

CASA director resigns amid speculation

By KRISHNA LALBIHARIE

WINNIPEG -- Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) National Director Hoops Harrison, announced his resignation Wednesday, February 24 citing "personal reasons." Speculation from within the organization, however, credits Harrison's early departure as indicative of his dissatisfaction with the association's movement towards progressive lobbying.

"The organization is in fine shape. It's in a transitional period for the organization. The reasons why I'm leaving aren't that important. It's really insignificant in the big picture of things," said Harrison.

"The new direction of the organization and the fact that I'm leaving have nothing to do with each other."

While CASA's established mandate provides for lobbying of issues exclusively germane to post-secondary education (PSE) accessibility and financing, the association, according to Harrison, has recently indicated a willingness to address issues from a "grass roots" perspective.

"If CASA chooses to lobby for things beyond PSE or through grass roots lobbying, that's fine. CASA is constantly changing and is reflective of the changing concerns of students," he said.

But according to Andrea Wenham, Vice-President External of the University of New Brunswick Students' Union (UNBSU) -- a CASA-aligned school, Harrison's resignation may in part be due to his disfavour of CASA's shifting focus and potential structural reorganization.

"I don't think that as a whole the organization is

moving towards addressing activist issues, but some ideas were raised at the last national conference about developing, what some may consider, a more activist approach to lobbying, which we currently don't do," said Wenham.

"I think Hoops has a slightly different idea than what the majority of CASA now wants -- a more comprehensive and broader view of how to lobby and who we should represent. There are certain people in CASA, he's not the only one, who tend to dismiss ideas that aren't exactly the same as theirs," she added.

National Chairperson of the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) Elizabeth Carlyle notes that Harrison's departure may evince a movement towards addressing broader student issues, but is skeptical of CASA developing an effective lobbying strategy.

"They can talk all they want about doing grass roots work, engaging in demonstrations, etc., but their by-laws are very clear in stating their membership is comprised of student councils and not the students themselves and so you can only get so close to the grass roots with that kind of structure," she said.

Considered rivals among student lobbyists, CFS and CASA have maintained a tenuous relationship since the early 1990s, often a function of perceived political party alignments and their respective approaches to lobbying.

"Students by and large are not interested in sucking up to Liberal politicians or pussyfooting around issues which is essentially what CASA does for students," Carlyle said.

CASA delegate and the Director of Student Relations for a central Canadian university, Andrea Pratt, disagrees with Carlyle.

"CASA has done so much for students nationally this year, particularly with respect to needs assessment on student loans, tax-relief on student loans, as well as entering into discussions with the Social Union and the Council of Ministers on Education in Canada [CMEC]," she said adding that the success of CASA is due in large

part to its national director.

"If CASA is moving in a different direction now and if that's why Hoops is leaving, I think that's honorable of him. What could be better for an organization than for someone like that to step aside a make room for someone else who likes the new direction," Pratt said.

Harrison has stated that he is returning to school in Alberta in the fall, but will assist the new national director, elected March 9, in transitioning as head of the

organization.

"The whole purpose of CASA is to make a difference in students' lives and we have. So I'm happy to leave at this point," he said.

"I'm really pleased with CASA, where it's sitting and the potential that it has. It does sadden me to think that even now, detractors and nay-sayers are looking for some sinister spin on what is the most personal decision and in fact a very natural progression in student politics."

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