

Leaders of Today and Tomorrow: Translating Post-Secondary Leadership to Political Success



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A Brief History of Post-Secondary Student Leadership in Canada

The post-secondary student leadership movement in Canada has existed for over a century, and has evolved greatly since the first student association was founded. The oldest student union is the Alma Mater Society at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, which was founded in 1858 as a debate club but eventually gained other duties, including student affairs, and advocacy to the University and different levels of government on behalf of the university's students¹.

It was after World War I that students began organizing on a national level. Indeed, in December 1926, the National Federation of Canadian University Students (NFCUS) was formed in Montreal, with a membership of ten student unions: University of British Columbia, University of Alberta, University of Saskatchewan, University of Western Ontario, University of Toronto, Ontario Agricultural College, McMaster University, Queen's University, University of Montreal, McGill University, Bishops College and Acadia University². The NFCUS represents the first concerted effort of students in Canada to be involved in the promotion of post-WWI values, including national unity, a communication of student concerns across the country and more. In practice, its mandate covered the organization of activities such as debate competitions, athletic programs, university exchanges and student discounts³.

It was only after World War II that the NFCUS began truly exploring its potential to harness political power to act as an agent of social change. A number of veterans having served in the war received the Veterans Affairs University Training Allowance,

¹ Alma Mater Society. n.d. "A Part of History". Accessed January 10, 2021. <https://myams.org/>

² National Federation of Canadian University Students. 1926. "Reports, Findings and Minutes of a Conference of Representatives from Canadian Universities." Accessed January 10, 2021. <http://www.studentunion.ca/cfs/1926/1926-nfcus-report.pdf>

³ Cliff, Robert Fredrick. 2002. "The fullest development of human potential : the Canadian Union of Students, 1963-1969." MA Diss. University of British Columbia.

thereby changing the makeup of post-secondary students from those with privilege and wealth to those with more diverse backgrounds⁴. This era saw the NFCUS acting as a springboard of sorts for aspiring politicians to gain experience and knowledge of the political realm before moving on to real-life politics. The NFCUS led to significant real life impacts in increasing accessibility and affordability of education, including efforts to establish bursaries to attend post-secondary institutions in the 1950s and 1960s. Part of the results of this lobbying led to the creation of the Canada Student Loan Program (CSLP) in 1965 by the Federal government⁵. Additionally, the NFCUS impacted political platforms of parties in that era, with support for the Federal Progressive Conservatives in the 1950s shifting to support for the Federal Liberal Party in the 1960s. Numerous NFCUS policies were in fact adopted by the Liberal Party in the 60s as platform points, and partially explained the popularity of the party with youth⁶.

After the NFCUS came the Canadian Union of Students (CUS) as a successor organization in 1963. This particular organization was short-lived due to numerous factors, including an incapacity to align Quebec students with the rest of the country in terms of priorities, but also because most of the recommendations had been adopted by government: from tuition freezes, to student loans and bursaries, to representation in university governance⁷. The organization had thus made itself obsolete due to its success and eventually discontinued its operations in 1969.

The CUS was succeeded in 1972 by the National Union of Students (NUS) in response to potential cuts to post-secondary education, including reduced federal transfers and student aid being reduced to only loans as opposed to loans and bursaries by the CSLP⁸. The NUS was at the forefront of grassroots level participation in campaigns in campuses across Canada. In 1981, it merged with another association, named the

⁴ Moses, Nigel. 1995. "All that was left: student struggle for mass student aid and the abolition of tuition fees in Ontario, 1946 to 1975". PhD Diss. University of Toronto.

⁵ Moses. 1995. "All that was left".

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Moses, Nigel. 2004. "Forgotten Lessons: Student Movements Against Tuition Fee Hikes in Ontario in the 1960s and 1970s". *Trans/Forms, Insurgent Voices in Education.*: 136.

⁸ National Union of Students. 1972. "Minutes". *Founding Conference*. Accessed January 12, 2021. <http://www.studentunion.ca/cfs/1972/1972-nus-founding-conference-minutes.pdf>

Association of Student Councils to create a new federation, which still exists today as the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS)⁹.

In addition, the mid 1990s was defined by austerity for post-secondary education, with funding being significantly cut to institutions. Tuition rates rose by rates far above inflation, non-repayable grants were substituted with loans, and funding was cut for granting agencies¹⁰. This led to the creation of an additional national student organization, known as the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) in 1995.

Over the last decades, these two associations, each representing close to half a million students have successfully advocated for a number of positive changes to post-secondary education, including the establishment and expansion of upfront non-repayable student grants, investments into research, expansion of work-integrated learning opportunities, and increased mental health supports for students, among others.

Post-secondary Student Leadership in Prince Edward Island

Prince Edward Island has seen its fair share of student leaders over the decades. Indeed, both institutions that were precursors to the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) and Holland College (HC), had active student unions, the St. Dunstan's University Student Union and the Prince of Wales College Student Union had been active in the early and mid 1900s, up until the formation of the two current institutions. Delegates had in fact attended multiple NFCUS conferences in the post WWII period up until the dissolution of the NFCUS and the establishment of UPEI and HC in 1969.

⁹ Canadian Federation of Students. 1981. "Minutes" *Founding Conference*. Accessed January 12, 2021. <http://studentunion.ca/cfs/1981/1981-10-minutes.pdf>

¹⁰ Alex Usher. 2018. "The History of Post-Secondary Education in Canada: Part VI – 1993 to 2003." *Post-Secondary BC*. Accessed on January 15, 2021. <https://www.postsecondarybc.ca/knowledgebase/the-history-of-post-secondary-education-in-canada-part-vi-1993-to-2003/>

With the establishment of UPEI and HC came the creation of the UPEI Student Union (UPEISU) and HC Student Union (HCSU). The UPEISU and HCSU have somewhat similar structures, with an executive team consisting of a President and Vice Presidents at the helm of the organization, supported by a number of staff overseeing the different aspects of the unions, and held accountable by a student council acting as a Board of Directors. They also hold mandates to enrich the lives of the students that they represent, be it through the organization of events, facilitating access to health and dental insurance, or mediating issues with the institutions and government.

The UPEISU was, additionally, one of the founding members of the CFS in 1981¹¹. It has furthermore been a member of CASA from 2009, establishing a presence at the Federal level. The HCSU, while not actively a member of either federal organization, has had an observer status with the CFS throughout the years.

The provincial leadership of these organizations has been instrumental in changing post-secondary education on PEI. This has included strong advocacy to implement needs-based grants on PEI, the establishment of per-student mental health funding for post-secondary institutions, the development of sexual violence prevention and response legislation, investments into research and more.

Women in Post-Secondary Leadership

Going back to the first NFCUS conference in 1926, it is interesting to note that all voting delegates sent by the participating student unions were men, with four women as non-voting, or additional delegates¹². This can be explained by the primary demographic accessing post-secondary education in that era, which encompassed mostly high income men. Indeed, women in the 1920s formed only 16% of undergraduate students in Canada¹³.

¹¹ Canadian Federation of Students. 1981. "Minutes".

¹² National Federation of Canadian University Students. 1926. "Reports, Findings and Minutes."

¹³ Alex Usher. 2018. "The History of Post-Secondary Education in Canada: Part II – 1900 to 1940." *Post-Secondary BC*. Accessed on January 15, 2021.

This is in sharp contrast to 2018, where 57% of all post-secondary students were women¹⁴. The national executive of the CFS in 2019 was composed of 10 women out of 19 potential positions, representing 52.6% of the Executive¹⁵. CASA also saw a high representation of women in its national leadership team, with 5 out of 7 members, or 71.4%, of the Board of Directors being women.

Within PEI, it was in 1970 that the first woman occupied a position in the Executive team of the UPEISU, with Connie Cullen being elected as the Vice-President Internal. It would take another 3 years before a woman would be elected President in 1973, with Diane MacDonald occupying this position. It would not be until 2019, on the 50th anniversary of the UPEISU, however, that the first executive of all-women would be elected.¹⁶ From a statistical point of view, 36.4% of all UPEISU Executive Committee members have been women, with women having been Presidents 13 times (24.5%).

Important to note however is that the number of women in leadership positions at the post-secondary level has increased dramatically over the last few decades. Since 1990, women have represented 50% or more of the executive team on 14 occasions, or 45% of the time, effectively reaching gender parity within student leadership¹⁷.

This number is higher than in the non-post-secondary world, with women comprising only 19.5% of Board members in the Top 500 companies in Canada¹⁸. This is also higher than the provincial average, with only 22.2% of elected candidates in general elections being women over the last 30 years on PEI¹⁹. Federally, the 2019 General election saw 98 women being elected to the House of Commons, representing 28.9% of

¹⁴ Statistics Canada. Table 37-10-0135-02 Proportion of male and female postsecondary graduates, by field of study and International Standard Classification of Education. Accessed on January 14, 2021.

¹⁵ Minutes. November 23 to 26 2019. "38th Annual National General Meeting." *Canadian Federation of Students*.

¹⁶ Tony Davis. September 9, 2019. "All-female executive 'a big moment' for UPEI Student Union". *CBC News*.

¹⁷ History. N.d. "List of Past Executives". *UPEI Student Union*. <https://upeisu.ca/history/>. Accessed: January 5, 2021.

¹⁸ Annual Report Card, 2015. Canadian Board Diversity Council.

¹⁹ Women in PEI: A Statistical Review (3rd Edition). 2015. Government of PEI.

the seats. This number increased in October 2020 as a result of by-elections, bringing this percentage to 29.6%, and an all-time high. While this is promising, it is still far off from gender parity.

This disparity leads to two preliminary observations:

1. As the number of women involved in post-secondary education increased, so has the number of women accessing leadership positions in this sphere, thereby showing a willingness for women to lead.
2. There is a gap existing in the transition from post-secondary leadership to the “real” world which leads to fewer women pursuing elected positions within government.

Considering the valuable experience and skills student leaders possess, there is an opportunity to harness these skills and capacities to translate post-secondary leadership to political success.

Methodology

Ninety (90) current and past student leaders across Canada were surveyed in Fall 2020 about their experiences as student leaders and the impact these positions have had on their attitude to politics. The questions were wide-ranging to obtain a comprehensive view of the student executive experience and its impact on potential political involvement. Questions revolved around workplace culture, relationship with the institution, media relations, government relations and more.

The gender breakdown of the survey respondents was as follows: 57 respondents (63.3%) identified as women, 27 (30.0%) identified as men, 5 (5.6%) were non-binary and 1 (1.1%) respondent identified as two-spirit.

Gender	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Woman	57	63.3%
Man	27	30%
Non-binary	5	5.6%
Two-spirit	1	1.1%

Table 1. Gender Breakdown of Survey Respondents

Respondents had furthermore served terms in all provinces, though none had been in post-secondary leadership in the territories, as can be seen in Table 2.

Province	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
British Columbia	11	12.2%
Alberta	8	8.9%
Saskatchewan	3	3.3%
Manitoba	4	4.4%
Ontario	15	16.7%
Quebec	5	5.6%
New Brunswick	8	8.9%
Nova Scotia	12	13.3%
Prince Edward Island	22	24.4%
Newfoundland and Labrador	2	2.2%

Table 2. Geographical Breakdown of Survey Respondents

Moreover, 18 respondents (20%) were part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, 10 (11.1%) stated they were visible racialized minorities, 2 (2.2%) were Indigenous, and 7 (7.8%) were people with disabilities.

Of the respondents, 80 (88.7%) had served terms as from 2016 onwards, or within the last five years, thereby showing data to be recent and as accurate as possible. This survey led to the collection of primarily quantitative data, though opportunity was provided for comments to be made.

Qualitative data collection was carried out by carrying out in-person or virtual interviews with eight (8) current and past student leaders having held positions within Atlantic Canada from 2016 to 2020. Care was taken to ensure that individuals of diverse backgrounds had the opportunity to share their experiences. Of those interviewed, five (5) identified as women, five (5) identified as members of the Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) community, three (3) identified as members of the 2SLGBTQ+

community, four (4) identified as International students, and two (2) identified as a person living with a disability.

All responses from the survey and interviews were kept strictly confidential to protect the identity of respondents.

Survey Results

General Results

Survey results showed that 47 respondents (52.2%) served one term in a leadership role, while 37 (41.1%) served two terms. A small minority of 5 respondents (5.6%) served three terms, though only two of them had done so in the last five years.

Most student leaders furthermore first started their positions as student executives in their early twenties, with 11 (12.2%) beginning at the age of 19, 6 (6.7%) at 20, 23 (25.6%) at 21, 21 (23.3%) at 22 and 8 (8.9%) at 23. An additional 16 (17.8%) made up the 23-30 age group, and 3 (3.3%) were first elected at the age of 30 or above.

Respondents' duties were also varied as is summarised in Table 4:

Responsibilities	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Advocacy and Government Relations	68	75.6%
Policy Writing	63	70.0%
University Committees	49	54.4%
Student Elections Engagement	46	51.1%
Communications and Marketing	44	48.9%
Event Planning and Management	41	45.6%
Human Resources	27	30.0%
Budget Drafting	22	24.4%
Club and Society Management	22	24.4%
Service and Business Management	22	24.4%

Table 4. Responsibility Breakdown of Survey Respondents

The general results of the survey highlighted:

1. The youth component of student leadership, which is to be expected given the majority of student leaders tend to be enrolled in undergraduate programs for those attending university, or in first diplomas for those in colleges and polytechnics, the majority of whom tend to be in their early twenties in Canada.
2. Consistent interest in leadership positions, with a significant number of student leaders choosing to serve a second or third term, which is reflective of their experience.
3. The wide array of skills and responsibilities falling under the purview of student leaders, which are above and beyond what is expected from an average post-secondary student in the course of their studies.

Political Interests of Survey Respondents

Respondents were asked to rate the contribution of their experience as student executives to their interest in politics and the accumulation of political tools. The results obtained showed significant exposure to legislative processes, campaigning skills, community awareness, and interest in politics at all levels of government.

My experience as a student executive...	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Exposed me to legislative processes and political culture	5 (5.6%)	3 (3.3%)	8 (8.9%)	25 (27.8%)	49 (54.4%)
Provided me with nomination-seeking and campaigning skills	5 (5.6%)	8 (8.9%)	6 (6.7%)	34 (37.8%)	38 (41.1%)
Taught me about constituency work	3 (3.3%)	8 (8.9%)	22 (24.4%)	33 (36.6%)	24 (26.7%)
Taught me about issues and opportunities within the community	3 (3.3%)	5 (5.6%)	8 (8.9%)	35 (38.9%)	44 (48.9%)
Created an interest for municipal politics	10 (11.2%)	8 (8.9%)	22 (22.4%)	17 (18.9%)	35 (38.9%)
Created an interest for provincial politics	3 (3.3%)	5 (5.6%)	6 (6.6%)	20 (22.2%)	56 (62.2%)
Created an interest for federal politics	6 (6.7%)	6 (6.7%)	17 (18.9%)	25 (27.8%)	44 (48.9%)

Table 5. Political Experiences of Survey Respondents

Respondents were also asked about their intentions with regards to political involvement before and after being a student executive, with the following results:

Interest in running for government	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
No interest in before or after being a student executive	29	32.2%
No interest before, but interest after being a student executive	22	24.4%
Interest before, but not after being a student executive	6	6.7%
Interest before and after being a student executive	33	36.7%

Table 6. Political Involvement of Survey Respondents

Of those showing interest in running for government, their interests are as follows:

Level of Government	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Municipal	13	23.6%
Provincial	18	32.7%
Federal	2	3.6%
Outside of Canada	5	9.1%
Undecided	17	30.9%

Table 7. Political Involvement of Survey Respondents

When asked to explain why they had chosen a particular level of government, 31 respondents (56.4%) explained this was due to their primary interest in issues tackled by that level of government while 17 (30.9%) justified it by the alignment of the party values with their own. Those still undecided expressed a number of reasons, including the political climate when they eventually decide to run, outreach by parties, and future matching of their professional expertise with a particular level of government.

Of those who indicated a disinterest in running for government, 19 (54.3%) stated they have been involved in, or are interested in being involved in political work such as communications, public policy, lobbying, and more.

An analysis of the political interests of survey respondents led to a number of interesting observations:

1. Students involved in advocacy and government relations, policy writing and student elections engagement were more likely to strongly agree with the statements in Table 5, showing a predisposition to politics from the choice of positions they chose to serve in as students.

2. While municipal government is sometimes seen as the gateway into politics, a higher number of respondents showed interest in the provincial government. This may be due to the fact that student organizations typically interact the most with provincial governments, who oversee the day-to-day administration of post-secondary education.

3. While some respondents indicated no interest in running for politics, only 16 out of 90 respondents indicated an unwillingness to do any kind of political work at all, thereby showing that the higher exposure to the political world has a positive impact on the potential involvement in the future.

Determining Factors to Political Involvement

Interviews were an opportunity to delve deeper into different aspects of experiences of current and former student leaders in an attempt to better understand how their experiences would shape any potential interest in politics. Questions were centered around three major themes: workplace culture, public opinion, and impact of identities.

Interviews, along with open-ended survey questions, provided insight into the background of current and previous student leaders. Some major themes emerged as determining factors, and along with quantitative data, provided a complete picture.

1. Workplace Culture

When asked about workplace culture, participants' responses were varied, with some having had more positive experiences than others. When it comes to continued involvement in student politics, for instance trying to run for a second term, workplace culture proved to be pivotal for respondents in terms of team spirit, mutual support and atmosphere.

One major barrier that respondents faced was a lack of support from the rest of their team, though, in many cases, this was not intentional. As one respondent put it:

“My role was one of the most specialised and knowledge-heavy ones in the union. Even if my team wanted to help more, there was so much background information required that it was tricky for me to get them involved. I ended up feeling pretty isolated in my work, though we were all good friends outside of union stuff.”

Another major point brought up by numerous respondents is work-life balance and its impact on mental health. Indeed, when asked about work life balance as a student executive, the following results were obtained:

Work-life balance	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Very manageable	7	7.8%
Mostly manageable, but I had to choose between work, recreation and study once or twice	14	15.15%
Manageable, but I occasionally had to choose between work, recreation and study	19	21.1%
Slightly overwhelming, with work, recreation or study often taking a back seat	28	31.1%
Very overwhelming, with an inability to judge work, study and recreation	22	24.4%

Table 8. Work-Life Balance of Survey Respondents

A number of respondents also elaborated, stating the positions took a toll on their mental health. Interestingly, seven respondents described the experience as “*both the best and worst time of my life*” with numerous others pointing out the stress of their positions. One respondent also stated that their workplace culture fed into the idea of working till exhaustion, expressing there was sometimes an “*informal competition between executives to see who was putting in the most hours.*”

Many respondents however also clarified that despite this impact on their mental health, the benefits outweighed the costs in terms of skill development, gaining of leadership capacities, and exposure to opportunities.

Participants however did not see interpersonal relationships with the rest of their team or staff to be a determining factor when it comes to politics itself, but did see these as

significant when looking at their experiences as leaders themselves. Indeed, one participant shared:

“My experience with my student association was not a positive one, with everyone bringing in personal issues into the workplace. There was a lot of toxic triangulation and office gossip. This did not negatively impact my perception of politics itself- I know my case was an unusual one.”

There were however two aspects of workplace culture that directly determined the level of interest that student leaders showed in politics:

I. Succession planning

Student leaders typically only serve one or two years on an executive. This is a very brief amount of time to learn skills and absorb knowledge, while also putting these into practice. When looking at the responses of ex-executives from universities and colleges, a clear distinction is made. University executives, who typically spend four years or more on an undergraduate degree, showed a higher tendency to have been involved with their student associations for at least a year prior to being an executive, as opposed to those from colleges, who typically spend two years on their diplomas.

This succession planning allows for information to be passed along and relationships to be made with elected officials even prior to the start of the term, with predecessors being able to set their successors of the subsequent year for success. This involvement not only increases the presence of university students at the bargaining table when looking at governments’ decisions on post-secondary education, but also creates a culture of continuity within these associations.

As a student leader who served in a college put it:

“We have short programs and we are usually on campus for less than the two years of our programs. Before actually being on the executive, there

wasn't much time for me to pay attention to what the student union was doing or learn the ropes. We were reliant on our staff a lot. Meeting with government was not a priority because students did not care about that. What they did care about was things they could see, like events."

Early involvement in the student union thus leads to an earlier exposure to the role student executives play in government relations, and subsequently in politics afterwards.

II. Operation within silos

Table 4 shows the breakdown of responsibilities of different current and ex-student leaders. As mentioned earlier, students involved in advocacy roles showed a stronger leaning for politics. In instances where each executive operated in strictly-defined roles, this distinction was more pronounced, as opposed to examples where all members were introduced to government relations during their term. One former student leader said:

"Government relations were not in my list of responsibilities when I first joined [the student union], but the Vice President Academic and External and the President would sometimes bring me and [fourth executive] with them to meetings with politicians. This is really how I started paying attention to politics."

2. Public Opinion

For many student executives, their time in leadership positions tends to be their first exposure to public scrutiny, be it from their constituency, which is their students, or the broader public in general. Public opinion is, from both quantitative and qualitative responses of participants, one of the stronger factors in influencing whether or not a student executive goes on to be involved in politics. To paraphrase one participant:

“Our year [as executives] was very tricky because of some internal issues within the union. Not only did we have students monitoring our every move, but local media was picking up on the stories. The level of scrutiny was unbelievable. I could not imagine doing this on a wider scale.”

This opinion has been echoed by five other respondents in the survey, one of whom added:

“In hindsight, we were not prepared enough for what was to come. It’s one thing to get media training, but another to sit down and figure out what the worst-case scenarios are. We were pretty much improvising the whole time.”

From the data collected, the opinion of the greater public influenced student leaders’ experiences more than student feedback on the student associations and executives, as well as their work:

“It’s one thing to have the student newspaper telling you you can do better, but another to be criticized on CBC for the community to see. [...] In many ways, students were willing to overlook any shortcomings as long as their experiences were not negatively impacted, but the public was not as forgiving.”

Hence, preparation and response to potential negative press and public opinion was pivotal to the experience of student leaders, and their perception of adopting a public-facing role.

3. Impact of identities

While women are proportionally better represented in student politics than in government, identities of student leaders still played a large role in how they were perceived and received by students, their institutions, government, or the general public.

23 survey respondents, out of 63 from historically underrepresented gender groups, stated that gender dynamics came into play in their experiences. The importance of representation also governed these experiences, as explained by a respondent:

“My first and second terms were very different. The first time round, I was the only woman which created challenges and left me feeling unsupported by my team. I experienced microaggressions such as being talked over, mansplaining and sexist comments both within my organization and external players such as lobby groups or male elected officials. The second time, we had more women, racialized minorities and international students, and my experience was more positive, at least within my team.”

Moreover, women repeatedly established a difference in perception by the student body as compared to their male counterparts. One respondent stated that she was often perceived more negatively by the student body, and described as *“cold and intimidating”* while her male colleague, who shared similar attributes, was more often seen as *“competent.”* This trend continued on for several other participants, who detailed closer scrutiny, increased likelihood of blame-shifting and lower engagement from the student body than their peers.

Participants from BIPOC communities also reported feeling tokenised during their experiences, especially when dealing with the media. One indigenous student leader reported:

“We would receive interview requests and I would attend, only to find that instead of being asked to speak on behalf of all the students I represented, I would have to speak about indigenous issues and be viewed as the spokesperson for indigenous students. While I was happy to see these issues covered, this ended up being very frustrating because it seemed like this is all I was being asked about instead of my work.”

Student executives who had also been international students reported similar experiences, with one distinguishing factor: the fact that xenophobia could be unleashed at any given point. As a student leader explained:

“As an international student, if I was praising the good work the government was doing, the comments on social media would always be positive and supportive. If I however pointed out flaws or ways for improvement, the comment sections would be a cesspool of the general public criticizing immigrants and telling me to either be grateful or leave.”

The same was true for student leaders from the LGBTQ+ community, who saw their grievances brought forward *“only on slow media days, and if there was a sensationalist headline to be made out of it.”*

A fourth aspect of identities that influenced student leaders' experiences was ageism. Six student leaders reported feeling that their age was used to discredit or disrespect them in meetings with the institutions' board of governors and administrators, or decision-making officials. While this number is not as significant as for other identities, age did play a role when utilizing an intersectional lens. To quote a participant:

“It is easier for people in decision-making positions to disregard what I am saying under the pretense of being young, a woman, or a woman of colour. I do not know which it is, or if it is a combination of all of these.”

Recommendations

A number of recommendations can be made to translate post-secondary leadership experiences to political success. These can be categorised as recommendations for student unions, political organizations, and government.

Student Unions

1. That student leaders be exposed to politics as early and often as possible

Exposure is the primary determining factor when looking at political involvement. While a number of student leaders begin their terms with a pre-established interest and connections in the political world, being an executive is an invaluable opportunity to gain exposure. This can be done either through comprehensive transitions from one executive to the next to allow relationships to be formed, or through the involvement of all executives in government relations within the scope of their interest and capacity.

2. That policies be put into place to protect student leaders from cyberviolence

While a level of scrutiny is to be expected when looking at all elected positions, including student leaders, student associations should have social media policies in place to protect student leaders. This can include disabling comments in cases where valid criticism transcends into cyberbullying, especially when name-calling and disproportionate reactions occur. Considering that women and other underrepresented groups are more prone to being targets of cyberviolence, this is particularly important.

3. That internal processes and practices be developed and implemented to take a trauma-informed approach to internal conflict

Student unions' staff, co-executives, councillors and volunteers typically form the primary support network for student leaders during their terms. In cases where students are facing discrimination or facing repeated conflicts, appropriate measures must be outlined to deal with the issue in a way that does not cause the leader additional harm. This can include provisions for interventions by Ombudspeople, third parties and appeal boards.

4. That adequate training be provided to the respect of different identities

While having downstream policies is necessary, upstream policies are key to preventing instances of discrimination within student organizations in the first place. This can be accomplished by mandated gender and diversity training to all student union staff, councillors and volunteers. This sets a benchmark of behaviour and makes it less ambiguous to identify issues and opportunities in the future. Moreover, this is an opportunity to provide a space for those having been socialised into harmful practices to unlearn biased perspectives and grow.

5. That realistic expectations be set and support provided for student leaders

Often, student leaders pursue these positions with the mindset of having limited time to accomplish multiple goals, at the expense of their mental health, studies or downtime. This culture is, in the long-term, harmful and leads to burn out, be it within their term or further down the line. Attempts should be made to ensure student leaders are able to maintain reasonable balance between their work and private life. This can include the incorporation of mental health or personal days within contracts, hiring of additional support staff where necessary, or adjusting expectations of positions where possible.

Political Organizations

6. That student leaders be able to provide input in party stances

While political organizations are expected to develop an expertise on all pertinent societal and economic issues, especially ahead of elections when developing platform points, they are often unable to have an on-the-ground perspective. Student leaders tend to be eager to work with different parties in getting post-secondary issues represented in platforms. This is a prime opportunity for parties to not only receive informed recommendations from an interest group, but also to form relationships and have a potential pool of skilled prospective candidates. Valuing students increases the probability of their involvement with parties post-student leadership.

Government

7. That student leaders be consulted on decisions affecting them

Similarly to political parties, government, be it through elected officials or senior administration, has an opportunity to engage with skilled young leaders and involve them in decisions. This provides insight into internal government processes and increases engagement and interest with regards to government. As with all areas, early exposure increases interest.

8. That student leaders' participation in the democratic process be formalised

Over the last few years, student leaders have been increasingly represented on government committees, especially pertaining to youth engagement and COVID19 recovery. There is however still room for improvement: members of the executive committees of the UPEISU and HCSU represent close to ten thousand students on PEI, a significant proportion of whom qualify as youth. It would thus make sense for

committees such as the Premier's Youth Council to have a dedicated seat for a member of these executives, so as to allow them to effectively represent students, while also learning about the work done by these committees.