

**MEND**

**THE GAP**

## **The State of Women's Involvement in Post-Secondary Student Politics in Nova Scotia**

**May 15, 2013**

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## The State of Women's Involvement in Student Government in Nova Scotia

Student governments are the only democratically elected organizations in Canada that represent young people as a constituency. It is crucial that these governing bodies accurately represent their student populations to properly advocate for their interests. However, women are systematically underrepresented in political and academic spheres within Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011), and there is concern this pattern also exists in student government. Recent studies in the United States have shown that underrepresentation emerges early and is apparent in the make-up of student governments, despite the fact that most students are women (ASGA, 2013; Johnson, 2011). As participation in student governance provides invaluable leadership skills and experience, we believe increasing women's involvement in student politics will help increase their involvement at provincial and national levels.

Within Nova Scotia, nearly 60% of the student body population identifies as female (MPHEC, 2012), but no empirical research has been conducted to assess the presence of women in student governance. Anecdotal evidence suggests that women are underrepresented in student government in comparison to the student body population. Given that women make-up the majority of post-secondary students, it is exceptionally important they have a voice in this arena. To examine the prevalence of women's underrepresentation in student government, StudentsNS conducted research into the role of women in student unions in this province.

### Rationale: The Gender Gap

Gender inequality in the workforce is an important subject of public debate across Canada (e.g. Bradshaw, 2012; MacKinnon, 2013). Economically, women and girls account for slightly over half of Canada's total population, however significantly fewer women participate in the workforce than men (Statistics Canada, 2011). The current female workforce is largely gathered into a few select fields, with the majority continuing to work in traditional "women's" occupations (Statistics Canada, 2011). An ongoing study conducted by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA; 2013) has found that Canada's gender gap in the areas of health, education, economics and politics had improved just 2.3% over the past 20 years, and if this trend continued it would take over 200 years to reach gender parity. In sum, although the economic position of Canadian women is improving, it is still substantially different than that of Canadian men.

The gender divide found in those who hold conventional leadership positions in this country is also striking. Women are under-represented in the upper echelons of nearly every subsector of the workforce (Bradshaw, 2012; MacKinnon, 2013; Statistics Canada, 2011). Women are woefully underrepresented in academic arenas, both provincially and nationally: Nova Scotia has only one female university President and women comprise only 21.7% of Canada's full

professoriate (Bradshaw, 2012). Moreover, there are twice as many men in legislator, senior official, and management positions than women (CCPA, 2013).

The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles is not limited to Canada.<sup>1</sup> Yet, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2013), Canada is ranked an embarrassing 46<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of female representation in the national parliament. Elizabeth May is our only female federal party leader and the proportion of women holding Member of Parliament positions is a dismal one in four, an all-time high (MacKinnon, 2013). On the bright side, five provinces have female Premiers, which is another all-time high in this country (MacKinnon, 2013).

The underrepresentation of women is symptomatic of a culture that discourages women from taking on leadership roles. Several cultural factors have been identified as perpetuating this pattern, including gender biased training and upbringings, religious beliefs, fear of sexist abuse or mistreatment, and the fact that a greater percentage of women have family duties, and/or are supporting single parent households.<sup>2</sup> Major, but perhaps somewhat 'subtle' barriers include women being not encouraged to take an active role in politics and being more likely than men to view themselves as unqualified to hold political office (Ely & Rhode, 2010; Lawless & Fox, 2012).

However, a recent American University study on gender in U.S. politics indicated that when women chose to run for office, they were equally likely to be successful in obtaining the position as men (Lawless & Fox, 2012). It appears that the lack of female representation in politics, at least in the US, therefore stems not from unwillingness to elect women as leaders, but from a lack of woman candidates. Addressing the barriers to female leadership early on in life, and especially during post-secondary education, may significantly impact the number of women seeking and securing leadership roles later in their lives.

## Student Governance & Civic Leadership

Individuals' time at university is a critical period of personal growth and development where they gain the skills and experience needed for their future careers. Choosing to participate in student government represents a significant decision to take a leadership position amongst peers. Student politics provides leaders an invaluable learning opportunity, offering hands-on practice in leading and representing thousands of people, handling budgets that often stretch into the millions and connecting with top university, business, and government executives as an

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<sup>1</sup> Only 14.3% of Executive Officers at Fortune 500 companies are women, six states have yet to elect a woman into the House of Representatives in the U.S. (Lawless & Fox, 2012; Soares, Bonaparte, Campbell, Margolin, & Spencer, 2012), and the gender gap becomes even wider when considering international regions such as the Middle East and North Africa (CCPA, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> For more in-depth discussion, see Eagly & Carli (2007), Ely & Rhode (2010), Lawless & Fox (2012), Newman & White (2012) and Prentice & Carranza (2002).

equal partner. Student governments are key agents in connecting students with governance at the level of their institution, municipality, province, and country. They build community and generate peer networks, giving students a voice in the organizations dominating their lives. Thus, it is of little surprise that student officials frequently go on to become civic and business leaders. For example, former Nova Scotia student union leaders include Nova Scotia Premier Darrell Dexter, his Chief of Staff Dan O'Connor and Principal Secretary Paul Black, former New Brunswick Premiers Frank McKenna and Bernard Lord, MLA Zach Churchill, University of King's College President George Cooper, and Sobey's Chief Financial Officer Paul Jewer. The experience gained through student governance gives individuals a distinct competitive advantage when pursuing and occupying leadership roles later in life. Thus, women's involvement in student governance is critically important not only for proportionate representation of post-secondary students, but to facilitate women's involvement in politics and other leadership arenas following graduation.

## The Current Research

### Purpose

Clearly, women are substantially underrepresented in leadership positions in Canada, particularly in political fields. It is critical that female youth are engaging and succeeding in leadership activities to increase the likelihood that they will be able, willing, and qualified to hold leadership positions later in life. Student governments are one of the salient ways youth are able to take an active role in politics and gain leadership experience. Unfortunately, evidence suggests that student governments suffer from the same systemic underrepresentation of women as found in national governments (ASGA, 2013; Johnson, 2011). Gaining knowledge of the current role of women in student government will help us to foster lifelong female-identified politicians and leaders.

The purpose of this research was to clarify the current role of women in student governance allowing a better understanding of the participation of young women in political leadership by comparing the proportion of women holding student government positions with the proportion of women in the student body population. We also explored which positions women were more likely to obtain within student government.

### Methodology

This report analyzed student government participation in the past seven years (2007/2008-2013/2014, inclusively). Information about the student governments was gathered from post-secondary institutions in Nova Scotia via university archives. During this time period, 11 student governments operated within the province: Acadia University Students' Union (ASU), Cape Breton University Students' Union (CBUSU), Dalhousie University Student Union (DSU), University of Kings College Student Union (KSU), Mount Saint Vincent University Students'

Union (MSVUSU), the Student Union of NSCAD University (SUNSCAD), Saint Mary’s University Students’ Association (SMUSA), the General Association of Students at the University of Sainte-Anne (AGEUSA), Saint Francis Xavier University Students’ Union (STFXSU), Atlantic School of Theology Student Union (ASTSU), and the Nova Scotia Agricultural College Student Union (NSACSU; part of Dalhousie as of 2012). However, comprehensive information was only available for nine of the 11 schools, with the ASTSU and NSACSU being excluded from analysis. Refer to Tables 1 & 2 for a complete list of student government positions in each union.

The gender ratio of student government was compared to the total male and female populations of each university, obtained through Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC). However, university population statistics are only currently available up to and including the 2011-2012 school year. Thus, all population comparisons were done using the data for the 5 year period between 2007/2008-2011/2012, whereas all position based student-government statistics were analyzed using data from the entire seven year period.

Table 1  
*Number of positions in student governments.*

	Acadia	CBU	DAL	Kings	MSVU	NSCAD	SMU	Sainte-Anne	STFX
<b>Executive</b>	5	4	5	5	5	6	3	6	7
<b>Council</b>	10	11	30	11	13	20	9	-	16
<b>Senate</b>	3	2	4	-	-	-	-	1	4
<b>Board of Governors</b>	1	4	2	2	1	1	4	2	2
<b>Total</b>	19	22	41	18	19	27	16	9	29

*Note:* Totals based on positions existing in the 2013/2014 school year. Total position numbers vary by year.

Due to the fact that the information for this study was gathered via student government documents and university archives, some data was unavailable for inclusion. Information surrounding the executive positions was complete for all universities, for all seven years. However, information for the ASU, KSU, MSVUSU and STFXSU councils, senates and/or board of governors’ representatives were missing at least one position for one or more years. Results were calculated based on the available information and were not weighted to compensate for this missing data.

Student governments differ by institution type and number of representatives included, elected, and hired. For the purposes of this study, executive positions were assigned 1 of 6 broader categories based on their primary responsibilities: Presidents, Internal, External, Student Life, Finance and Other VPs. Refer to Table 2 for a list of category assignments for each institution. In contrast, student councils consisted of a broad range of positions and thus were

looked at as a whole. Senate and Board of Governors positions were treated in a similar manner.

Table 2  
*Position Groupings for Statistical Analysis*

School	President	Internal	External	Student Life	Finance	Other
<b>Acadia</b>	President	Comm	Academic	Programming	Finance	
<b>CBU</b>	President	Comm/SL	Academic	Comm/SL	Finance	
<b>DAL</b>	President	Internal	Acad/Ext	Student Life	Finance	
<b>Kings</b>	President	Comm	External	Student Life	Financial	
<b>MSVU</b>	President	Internal		Student Life	CFO	Advocacy
<b>NSCAD</b>	President	Internal	External, Academic	Cultural	Finance	
<b>SMU</b>	President	Comm*	Academic, University Affairs*	Student Life	Finance*	
<b>Sainte-Anne</b>	President	Comm, Services	Academic	Student Life		Inter-regional
<b>STFX</b>	President	Comm, Union Services	Executive	Student Relations, Activities & Events	Finance	Campus Police*

*Note:* \*position no longer exists. Comm= Communications, SL= Student Life, Acad= Academic, Ext= External

## Findings

### Student Government

#### Are women less likely to take part in Student Government than men?

Yes, students who are women are significantly less likely to participate in student government than those who are men. Looking at the five years between 2007/2008 and 2011/2012, women made up 58.65% of the university student body, but only 45.76% of student government representatives. In contrast, men represented only 41.35% of the student body, but held 54.24% of student government positions. This trend was found consistently over all five years (see Figures 1 & 2).

Furthermore, women were found to be significantly less likely to participate in all levels of student government, including executives and councils, as well as the senate and board of

governors. For a complete breakdown of men and women’s representation on each level of student government, see Appendix A. The results of the tests of statistical significance can be found in Table 4, Appendix B.

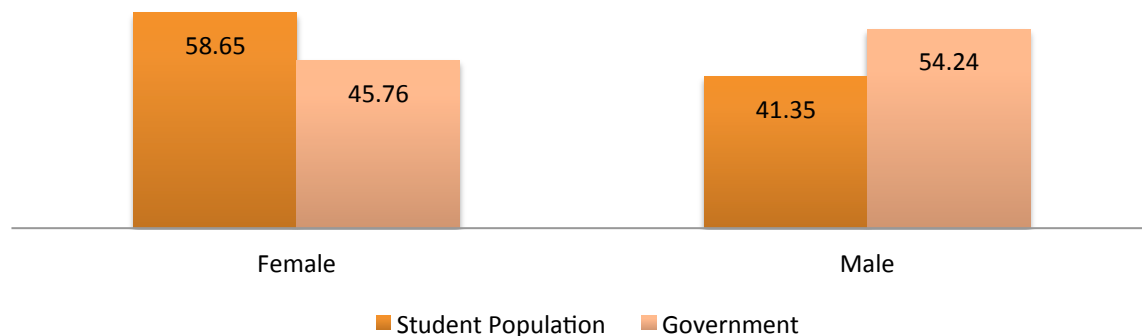


Figure 1. Percentage of student body and student government by gender (07/08-11/12)

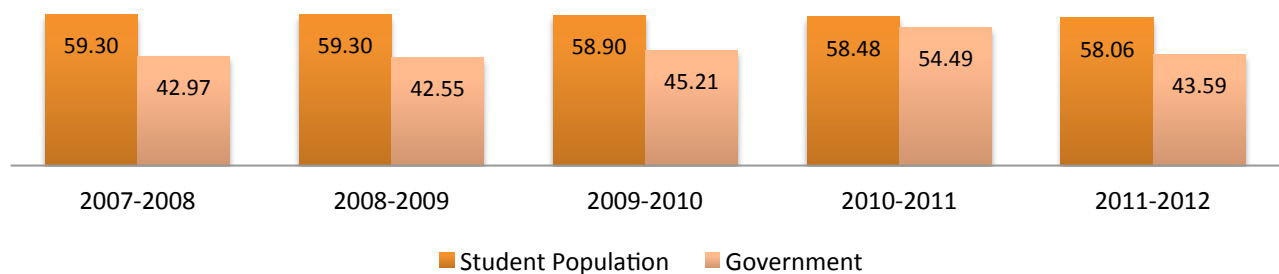


Figure 2. Women’s representation in the study body in comparison to student government.

**Did the average difference between the proportion of women in the study body and the student government vary by student union?**

Overall, student governments in Nova Scotia had a 16.23% greater representation of females in the student body than the student government. Furthermore, when considering only the larger schools with a comprehensive curriculum (i.e. excluding Sainte Anne, King’s and NSCAD), the underrepresentation of women in student governance increases to 19.86%. While women were underrepresented in student governance at all nine universities, the severity of this underrepresentation varied substantially. The difference between the percentage of women in the student government and the student body ranged from 8.19% (ASU) to 45.30% (MSVUSU). See Figure 3 for full results.

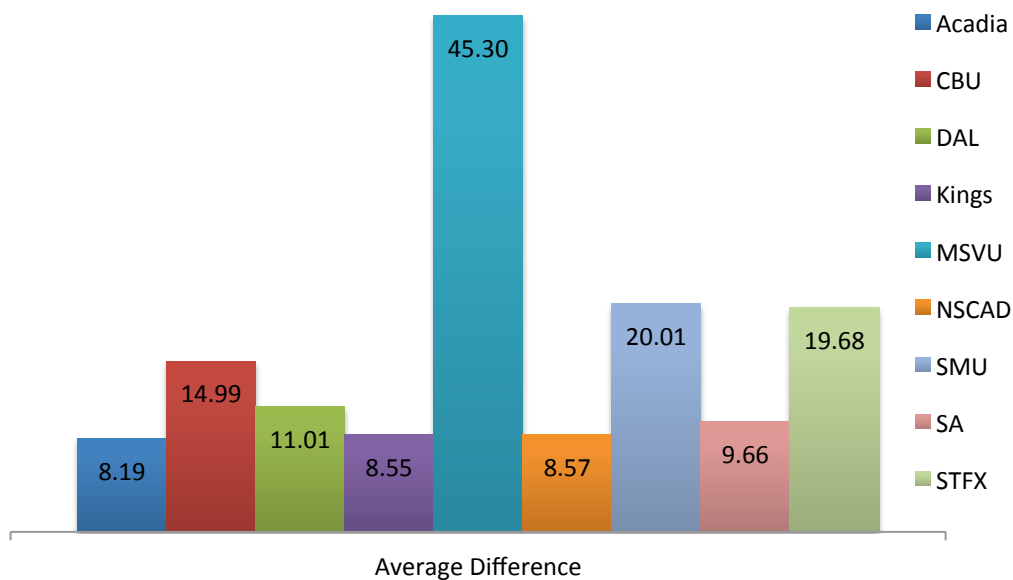


Figure 3. Average percentage difference in female representation in student population vs. student government from 07/08-11/12

**Among student government representatives, were women more likely to join certain governing bodies over others?**

No. When considering only those individuals who held student government positions between 2007/2008-2013/2014, women were not significantly more likely to hold a position on one governing body than the other. The results of the tests for statistical significance in this area can be found in Table 5, Appendix B.

**Student Executives**

**Are women less likely to hold positions on student executives than men?**

Women were significantly less likely than men to hold student executive positions. Looking at the 5 years between 2007/2008 and 2011/2012, women made up 58.65% of the university student body, but only 47.41% of student executives. In contrast, men represented only 41.35% of the student body, but held 52.58% of student executive positions (See Figure 4). This trend was found consistently for all five years. This situation became even worse when the 2012/2013 and 2013/2014 school years were included, lowering the average representation of women on student executives to 45.43%. A breakdown of gender ratios on student executives by year can be found in Appendix A.



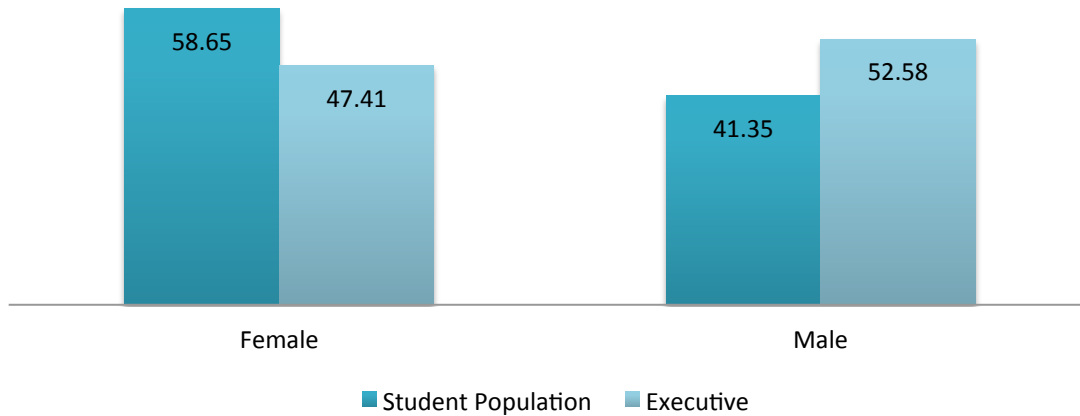


Figure 4. Average percentage of student body and student government by gender (07/08-11/12)

**Were women less likely to hold both elected and hired positions?**

Yes. Women held significantly less executive seats than men, regardless of whether the position was elected or hired. However, there was a greater gender divide in hired positions. The results of the tests for statistical significance in this area can be found in Table 6, Appendix B.

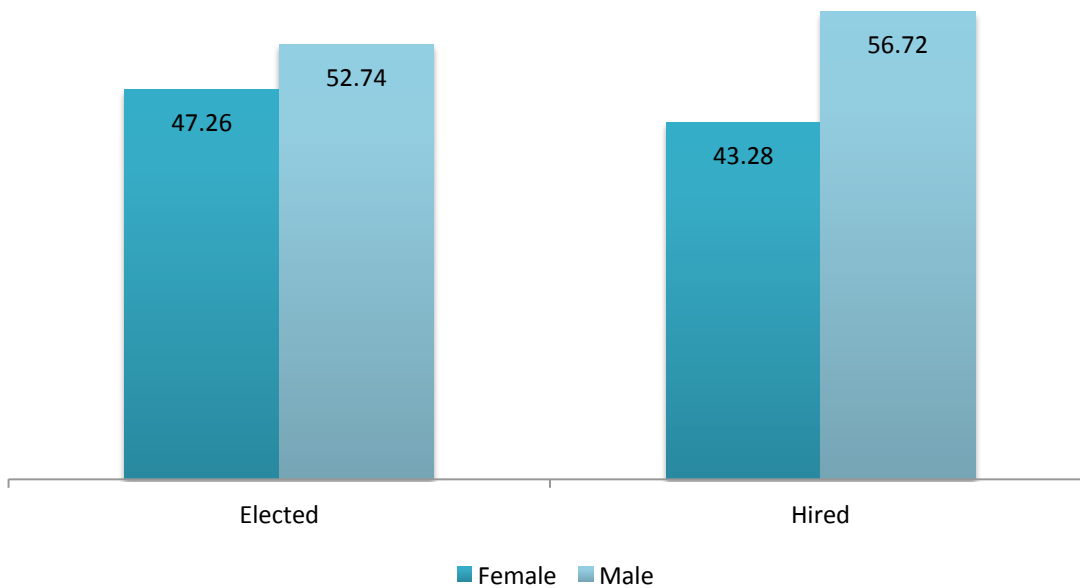
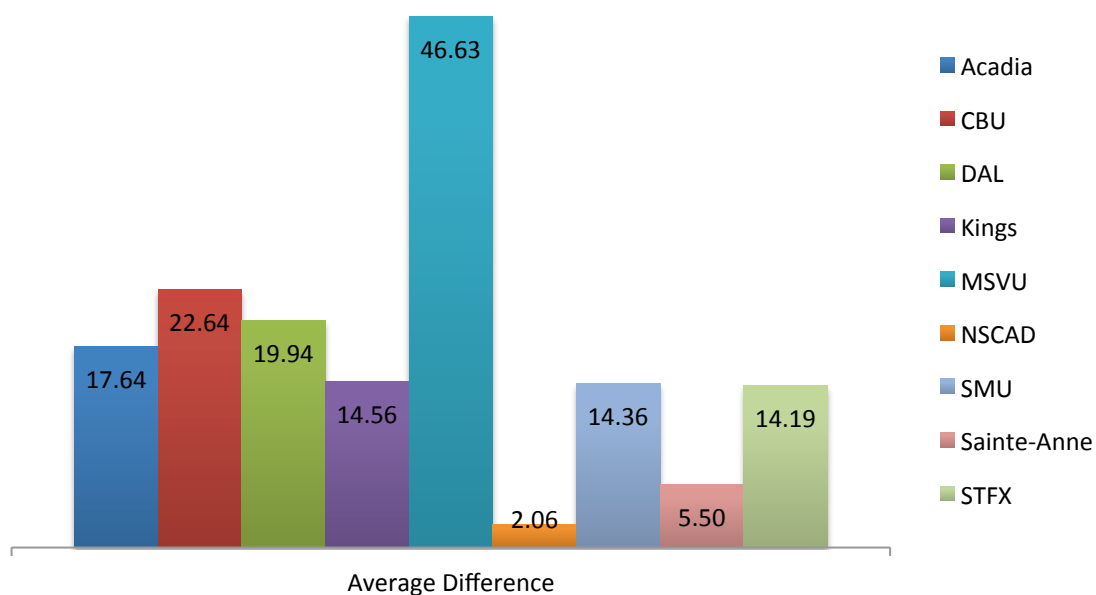


Figure 5. Average percentage of Elected and Hired student executive positions held by each gender (07/08-11/12)

**To what extent were women underrepresented on student executives? Did it vary by student union?**

The underrepresentation of women on student executives was found for all nine student unions, but the size of the gap varied dramatically. SUNSCAD had the most proportionate representation of women, having an underrepresentation of a mere 2.06%. At the opposite end of the spectrum, MSVUSU had the most disproportionate representation of men, with an underrepresentation of women of 46.63% (MSVUSU). On average, women were underrepresented on Nova Scotian student executives by 17.53% in comparison to the student body population, although women’s underrepresentation on student executives increases to 22.57% among schools with a comprehensive curriculum. See figure 6 for full results.



*Figure 6.* Average percentage difference in female representation in student population vs. student executive from 07/08-11/12.

**Are some positions more likely to be filled by one gender than the other?**

Women were significantly less likely to hold the positions of President and/or VP Finance than men. This trend was also found for the External, Student Life, and Other VP positions, but no significant gender difference was found in relation to the Internal position. The results of the statistical significance tests can be found in Table 7, Appendix B.

**Among previous student executive officials, were some positions more likely to be filled by one gender than the other?**

When considering only those individuals who held student executive positions over the past seven years, women were significantly less likely to hold the position of President, and were

significantly more likely to hold “Other” VP positions such as VP Advocacy or VP Campus Police. Women were no more or less likely to hold the positions of VP External, VP Internal or VP Student Life. See Figure 5 for gender comparisons for each position. The results of the tests for statistical significance in this area can be found in Table 8, Appendix B.

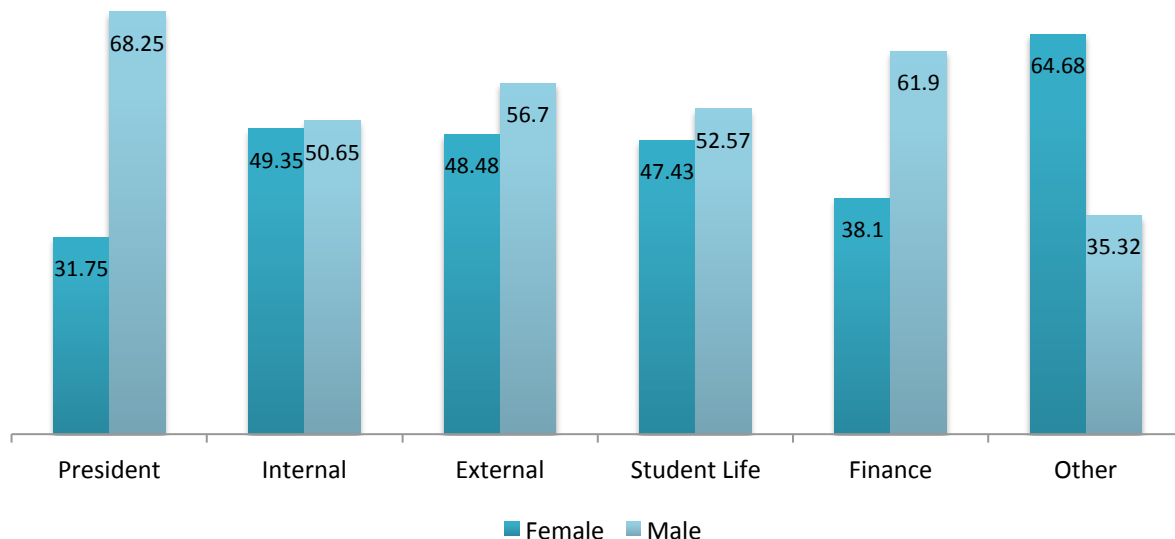


Figure 5. Student Executive Positions by Gender (% of Total).

## Conclusions

This study examined the role of women as student government representatives in Nova Scotia over the past seven years. Previous research has shown that women are underrepresented in Canadian civic politics, as well as American student governments (Johnson, 2011; Statistics Canada, 2011). Thus, it was anticipated that similar results would be found within Nova Scotian student representatives. The findings of this study supported this assumption. Women are underrepresented in all forms of student government, in all examined student government organizations in Nova Scotia. In sum, the gender gap in leadership that is prevalent in Canada’s career oriented sectors is also present in organizations representing today’s young people.

## An Issue of Representation

The student body is approximately 60% female and 40% male, whereas men dominate student governments (see Figure 1). Obviously, there is a lack of female voices in student leadership. If we neglect the representation of women, then student unions as a group are not fulfilling their role and purpose on behalf of the student population.

The underrepresentation of women is not as pervasive in student politics as in national politics though. This suggests that a portion of the women graduating from university are gaining hands on political experience and provides hope that women's representation in provincial and national politics will increase in coming generations. However, the fact the women are systematically underrepresented in political arenas even at the level of student governance is a cause for serious concern. This suggests that the larger cultural phenomena causing the gender divide in these fields are still actively influencing today's youth. Clearly, we have substantial ground to cover before we will see gender parity in this arena.

## Mending the Gap

In order to create systematic change in the general population, women's participation in leadership must be encouraged and supported earlier and on a broader spectrum. University leadership roles such as student government provide substantial political and organizational experience. Furthermore, success in leadership at the university level provides knowledge and increases confidence in one's skills and abilities—two factors that have been identified as barriers in female leadership in the past (Lawless & Fox, 2012). Although student politics is obviously an episodic activity in a person's life, the skills and experiences individuals gain by taking part in student politics remains with them and encourages them to become advocates for change in the future. If women are not taking on leadership roles during their youth, not only may they lack the confidence to obtain these positions in the future, but they may simply not gain skills or experience to compete with male counterparts. Men are gaining a life-long advantage through higher participation in student politics, so mending the gap in student politics is important for closing the gender gap in civic leadership.

Having women at the forefront of student governance is essential. Women must represent the voices and well-beings of our mothers, sisters, daughters and children. A woman's unique perspective and attitude is not only a key part of the governing dynamic, but an essential component in the representation of the diverse community our governing bodies serve.

While recognizing this is a long-term challenge, the gender gap in student leadership is unacceptable. StudentsNS is committed to supporting women's involvement in student politics and the electoral process as a whole. Mend the Gap is an on-going campaign focused on increasing awareness of women's underrepresentation in student leadership roles, and encouraging and supporting young women in seizing leadership positions in their student unions. StudentsNS is actively working with student unions to host public events, clarify the

process of running for student government and provide potential women candidates support and mentorship opportunities. All students cannot afford to continue missing out on strong leaders because of gender barriers.

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