

BUDGET

Letter to the Editor

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One of the more exciting debates on Student Union Council – at least last year – was about our union's working budget. Although I would agree with most people that the budget is hardly something to get worked up over; I find what makes the budget issue interesting is not so much the document itself, but rather the reaction it evokes from the Student Union Council Executive (that would be the SU President, Vice-President, VP Finance, and VP Activities), whenever questions of publicizing the working budget come up. I am referring here to the borderline-condescending justifications made by the Executive explaining why they refuse to publish the working budget; one of the more blatant examples of such justifications being "that the distribution of [the working budget] would make it subject to possible misinterpretation" (see the SU Executive letter below). Of the many responses that come to mind when hearing such contempt, the one that is probably most fit to print is: So what if the budget is misinterpreted? At worst, the SU Executive would be inundated with questions; at best, questions may increase student participation in the decision making processes at the student union. After all, isn't it the job of the SU Executive to serve its membership? Students should remember, that they are the ones who pay the salaries of the SU Executive (see the budget below); and it is their monies that allow for a working budget in the first place. Thus I hope readers will excuse those of us who think that the SU President or the VP Finance should answer as many questions as possible about the working finances of an organization that we are legally bound to be paying members of. Besides, at the current rate of student apathy on campus, the SU Executive can be certain that they will not have too many questions to answer. But, could maintaining student apathy on campus be the point?

By sitting on Council for the past two-years, I can say with some degree of confidence that: through our actions and in most cases, inaction, we are unwittingly practicing 'student-management' as opposed to 'student-governance'. I use the word 'unwittingly' because I don't think it has ever been our intention not to represent students, and many Councilors actually believe they are representing the best interests of the student body on the various university committees (including the Board of Governors and Senate) they sit on. However, in examining our actions, it becomes clearer

that we act more as rubber-stamps than voices of student-advocacy. Some examples: Tuition hike? Sure, just as long as it's not inordinately high ... Assaults and thefts on campus occurring more frequently? Hmm ... let's hold a "safety-rally" to bring attention to the University Avenue crossing ... Faculty Strike? How about a "counter-strike" ... Rules governing the re-writing of exams change? Fine (this one happened 2 years ago). We did not consult students about the position we took (on their behalf) on any of these issues, yet they are all very important to the student-body at large. So, it's no wonder that 40 students showed up to the "tuition-rally," or that 60 showed up to the "counter-strike," or that a dozen showed up to the "safety-rally," or that only 24 per cent of the student body decided to vote on the uncontested position of SU President (which resulted in one in every six students voting "yes", and therefore deciding your SU President for the following year). We are tacitly alienating the student-body. Could this be at least one of the reasons explaining the rise of computer and equipment thefts on campus, that we don't feel invested in this institution? As Councilors, we are unable to interpret these dismal numbers as detachment, instead we tell ourselves, that "it's the way of student bodies everywhere" and that "we try our best." But whose interests do our actions serve? Certainly not the student-body, because if Student Union Council was to dissolve tomorrow, it is unlikely that the experiences of the vast majority of students would change, or am I being too harsh?

This brings me back to the working-budget, and why it is being published in the Cadre in the first place. At the March 11 Student Union Council meeting, the VP-Finance (which is a hired position on the SU Executive, thus non-elected, yet it retains a voting position on the Executive) presented, as per the SU Constitution, and a bit late, the Budget to Council (according to the SU Constitution, the VP Finance is supposed to do so "at the beginning of semester one ... [and] also review the Budget and any major changes at the beginning of semester two with appropriate explanations").

According to the VP-Finance, copies of the budget were not being distributed to Councilors – and I'm quoting here – "in the interest of saving trees," this can be verified in the minutes of that meeting. As it happens, the "Budget" was third from the last item on the agenda (the other two being "New Business" and "Adjournment"). So the budget was

presented, without Councilors seeing what was read (if this was a class-presentation, the VP Finance would have undoubtedly done quite poorly), and then passed the document around the table. In the mean time, there was very little in terms of "New Business" and the meeting was promptly "adjourned." By the time the budget found its way over to my seat on Council more than half the Councilors had already left for the evening. So I asked our VP-Finance if he had another copy of the Budget, to which he replied yes, and then I asked him if I could keep the copy he brought to the meeting, to which he replied no. I won't go into the details of the conversation that ensued, but I left the meeting with that copy, photocopied it, and promptly returned it to the SU President.

A few days later I received a letter from the SU Executive stating that: "distribution of [the budget] is not permitted" (a copy of that letter is included in this edition of the Cadre as well). Says who? There is absolutely nothing in our Constitution or By-laws that states this, and I challenge the Executive to read these documents; and find something to the contrary. Readers will recall that in the opening paragraph of this opinion piece, I write that: "the budget issue is interesting not so much [because of] the document itself, but rather, the reaction it evokes from the Student Union Council Executive whenever the 'working budget' comes up." So I ask again: Why the guardedness over this document? In their letter, the SU Executive rightly claim that it is "subject to misinterpretation ... [and] that it [is] subject to change at any time" (surely they didn't need lawyers to "confirm" these points). However, why does this mean that the working budget should not be as transparent as possible to the student-body? Do we have 'trade-secrets' that we are protecting? ... are we competing with other organizations? We are a not-for-profit corporation ... what do we have to hide? To these questions, the SU Executive will restate their point that: "All members of

the UPEI student body are encouraged to make an appointment with the Vice President Finance to review the budget at any time" (see the SU Executive letter below). However, this option makes very little sense for those of us who aren't trained in: Business/Finance/Accounting; i.e. those of who don't know how to interpret financial statements. Why should that prevent us from examining the document independently?

Lastly, readers should know that there exists, on the record, a resolution passed by Council that specifically states that: "Council [is] required to publicise their working budget in a format appropriate by council" (this resolution can be found in section 8-1 of the November 20, 2005 minutes; which should be available on line). Granted, the wording of the resolution needs some tweaking, but the message is clear: Council must publicise the working budget.

So, where does that leave us? Well, by the time you read this, Council will have met again (on March 25th), and I would have raised the issue of publicizing the budget at that meeting, reminding the SU Executive that they are bound by the will of Council (this is clearly stated in the SU Constitution) and reminding Council of their duty to publicise the working budget (Resolution 8-1). One of the exciting things about writing this piece days before our decision, is that I can venture my guess as to what the outcome will be. I offer two scenarios. (1) Upon learning of/recalling motion 8-1, the SU Council will agree and proceed to publicise the working budget. (2) The SU Executive will effectively stonewall any discussion or decision by calling the working budget a legal-document and asking Council that they be allowed to refer to their lawyers (they've employed this trick before). How will this drama unfold? Check the minutes from April 1 to see. Also, go ahead and look over your budget ... and misinterpret at will.

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