

Independent Review of Student Union Democratic Governance Terms of Reference

Overview

StudentsNS is seeking a consultant to conduct a review of Student Union Democratic Governance in Nova Scotia under the supervision of an Advisory Committee. Participating Student Unions will include the Acadia Students' Union, Cape Breton University Students' Union, Dalhousie Agricultural Students Association, Saint Francis Xavier University Students' Union and Saint Mary's University Students' Association. StudentsNS is offering a \$10,000 total contract to complete the work (taxes-in) plus incidentals (notably travel).

Student associations are among the only organizations in Canada that represent young people as a demographic group with unique challenges worthy of policy attention. Among such organizations, student associations are likely the most democratically accountable as their leadership is generally elected by memberships numbering in the thousands. They provide unique spaces for incubating young leaders, who are empowered to represent their peers while exercising decision-making over very significant resources.

Yet, they consistently face significant difficulties with respect to democratic engagement and accountability. Recently, there have been high profile incidents of misconduct by student association leaders across Canada, and participation in student elections has dwindled on some campuses. These challenges undermine our vision for student and youth leadership, and bolster arguments against student association autonomy.

We firmly believe that the best route to build engaging and positive cultures on Nova Scotia post-secondary campuses is by having authentic and accountable youth leadership. We would like to tackle head-on our shortcomings with respect to democratic engagement and accountability by seeking independent, evidence-based advice on how we can do better.

This review will help to establish stronger norms for how our student associations are governed, to ensure they are accountable, responsible and democratic. It will provide a tool for incoming executives each year to understand how their student associations are governed, and ideas for actions they can take to empower their students. It will build upon a strong tradition of critical self-study supporting improvement within universities.

To ensure the review's independence from current student association leadership, the Advisory Committee will be comprised primarily of former student association executives and operate at arm's length from current student association leaders and staff. The StudentsNS Board of Directors will appoint a Steering Committee with active representatives from the participating student associations.

Participating Student Associations:

- Acadia Students' Union
- Cape Breton University Students' Union
- Dalhousie Agricultural Students' Association
- Saint Francis Xavier University Students' Union
- Saint Mary's University Students' Association

Steering Committee Members:

- Brandon Hamilton, Committee Chair and StFX Students' Union President
- Ryan Hamilton, SMU Students' Association Vice-Chair of the Board of Directors
- Callie Lathem, Acadia Students' Union President
- Brandon MacDonald, CBU Students' Union Student Representative Council Off-Campus Representative

Steering Committee Responsibilities:

- Prepare initial terms of reference and finalize terms of reference with feedback from the Advisory Committee and the Researcher
- Appoint Advisory Committee by August 1
- Appoint Researcher by August 8
- Finalize project budget
- Help researcher to coordinate meetings with interviewees on their campus
- Ensure that focus groups take place on each campus according to the research methodology determined by the Researcher
- Publicize requests for submissions to the Researcher for campus actors
- Appoint a committee chair
- Suggest changes to the Researcher to facilitate communication of the review findings and determine how/whether to publicize the review

Advisory Committee Members:

- Lisa Buchanan, former Dalhousie Student Union Councillor
- Emma Cochrane, former Acadia Students' Union Senator
- Nick Head-Petersen, former StFX Students' Union President
- Andre Petrie, CBU Students' Union Executive VP
- Kyle Power, former Acadia Students' Union VP Academic and External
- Matt Risser, Committee Chair and former SMU Students' Association VP External and ANSSA Chair

Advisory Committee Responsibilities:

- Review and provide feedback on the initial terms of reference
- Provide guidance to the Researcher on the research process/methodology
- Share views and experience to support the Researcher
- Review, amend and finalize report with a view to providing quality assurance and constructive criticism; the report will not be deemed completed until accepted by the Advisory Committee
- Appoint a committee chair

Guiding principles:

The project must be respectful of the following guiding principles:

- All student association representatives must be accountable to some form of formal oversight
- All student associations should be reviewed through a consistent process to ensure equitable treatment, recognizing that there is no one-size-fits all governance model that is appropriate for all student associations
- Financial constraints can limit the ability of some students to participate in student leadership positions
- Student association elections must be as fair as possible with election officers remaining as indifferent as possible
- Student association representatives must consult with students throughout their term to inform their decision-making
- Student association staff must be as accommodating and supportive as possible to incoming student leaders
- Student associations and their sub-entities should uphold all general standards in terms of accounting, filing, financial management, governance, etc.
- Student associations must be led by their members first and foremost
- Student associations must strive to continually improve their governance processes
- Student associations must take all reasonable steps to transfer knowledge between cohorts, recognizing the regular turn-over in many leadership positions
- Student associations should aspire towards absolute transparency in their governance and financial management
- Student associations should foster an atmosphere where students can be comfortable and feel free from any form of discrimination or harassment.
- Student associations should have mechanisms in place to track and report on their performance to their membership.
- Student associations should strive to be representative of their student body, with respect to gender, ethnicity, diverse abilities, sexual orientation, etc.
- Student associations should strive to maximize participation in student elections at all times
- Student associations should strive to measure their success by their results.
- Student associations should uphold the values they espouse to other parties in the post-secondary system, including honesty, integrity, openness, cooperation, democracy, responsible financial management, long-term vision and humility.
- Students must be empowered to actively participate in setting their post-secondary system's direction via engagement through their representative student bodies, within their post-secondary institutions, and through the broader democratic process
- The review can and should provide advice, but cannot issue directives
- The review should not only identify issues of concern, but propose concrete steps to address these issues.
- The selection of student representatives should be as open, fair and transparent as possible, and seek to ensure representation to the greatest extent possible

Research questions:

- Are student association governance frameworks robust, respected and being improved?
- How should student association governance bodies be composed and how should their members be selected?
- How should student association representatives be compensated and how would this impact on their ability to fulfill their responsibilities?
- What strategies should student associations use to consult with the student body on their priorities and views?
- How should the student association determine its plans, advocacy positions and priorities, etc.?
- How should student association executives, council/board members and staff members be accountable to one another and the student body?
- How can participation in student association elections be increased?
- How should student representation on external bodies (board of governors, university working groups, external advocacy organization boards) be decided?
- How should student associations more meaningfully include members of underrepresented groups (women, visible minorities, students with disabilities, etc.) in decision-making?
- How should the student association relate to its post-secondary institution and how would this impact on student association autonomy? How would restrictions on student association autonomy impact on democratic governance and accountability to the student body? In what ways can student associations work alongside their respective universities to alleviate restrictions that may be in place and foster a more equitable partnership?

The Review may address additional questions that arise during the research process.

Timeline

- June 11, 2014: Approval of initial project proposal by the Board of Directors, funding request submitted to the Democracy 250 Youth Engagement Legacy Trust
- Mid June 2014: Selection of steering committee
- July 29, 2014: Steering committee proposes Terms of Reference
- July 30, 2014: StudentsNS issues a request for proposals for a Researcher to conduct the Review
- August 1, 2014: Steering committee appoints advisory committee
- August 7, 2014: Steering committee selects a Researcher and provides feedback on the approved research proposal
- September-October 2014: Researcher conducts qualitative interviews with current and former student association leaders across the province
- November 17, 2014: Researcher submits a draft report to the advisory committee for feedback and approval
- Early December 2014: Final draft report released to the Steering Committee
- Mid-January 2014: Final report released to the public at the discretion of the Steering Committee

Deliverables:

- Report on democratic governance in student unions across Nova Scotia:
 - Recommends guiding principles for all student associations
 - Identifies best practices at student unions across the province
 - Identifies concerning practices or policies within specific student organizations and suggests steps for improvement
 - Provides a resource to incoming student leaders on a go-forward basis with respect to how student associations in Nova Scotia work and could be governed more democratically
- Acknowledgement of D250 in the report and any related communication