

## SMUSA elections

The Cranky Professor

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The election for next year's Saint Mary's University Students' Association is just next week.

I understand perfectly those students, over 80% of the total, who couldn't care less.

Yes, SMUSA has a big budget and does a lot of things on campus. But its officers are, or should be, administrators, not leaders. They need to understand how to spend well and wisely the money with which they have been entrusted, of course, but that's not rocket science. To spend it well they just need a good sense of campus life and current tastes, and a little imagination, while to spend it wisely they just need an experienced staff and reliable suppliers.

Students who don't vote in students' association elections are not apathetic or disengaged, as student journalists and others sometimes say they are—or, at least, most are not. Rather, they simply don't think the matter who is to be charge deserves their attention. As with all administrative posts, doing a good job as a SMUSA officer is enough to do a great job.

Moreover, students are confident that whoever is elected, he or she won't blow it. They figure that whoever is president or on the board, something or other will be happening at the Gorsebrook, there will be events (like skating at the oval) to enjoy, the book exchange will be running, the newspaper will get published, and student societies will receive the space and funds they need.

Yet, in the end, taking SMUSA for granted has had bad effects on student life and the university itself, for SMUSA's officers have not in all regards been doing the job well.

The trouble is two-fold. On the one side, SMUSA officers often think of themselves as politicians, as leaders, as active organizers of student and campus life. On the other side, their causes are often illiberal, at odds with what university community should be. Given the first side, SMUSA officers are prone to intervene or interfere in what goes on on campus. Given the second side, they are prone to intervene or interfere on the side of rules, order, control, and suppression. Further, there's always the worry that public relations means more to them than public service.

I remember from my days at Carleton University the sort of damage an activist students' association can cause. One year the association, its members troubled by low voter turnout in the election and in the grip of the myth that low turnout is a symptom of apathetic and disengaged students, decided that the solution was to bring the organization to the people, to connect with the students, to let them know what their students' association was doing for them, and to encourage them to participate in it.

So the association put a big door and some windows on the side of its offices that faced a popular student gathering place. And it installed on this wall electric signs that advertised

campus events and news and welcomed students to the association's offices. No longer had students to take a short detour down a side hall when they wanted to visit with their elected officers or the association's staff. Officers and staff were now right in their midst.

Problem was, in order to instal the door and windows, a large colourful mural had to be removed from the wall. The mural, both joyful and sombre, celebrated the struggle of Latin Americans for equality and justice. It featured in its bottom right corner a couple stirring lines from Pablo Neruda. So the mural was removed, reinstalled in an obscure stairway near the poli sci department, poorly lit and hard to see all at once. The gathering place became just another corridor.

The officers of the Carleton students' association had no idea what real campus life is like. (Why should they have been expected to? They were students. Students, many of them, need to be initiated into the ways of the university. The real culprits, as always, are the university administrators and professors who fail to guide them.) In their desire to use their power to improve things, these student politicians destroyed a corner of the campus and impoverished campus culture.

It's easy for a students' association to be good, and, in being good, a students' association is just great. It's about as easy for one to be bad, though, and in being bad it can be a disaster for all of us.

A serious problem here at Saint Mary's is our fear of open discussion and free expression. As an institution, we have shown ourselves to be intolerant of these things. Our official statements regarding expression are more about setting limits than opening spaces for it or celebrating it.

SMUSA, for its part, has the power to turn down students who want to form a society. As well, it claims the right to vet displays societies intend to mount. On occasion it has acted on complaints about messages, using whatever interpretation of its rules is handy to justify its censoring of displays and discussion.

That's why it is important for students to take student elections seriously and to get out and vote. Not to help to elect the best candidates, but to make sure that those candidates who would harm the campus don't get the chance.

Voters should be asking of candidates whether they would use the powers SMUSA's charter gives its officers to interfere with students' expressions of their opinions and emotions. They should be making sure that they elect candidates who favour a free and open campus culture.

If no such candidates emerge, if each would take it to be his or her solemn duty to police the messages students want to get out, then voters should cast blank ballots. Voting for no one speaks much less ambiguously than not voting at all.