

Voter apathy meets its match at St FX

DANIELLE WEBB
The Xaverian Weekly
(St Francis Xavier University)

ANTIGONISH, NS (CUP)—In a time when student apathy is soaring, students at Nova Scotia's St Francis Xavier University turned out in droves to vote in their annual Students' Union election, breaking 50 per cent voter turnout. The massive turnout is unique in Canadian student politics.

From 19 to 20 February, 50.4 per cent of full-time students cast their ballots.

"To say that I'm happy is an incredible understatement," said Neil Stephen, Vice-President of Communications for St FX's Students' Union.

According to Stephen, the high turnout was the result of a two-year improvement project in the way the Union communicated with students.

Voter turnout at the University has increased by 26 per cent in the last two years.

"It is the result of an entire Union-wide focus on improving communication channels and relationships within the University," Stephen said, adding that their increased credibility in the eyes of students was a key factor in their success.

"You can't ignore people for two years and then expect them to vote. We've worked hard to build good relationships; [therefore] people thought voting was a good thing to do as opposed to a waste of time."

Advertising also played a key role in getting students out to the polls.

"We advertised the living shit out of it," said Michael MacIsaac, the Union's chief returning officer and Chair of Council.

Blogs designed to cover the candidates were introduced this year, the Union's website was updated regularly as the campaigns progressed, a second all-candidates debate was held, the campus was covered in advertisements, and the Union even convinced the University to post a link to election information on its main homepage.

Revisions to the Elections Act also allowed candidates more freedom in their campaigning, with the Chair's Office only stepping in where absolutely necessary, MacIsaac explained.

He said that this contributed to the most open and creative campaigns that St FX has ever seen, which in turn increased interest from the student population.

Gabrielle Schmid, a first-year student and first-time voter, decided to vote based on the Union's promotional initiatives and enthusiasm. She said that all of her questions about the election were answered with clear and well-presented advertisements.

"We advertised the shit out of it."

MICHAEL MACISAAC
ST FRANCIS XAVIER SU CRO

"The U did a great job of keeping us students informed about the elections. By voting, not only was I supporting the candidates, but I was also supporting the U for their hard work and dedication to the election," she said.

Student apathy is a nation-wide issue that most student unions are trying to overcome.

Acadia University, also in Nova Scotia, had 28.9 per cent of students turn out, down nearly 10 per cent from last year's 38 per cent.

Ryan Tipping-Spitz, chair of the Students' Representative Council at Acadia, attributed the decline to the fact that four of the seven elected positions ran uncontested candidates, including the president and vice-president of student affairs positions.

"Turnout is definitely an issue, and we were disappointed with the percentage [this year]," he said.

Manitoba's Brandon University is in a similar boat. With their 2008 elections scheduled for the middle of March, the Students' Union is hoping to build on last year's 25 per cent turnout.

Current BUSU President Nathan Peto

believes that controversy increases voter turnout.

"Based on what I've seen, if students are upset with what the Union is doing, they are more likely to participate in the election."

Larger universities, however, often struggle to get even one in ten students to vote.

In 2007, the University of British Columbia's voter turnout sat at only 6.4 per cent.

Third-year UBC student Catherine Bright said that students tend not to care about the Alma Mater Society (AMS), UBC's Student Society.

"I don't feel that the students' union has anything to do with me except having access to some of my student fees," she said.

Bright said she only voted for the one position—in which a classmate was running—arguing that the AMS needs to break out and become more accessible to the average student if it wants to increase voter turnout.

Likewise, Carleton University's voter turnout dropped this year, despite an increase in the overall student population. Carleton's turnout rested at approximately 15 per cent.

Carleton Students' Union's chief electoral officer, Kimalee Phillip, said that advertising was a major issue this year and that in order to increase turnout, elections need to be publicized more.

But Neil Stephen isn't one to rest on his laurels after his elections promotions racked up an impressive turnout. He believes that there's still room for improvement, particularly with off-campus students.

"I think we got the vast majority of students living on campus engaged and voting [...] but there needs to be a real focus on developing relationships with students living off-campus so they have a reason to care and a reason to vote," said Stephen.

"When you understand something, you are more likely to pay attention to it."

—With files from Tim Bryant (the Charlatan)

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