CASA Foundation 2023 Conference Report

***Introduction***

The first conference of the 2023-2024 year was held in Ottawa, Ontario by CASA. The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) hosted its annual Foundations conference from May 15th-19th, 2023. This week long conference brings newly elected student executives from various student unions across the country to introduce advocacy at the federal landscape, how it works, and why it is important.

There were 24 member schools in attendance from across the country. The student unions in attendance flew from British Columbia, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Alberta, Prince Edward Island and many more. There were also 11 schools with observer status in attendance; these are schools that are not members yet but are visiting conferences to see if the organization is worth joining. You can think of it sort of as a two-year trial period before deciding to pay into the organization.

Foundations is often regarded as part of the orientation for these new executives. It brings passionate student leaders together to network, discuss and prioritize advocacy goals for the year ahead.

There were three delegates that attended this conference on behalf of CSI:

* President- Nelson Chukwuma
* Vice President- Monil Jethva
* Director- Kassidy Rousselle

This report will give a summary of each day of the Foundations conference and highlight its importance to our student union.

***Day 1: Sunday May 14th***

This day was a travel day. We arrived at the hotel in the late afternoon and met some of the delegates from other schools. There was a quick meet and greet in the hotel lobby, and then dinner in the Ottawa Byward Market.

***Day 2: Monday May 15th***

The day began with an Indigenous opening ceremony from an Elder. He gave a speech whoch highlighted his personal journey of education and linked it to our work as student leaders. He was able to highlight the importance of leaders within his communities and also linked that to the work we do as student leaders. We then moved into the Code of Conduct presentation. These two sessions helped set the tone for the conference because it outlined the importance of respect, integrity and dignity within CASA. The culture of CASA is one of acceptance and inclusion, it embraces all and promotes a community of openness within its member schools.

The first plenary took place after the Code of Conduct Presentation; think of this like a CSI Board Meeting but with separate procedural rules. The outgoing Chair of the Board, Christian Fotang, started with a land acknowledgement and the Code of Conduct officers for the conference were selected. Following this was an icebreaker, CASA Bingo. This was a quick way to have people meet each other and learn more about one another while scrambling to be the first person to yell Bingo!

After lunch, the sessions continued with “CASA Deeper Dives”, and presentations of the Strategic Plan and Budget for the year.

Vice President Monil Jethva states in his report:

*“As the name suggests, this session took us through the intentions that the foundation had laid. It spoke about the strategic plan and what it wants to incorporate. It also outlined the budget allocation and how the resources would be used.”*

President Nelson Chukwuma states in his report:

*“A strategic overview of the financial budget approved at the AGM. This provided financial transparency for new delegates and allowed for questions to be answered in regards to certain budget lines.”*

The day came to end and there was time for dinner followed by a scavenger hunt to explore Ottawa and the various buildings on Parliament Hill.

***Day 3: Tuesday May 16th***

This day began with a presentation on the Federal Political Climate. The theme of the day seemed to be an Introduction to Federal Advocacy, so this first presentation was extremely important for allowing delegates to understand the federal political landscape.

President Nelson Chukwuma states in his report:

*“This presentation highlighted the current political landscape and how the various political parties are viewed. A bit of emphasis was placed on the polling results between the two major contenders for PM, Justin Trudeau, and Pierre Poilievre. It also highlighted some of the major decisions that the government in power as well as other parties would be considering this year. Presented by new GSRO Matthew Gerrits, he explained that this was important to know because the political appetite on Parliament Hill will often aid in our successes or progress of advocacy efforts.”*

Following this was a presentation on the new CASA Mentorship Program which would allow members to connect with Alumni and build stronger relationships.

Director Kassidy Rousselle states in her report:

*“This presentation was delivered by Wasiimah, who is the MRO for CASA. It gave a brief but informative explanation of a new program that would connect incoming delegates with past and current delegates (or Alumni) to provide guidance and support navigating through our involvement in CASA.”*

The sessions continued with presentation on Elections Canada and the partnerships that CASA has with elections Canada as a non-partisan organization. We then went in to a presentation on how to properly advocate to political representatives and the government in power.

President Nelson Chukwuma states in his report:

*“One of my favorite presentations from the conference, it highlights the strategies and tactics that can be utilized when working on advocacy initiatives. It was presented in the federal advocacy landscape but can be utilized in both provincial and municipal levels of government. Presented by Mackenzy Metcalfe, this presentation provided valuable information but ultimately the main message for me was to remember that politicians are people too.”*

The last half of the day included sessions from the National Indigenous Advocacy Committee, and the presentations were led by Co-chairs Shannon Cornelson and Stevie Demerchant, with some support from the MRO, Wasiimah Joomun.

Vice President Monil Jethva states in his report:

*“Through this session, we were informed about the nation’s history and why it is essential to undertake specific initiatives to spotlight the Indigenous community. It also extensively spoke about the actual life ill-treatment that the community faces and how we can take steps to remedy it and rebuild relationships with the indigenous communities.”*

Director Kassidy Rousselle states in her report:

*“This presentation was delivered by Wasiimah, and described the committees responsibilities, the structure in which the organization is run. It also gave a brief description on what our role is in supporting NIAC.”*

President Nelson Chukwuma states in his report:

*“Presented by Shannon Cornelson, this presentation helped introduce the history of truth and reconciliation in Canada to the delegates. She integrated stories from her personal life which captivated the audience with it. The part of the session that I enjoyed the most was about Consensus-Based Decision Making. It is an important part of the culture for the Indigenous community and Shannon encouraged that we respect this model when making decisions about NIAC representatives.”*

***Day 4: Wednesday May 17th***

The theme for this day involved practicing advocacy through discussions and debates, and observing/meeting political representatives.

It began with a presentation on CASA Policy Library Overview. These are researched Policy standpoints and recommendations that all delegates before us worked on, and delegates after us will begin to work on. They outline our position on various issues that affect students and aid in our advocacy efforts.

Following this was the “Issues That Matter To Your Student Union” session. This session is very important as we start debating the advocacy priorities for the year based on what we see on various campuses. It is highly passionate and sometimes contentious due to the many priorities that each student union.

President Nelson Chukwuma states in his report:

*“This is the beginning of our decisions on advocacy priorities for the year. The staff and board led this activity that allowed delegates to debate on issues that matter most to our respective student members.”*

Vice President Monil Jethva states in his report:

*“The CASA team spearheaded this session to understand each union’s priorities. It also helped me realize how aligned the individual student bodies were compared to the overall collective and what matters were common to most unions that could be taken to the forefront.”*

The last half of the day was spent in Parliament and we were able to attend Question Period in the House of Commons.

Vice President Monil Jethva states in his report:

*“During this session, the board was welcomed to sit through the question period, where ministers took on each other to advocate for their parties and political belief. This was an exciting session as we could see real politicians go head-to-head in a professional environment.”*

In the evening, we were able to get dressed up and attend a formal dinner hosted by CASA, with the Minister of Mental Health, The Honourable Carolyn Bennett, MP as a special guest. We were able to discuss important issues regarding mental health across our campuses and she gave a keynote speech.

***Day 5: Thursday May 18th***

This day was spent receiving cultural competence training from the renowned Chuk Odenigbo.

Vice President Monil Jethva states in his report:

*“This session was brought to the forefront after last year. A whole day was dedicated to this session, proving how important it was for the organization to create a safe, equitable space within the organization and to take it outside into the real world. This session dealt with sensitive topics like equity, diversity, and inclusion and how to approach each. And create spaces that would prioritize inclusivity regardless of the topic of discussion.”*

***Day 6: Friday May 19th***

The final day of the conference was a plenary in which we elected candidates to the CASA Board of Directors and selected committee members as well. The seven-hour meeting saw many debates and question periods for candidates, and ultimately we were able to elect 7 new members to the CASA Board. It was clear that selecting the Board of Directors was very important to the members because they would be aiding in the direction of policy and advocacy for the next year. There were elections for the following positions: Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, Director of Policy, Director of Advocacy, Director of Membership, and Director of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

CSI delegates did not run for any Board positions this year, however, Nelson Chukwuma was selected to be part of the Federal Policy Committee (FPC) for the second year in a row, and did also join the Governance and Internal Review Committee (GIRC).

***Benefits to CSI***

Director Kassidy Rousselle writes:

*“The presentations given throughout the week have provided a much more in depth understanding in how CASA functions as an organization and all of the things we can work together to achieve over the next year.”*

Vice President Monil Jethva writes:

*“It was helpful to sit through each session thoroughly and gain sufficient knowledge to understand how such a huge organization works dealing with multiple opinions and working through it to present a unified front. The networking aspect was another advantage. It allowed delegates from our student union to connect with passionate student leaders from various schools across the country. We learnt about the work being done at these schools and exchanged ideas. The conference was attended by 22 member schools from different provinces across the country.”*

President Nelson Chukwuma writes:

*“This conference is an important part of orientation for new student leaders. It allows for connection with other Student Unions within the first month of new terms, allows for greater understanding of collective advocacy and provides immense value to our student members. A lot of the sessions contain information that can be implemented within our institutions and that could help us better serve our students.”*