

AUTONOMY: A GOOD IDEA FOR STUDENTS

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"Council president loses \$2000 in get-rich-quick scheme", scream the headlines in one week's issue of a student paper.

The next week: Well, there aren't any headlines next week because the president has shut down the paper.

The above case is fictional, but it's also typical of many conflicts that have existed between student papers and student councils for many years. And it's the reason why many student papers want to reassess their relationships to student councils and to students.

The catchword is autonomy particularly fiscal autonomy, and it's something more and more papers have been going for in the past few years. Whether it's by a per-student levy delivered through the administration, or a contract negotiated each year with the student union, papers are trying to distance themselves from their student government.

But why? Aren't student papers and student governments both part of the student movement? Aren't they both supposed to serve the students?

WHY AUTONOMY?

Many student councils use the argument that, because they are the elected representatives of students, they have a responsibility to the students to direct the papers "in the best interests of the students".

Since only they are responsible to and elected

by students, they argue, they should control the paper's editorial policy and content. But as a paper prepared by last year's CUP national executive points out, "the problem lies in the conflict of interest councils have."

The problem occurs, because, in most cases, student councils are both the main financial and main news source of student papers. Large sections of student papers are usually devoted to their activities (or lack of activity), and their internal squabbles and external pronouncements.

But that doesn't mean the student governments will always like the coverage, because papers also cover what they are doing wrong.

As Chris Jull of the Ontario, one of the few fully-autonomous student papers, points out: "If it is the newspaper's responsibility to report the activities of its student government, it follows that it is its responsibility to work to become independent enough to do that in a complete manner. In other words, if the council is falling flat on its face, the paper should say so."

While student governments have constitutional or financial control over papers, there will always be trouble with interference. If 'power wing nuts' are messing up council business, there is little reason to suspect they will stand by while

the paper reports their transgressions."

In most cases, student unions, as publishers, control student papers' budgets, and usually ratify papers' choices for editors. With this power, if they don't like a paper's coverage, they can interfere in its operations.

This interference, last year's executive explained "may range from comments about the editorial position on certain items around the time of budget approval to locking the staff out of its offices over political differences."

On several papers this year, continued personal differences have led to extended, months-long fights over papers' budgets, editorial salaries, and editorial content. In extreme cases, councils have grilled editors at meetings, and, in some cases, fired or tried to fire them for alleged poor news coverage or financial incompetence.

FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

However, it's not only the question of editorial freedom that has caused problems between student councils and papers. Papers' fiscal responsibility is a problem, too.

And the lack of responsibility can often be traced back to papers' lack of autonomy. Because the student government's accounting department handles their books, they don't know the

state of their own finances. And that can lead to trouble.

A classic case is the attempted closing of the Dalhousie Gazette last spring. As then-editor Val Mansour explains:

"There was a \$2000 printing bill from the year before which was carried over in our budget, so it looked like we were \$2000 over, though, in fact, we had printed less pages than last year. Our ad manager wasn't collecting ad revenue fast enough, so the money in the account was low."

With this lack of revenue, the Dalhousie student union told the Gazette it couldn't publish its last two scheduled issues. Mansour: "They wouldn't even listen to reason that we could print two small issues and break even if we wanted to. They told us we couldn't publish our last two issues, and they told our printers not to print them". "We told them, 'Phooey on you'. Then we put out two issues on our own, and turned a profit."

But the whole dispute was unnecessary, Mansour said. "It all could have been avoided if we had had better knowledge of our finances. The ultimate solution is to be separate from your student council and have your business manager responsible to your staff - to keep them aware of what's going on."

Fiscal autonomy also ensures papers keep their funding, points out Peak

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