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## Attention all Societies

The deadline for submissions to the Winter term "Campus Activities Unlimited" Calendar is November 28 at 9:00 am. If you have an event you would like to advertise, please send it in to either Judy Guthrie or Sandra Bell in Room 222, SUB. Because of the limited space on the calendar, we can not guarantee your event will be put on, so early submission is strongly advised.

## DON'T BE A STATISTIC



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# NSERC's granting procedures

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The next step is the NSERC Postgraduate Scholarships. First-year Master's students — those embarking on research careers requiring insight, ingenuity and a willingness to work hard — are assessed by NSERC in the seemingly appropriate manner, by their marks. According to Dr. Martin Willison (past Chair of the Biology Department's Graduate Admission Committee), by the time the applications reach the final selection, regardless of how the department had ranked its applicants, they will have been re-ranked by the university and NSERC with increasing emphasis placed on grades. Dr. Kimmins sees the system as being less mechanical, with the university paying attention to departmental rankings. According to him, reference letters and rankings attesting to a student's actual research ability are very important. My experience as an outside observer (and one of the horde of applicants) tells me that marks are probably the most important criterion with the rest of the factors counting only in close ties. Dr. Willison feels that, "The losers are those students who have ability and potential but don't have appropriate grades." If the student is successful, renewal is largely a matter of showing some progress.

Dr. Willison concluded his talk with me by assuring me that a "snowball" effect was not inevitable. Prestigious scholarships

received in the past do not count as much towards future grant success as do good publications. To make up for some bad marks received in his/her undergraduate career, all one needs is the desire to work for a few years poorly funded and somehow produce respectable publications.

Well, enough griping for now. What about making the system more cost-effective in terms of dollars per promise kept? The simplest system would be to rewrite the handbook, replacing the words "research ability" with "high academic standing." That wouldn't really get us anywhere though. I had thought that a system based on score sheets submitted by three referees would be a better idea. However, Dr. Willison pointed out that such a system is highly susceptible to "fudging," with the end result being a pile of applications with ranks of "excellent" in all categories and no way to choose between them but academic standing.

Dr. Kimmins suggested a minimal change which would improve the undergrad granting procedure. As the system exists, all years are used in calculating academic standing. Because of this, brilliant students who had trouble adjusting to the first year of university life or who had one marred by personal tragedy or the need to work, are passed over. If the committee would look at the whole transcript and exclude one obviously bad year before calculating the average, the system

would be much more fair.

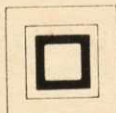
Another possibility suggested by Dr. Kimmins involves a larger (but not impracticable) restructuring of the system. The system presently includes a set of loose informal quotas with each university receiving a certain number of NSERC scholarships (plus or minus a few). If these quotas were formally set at the beginning of each application year, with each department being given a set number of awards to fill at their own discretion, the system could fulfill its promise much better. As it is now, a lot of departmental groundwork is lost. This groundwork consists of ranking students with respect to marks, references and individual ability. This ranking is then overturned at the university level in favour of marks only. Getting rid of the middlemen (the university and national levels) would eliminate the necessity to use marks as the only selection criterion. To reduce the chances of a deserving student being passed over because his/her department has filled its quota, each region could have a "slush fund" of a few awards which would probably have to be dealt out in the traditional arithmetical manner. Final assessment at the departmental level would allow a more personal (and I would say more accurate) assessment of a candidate's actual research potential and in that way, meet NSERC's promise and spend our tax dollars more appropriately.



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