



Essay on student participation

A look at representation in university government

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In a recent address to the annual meeting of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, Dr. C. B. MacPherson of the University of Toronto stated that "students must be given a means of participation if universities are to perform their function."

He elaborated by saying "students need a real voice in the uses to which the whole resources of the university intellectual and material, are put."

Upon examination, I think very few people would dispute the contents of these statements. However, there is a serious question which can immediately be raised as to what constitutes the "means of participation."

Here at The University of Alberta, students have been fortunate in achieving participation without having to "confront" the administration. Upon the request of the students, participation took the form of representation on the General Faculty Council, several of its committees and the Board of Governors. (For those interested, a short summary of the purpose of these bodies is given in the back of The University of Alberta telephone directory.)

At this point it may be useful to note the two extremes which student participation could have taken.

The first extreme is really one of no participation in universities affairs at all. Strangely enough, one observes that there are a considerable number of students who candidly hold the viewpoint that students should avoid active participation as "we are here to study and not here to waste our time playing university administrator."

I personally disagree with this belief as I cannot see how a student body numbering 15,000 students or more could sit back and never have an opinion or constructive criticism. Most students can still remember being told immediately upon entering this institution that "if it is only one thing you learn during your brief stay at this

university, may it be that you have acquired the ability to think."

Certainly it cannot be said that this ability to think is acquired one week prior to graduation. Hence at some time or other every student has wondered to himself or out loud to others about the relevance of some course, the teaching ability of some professor, the adequacy of some facility, be it a building complex housing a faculty or only an isolated piece of lab equipment, the transportation system to and from university, etc.; the list is infinite in number and scope. Most certainly the administration and academic staff are not totally unaware of these areas of concern but how do we communicate our views, our needs, our problems and our often idealistic solutions to them?

One possible way is, of course, continuous out loud wondering and speculation in the hope that some of our views will ultimately filter their way to those who can take them into consideration when decisions are to be made. Or else we can say nothing, knowing that soon we will graduate and therefore others can solve their own problems. These approaches are certainly not the answer.

When one examines its closely, the other extreme of student participation in the affairs of the university is really not one of participation either. There are groups on this campus who advocate complete student control of the affairs of this university. They would solve all problems by "democratizing" the administration and govern by constant dialogue among students while at the same time maintaining the present administrators in the capacity of civil servants. They would govern the university in its entirety, making policy decisions, assign priorities for academic and building programs, make requests for student grants, regulate finances, decide curricula, entrance requirements, grades, etc. etc. It must be remembered that at the same time these students would be acquiring an education themselves.

Undoubtedly there are times when the president of our university, or for that matter any administrator or staff member, has wished that a difficult decision could be made by someone else, but I think it rather ludicrous to assume

that students acting as part-time administrators and having no background or experience could effectively and efficiently govern this university. As stated earlier this would not be participation but absolute student control, a type of government which would likely falter in its initial stages of inception.

What then should participation be? How can we have our views heard and where? Probably the most satisfactory method is to seek representation on the administrative bodies of this university. It can be said that this view is generally held by the majority of the students on this campus and of course is therefore also the reason for the Students' Union and the Graduate Students' Association making their requests for representation. It requires no upheaval of the present structure of government at the university, just the representation of students. The writer of "I am sick of student power" would not and should not object to this type of student power as it does not seek control but only a voice in the affairs of this university.

However, there are still some questions that need to be answered. How much representation do we desire? Do we want representation on more governing bodies, should we have a vote, do we want more representation on any single body, must we seek a majority? As student representation is yet still in a state of evolution at this university, these questions are of vital concern to the voter.

I personally feel that representation could be expanded if students so desire. For example, most students know that many buildings are presently in various stages of planning. The planning phase has essentially been completed for the Law Building, the Fine Arts Building and the Basic Medical Sciences Building but for many others it is still actively going on.

Recently the Department of English asked the Campus Development Committee (a committee of the General Faculty Council) whether any policies were established with respect to the participation of students in planning of specific capital projects.

The committee's answer was that no such policy existed but that if a faculty or departmental building committee so desired it could consult with students.

In fact, the committee recommended that some systematic manner of consultation with students be implemented early in the planning of a specific capital project since they constitute a major user. This then is a simple case of recognizing that students, being major building users, most certainly have opinions about the nature of classrooms, lounges and laboratories.

The second question is also of concern. Should students have a vote? On some committees student representatives have a vote now. I feel that this is as it should be, because if it is recognized that students have views which make their representation desirable, there is then no reason why the representatives should not have a vote like other members. However, since many committees essentially function by consensus of opinion the question of voting rights is of somewhat lesser importance.

The last question is of the greatest significance. Should students seek a majority on any one body? I personally feel the answer to this is that they should not. By seeking a majority we would be shifting the emphasis from the role of a student representative as a person voicing student opinion and viewpoints to a role of he or she actually being the administrator. In other words we approach the second extreme which was mentioned earlier.



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