

EDITORIAL

Structures and Volunteer Power(lessness)

by Lynne Wanyeki

The purpose of most, if not all, of the volunteer organizations on campus is two-fold. On the one hand, they supply the university community with what could be considered "finished products" relating to their particular concerns. On the other hand, they provide the means by which student volunteers can learn how to produce these "finished products".

Thus, if one examines the two media organizations on campus, their respective purposes seem rather obvious. The Brunswickan's primary task is to produce a weekly newspaper. In so doing, volunteers at the Brunswickan participate in any aspect of such production according to their individual interests, whether these interests lie in writing, photography, design or management. Likewise, CHSR-FM's mandate is to produce so many hours of on-air programming. And in so doing, one would assume that its volunteers could participate in any aspect of organizing and producing such programming. However, this has not been the case.

CHSR-FM's organization is structured somewhat differently from the Brunswickan's. Towards the end of the last academic year, the Board of Directors of the station initiated a controversial push for restructuring. This assumption of a legal mandate highlighted the fact that the volunteers who participate in the station do not wield any real power in the actual management of the station. The station is run by two hired staff, the Station Manager and the Program Director, who are both responsible to the Board of Directors rather than the general membership. This is a rather dangerous situation. For while CHSR provides its volunteers with every opportunity to learn about the creative and technical aspects of radio-programming, it does not afford them the opportunity to learn about the actual management of the station. It does not afford them a viable means by which to have a say in the decision-making which affects the running of the station.

There are certain reasons for this. One is that the very nature of radio-programming does not necessitate great interaction among the volunteers. Most volunteers simply drop in, do their respective shows and leave. Such volunteers do not necessarily interact with the other station members, and thus do not learn about the goings-on at the station. However, this could not, in all fairness, be termed a structural problem.

A more valid point to consider is that an entire level of management was allowed to disintegrate over the past few years. Volunteer-filled positions dropped from eight to two - the News Director and the Music Director. How did this happen? And more importantly, who is responsible for this having happened? The volunteers themselves, the Station Manager and the Program Director, or the Board of Directors?

If one considers the fact that the Board of Directors recently decided not to renew the Station Manager's contract, it would appear that blame is being laid at his feet. But maybe this is not an entirely fair conclusion. He has been, as stated before, responsible to the Board of Directors, and not to the general membership. And whether or not the general membership was concerned about the situation, viable channels were not available for complaint. This is because the Board of Directors includes only two representatives from the general membership of the station.

The whole process has become rather nebulous. The Board of Directors is overseeing the creation of a search committee to review and hire a new Station Manager. Some controversy has been raised concerning the application of the station's Employment Equity policy to this procedure. As it stands, the Employment Equity policy is rather loose and applies only to hired and commissioned staff - not to any level of volunteer management. And while it is supposed to apply to hiring committees, it targets women, aboriginal people, persons with disabilities and visible minorities all in the same breath, which means that its ability to affect participation for any one of these targeted groups is severely weakened. The question also arises as to the Board of Directors's level of commitment to ensuring that the Employment Equity policy is enforced. Meanwhile, the present Station Manager was instructed to advertise the department positions as being open for application. That was done, and the level of volunteer management has now been filled. However, these changes have not ended volunteer dissatisfaction with the ways in which decisions have been made (or not made) in the past few years. For several volunteers have banded together in an ad-hoc committee with the aim of producing a proposal to restructure the management of the station.

What does all this mean? Evidently, something will have to be done to respond to the demands for increased volunteer participation beyond the level of department heads, beyond two seats on the Board of Directors and beyond participation in various committees authorized by the Board of Directors. Some means will have to be found by which volunteers can initiate structural changes themselves as they see the need. For direct involvement in the day-to-day operations of the station gives the volunteers rather than the Board of Directors an informed view on what is needed and where. But this raises the question of how far volunteer power is to be taken. Quite conceivably, it could lead to a situation in which there would be no paid, full-time staff at all, a situation in which the Board of Directors was left responsible solely for reviewing the finances of the station. Is this really what the volunteers want?

The Brunswickan

Canada's oldest official student publication
The University of New Brunswick

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The Brunswickan, in its 126th year of publication, is Canada's oldest official student publication. The Brunswickan's offices are located in Rm 35 of the University of New Brunswick's Student Union Building, P.O. Box 4400, College Hill, Fredericton N.B., E3B 5A3. Tel. 453-4983.

The Brunswickan is published by Brunswickan Publishing Inc. and printed with flair by Global Printing & Binding Inc., Fredericton, N.B.

Subscription is \$25 per year. Second class mail is in effect - #8120.

Local Advertising rates are available from The Brunswickan, (506) 453-4983. National advertising rates are available from Youthstream Canada Ltd., 1541 Avenue Road, Suite 203, Toronto, Ont. M5M 3X4, Tel: (416) 787-4911.

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