

DAGS elections: many positions left vacant

BY MARK REYNOLDS

The Dalhousie Association of Graduate Students has taken student apathy to a new level.

Despite an extension of the nomination period, lack of interest in the association's elections has left close to half of next year's council positions vacant — including that of president.

Of the 20 positions available on the new council 12 have been filled, and all by acclamation. The nomination period was extended from Mar. 4 until Mar. 9, but there was still not enough interest generated to elect a complete council.

"(This) is something that will likely happen every year," said Annie Crombie, the chief returning officer for the elections. She said that since many graduate students are in one-year

programs, they are unwilling to run for positions they may not be around to fulfil.

Crombie explained that the vacant positions, including that of president, will be filled in a September by-election. In the meantime, an interim president will be appointed from within the ranks of the new councillors.

Crombie said that usually the position of president is filled from the ranks of the previous year's council, but "there just wasn't any interest from this year's council."

James Leger, the current president of the Dalhousie Association of Graduate Students (DAGS), is optimistic about the results.

"Ideally we would have liked to have filled all 20 [positions], but I believe that sometimes a smaller group can accomplish more than a larger one," he

wrote in an e-mail interview.

Leger stated that the lack of applicants was due to a number of factors: many students do not believe they have the time to commit to student politics, DAGS has a tarnished reputation and this may have soured students on the organization, and many students don't realize DAGS can be relevant to their life.

"[It may be] a lack of understanding of just how DAGS could be involved in both the national and Dalhousie communities," Leger stated.

Leger pointed to issues that DAGS has addressed in recent months that affect Dal graduate students, including teaching assistant labour issues and reduced funding from the Medical Research Council.

"We were late getting into these issues due to distractions earlier this

school year, and it was for that reason that our smaller council amended the constitution in a referendum," he added.

"The activity of the council was determined by the interests and concerns of the council members."

DAGS weathered some turmoil earlier this year when most of its council chose to resign rather than continue to operate the Grad House, which was deeply in debt. Many of those who resigned were Masters in Business Administration (MBA) students, who have traditionally dominated the council. The new constitution calls for a more even distribution of seats. Council positions are elected in proportion to the number of students enrolled in each graduate program.

Despite what many grad students call positive changes to the council, William Schmidt, a graduate student in

psychology, says that students just don't have the time to commit to DAGS.

"What are the benefits of the positions? They let you list leadership related work on your resume, you make a few new acquaintances, but besides this, what is there?" he wrote in an e-mail interview.

Chris Riou, a graduate student in history, feels that the lack of applicants for positions has more to do with self-interest.

"People are here to get a degree, and then a job. Thus it is a very individualistic attitude. I am not sure how many students ask themselves what more there is to university than this," he wrote in an e-mail.

Riou says that students are missing out on an important part of their education by not participating in organizations like DAGS.

DSU commercial airs during election

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where do the healthcare workers come from? Where do the engineers who build the hospitals come from? They come from the education system and post-secondary education."

He says he was disappointed that post-secondary education was not discussed during the Mar. 5 leadership debate and hopes the ads will help force the issue.

Media campaigns can be an effective means of gaining public support in an election says Simone Saint-Pierre, communication coordinator for the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS). The CFS has used radio messages as recently last June's federal election.

"It is important to protect student rights and we can't do that alone," Saint-Pierre said. "We have to have the general public know the student issues

before we can really make a difference...advertising is one of the tactics we use."

She says that the success of such commercials is hard to gauge but that, over time, there are gradual shifts in public opinion.

"It's hard to measure, but I know that on the issue of student debt we've seen a change of position in the general public from, 'students are whiners' to a real concern about student debt."

But Saint-Pierre also said it is unusual for one student union to fund and organize their own campaign.

Adams says because the Mar. 24 election date was earlier than expected, there wasn't as much co-ordination between Nova Scotia's student unions as there could have been.

"We made the effort to work with [the other schools] but it just didn't happen," Adams said. "In order for the

project to have been done properly, we had to do it on our own."

Ryan Marshall is coordinator of external affairs for the students' society at the University of British Columbia. He says his organization has also created its own education campaign during the federal election, which included radio and print ads that cost \$18,000.

"It's expensive and it's something you only do every four years, but it was definitely money well spent," he said.

"As much as we try to work together [with other schools] on certain issues, we felt it was better to do a campaign for all the students of UBC."

So far, Dalhousie students have been reacting positively to their commercial.

"I liked it," said first-year student Tanya Baird. "I think this is the only country where we're pretty lax in our rights as students...we take a back seat

to everything and it's about time we didn't."

"I thought it was a really good commercial," agreed second-year student Deborah Shortall. "Of course

it's our money that they're spending, but if it helps somebody else in the future, by decreasing tuition so that people can afford to go to school, then I don't really see it as a problem."

Faculty Strike

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provide a guarantee to maintain that size of the [complement]," Gallant said.

"Given the financial constraints the university is under after so many years of drastic reductions in government funding there is very little flexibility in terms of our budget," she added.

Gallant also wants to be clear about what the complement issues are.

"We are not talking about layoffs...we are talking about an inability to guarantee full replacement

of every faculty member who

leaves," she said.

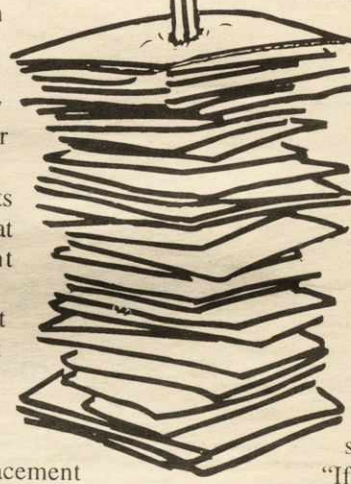
So with both sides seemingly deadlocked, there are some cracks to the optimistic fronts.

"We have to approach this with cautious optimism but we also have to be prepared for failure," Cross said.

Ugursal agrees, saying that the talks can affect the union's members' morale.

"The faculty are quite disappointed and frustrated...a lot of energy has dissipated," he said.

"If these things last too long there is a bad taste."



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