

Your campus: Why

Problems of engagement

Is apathy a problem on our campus?
Students and experts share their
opinions

by Julie East & Greg LeBlanc

There is an illness sweeping across the campus, creeping into every faculty and plaguing its students. It isn't a viral disease, although it seems to be highly contagious. The disease is none other than apathy. Yes, UNB students just don't seem to care about their school. Now don't misunderstand me. There's lots of evidence that school spirit is abundant, and everybody loves to hear that UNB has outdone its competition in some way.

Yet still, students haven't shown the same enthusiasm for its Student Union (SU) issues. Last month, the SU bi-election had a terrible voting turnout; a little more than four per cent of students took two minutes out of their busy schedules to go online and cast their vote. Even the faculty of Renaissance College, which boasts its student leaders, had less than a 20 per cent participation rate. Why is it that even the most engaged students of UNB are choosing not to exercise their right to vote?

Did you vote?

The lack of engagement and interest in SU affairs is not a new trend; participation in many of its events, and even elections, has been chronically low, with the latest bi-election being a prime example. In universities across Canada, frustrated student leaders are shaking their heads as they wonder why students care so little for their schools. Still, the election held last year boasted a record high of 36 per cent participation from students. In other words, more students than ever before decided to have their say in what was happening in the SU.

So why was there such a drop this year? The Student Union's VP Academic, Jillian O'Reilly, thinks that the surprising drop may have to do with money. She said that "last year a lot of money was put into awareness about the Student Union, which

was awesome," and added that having 10 people employed on the SU Crew, who were responsible for raising SU awareness, was a huge factor in the high voting turnouts.

This year, budget cuts are apparently taking a toll on campus awareness. The SU Crew is non-existent, there is less money allotted for posters, and the SU page in The Brunswickan has been cut in half. With publicity going down, it only seems logical that students are less aware of what's going on.

"I can tell you right now, I had a huge meeting with the CRO [Chief Returning Officer] and we are really concerned," says O'Reilly.

It also seems as though the SU is fighting against a demographic trend that is evident throughout our society. Fewer and fewer people are voting, whether it is in municipal, provincial, or federal elections. Studies have shown that people are busier than ever, and thinking about politics is low on their priority lists. If this trend is so widespread, then why are people concerned?

According to Matt Ralph, a candidate in the recent bi-election, "the point of having a student democracy is undermined when only five per cent of the public is represented in a vote."

In all truth, the point of having a democracy is so that the general public may have an impact on governmental decisions. We pride ourselves on living in a country that boasts freedom of speech, while criticizing dictatorships that deny this right to its citizens. Yet still, very few of us exercise this right when it comes time to vote. Why?

While there were mixed responses among students, a general message became clear: in the words of first year student Andrea Emrich, "I have no idea what the Student Union does."

It seems as though the budget cuts may actually be a direct cause of the four per cent participation. Without extensive publicity and initiatives to improve awareness, new students are left in the dark when it comes to the SU. Why should we expect students to vote for complete strangers, especially when those strangers are running for "mysterious positions" that haven't been fully explained?

Some ideas to spread awareness include public discussions, forums, debates, and a volunteer SU Crew. Another suggestion would be for SU members to approach their peers and ask them questions; by being engaged by their representatives, students will actually feel more connected to their union. Although

nothing is guaranteed, perhaps a combination of all of the above efforts would yield positive results.

A much tougher opponent to fight is the indifference that a portion of students feel with respect to their school. Although the above problem is fairly easy to address, how does one fight apathy? When second year student Chantal Sonier was asked about her opinion of the SU, she simply stated, "I hate politics, I don't believe in the SU, and I couldn't be bothered with it."

This isn't a matter of knowing what the different positions do, or how much time there is to think about voting. Some people show no interest in student governments and have taken a cynical, apathetic stance towards elections in general. Some students believe that one voice among thousands goes unheard, and that your opinion doesn't matter to the representatives in the SU. What is the suggestion for a person in such a position?

Complain!

If you want to complain, then complain! When something happens that you don't agree with, write an email to your SU representative. Better yet, go to one of the weekly meetings and speak your mind.

"We love it when people show up, we love it when people are pissed, and we love it when people are happy because it says that people do care," says an enthusiastic O'Reilly. "We are students helping students, and we want to do what they want us to do."

The purpose of having an elected student council is to have students' desires effectively presented to those who can fulfill them. It only seems reasonable that the SU needs to hear from students in order to successfully do their jobs.

Yet maybe the responsibility to raise awareness during elections isn't all upon the SU itself. Ralph admitted to having placed only limited resources in campaigning for the election. In retrospect, he admits that students were likely unaware that he was advocating.

If candidates were to describe what they believe in and why a person should vote for them, maybe more students would feel compelled to vote. Candidates are the future of the SU, so an early emphasis on student engagement could only help their political positions.

As for the average student, O'Reilly recommends approaching members of the executive and asking them every question that comes to mind. She wants to see more students at the Wednesday

"I think you can worry too much about student apathy."

• Jane Fritz •

council meetings (6 p.m., SUB room 103) because this will spread awareness about the SU.

So what do the experts have to say?

When approached about the subject of apathy, members of the SU and university governance had different perspectives.

"In general I don't think students are apathetic," affirms O'Reilly, "and the reason why is that students have a number of demands [such as] working a part or full-time job...plus they're full time-students. That's the number one problem."

This view is not uncommon.

"I think you can worry too much about student apathy," furthers Jane Fritz, Associate VP Academic at UNB. "I think everyone is too busy, and they may be apathetic about the things that some of us wish they'd take more interest in, but they definitely have interest in many things."

"We see far more people working and studying at the same time," adds Pierre Zundel, Dean of Renaissance College. "People have much busier lives than they did. [They] are chronically overworked."

"And they do that consciously realizing that their education is suffering," furthers Judy Roy, a business professor at UNB. "However, they wouldn't be able to do their education if they didn't have the part-time job. They're really in a catch-22 situation."

"Number one, [the SU is] not saying that students are apathetic," O'Reilly says. "If you ask the fundamental question 'are they apathetic?' and you answer no, you've clearly made a decision of where you want to go, and we've done that."

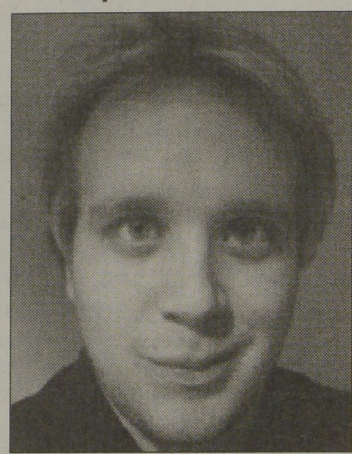
How about professors?

"Professors engage their students in many ways, inside and outside the classroom. They mentor them, they talk to them in their offices about all sorts of different things," notes Fritz. "To me, that's the greatest value that is added on campus, when professors and students interact together and share ideas."

In fact, being engaged is ac-

VIEWPOINT

What's your opinion of the low participation in the recent SU by-election?



I think the point of having a student democracy is undermined when only 5% of the public is represented in a vote.

•Matt Ralph•

"Are they apathetic? I really don't think so."

•Judy Roy•

"I have no idea what the Student Union does."

•Andrea Emrich•

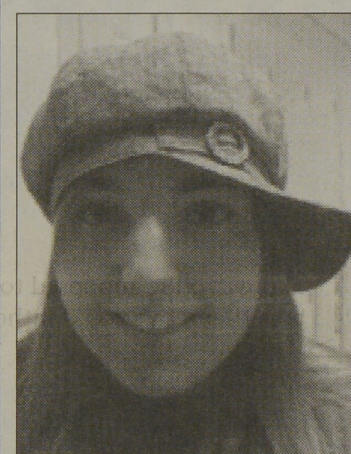
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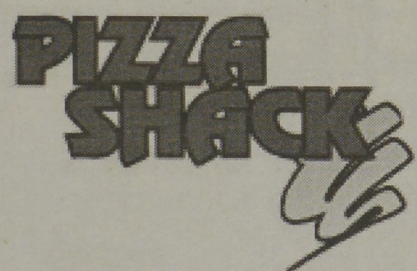
Me personally, I did know about it, I got the message, but I didn't know who was running.

•Andrea Emrich•



I knew there was something going on but I didn't really know what.

•Brittany Grant•

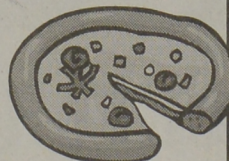


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