Discover Governance held a 60-minute online e-Panel event that featured six former SU executives, councillors, and employees as panelists. Participants were free to ask these experienced SU alumni questions about campaigning, serving as representatives, or anything else they wanted to know.

This event was a big success, and we couldn’t have done it without our fantastic panelists:

Leah Trueblood – leah.trueblood@gmail.com
  • Lived in Lister, helped establish the Collective Body for Arts Students (CBAS), VP Academic (09/10).

Samantha Power – samantha.power@gmail.com
  • VP External (05/06), President (06/07), worked on the UPass and the CPI cap on tuition.

Beverly Eastham – beastham@gmail.com
  • Arts Councillor (07/08), VP External (08/09, 09/10), served on the only majority female executive in the past ten years.

Kristen Flath – kflath@gmail.com
  • VP Student Life (08/09), former associate director and Manager of Student Group Services.

Catrin Berghoff – catrin.berghoff@gmail.com
  • Two-time Arts Councillor, former SU Advocacy Department staff member.

Lisa Dockman – lisa.dockman@gmail.com
  • Current Sustainability Coordinator at the U of A’s Office of Sustainability, previously worked for Sustain SU (or ECOS), worked on many SU campaigns, lived and worked in Lister.

They are happy to chat with anyone who is interested in running in SU elections (hence the presence of their e-mail addresses).

A big thank-you to the panelists and everyone who participated in this event.
Highlights

Three main themes came out of the questions and discussions:

1. Nominations, Campaigning, and Elections

Some of the questions we got were straightforward but important ones concerning the more technical details of running in an SU election. They included things like where to get nomination packages and when/where they’re due, how many positions are available, how long the terms are, etc.

There were also questions about campaigning, such as whether or not it is stressful (short answer: yes), and what the panelists’ best campaign advice is. Their advice included:

Know why you’re running/what goal you want to accomplish, and make sure you are passionate about it.

Try to raise awareness about current issues students face.

As Beverly Eastham said, “Talk until you feel like you must have talked to everyone on campus five times. And then keep talking.”

Take care of yourself.

2. Serving as a representative

We had some questions with interesting answers about serving as representatives. To paraphrase a few of them:

What does a councillor actually do? Where can I find a job description?

There isn’t an official description, and it’s actually something Council has been talking about informally this year. However, Samantha Power summed it up quite nicely: “Represent students and ensure executives are making decisions with the best interests of students in mind. You propose options, vote on policy issues and communicate those issues to your students. You also sit on committees to discuss SU internal issues and external campaign issues.”

Are councillors responsible for asking questions of the executive and acting as a check and balance for them?

Short answer: yes. Other words that were thrown around: definitely, absolutely, unequivocally, indubitably.

Where/how do I learn to use Robert’s Rules of Order?

Almost everyone who responded to this question agreed that Robert’s Rules can be quite intimidating at first, so hopefully no one feels too silly for being intimidated themselves. The very formal and somewhat complicated ways of participating in Council meetings, otherwise known as Robert’s Rules of Order, are explained in some length at a retreat that is held every spring for councillors. There will also be a mock council meeting at this retreat where you get to practice using this language. You can also quietly observe for a few meetings until you feel more comfortable with the expected participation style.

The issue of Robert’s Rules of Order being a barrier to participation was also brought up. Those who are already quite articulate in this way of speaking have a lot of power over those who are not. It can be very intimidating and discouraging to have the way you asked a
question criticized before the question itself is even considered, preventing many from participating in the future. It's the Chair's job to level this playing field as much as possible. If you have questions and no one on Council you feel comfortable approaching about them, talk to the Speaker. This can be done over e-mail, in person, or even right in the council meeting.

3. Barriers to participation

One participant asked: “Are there particular barriers to females running?” Which really gets to the heart of a big issue facing our Students’ Union (and many other representative institutions across the country) right now. Here are some of the ideas our panelists came up with:

It can be more difficult to find support networks.

It can seem daunting when you don’t know other females who are running, and easier when you do. (No one is running because no one is running).

Elements of the process are geared towards more individualistic/competitive approaches, rather than communitarian/collaborative, which tends to have a gendered impact.

The approach to the visual elements of the campaigning can be gendered.

Women choose to work on the campaign team rather than run.

Women are involved in areas that aren’t typically targeted to recruit candidates.

There are no immediate examples of women executives, so it’s more difficult for candidates to feel like they can win.

Lack of mentorship – women often need someone to tell them “you can do that.” This led to some debate over whether or not this hypothetical mentor to a potential female candidate needs to also be a woman.

It was also mentioned that women seem to be running for the more ‘mid-level’ governance positions, such as Students’ Council and Faculty Associations, which statistically is true.

A fun fact was introduced towards the end: Courtesy of the Brown Policy Report: men tend to think they are overqualified for political involvement (when they often are not), and women tend to think they are under-qualified for political involvement (when they often are not) because of the way that men and women are socially conditioned as they reach adulthood. Therefore women need more encouragement to run for political office than men who are similarly qualified do.

Some cultural barriers were mentioned as well. As Leah Trueblood pointed out: The SU is often accused of being cliquey, and it certainly can be.

There are cultural attachments to the SU – Executives often go to the bar and discuss issues, which is where a lot of mentorship happens, so if you’re not already involved in the cultural and social aspects of the establishment, it can be hard to get that mentorship.

There is often a “boys’ club” feel to the camaraderie of the leaders that feels exclusive, and in meetings men’s voices and ideas are heard more than women’s.

Going to the bar to discuss things can also exclude people who don’t drink, whether for religious or other personal reasons. It can also exclude or be very intimidating to introverts.
4. Other

We also had a great question about the "real world" benefits of student governance. Among other things, the panelists listed:

Meet great people and establish life-long contacts.

Confidence.

Learn how to define your goals/positions, implement plans/projects, work on a team, manage time effectively – all helpful in finding employment after university.