reserves, create policy around it, and work towards that level.

1 to 3 Year Plan

- Look forward strategically for fiscal sustainability in the long term, including regular increases to membership fees to avoid occasional large increases.

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Considering the previous discussion, the group looked at the categories of spending that are variable and what to do with them for the 2016-2017 budget. The results are shown in the following table. Actual figures were estimates at the time and meant to illustrate the intent moving forward with drafting the 2016-2017 budget, rather than actual amounts.

Category	2015-2016 Actual	2015-2016 % Revenue	2016-2017 Budget	2016-2017 % Revenue	Notes
Promotion	\$25K	4%	\$21K	3.5%	Can be done by eliminating the \$4K for calendars
Representation /Advocacy	\$40K (\$32K)	6.5% (5%)	\$48K (\$37K)	8% (6%)	Add funds from reducing promotion and programs
Awards	\$40K	6.5%	\$50K	8%	Use all of the funds traditionally budgeted
Member Programs	\$70K	11.5%	\$66K	10.5%	Drop Smart Draw
The Voice	\$74K	8.5%	\$74	8.5%	No change

Note: The 2015-2016 total revenue is estimated at \$615K and will be roughly the same in 2016-2017.

Note: Since the retreat, CASA dues were negotiated down so a savings in the advocacy was realised that will be carried forward to next year. New figures are shown in brackets.

Recommendations: 2016-2017 Budget

Continue to work to reduce administrative and operating expenses while maintaining or increasing the services to the membership.

Use the feedback directly from the membership survey to prioritize spending on members' services. This includes all the lower sections of the budget as follows:

- Promotional;
- The Voice;
- Awards and Bursaries;
- Representation; and
- Member Programs.

Use the chart in the discussion summary section above to guide 2016-2017 budget in the member services areas.

Focus on strategically moving towards fiscal sustainability which includes determining an appropriate level of reserves and establishing reasonable periodic increases to member fees.

Policy Position Session

This item on the original retreat agenda was replaced with a trial pre-council meeting discussion. The main topic of conversation was the proposed changes to policies that were on the council agenda for the meeting immediately following the close of the retreat agenda. As noted in the guidelines for these sessions, there was no formal recording of the conversation.

Wrap Up

At the close of the retreat, each participant was asked to comment about their experience. The following is a summary of the main themes expressed.

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- The face-to-face time at the meeting was considered valuable. Not only did a lot of organic discussions happen which lead to new ideas, but the group will be able to work better as a team moving forward having gotten to know each other's strengths, personalities, and styles a bit better.
- A good balance of efficiency, economy, and effectiveness was achieved.
- There was a broad consensus, even amongst the initial slightly cynical councillors, that as long as it is well planned, organized and facilitated, the retreat should be an annual event if resources allow. An annual planning retreat is considered a business best practice crucial to any organisation. A bi-annual event would be recommended if the budget does not allow for an annual event.
- The focus on goal setting, advocacy planning, and budgeting was the right one and participants felt comfortable that a solid foundation in these areas was built.
- The focus on the messages from the members' survey and fiscal responsibility were key factors in the value of the retreat.
- The weekend will directly impact AUSU for the better and translate into council better serving the membership.
- One councillor had a light-bulb moment that it is okay to have a deficit budget as long as there is a plan to manage the deficit and a sustainability solution in place.
- One councillor noted that it was the "happiest day in my AUSU life".
- Staff noted that they felt like they now had a bigger group of co-workers.
- Regret was expressed that the full council could not be present but a commitment was made to be inclusive moving forward and bring those not present into the rest of the process.
- Council will not be able to act on every suggestion and idea but nothing will be lost as the full transcription of the brainstorming will be created.

Suggestions for the next time included the following.

- Have a meet and greet separate from the meeting facility at the beginning of the next retreat to help break the ice.
- Schedule an afternoon outing and evening working sessions to break up the day.
- Have optional pre and post retreat events planned, possibly a trip to Athabasca.
- Arrange a meeting with the university president or the minister of advanced education.
- Schedule around an AU board of governors meeting so councillors can be observers and some travel expenses may be covered.

Next Steps

The next steps, in the process that was begun at the council retreat, include the following.

Retreat Report

Finalize the retreat report.

1. Circulate the draft report and retreat transcript to the council for comment. Those councillors and staff that were present should review for accuracy and completeness. Those who were not present should review for clarity.

2016 Council Retreat Report

2. Finalize the report based on comments and put on the August council agenda if possible to be received by the council.
3. Post the report as a public document on the website after it is received by the council at a council meeting.

2016-2017 Council Goals

Create the 2016-2017 goals based on the recommendations in this report.

1. The executive council, led by the president, will create and circulate the draft list for council input and consideration.
2. Finalize the list based on comments and put on a council agenda as soon as possible to be approved by the council.
3. Post the report as a public document on the website after it is approved by council at a council meeting.
4. Use the action plan development process (see Other Action Plans sub-section below) to work on each goal throughout the year.

2016-2017 AUSU Budget

Create the 2016-2017 budget based on the recommendations in this report.

1. VPFA and executive director will lead this process with input from executive council and finance committee.
2. Circulate the draft budget for council input and consideration.
3. Finalize the budget based on comments and put on the August council agenda if possible to be approved by the council.
4. Post the budget as a public document on the website after it is approved by council at a council meeting.

AUSU Bylaw Review

Create the bylaw working group of council based on the recommendations in this report.

1. The executive director will look for another councillor to be on the working group.
2. The executive director will discuss consulting services with Titus Gregory for expert support and use the legal fees budget to cover costs.
3. The working group will develop an action plan for a full review of the AUSU bylaws including participation by the full council, legal review, the required two readings of a council motion to amend, and the required member consultations.

Other Action Plans

Council will use this report as one of several sources to develop the 2016-2017 goals list, which will form council priorities for the year.

Council will also revisit this report in December 2016 to determine if any additional goals for council, staff, or executive council will be created from for the remaining recommendations or the discussions captured in this report. The decision to create additional goals needs to be based on assessment of priorities, and availability of resources.

Action plans can be created for goals using the template provided at the retreat to encourage a process based approach. The level of detail should correspond to the size and complexity of the goal.

Action plans are living documents. They are adjusted as the plan is implemented based on results, roadblocks, and experiences. Building action plans is an iterative process and should be guided by priorities, resources, and achievable timelines.

1. Executive council will create the first level action plan drafts. This will be a very high-level outline of steps, identification of the responsible person or group, and a basic timeline.
2. Executive council will assign the action plan to the appropriate person or group to continue its development. This may be a staff person, an executive councillor, a committee chair, the executive council, or a committee.
3. Those responsible for each action plan will report to council on progress, again at a level corresponding to the size or complexity of the goal.

Conclusion

The first face to face AUSU council retreat in over a decade was a resounding success.

All of the fundamental goals for the retreat were met. The planning process for the 2016-2017 year was kick-started in a way that allowed for maximum participation, open brainstorming, and team building.

Most importantly, the beginnings of a systematic process of consultation, discussion, prioritization, goal setting, the creation of action plans, and implementation of those plans took place. If this systematic approach is continued, it will result in an organisation that is responsible to its membership, proactive, achieves success, and continues to grow, learn, and increase its effectiveness.

Appendix A: Action Plan Template

Athabasca University Students' Union



Action Plan

Use this Action Plan Template to identify specific steps you need to take in order to achieve the goals and objectives outlined in your strategic plan.

Tip: Make each action step as simple and specific as possible, breaking down complex actions into single steps.

Objective:					
Action Step <i>What needs to be done?</i>	Responsible Party <i>Who should take action to complete this step?</i>	Necessary Resources <i>What do you need in order to complete this step?</i>	Potential Challenges <i>Are there any potential challenges that may impede completion? How will you overcome them?</i>	Deadline <i>When should this step be completed?</i>	Status <i>Complete Ongoing Delayed</i>

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