Student request 'inappropriate' says spokesman

OTTAWA (CUP) – The request by the National Union of Students (NUS) for student representation on the Canada Student Loans Plenary Group is "an inappropriate suggestion", according to the chairperson of that group.

David Levin, the chairperson of the CSLPG and the director of the federal finance department's Federal-Provincial Relations Division, said in a September 30 interview the NUS request will be considered at the October meeting of the Group, but stated that he opposed including students in the group.

The plenary group sets the rules governing who will get student loans and how much they will get. It presently consists only of student aid officers from the federal and provincial governments, meets annually in closed session, and releases no information about its discussions or activities.

"Here are a bunch of administrators - civil servants - getting together trying to scratch their heads on how to improve the (student loan) program working within the constraints they have to, and I don't think it would help the work we do to have students or any other group of people involved in our work. At that stage we're in a different world", Levin explained.

He described the role of the Plenary as being "to arrive at nationally acceptable standard practices with respect to the administration of student loans" but conceded that "administration" included "substantive policy matters" determining the nature of the program.

While noting that the "bulk of the decision-making" about student loan policy involves the plenary group, Levin said he sees no role there for student representatives. "Student organizations always have the opportunity to make representations with respect to particular program changes" he said, suggesting that NUS should "submit brief" if it wanted, rather than seek representation.

Submitting briefs, he said, is "part of our traditional way of doing things" and stressed that it is not usual to include people affected by government programs in the decision-making process itself, citing areas of health care and welfare policy as examples.

According to Levin, if students have anything to say about student aid, they should direct their attention to the provincial governments, not to the plenary group he chairs.

"I equate students with the ministers not with the civil servants", he said. "Where there are basic policy issues that have to be decided, proposals to be put forward, then students have to have contact with the (provincial) ministers of education."

The process he favours has student groups submitting student aid proposals to provincial ministers, who may decide to raise them at the plenary group. If they do, and if the plenary approves the proposal, it is then returned to all the provinces for approval. Finally, if the provinces approve, it is returned to the federal finance minister for final decision. Once the change has been decided, Levin said, only then could it be made known to the students and the public.

According to Levin's scenario, the federal government plays only a passive role in student loan policy formulation, even though it is a federal program, while the initiative for policy development comes from the provinces.

He agrees that students "might have a point" in arguing that they cannot make adequate representation about possible student loan policy changes since the present secrecy blanketing the decision-making process prevents them from knowing what, if any, changes are being considered.

But although the existing procedures "may be imperfect" as far as student input is concerned, Levin feels "if students are dissatisfied with the opportunities they now have to communicate their concerns, then they have to go to the provinces and say "as you people formulate suggestions for changing this programs we want an opportunity to participate". Levin said this is "a way of improving the input of students".

As for students being seated on the plenary group, that will be on the agenda for the upcoming meeting of the group, and is in the hands of the provinces, Levin said. When asked if NUS would be given an opportunity to address the meeting, as requested, Levin replied:

"I don't think we could do that. There's firstly a matter of time. The agendas are fairly long usually and, as I say, my own view is that it is not a good thing to do. It is not done in these kinds of situations and would create a bad precedent. It would really foul up the discussions of the plenary."

The plenary is scheduled to meet in Ottawa on October 22, according to finance department sources.

SMU Journal's problems continue

HALIFAX (CUP) – The St. Mary's Journal, the student neswpaper of St. Mary's University may have two editors this year - one elected by the staff of the paper and one by the student council, with neither recognizing the legitimacy of the other.

The Journal's problem stems partly from the financial dilemma faced by the student council. While the council expects to receive only $48,000 in revenue this year, $28,000 will be used to pay debts from last year.

At first the council decided to shut down the newspaper altogether, citing financial constraints as the cause. At the beginning of the school year they relented, deciding the paper could re-open providing the operation was self-supporting, and providing the student council could elect the editor.

The staff argued that neither condition can be met. They say it is not financially possible to run a break-even paper in a small college, and they object to making the editor responsible to the council. Previously the editor was elected by and responsible to the newspaper staff.

They also point out that the constitutions of the Journal and the student council both state the editor will be elected by the newspaper staff.

Now the council has set up an applications committee to screen hopeful editors, while the staff has called a meeting to elect an editor.

The two prime candidates are Sarah Gordon, supported by the staff, who says the paper can run on as little as a $4,000 subsidy; and Pat McLaughlin, thought to be supported by the council, who says he can run the paper on a profit-making basis.

Last year McLaughlin was responsible for organizing the Winter Carnival at St. Mary's, one of the major money-losing operation of last year's council, accounting for over 30 percent of the total deficit.

McGill faculty opposed to course evaluation

MONTREAL (CUP) – Attempts to establish an autonomous course evaluation by students have been met with resistance by professors and administrators at McGill University.

At present only the administration controlled evaluation has been officially sanctioned.

Several student groups have launched trial course evaluations in the past year, but Professor H. Senior of the history department takes a "completely negative" view of their efforts.

Senior calls them "unnecessary paper work and a waste of time, which often does more harm than good. Very few of them are of good quality".

Four other professors in the history department objected to the trial history students course evaluation by saying it was of poor quality and had a tendency to lend itself to "interdepartmental politicking".

Senior feels courses should be evaluated by an independent "referee". Professors "should avoid collusion between the referee and the player, especially since the value of the ... course is rarely evident while a student is taking it. The real test of a course is its utility in later life," he said.

The history students association has distributed the results of its unofficial evaluation, and plans to continue lobbying for improvement in the evaluation of courses.

The association began the proposed course evaluation last January, during the elections for officers. "The idea was to give students a better idea of what they're going to take than is given in the course bulletin," explained association president Marc Casavant.



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