CSU General Election and Referenda 2019

Chief Returning Officers Final Report

The 2019 CSU elections and referenda were a general success, though some concerns were raised. This was now the third election/referenda conducted using internet voting. Turnout for the elections and referenda was relatively high, with a total of 1,394 voters (18.8%). A few positions remain vacant as no candidates were nominated for them, which while the majority of positions filled were uncontested ballots. However, there were a number of seats that were contested with a high number of candidates. I believe that much of the success to recruiting candidates should be directed to the outgoing board. The following pages provide a general overview of the electoral process and include some recommendations moving forward, many of which remain from previous election cycles.

It was again a real pleasure and honour to work with the Capilano University community, the CSU and all of its staff and members. Should you have any questions regarding the following commentary, please don't hesitate to contact me at anytime for further discussion.

A total of 1,394 students voted, made up of 515 Arts and Science students, 426 Business and Professional Studies students, 149 Education, Health and Human Development Students, 177 Fine and Applied Arts Students and 127 Global and Community Studies students. The total membership is 7,406, making turnout 18.8%.

Rules and procedures

The rules and procedures governing the CSU elections are generally conducive to the conduct of fair elections and a number of recent clarifications and amendments were made to further smooth the process, improve clarity and minimize potential disputes. Further improvements should be made and are included below.

One area that must be addressed is the nomination and elections for collective liaisons. Few rules currently exist regarding how collective positions may be filled or voted on. Only the position for International Student Representative is restricted in terms of nominations and voting given it is a position that is easily segmented by the registrar's office.

The other collective positions are not being respected by a significant proportion of voters as they are voting for positions they surely don't self-identify with. The fact that each of the positions is attracting at minimum 500 voters, when the total number of votes is 1394 makes this clear. These results indicate that something should change with the process for electing collective representatives.

Several options are available, including opening voting to all voters or altering the ballot in some manner to put more psychological pressure on voters to truly vote for collectives they self identify with. The current process simply allows for too much leniency and trust in a process many members are not respecting or understanding.

During this election, we had a few candidates withdraw from the election. As stated previously, consideration should be given to adding a regulation on how candidates may withdraw from the elections. A potential recommendation could allow candidate withdrawals at any time prior to election day. If ballots are not already printed, the candidates name would simply be removed from the ballot, while if the ballots are already printed, the rule could state that all votes cast for that candidate would simply not be counted and posters advising voters that a candidate had withdrawn could be made available.

Some housecleaning of the rules and procedures should be carried out. It would be helpful to combine articles 4 & 9 regarding complaints and violations. Furthermore, a rule should be established clarifying what is published regarding complaints. 2 complaints were submitted during this election, but I believe a number more would have been filed if I hadn't insisted that the names of those filing complaints would be published along with their complaints. This was my ruling and absolutely something that could be altered and codified. There are pro's and con's both ways.

Bylaw VII(2) states that a candidate elected into a vacant position shall take office upon ratification at the next board meeting. As noted previously, there may be cases where we have one vacancy – but two successful candidates elected. If there are two successful candidates and one vacant position, a formula for allotting that position should be codified, such as allocating such a position by lottery between the two successful candidates.

This year, added positions were created for parallel elections to the Business Society of Capilano University. A separate nomination package was created for these positions. While few of the positions were filled, it was not a massive burden to take on this extra duty. I would hope that greater participation is seen in the future.

Referenda

For the third year in a row, a series of referenda questions were posed to the CSU membership. Carrying this out was entirely manageable, however, as previously noted some thought should go into refining the rules to distinguish differences in conducting referenda versus an election, as they are distinct. This would allow for more practical implementation of referendum rules that naturally differ, especially from a campaign perspective. Greater clarity must be made regarding yes/no committees, so they are better informed and enabled by the rules. Nevertheless, in this round, no concerns were raised regarding any of the referenda issues at all.

It would be wise to explicitly add to the procedures that when the CSU is authorized to take a position in a referendum, they may use CSU logos and slogans, as distinct from candidates.

Nominations

This year we took efforts to amend the nominations package in order to simplify the process, reduce areas where members often made mistakes while completing the package and remove bulk so more candidates would read the package.

The nominations process ran reasonably smoothly, with all candidates fulfilling their nomination requirements.

The optional “Candidate Statement” submission deadline was altered to be a few days after the nomination package deadline to try and increase the number of candidates who submit the statements. The statements are a primary reference tool members use to distinguish the candidates when voting. Consideration to remove the requirement to include the candidates name and positions from the statement would be appreciated as these pieces of information are always listed by the CRO by default.

Most positions were filled were this time around and I always attribute the success or failure of the number of seats contested to the incumbent board members, as they are in the best position to seek out potential new candidates. I would hope such efforts can be continued in future elections.

As in previous election, some candidates made requests to have their name listed on the ballot differently than how it is shown on their student card. New procedures allow for a far greater amount of flexibility and this worked well in this round of elections.

A pre-check deadline has been used in the past and is an effective way of getting candidates to submit nomination packages early to ensure their packages meet the required criteria to be nominated allowing time for any corrections. Several packages were submitted prior to the pre-check deadline, so it did have added value. Consideration could be made for providing a submission deadline for all and allowing a few days for all prospective candidates to resolve any errors or omissions found by the CRO.

Again, if the nomination process could be altered to be completed by students entirely online, it would greatly reduce difficulty in reading and “interpreting” written packages. While this is not a priority, it could be added to a wish list.

<u>Candidate Orientation Meeting</u>

The Candidate Orientation meeting is an excellent opportunity for candidates to meet the CRO and learn about the important process they are embarking on. It is also helpful for the CRO to meet the candidates. However, as noted previously, it is extremely difficult for all candidates to be available for one such meeting. The current rules state that candidates cannot begin their campaign until they complete such a meeting with the CRO. Rather than require subsequent in person meetings, I organized several online video meetings for candidates unable to meet with me at the initial Candidate Orientation meeting. This reduced inconvenience on both the CRO and students and worked relatively well. Nevertheless, I had to organize 5 different meetings to capture all the candidates.

The Candidate Orientation meeting should be held during the official student lunch break hour to ensure that the initial meeting captures as many students as possible.

As stated above, the CRO should expand this meeting to referenda campaigns, though this should be completed as a different meeting. This only works when there are official campaign groups in a referenda.

To encourage students to make an effort to attend the actual Candidate Orientation meeting, some incentives should be noted, including the fact that their campaign cannot begin until this meeting is complete.

Advertising

A good amount of advertising was provided regarding this electoral process and certainly election days were further highlighted by the effective campaign of candidates and referendum campaigners. Certainly, a massive driver of turnout for internet voting are the mass emailers that are sent out via SimplyVoting providing information on how to cast a ballot.

All Candidates Forum

An all candidate's forum is a great opportunity for candidates to speak to members, but also for members to learn about the candidates. For such forums to be effective, getting greater participation from both candidates and members is essential. Greater advertising may be effective in drawing more people to such events. Again, the Capilano Courier carried out the process, however my assistance was not required this year. I believe having the Courier run the process is a positive development and as they come more familiar with the process, it will only become easier to organize. From what I understand, the forum was a far greater success this year than it has been in the past.

Polling

The polling process was held over 3 days, starting at 9 am on March 19th and ending at 5 pm on March 21st. An information booth was set up at the North Vancouver campus to advertise the election, provide information and allow for a location that students could vote at. As well, an information booth was opened at the Sunshine Coast campus on the 21st.

I would recommend retaining information booths as they provid an important layer of advertising and in person information for the election and actually attracted a good number of voters.

Ideally, the internet voting vendor would allow for members to cast ballots as many times as they wanted, with each subsequent ballot cast cancelling their previous ballot. This would go to some lengths in addressing concerns with candidates or other students putting pressure on individual members to vote for them while hovering over their computer.

Ballot

The ballot was created on the Simply Voting template for ballot production and suited our purposes nicely. Members were provided the opportunity to abstain on each of the ballot questions and perhaps this option should be reviewed, as certainly with the elections for collective liaisons, the concept of abstaining is likely not as negative as can sometimes be perceived.

Voter Turnout

Voter turnout was relatively high and remains around the same level as the first vote held online in 2018. In fact, the percent turnout was slightly higher in the 2019 election process with 18.8% vs. 18.2% in 2018.

Complaints and Appeals

Going forward, an issue which is likely to be seen in greater numbers given the move to internet voting, is candidate or campaign pressure on members to vote under pressure. In each election held since internet voting was adopted, such concerns were raised with the CRO and insufficient evidence was provided to the CRO to proceed on the matter. Internet voting removes control of the voting process from the election administration and as such far less oversight is available to ensure voting is taking place according to the rules and procedures. This is a tricky subject as it is easy to exert pressure on the membership without others knowing and there are many avenues to "vote buy" given the lack of control from the administration.

Of course, evidence of such actions could turn up or complaints could be made to the CRO for action to be taken, but a reasonable level of evidence is required to intervene in such a situation. In many cases, members are unwilling to make a pubic complaint given fears about how the individual they are complaining about may respond to such a complaint.

In a separate matter, I believe it remains valuable to create a simple complaint form to simplify the election complaints process. The form could be available online and/or at the CSU service desk, outlining any required information would make the complaints process more official and easier for complainants. This would also provide an outline of necessary details for the CRO and appeals committee to handle complaints and appeals more efficiently.

CRO Involvement

The CSU elections are consistently held at the same time of year, allowing for a great deal of lead time to prepare for the elections. As such, providing the CRO with large amounts of lead time with regard to the initiation of the process would be helpful for both the CRO and I believe the CSU. Completing the planning process well in advance allows for all involved to carry out the administration of the elections properly and allow for the mitigation of any unforeseen staffing issues.

As previously suggested, in order to reduce pressure on staff and transfer institutional knowledge from staff and the CRO to a hard document, a Chief Returning Officer Manual, as envisaged in the CSU Procedures Manual should be created to provide a document which is standardized, comprehensive and one the CRO can refer back to over the course of the process. This would also reduce the learning curve for new CROs dealing with an unfamiliar process. Once this document is created, future CROs should take the time to update this living document and reduces reliance on CSU staff to carry forward the institutional memory.

Ron Laufer
Chief Returning Officer
Capilano Students' Union

Signature: Date: April 8, 2019