2005 Second Place Persuasive Research Paper

Diversity and Accurate Representation in the BYUSA Program

March 2005 heralded the most recent change in command for the Brigham Young University Student Association, or BYUSA. In what was a very controversial campaign season, BYUSA refused to release the end results of the race because they did not determine the winner. Jason Smith and J. Griggs lost due to an Honor Code infraction by the vice-president of the team, while the winning party, Adam Larson and Chrissie Sant, were highly criticized due to their use of the Coca-Cola “Break Free” jingle in their campaign. With this sort of atmosphere surrounding the 2005 campaign, many students dismissed the elections as useless or ignored them altogether.

This is nothing new. For years now, the student body has been decried as “apathetic” (Daily Universe, 20 March, 1996). There is some reason for this. In 1996, on 17.5% of the student body voted, about 4,833 out of over 30,000 (Universe, 20 March 1996). The statistics have, if anything, gotten worse since then. The recent election was only 15%, “... an improvement over last year.” (Universe, 8 March 2005). The best explanation for such a low turnout is, rather than apathy, that the students on this campus simply do not feel that the elections affect them, that they truly are voting on their representation. Those who cry for change often face a “run yourself” attitude, best summarized by a letter to the editor in 1999;

... run for president yourself. Then you can see how ‘easy’ it will be for you to think of your new and improved platform and how ‘simple’ it will be to make it known to the student body without annoying people. (Universe, 24 Feb 1999)

This however, raises an important question: is it possible for the average student to even consider running for BYUSA President? At a school that loves American Values such as freedom and democracy as much as we do, it only seems logical that any student, so long as they have the determination and the drive, should be able to rise to the top, bringing a fresh perspective and new ideas with them. Under the current BYUSA system,
however, that is not the case. As visible by history, particularly the past 17 years, it is currently only possible for a select minority on this campus to thrive in the BYUSA elections, an unintentional discrimination Brigham Young University seems to be unaware of. One of the most visible characteristics of this inequality is the distinct lack of women who become president of BYUSA. Awareness of these problems, as well as steps to fix them, would not only lead to more accurate representation, but would also strongly boost student interest.

The only readily available source on past presidents before computer documentation is a wall plaque on the wall of BYUSA headquarters. This plaque lists all the presidents since 1906. Interestingly enough, only two of 96 presidents have been female, Lora Hilton in 1943 and Amy Baird Miner in 1992.\(^1\) While not very flattering, this trend is historically reasonable. Until the 70s, America had a strong emphasis on males in leadership roles. For there to be a female president during WWII, when the number of men on campus drastically reduced, also comes as no surprise. While it is logical that the standard would be male through to the 50s and 60s, that hardly explains why there should be only one female president since then. Female vice-presidents, though more common, are still somewhat rare. Chrissie Sant is, according to the Daily Universe, the first female vice president in two years (Universe 7 March 2005). Why would this be the case now, when opportunity is open to men and women alike? Society and culture have changed remarkably in the past 50 years to favor talent over gender in most fields. Because of this, it seems that the low numbers of women who have become BYUSA president are an example of a larger problem with diversity. A contributing factor other than male-female representation must be involved as well. If so, then a reasonable alternative factor to consider is the set of requirements involved in actually running for president.

What is most pertinent to examining the rules and requirements for becoming BYUSA president is the Brigham Young University Student Service Association Charter, written in 1988 during a reorganization of the BYUSA structure to make it, “...more consistent with the nature of the university and more relevant to the majority of students.” (Charter, 2) The basic qualifications for president and vice–president are completely reasonable: 1) a good Honor Code standing, 2) a GPA of at least 3.00, and 3) Full-time student status. After

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\(^1\) Two other names, Meredith Wilson (1934), and Lynn W. Southham (1967) were unidentifiable, but can be reasonably considered male due to the years in which they served, while Kristian Watford (1996) was identified by Student Advisement Services as male.
that, however, it becomes far more complex. Over 40 hours of service through BYUSA are expected in the two semesters leading up to running. Although there are multiple options allowed for the way this service may be filled, at least one semester must be in a position such as program director, club president, or SAC representative, all of which are almost always appointed positions, making it nearly impossible for someone to run without at least a previous year of political maneuvering. These requirements concerning leadership experience, as well as the severe stress the position places on the candidate’s time\(^2\), were put in place to insure that a BYUSA president is familiar with the inner workings of the program. The problem, however, is that this creates a conflict of interests. It’s reasonable to create very limiting requirements when the goal is to produce a suitable leader for a particular organization on campus. The president of BYUSA, however, fills two different roles; he or she is not only the leader of this service organization, but is also the only campus representation for the student body at large.

These requirements also seem to severely narrow the field of opportunity in ways that BYU probably did not anticipate. Over the past decade the students able to succeed with the 1988 requirements are only from a small handful of majors. According to Student Advisement Services, out of the 17 presidents since 1988, seven BYUSA presidents were in business-related fields, such as accounting, advertising and public relations, or business management. This seems to be by far the most successful approach, since the majority of the other presidents also took business-related classes in addition to their major. Out of the remaining ten, three studied law-related fields with one also studying economics. There were two English majors, both of which also studied political science or communications, again business-related fields. The remaining four were a public policy major (also business related), a psychology major, an American studies major, and one teaching major, the previously mentioned Amy Baird Miner. The fact that women are so poorly represented makes sense when, according to the Marriott School of Business, only about 23% of their students are female. This makes the one female president during that space of time a fluke not only due to gender, but major as well, with the statistics following the expectation for that school fairly well.

\(^2\) The president of BYUSA is required to maintain at least 30-35 office hours per week, including from 2-5pm each school day from the beginning of spring semester, to the end of the following winter semester.
For so select a group on campus to be almost single-handedly in charge of this position—our student body’s only representation—the there must be ways in which the current organization is more beneficial to them then to the rest of the student body. I do not believe that it’s possible for no one else to have any interest in becoming the president of BYUSA. The current requirements limit those who are actually able to become involved. While it is impressive for a business major to have done many of the activities BYUSA provides, the activities which someone in the liberal arts, such as a music or language major, are more likely to directly benefit from are through the Museum of Art or the Service Center. Thus, the service requirement in particular prevents many potential candidates.

The requirements also make it very difficult for there to be diverse representation. A BYUSA president serves incredibly long office hours which prevent them from being able to have a job. Although a scholarship is provided to the president, there is no recompense for the many hours required to reach that final destination. Anyone with a tight financial situation, even if they meet all other requirements, is thus placed at a distinct disadvantage regarding the service requirement. These time constraints also make it virtually impossible for anyone with other obligations, such as a spouse or children, to run. It is a small wonder, then, that other characteristics which would create a diverse perspective, such as marriage and low income, are impossible to coordinate into the current system.

There is a serious problem of representation when representation of BYU’s student body is only available to a select handful of people. Although it is most readily visible with the absence of female BYUSA presidents, it is obvious that the true variety of this campus in exceptionally under-represented. BYU is slowly but surely developing a vibrant diversity that it lacked in the days of the current student body’s parents. People from many different backgrounds—economic, ethnic, and cultural—are being able to meet and learn about each other on this campus in ways that have never before existed. The current representation of the student body, on the other hand, seems to have scarcely changed from the time of our parents and their parents before them.

There seem to be two possible solutions for this problem; either changing the requirements for presidency, or separating the position from student body president away from BYUSA. Loosening the requirements could potentially create more work for the staff involved in the election, but the benefits of new
blood and ideas would far outweigh the problems. The requirements most in need of change to create a more democratic system would be to lower the service requirements somewhat, and to change the amount of time required for the position. Changing the service requirement, particularly making it more appealing to club presidents, would also help to deter the problem of access to running being predominantly through appointed positions.

If that were to fail, or if BYUSA were completely unwilling to make similar changes, the move which would be most beneficial for BYU campus would be to completely separate the position of student body president from the BYUSA program. This is probably the best possible solution, since it would completely eliminate the conflicts of interest between what type of person BYUSA wants as their representative, and who the student body at large wants to represent them. Although this would be a large change in the organization, I believe that it would generate not only a greater diversity and an influx of fresh enthusiasm, it would aid if not completely solve the problem with apathy discussed at the beginning of this paper.

It is this under-representation which has created any sense of apathy with the student body. Until such problems are addressed, there will be little interest in the elections by the student body, because they are not being represented. Merely being told to get out and vote will never fix that. Because the current situation makes running for the president of BYUSA available to only a select group of students, until it is in some way freed to the public, there will never be the interest and attention which BYUSA desires.
Works Cited


Brigham Young University Student Service Association Charter, Brigham Young University Student Service Association, 1988 <Elections.byu.edu>

Elections Handbook 2005, Brigham Young University Student Service Association, 2005 <Elections.byu.edu>
