

To pay or not to pay SU fees

Law student John Pfreim has a motion before Students' Council to make Students' Union fees optional. Pfreim and SU President Robert Greenhill will be debating the motion at tonight's Council meeting. It should be entertaining and almost worth the free admission price. Here is a preview.

\$54.50 or nothing

by John Pfreim

The University of Alberta forces all full-time undergraduates to join the Students' Union.

If you don't join the SU and pay your \$54.50, you cannot study here.

This is not only a violation of students' rights, it makes the SU unaccountable to students.

I have a motion before the February 14 meeting of Students' Council requesting the Board of Governors to cease the current practice whereby the payment of fees of membership in the Students' Union is a condition of registration at the University.

If the motion passes, Students' Union fees and membership in the organizations will become optional.

This means at least \$54.50 to most students: think about your rights and then think about your money.

According to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms Section Two:

Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms:

d) freedom of association.

Simply put, you cannot force me to join the Students' Union if I do not want to; if you force me to join, then you are violating my rights.

Students would be able to vote with their dollars.

But there are advantages to optional Students' Union membership aside from conformity with the ideal of a free society and money in your pocket.

Optional membership would force greater accountability on the Students' Union. The SU would have to offer exactly the services that students are willing to pay for.

Students would be able to vote with their dollars. Were the Students' Union to sponsor a social or

political cause that a student disagrees with, that student would be free to withdraw his or her support by declining membership in the SU the next year.

Nothing could be more fair: the Students' Union could promote whatever cause it might choose, but not with your money if you disagree with that cause.

Optional membership would force the Students' Union to hustle — to actively promote and sell its services.

The SU need not do this now because it gets its money automatically. Students are unaware of what the Students' Union does and what their fees are paying for.

There are of course disadvantages to optional Students' Union membership.

If the Union continues to provide all the services it does now, in the same manner, students who didn't pay for membership would get some of the benefits paid for by SU members.

The solution would require rearranging all SU functions to avoid this "free rider" situation — with the exception of the pure student representation role of the SU, the costs of which are nominal anyway.

Those opposed to optional SU membership and fees complain that the net result would be a Students' Union drastically reduced in size and scope.

I doubt that this would be the result, but if it were then it is simply too bad for the SU: students will have determined the nature of the Students' Union for good or ill.

Practically, the Students' Union could still get most of its money if a "positive back-out" provision was employed. The student would pay fees automatically, but could later apply to get the money back. Truly apathetic students wouldn't bother.

This University has always meant to be a progressive institution, promoting greater justice and freedoms.

Optional Students' Union membership would take the University a long way forward in this regard.

Right now, they simply take your rights and then they take your money. But it doesn't have to be this way.

To paraphrase a recent SU promotional slogan. "Your Students' Union: make it better, make it optional."

\$54.50

by Robert Greenhill

At first glance, mandatory Students' Union fees seem to contradict the notion of freedom so essential to a university. In fact, the Students' Union, as an integral part of university self-government, cannot be separated from the costs of our education.

Universities have a long tradition of student government, parallel to the university administration. This is based on the principle that those who teach and

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those who are taught have an equal investment in a university. Students represent student interests at every stage of decision making, from departmental committees to the Board of Governors.

Such involvement, particularly when dealing with the complexities of running a university, costs money. Just as it would be impossible to assess the cost of a course without including administrative costs, so one cannot ignore the costs of student involvement. As student input benefits everyone, every student should share the costs.

Given the benefits offered by a students' union, there is no better way of assessing costs. If the Students' Union obtains a more equitable method of appealing marks, this benefit cannot be applied only to Students' Union members. If scrip and tuition costs are kept down because of work done by the Students' Union, these savings should not be restricted to Students' Union members. If the Students' Union is successful in improving student aid, all students will - and should - benefit.

As the advantages of a students' union are enjoyed by everyone, and as student government is an essential part of our university, it is fair and just that the costs of the student government should be shared by all.

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