

**CANADIAN ALLIANCE of STUDENT ASSOCIATIONS:  
A Working Document**

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**I. PREFACE**

Once again, it appears that there is strong interest in creating a new organization made up of student unions across Canada. Most recently, the SUDS conference at Whistler BC served as a forum for those groups present to discuss the on-going effort to formally establish CASA: the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations. Many ideas were discussed, several proposals were suggested, and numerous agreements and disagreements played themselves out in this open forum. Correspondingly, satisfaction amongst the participants with respect to the proceedings varied greatly. For some, CASA was viewed as an imminent and realistic opportunity; for others, a great number of issues formed the gulf between expectations and realistic implementation.

We believe that CASA is an imminent possibility, and have written this proposal only in order to expedite and facilitate the process of eventual incorporation. We hope that the various parties interested in getting CASA off the ground will converge on this proposal as a rough starting document, and use it to focus their energies throughout the lengthy and difficult process.

This working document offers you a proposed structure, a declaration of founding principles, and a set of organizational objectives (in rough format) for CASA. (Please note that the document that follows is only a basic outline of how we think CASA should be organized. It is not our intention to delve too deeply into matters of protocol and procedure or, for that matter, every possible aspect of organizational structure. Instead, it is hoped that this document will clear the ground for such discussions.) We have added, in addition, a number of recommendations for coping with the problems and issues which might drive away or divide discussions. We must emphasize that, in formulating these ideas, it was not our intention to take a leadership role in the process without the explicit consent of the student associations interested in moving CASA forward. We submit this document to any interested student organization simply in order to help us all reach the next step: discussing a concrete proposal and amending it, or perhaps re-casting it as necessary.

We are strongly aware that there exist a wide range of opinions with respect to the questions of how, when and for whom CASA should be set up. This proposal attempts -- to the greatest extent possible -- to incorporate a wide range of interests as well as to accommodate the different circumstances in which student associations across Canada find themselves. Despite the fact that this proposal for CASA is based on an attempt to keep open not only the founding process but also the future CASA itself, we believe that the ideas contained herein offer a viable structure for student associations to work together on a number of levels.

Finally, this document owes its existence not principally to its authors but to the great number of student leaders who have set forth visions, debated structures, and networked with other student associations, from the first Winds of Change conference in 1983 to the most recent SUDS meeting at Whistler. We have attempted to synthesize and reconcile their positions and proposals, and to draw together the wealth of their experience. The proposal we offer you is merely a signal post recommending a fruitful path to pursue.

## **II. FOUNDING PRINCIPLES**

### **A. Openness**

CASA will be an organized alliance of Student Associations from across Canada. There is no barrier to membership except that any prospective member must be recognized as the official student organization by the university, college, or institute whose student body it represents.

CASA will be open to working with non-member student associations over areas of common interest irrespective of the association's other affiliations. Furthermore, CASA will consult regularly with other provincial and federal student organizations, on an organization-to-organization basis, in the interests of freely exchanging information and seeking out potential areas for cooperation.

### **B. Accessibility**

The financial commitment entailed in joining CASA and contributing to its regular operation will be kept at a minimal, but not nominal. In doing so, membership and contribution to the functioning of CASA will not be unfairly structured in favour of larger or smaller student associations with greater or lesser resources. CASA shall collect a membership fee set by the National Committee which will be deemed affordable to all its members. The membership fee will cover honoraria for the Chairperson and Secretary, communication costs incurred by CASA appointees on CASA business, as well as members' delegate fees for the Annual General Meeting.

CASA will encourage the sharing of resources amongst its members. As it is recognized that research resources are unevenly distributed between schools, each CASA member will sign a formal letter of intent to commit a percentage of their resources towards the research of policy platforms and public statements on issues related to post-secondary education. Regardless of the origin of the research, all members will have equal opportunity to be involved in the policy formation process.

### **C. Equality**

CASA endorses the principle of "one school, one vote, one fee". Voting at the CASA National Committee level will not be weighted according to the size of constituency each student association represents. The organizational membership fee shall be the same for all members. Fees shall be collected on an annual basis.

### **D. Flexibility**

CASA should operate on the basis of an "easy in, easy out" policy with respect to its membership and policy endorsement. Because CASA is an association of student

associations, only the consent of any particular student association's governing body is required for membership admittance and policy endorsement.

#### **E. Responsible Action**

CASA exists in order to fulfill three vital roles:

1. To serve as a nexus of communication for student associations across Canada, through the medium of annual meetings and various communications technologies. These communication channels will be oriented towards:
  - a. Sharing the wealth of internal research resources that student associations possess.
  - b. Widening the range of opinion and information that student associations may wish to consult in seeking solutions to problems related to the day to day functioning of their internal administration.
  - c. Establishing a national student database where student associations may deposit any documents that might be of interest to other student associations and interested parties. Access to this database would not be exclusively limited to member student associations.
2. To serve as a forum for addressing, discussing, researching and responding to issues and concerns related to Post-Secondary Education within federal jurisdiction.
3. To serve as a forum for the exchange of information regarding, and to lend support to members over, trend-setting or unprecedented issues/developments in Post Secondary Education at the provincial level on the initiative of a member and with the consent of a reasonable percentage of the members.

### **III. STRUCTURAL PRINCIPLES**

#### **A. Organizational Elements**

##### **1. National Committee:**

- (a) The CASA National Committee shall be composed of one representative from each member student association.
- (b) The CASA National Committee shall be the governing body of CASA, responsible for making decisions pertaining to the CASA mandate.
- (c) The CASA National Committee shall elect or appoint when necessary, members to the various positions within CASA.
- (d) The CASA National Committee shall establish a set of policy priorities and a coherent lobbying or political strategy at the Annual General. Such initiatives will respond to the organization's need for proactive platform strategies, as well as a streamlined plan of response to unanticipated developments within the area of Post-Secondary Education.
- (d) The CASA National Committee shall appoint CASA members to the National Policy Sub-Committees to address PSE issues (see 1.d)

##### **2. Chairperson:**

- (a) The Chairperson shall be elected by the National Committee.
- (b) The Chairperson shall be the official spokesperson for CASA. S/he shall be responsible for publicizing, lobbying or seeking support for CASA's policy platform on any given issues by other means of solicitation.
- (c) The Chairperson shall issue directives for research on policy positions from the National Committee to the appointed National Policy Subcommittees.
- (d) The Chairperson shall receive and disseminate policy platform proposals from the Subcommittees to the National Committee membership for endorsement. S/he will also be responsible for preparing a final draft of a policy document before it is circulated to members.
- (e) The Chairperson shall establish the agenda for the CASA Annual General Meeting (AGM), and shall preside over the AGM.
- (f) The Chairperson shall perform any other duties that the CASA National Committee may choose to delegate to him or her.

(g) Where a substantial portion of the CASA membership finds the Chair's representation of a particular policy position to be in contradiction with his member student association's dissent over the same issue, CASA shall appoint a Vice Chair to represent, lobby for, or seek support for that policy position.

### **3. National Secretary:**

- (a) The Secretary shall be based at the same student association as the Chairperson, whenever possible.
- (b) The Secretary shall be responsible for overseeing the organization of the AGM with respect to the collection, disbursement and accounting of all CASA funds.
- (c) The Secretary shall be ultimately responsible for ensuring that all members receive CASA communications in a timely fashion and that all members are informed of upcoming items for voting on the National Committee.
- (d) The Secretary shall distribute policy packages to members of the CASA National Committee, which have been formulated by the Policy Sub-Committees, for endorsement by members of the CASA National Committee, as directed by the CASA Chairperson;
- (e) The Secretary shall ensure that the various communication links that join individual associations to the rest of the membership are used consistently. This entails maintaining a list of members and the media of communication that the Chair and all other members use to communicate with that member.
- (f) The Secretary shall be responsible for the collection and archiving of all official CASA documents.

### **4. National Policy Sub-Committees:**

- (a) For any given PSE issue that the CASA National Committee wishes to investigate and address, a Policy Sub-Committee composed of member organizations shall be struck at CASA's AGM. Further sub-committees may be struck as unanticipated developments arise with respect to issues in PSE that CASA may seek to address publicly.
- (b) The Policy Sub-Committees will receive directives from the National Committee for investigating and producing a policy platform on a given issue. The Sub-Committee shall forward its recommendations to the National Chair for distribution and endorsement by the National Committee.

- (c) The Sub-Committee shall appoint a Chairperson responsible for communicating with the National Chair.

[N.B. An appropriate selection method for electing members to the Policy Sub-Committee has yet to be worked out in detail.]

#### **5. The Sub-Committee Chair**

- (a) The Sub-Committee Chair shall be responsible for overseeing the sub-division of the policy formulation task amongst the Sub-Committee's members.
- (b) The Sub-Committee Chair shall be responsible for overseeing that communications amongst Sub-Committee members are effectively and consistently maintained.

[N.B. As the Sub-Committee will likely not be able to meet throughout its work on a particular policy initiative, its communications will be handled largely over e-mail, phone and fax. The need for good coordination in this respect is highly important].

#### **6. The CASA National Student Database Implementation Committee:**

CASA shall appoint a sub-committee from amongst its members to research and recommend the implementation of a computerized National Student Database. Accessible to all members and the general public, the Database will serve as a repository for any public documents or information that student associations may wish to place at the disposal of interested parties.

#### **7. CASA Associates:**

- (a) CASA National Committee may wish to regularly and officially solicit the input of other provincial and federal student organizations on a variety of issues, and to establish or rationalize a working relationship with such groups [e.g. OUSA, FEUQ, etc.].
- (b) The National Committee may choose to solicit these parties as potential CASA Associates.
- (c) The preceding holds true for individual student associations that elect to remain outside of the formal CASA framework.

#### **B. Decision-making and Voting - Internal Administration:**

- (a) Voting on issues related to the functioning of CASA as an organization shall be done without the need of convening an actual meeting of CASA's members, through established and secured communication channels to minimize overhead



costs. (If ALL voting matters could be handled by the Chairperson and solicited through e-mail or fax (ensuring proper security arrangements) then the business of the organization could be effectively conducted 'in absentia' with the exception of the AGM. Some corporations and associations in the US and Canada already run meetings this way).

[We have left this section undeveloped so as not to overly complicate this document with minutiae about voting procedure, protocol, etc.]

### **C. Decision-making and Voting - Policies**

(a) Draft policies shall be developed at the Sub-Committee level and forwarded to the Chairperson. The Chairperson will prepare a final draft of the policy position which will be circulated to the National Committee members for approval, whereupon the Chair shall be responsible for publicizing and soliciting external support for the policy position, according to criteria agreed upon by the CASA National Committee.

(b) Endorsement shall work on a sign-on basis. When the final draft of a document has been passed, schools will have the option of signing onto it or not. Publicly, any position paper circulated by CASA does not bear the official stamp of CASA but that of the individual member organizations within CASA which choose to endorse it. Such an endorsement structure would facilitate and accelerate the process by which policy or lobby positions could be discussed and made public.

[ Recommendation: (c) CASA may elect to include a minority statement for members who choose not to endorse a particular policy document]

### **D. Annual General Meeting (AGM):**

(a) The AGM shall serve as the forum through which communication channels are evaluated and improved.

(b) The AGM shall serve as the forum where CASA will initiate a set of proactive policy priorities for the year. At the AGM, the CASA National Committee shall establish a set of policy priorities and a coherent lobbying or political strategy at the Annual General. Such initiatives will respond to the organization's need for proactive platform strategies, as well as a streamlined plan of response to unanticipated developments within the area of Post-Secondary Education.



## **General Observations**

### **A. Communication**

The key to making CASA operate effectively as laid out in this document is a strong communications network. The authors of this document have envisioned a process whereby most of the decision-making and routine work within CASA will be done by member associations at the site of their own universities. It is for this reason that the National Chair is responsible for a number of purely duties related to communication. The Chair is pivotal in the network because s/he is responsible for ensuring consistency in communication; only with such consistency can CASA function 'at a distance' without the need for its members to meet frequently.

### **B. Accountability and Commitment**

Many student associations concerned with founding CASA frequently express concerns about the proposed size and financial burden that running CASA would represent. While we sympathize with this concern, and while we have formulated this proposal on the caveat of low operating costs, it is clear that some operating costs will have to be collected from members on behalf of CASA once it becomes an actual organization.

The reason for this is two-fold. First and most obvious is the fact that certain costs will inevitably be incurred by CASA Officers in the execution of their responsibilities. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the imposition of an organizational fee, and the proper accounting-for of funds, is one of the surest ways of building an accountability structure into a semi-centralized organization such as CASA. On the basis of what has been proposed in the past regarding the founding of CASA, little attention was given to the issue of accountability. And yet, the need for accountability is clear. CASA members may appoint sub-committees to develop policy, and they may appoint a Chairperson to responsibly represent the organization; but nothing guarantees that these individuals will carry out the jobs they have been entrusted with unless the organization as a whole can recognize and supervise this process. We have tried to incorporate some elements of accountability into our proposal here, for a start. The imposition of membership fees helps to achieve this aim.

The counterpart to accountability is commitment. If CASA is going to work without a rigid and strong central structure like CFS, it must be able to summon the commitment of its members; members must be willing to work, and to have a stake in CASA as their organization. To respond to this need, we have recommended that certain financial resources be fronted by member associations, and that physical resources in terms of research labour-time be formally placed at the disposal of CASA. We feel that it is only through these measures that we can ensure the two keys to organizational success: accountability and commitment.