

EDITORIAL

Consultation isn't that hard

Kwame Dawes

As difficult as it may be to believe there are still people at this university who strongly believe that students are the children and faculty and administration are the adults. Such people include professors who are convinced that students do not have the ability to judge the usefulness of lectures on their own and to make decisions as to whether to attend them or not. They include residence administrators who feel that they can actually dictate the behaviour of students without consulting them. This quality of disrespect amounts to the perpetuation of the myth of parent/child relationships in the context of the university community.

A few years ago, (long enough at least to allow for the evolution of facts into myths and legends) the administration felt that it had to act as the custodian of discipline and good sense and intervene in the actions of students. The administration was convinced that students were mismanaging their funds and that they had to be set straight. At the time, some students were in total agreement with this evaluation of the situation and willingly participated in the actions that were taken to end the reign of mismanagement through unorthodox and drastic action. The UNB student body lost something during that period. Administration literally stated: "Since you can't show yourself to be able to resolve your own problems, we will just have to take your allowance from you until you learn."

The UNB Foundation for Students, complete with a vetoing right reserved for the administration, was introduced and it went about doing the business of bringing stability and accountability back to the Student Union. It may have been necessary, but it was in no way something that students should have been proud of. This intervention by the administration was a sad indictment on the students' ability to solve their own problems. Four and half years later, it is clear that the Foundation has done its job. What is going to happen to the system? Many students have become spoiled by this "parental" presence in the running of its finances and they have come to enjoy the absence of responsibility that is inherent in allowing it to continue. Some have developed a peculiar skepticism for student governments very much in the same way that Americans lost faith in the honesty of American governments after the Watergate scandal. They have developed a view that implies that students themselves cannot handle the responsibility of safe-guarding against abuses by their elected officials. The power of the administration is acknowledged and has now been equated with the power of the professor. With the "parents" around, nothing can really go wrong.

Many have forgotten that the Student Union has an infrastructure that safe-guards against abuses, and this structure need not be the Foundation. The by-laws that guide the Union's activities contain clauses which make it clear that students have a right to monitor the actions of the elected officers fully. Paid-up students, can, for instance, walk up to the Student Union offices and demand access to the books of the Union. This access is protected by the by-laws of the student government. If students were vigilant and if they did act according to the laws they could ensure that abuses are kept under control.

But this requires responsibility. Sadly, students would rather someone else worry about such details. Who has the time to monitor, perpetually, every action of the student government? The administration is paid to do it, let them do it. This kind of thinking has a price, however. If we forfeit our ability to judge ourselves, we will give up the respect that faculty and administration should have for us. Invariably, the evidence of the erosion of this respect will start to emerge. One doesn't have to look very far. If it is in fact true that student representation on all the important governing bodies or policy making bodies on campus is necessary and respected, one expects that administration will ensure that no decision is made without due consultation with students. In a perfect world, that will happen. Very often students don't attend many of these planning meetings and administrators have full right to act in lieu of student participation. But when administrators begin to act with total disregard for the students, it becomes clear that we have lost something very important.

And it has happened. The Residence system is going to face many challenges in the next few years not the least of which will be the realization by students that living in residence is a painfully expensive business. Dr Armstrong himself has stated that it is the residence system that pays for the deficit that Bar Services makes. Is this right? Are students who live in residence the only ones who use Bar Services? Should students who don't drink be forced to pay for a facility that does not in any way benefit them? Do students who are opposed to drinking know that they are actually paying for an income losing business that involves drinking? Fees are very high and living conditions are not the optimum. But if these were the only problems, living in residence could be seen as bearable. However, things are changing.

Recently, the residence administrators unilaterally chose to legislate the way in which orientation activities are organized in the residences. No consultation with the proctors took place. They were simply told that this was the way it would be. It doesn't matter what the new legislation is; students should have been consulted. It only makes sense. If one wants cooperation, students should be allowed to participate in the process of decision-making. The administration may have a genuine desire to ensure that students are not abused or hurt by the orientation activities. I empathize with this concern. But if students are not a part of the effort to ensure that this takes place, what makes them think that there will not simply develop a more dangerous and frightening underground orientation system spearheaded by annoyed students? I have seen it happen elsewhere and it could happen here. Consultation is not difficult. It only shows respect and good sense. The actions of those who run the residence system indicates that these two qualities are wanting.

I salute the Student Union for resisting the changes and the approach of the residence administrators. The mess can be corrected and ought to be. Students must be consulted. I hope the Student Union will maintain this position when they come to negotiate the restructuring of the Foundation with the administration. I gather that this is afoot and that, already, there is some resistance to some of the changes on the part of the administration. I think the closed door meetings should now be opened up to the press and to other students. It is time we heard what is happening with regard to the process of partnership between students, faculty and the administration at UNB.

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