

DSU Proposal to Democratize Student Positions on Dalhousie Senate

Preamble

In university circles we talk often about “getting the student opinion”, and it is student Senators who are primarily tasked with soliciting student feedback on academic issues. Student Senators work hard to gather input, and Senate generally welcomes and appreciates student opinions. Unfortunately, methods for soliciting student feedback are often unclear, undemocratic and ineffective. As five of the seven student Senators are elected at large, they do not have an obvious or defined constituency to consult with and gather input. Despite student Senators’ best efforts, they are often left to rely on the views of their friends and colleagues from their own departments, which may or may not be reflective of the student body as a whole. Senators are not tied to any specific group of people except for DSU council. Although, they do a great job bringing issues and student feedback to council’s attention, DSU council is not tasked with the sole responsibility of addressing academic matters and is not the most effective body for mediating academic issues on campus that affect the students at large.

The following is an outline of desired amendments to the Constitution that governs Senate; these recommendations are designed to strengthen student participation and representation at the Senate level. The primary goal of this proposal is to make Senators more representative, accountable and democratic. Increasing student Senator positions is an only method of achieving this goal.

The Proposal

The DSU proposes that the Dalhousie Senate approve a constitutional amendment to increase the number of student seats to fifteen members. This would allow the DSU to include the DSU President, Vice President Academic and External (VPAE), and thirteen student faculty reps who would serve as Student Senators. Below is an outline of the benefits this amendment would have for providing Senate with a more representative student voice.

Stronger Representation

The core of this proposal is to define specific constituencies for Senators to report back to, consult and take direction from. A policy decision or topic that arose at Senate or a sub-committee, could be brought in front of every student, Faculty and council by their respective student senators for feed-back before returning to Senate with recommendations that accurately represent the student body. Likewise, a matter needing promotion by the Senate, the Student Ratings of Instruction for example, could be facilitated by student

senators who would have direct access to each Faculty and department. This could enhance the solicitation of student input on a multitude of levels. For instance, the library could ask Student senators for student opinion on their services and the Student Senator Caucus could respond to student's concerns and start its own initiatives. This framework would allow for efficient collaboration between faculties. A matter arising from Senate or from students in professional programs could primarily be handled by Senate representatives from professional faculties, rather than having Student Senators whom are foreign to the faculties and/or issues deal with them. Above all, there would be one person responsible for each Faculty, hence, no matter where an issue arises, there is a respective student representative available to address it. Emphasis on Faculty representation would also strengthen ties to local Faculty Senate representatives.

This model is more representative of how many Senate Faculty positions and government structures operate. Historically, Student Senator positions have been added for Graduate students and the Agricultural College, so that Senate could be more representative.. These changes were made to reflect the unique interests of the aforementioned groups. Our proposed amendments to the current Senate structure would help to ensure that the distinctive interests of all Academic groups are best represented.

Better Focus

This new structure would also allow the DSU increase the autonomy of the Student Senate Caucus and to not have Senators also serving as council members. This would help our council function more effectively and it would also ensure that Senators are available to handle matters that specifically center on academics. Candidates would run for these positions knowing exactly what their responsibilities would be, which would in turn heighten their level of commitment. The electoral process would require them to think about issues relating to their faculty three or four months before they entered into the position.

Lack of Alternative Solutions

Non student Senators' first response to this proposal is often that we should look at paring some faculties together to be represented by one representative in order to minimize the total number on senate. The problem with this is that some faculties inevitably get left out. If there is an election for one senator to represent faculty A and B, then the winner of the election will likely be more committed and inclined to represent their respective faculty. We suspect that candidates would chose to run after having participated in a faculty society, which would further perpetuate their allegiance to that faculty and its corresponding society. The elected Senator could be mandated to consult and participate in both faculty societies and faculties but, this is an unrealistic expectation for a senator and one faculty will inevitably be under represented. When one faculty is considerably smaller, it will also have a smaller electorate and their

candidates are less likely to be elected. This will result in one faculty being consistently excluded, which is far from an ideal situation for the DSU and Dal students whom are concerned with academic matters.

Other Schools

In the spring the Senate Chair, presented a report on Senate structures that cited that the size of Dal's Senate was average and that the percentage of student representatives represented half of what is common at other Universities (Dal has eight percent while the average is sixteen percent).

We were able to find solid examples of Senates that operate similar to what we are proposing. The most notable being the University of British Columbia Vancouver, where they have eighteen student representatives on an eighty-five person Senate (21%). Thirteen of these student Senators represent faculties and are elected by and from each individual Faculty. Also, the VP Academic and four elected members at large sit on their Senate. These Senators do not sit on the Student Society of UBC Vancouver Council.

At the University of Utah students have eighteen of seventy-nine seats (23%), at University of Western Ontario students have eighteen of 102 seats (18%), at McGill University, Students have nineteen of 100 seats (19%), at University of Manitoba students have twenty-nine of 138 (21%).

Conclusion

We hope that this proposal is considered and recommended to Senate. Student Senator Caucus, DSU Council and Faculty Councils have discussed these issues at length and are more and more enthusiastic about implementing possible changes. We understand concerns about senate's size as well as the timing for such change; at the same time we are more and more confident that this new student Senate structure is the only way to accomplish our goal of improving student engagement and representation. It should be noted that adding eight Student Senator seats would bring Dal just barely above the national average for student representation on senate. We also think that representative structures are, and should be the norm and that it is clear that this should be the case for Student Senator positions at Dalhousie. We look forward to discussing our proposal further. We hope that this proposal will serve as a starting point for discussing a Senate reform that is more representative of the student body and on par with other Universities.