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December 11, 2019

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Dear Ms. Chai,

In student-run organizations, participation from students is vital. To assist you with maintaining high student participation within your organization, please accept this report investigating the voter turnout, event turnout and volunteer rates within the UBC Science Undergraduate Society (SUS).

This report includes election data from the AMS Election website demonstrating voter turnouts, data from surveys that demonstrate student reasons for participating or not in SUS, and interviews from current members of SUS on current participation strategies. The report concludes with feasible recommendations for improving participation in your organization.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to initiate this investigation. If you have further questions, please contact me by email at jobina.tamminga@alumni.ubc.ca anytime.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jobina Tamminga', written in a cursive style.

Jobina Tamminga

PARTICIPATION ANALYSIS

Analysis on Participation Rates in the
Science Undergraduate Society at the
University of British Columbia

for

Julia Chai

President

UBC Science Undergraduate Society

Vancouver, British Columbia

by

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ENGL 301 Student

November 29, 2019

PARTICIPATION ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This report analyzed the participation rates of the Science Undergraduate Society (SUS) at the University of British Columbia through comparison of similar organizations, student feedback, and feedback from within the organization.

SUS is comprised of elected and volunteer positions which means that participation is required at all levels of the organization, from student feedback to passing motions. Participating also benefits students, as part of their tuition is dedicated to the Science Undergraduate Society. Historical election data shows that overall participation in SUS decreased over the past three years and was considerably lower when compared to similar organizations at UBC. Most students had participated in SUS events and voted in elections, though few students had volunteered in the organization. SUS is currently undergoing many initiatives to increase participation.

This report suggests the following to increase participation in SUS:

- Holding more events outside of the science building
- Advertising events earlier
- Advertising students to follow SUS on social media
- Collaborating with other department organizations
- Creating a transfer student program
- Starting science student exclusive traditions

Introduction

The Science Undergraduate Society (SUS) at UBC is a student organization that aims to promote academic, physical, and social wellbeing to science students at UBC. The organization is comprised of elected positions and volunteer positions, thus requires participation from students. SUS is made up of many positions who organize events, liaise between students and faculty, change school policy and much more. In recent years, student participation rates have been declining. Improving student participation by improving voter turnout, increasing the number of filled positions, and improving event turnouts will help to keep the organization going and create a stronger community among science students.

This report will conduct an analysis on the current participation rates among the organization and propose possible solutions. By surveying science students with questions in Appendix A, interviewing current members of SUS with questions in Appendix B, collecting election data from the AMS website, and comparing participations rates of similar organizations, this report will establish possible strategies for the organization to improve participation.

The following topics will be addressed in this report: the importance of participation to the organization, how the voter turnout for SUS compares to other student governments at UBC, how the voter turnout compares to previous years, possible reasons why students may not wish to participate, and what SUS is currently doing to increase participation rates.

This report concludes that improving marketing strategies and changing various aspects of events to be more inclusive to students will help to improve the stigma associated with the organization. Improving the stigma and getting more feedback from students will ultimately create an organization the more students will want to be a part of.

Data Section

Overview of SUS

Organization Structure

There are currently over 8206 students in the faculty of science which the Science Undergraduate Society serves (“Enrollment Statistics 2018/2019”). All students have access to all meeting minutes in the organization and elect their own representatives. The Science Undergraduate Society is designed to represent the interests of the student body, which changes over time. The organization is comprised of a team of eight core executives including the President, VP Administration, VP Finance, VP Student Life, VP Internal, VP External, VP Academic, and VP Communications. These roles are elected once per year by all science students and they oversee all committees and running of the organization. Other elected positions include two Alma Mater Society (AMS) representatives who represent SUS in the AMS council, one Science Student Senator who represents all science students in the UBC Senate, two First Year Representatives who help run the First Year Committee, and 22 Councillors who are elected by science students every year. Councillors represent each science department and are elected by the students in their department. Additionally, there are at least 19 committees with at least 15 requiring volunteers.

Importance of Participation for SUS

The Science Undergraduate Society is an organization that depends on engagement. All positions are either elected or volunteer positions, which require students contribution. The purpose of SUS is to bring students in the same faculty together and only fulfills this goal when students engage. Effective participation allows elected students to vote in councillor meetings according to the interests of their peers. Without engagement in just one part of the process, the organization cannot fulfill its intended purpose. The most important parts of the process include

running for an elected position, to voting for the representatives, to student feedback on pertinent issues, to attending and engaging in meetings, the organization cannot fulfill its intended purpose. Another consideration is that in order to pass motions in councillor meetings, more than half of members must be present and vote in favour. More students filling positions and attending meetings will increase the chances of motions being passed, benefiting more students.

Benefits of Participation for Students

The Science Undergraduate Society manages a \$220,000 budget every year from the \$26.69 fee included in tuition from each student in the faculty of science (UBC Science Undergraduate Society). By default, every science student contributes money and is a member of the organization. The organization is structured around the wants of the students and has many strategies to get opinions from the students. If students voice what they would like to get out of the organization, they not only get events and policies that they prefer but they are helping to allocate their own tuition money to their choosing.

UBC Election Data

Recent SUS Elections

The most recent election in the Science Undergraduate Society (Fall 2019) for councillor members had a 10.5% voter turnout (“AMS Voting”). Though this number is slightly higher than previous years, only 9 out of 22 councillor roles were filled with 7 out of 9 of the filled positions having only one person running (“AMS Voting”). In 2018, there was a slightly lower voter turnout of 6.2%, though 11 out of 22 councillor positions were filled with five out of the 11 positions having one person running (“AMS Voting”). 2017 had a 7.9% voter turnout, which had even more of the councillor positions filled, 17 out of 22, with 11 of them having one person running (“AMS Voting”). Within just three years, even though the voter turnout slightly

increased, the percentage of filled roles decreased significantly from 77% to 40% (Figure 1). The number of positions with only one nominee also increased as seen in Figure 1.

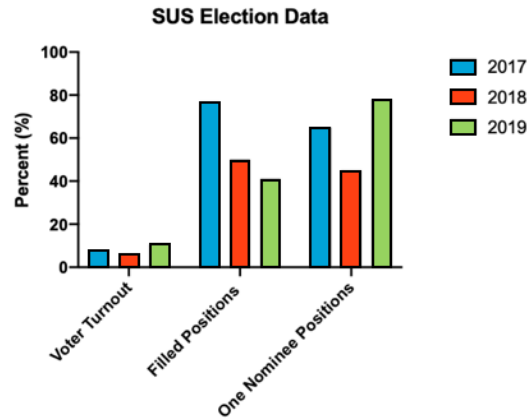


Figure 1: Election data for the Science Undergraduate Society (SUS)

Recent Elections in Other UBC Organizations

The AMS at UBC is a student run organization that organizes events for UBC students and aims to liaise between all UBC students and faculty. All UBC students are members of this organization, thus this organization has a much larger voter base. The AMS general voting for executive positions from 2019 had a 21.7% voter turnout, 2018 had a 20.4% voter turnout, and 2017 had a 20.7% voter turnout (“AMS Voting”). All of these years had more than double the voter turnout for SUS, even though the AMS had significantly more members.

The Engineering Undergraduate Society (EUS) is another student run organization with the same duties as SUS but in the engineering faculty. EUS has over 4500 members, which is just over half of the number of students in SUS (UBC Engineering Undergraduate Society). The EUS general election in 2019 had a 12.9% turnout, 2018 had a 20.9% turnout, and 2017 had a 14.9% voter turnout (“AMS Voting”). The engineering department has significantly less members, though had at least a 2.4% higher turnout than SUS every year.

Survey on Student Participation in SUS

Reasoning Behind Participating or Not

Results from a survey (Appendix A) found that 22.7% of students had never attended an event from SUS before. Most of the students who had never attended indicated that they did not attend because they had other commitments. The rest of students did not attend because they thought that they could make better use of their time, they didn't know that SUS has events, or the event didn't look interesting (Figure 2).

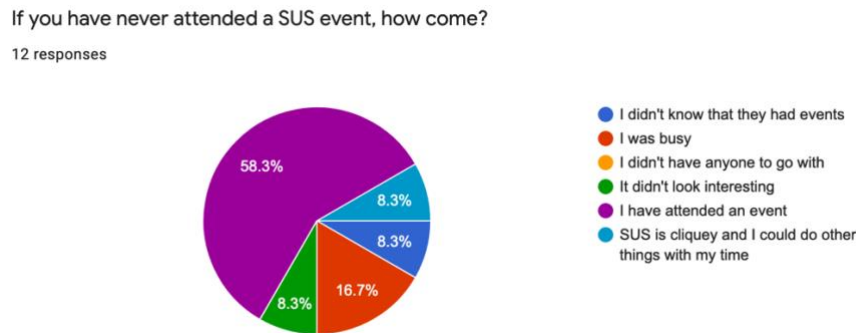


Figure 2. Survey results for why students did not attend a SUS event.

It was also found that 41.6% of students had not previously voted in the SUS elections (Figure 3). For those that had never voted, the overwhelming response was that they did not care about the elections, while some students could not decide on who to vote for (Figure 3).

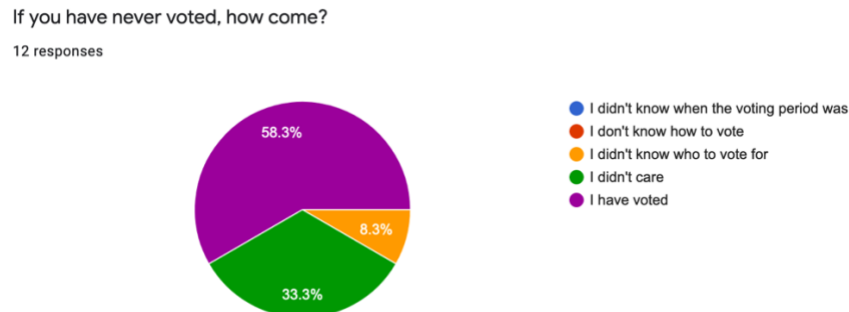


Figure 3. Survey results for why students did not vote in a SUS election.

It was also found that 93.3% of students had never volunteered with SUS, and the most common reason for this was that students were not interested in volunteering (Figure 4). The next most common response was that students didn't know that they could volunteer with SUS or they didn't have time to volunteer (Figure 4).

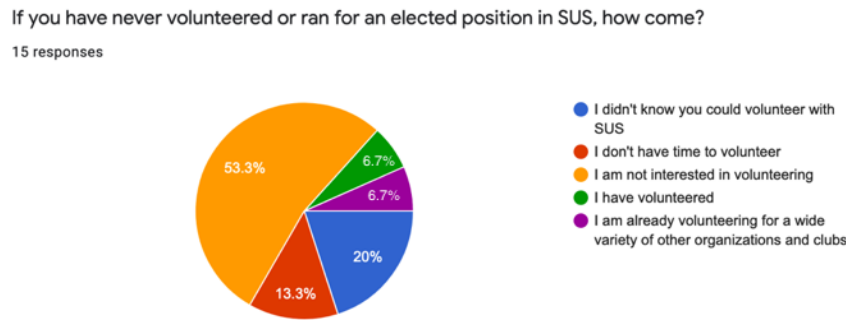


Figure 4. Results on why students had never volunteered with SUS.

Overall Feedback on Participating in SUS

The last survey question (Appendix A) asked students for overall feedback about positive or negative experiences in SUS. Some students brought up the issue that they felt like the executive team were all particularly close with each other and didn't feel like they would be accepted into such an intimate group. Other students feared to run for elected positions because they felt like most votes came from current members of SUS and would only vote for their friends. Another student indicated that they felt like the organization was focused on pre-med students and did not focus on other majors such as physics or environmental sciences. Some students mentioned a negative stigma associated with participating in events put together by SUS due to the quality of previous events. Lastly, some students felt like the events were not commuter friendly as they happened later in the evening when most students were commuting home.

Research on Current Practices at SUS

Current members in SUS were interviewed (Appendix B) about current participation rates in SUS. Interviews found that participation is an ongoing battle within the organization and a few strategies have already been implemented to improve involvement. To increase voter turnout, SUS advertises the election on both social media and through email. Nominees will go to classrooms and announce their platform. Last year SUS also held a “Vote for Blue Chip Campaign” that offered students a cookie if they could prove that they voted, which was said to be successful. Most events are free or cost very little which is also done to draw in more students. SUS events are typically held in the Abdul Lahda Science Student Centre, which decreases the cost of events. Events were also claimed to commonly happen throughout the day to include commuter students as well, which contradicted student feedback. The current VP Student Life is working on fewer but higher quality events in order to allocate more of the budget per event. SUS also conducts surveys every September to try and listen to students and gather what kind of issues and activities students are interested in. The volunteering positions are also open to any science student, allowing the positions to be inclusive. Lastly, SUS has been enforcing a new policy called “1 Person Per Position” which limits each member to only one position within SUS so that there are more open positions for students wanting to join.

Possible Solutions for Increasing Student Participation

Short term Solutions

These solutions are suggested for the current school year.

1. *Holding more events outside of the science building.* Many students feel intimidated or like they don't belong in the building and avoid going inside. By hosting events in various science buildings around campus such as the computer science building, biology

building, or chemistry building, it may portray SUS as a more inclusive organization and help students not to feel as intimidated going into the science building. There is currently no cost to reserve spaces in other buildings which would not cut into the budget at all.

2. *Advertising events earlier.* Many events are posted one week prior to the event date, though this may not give students enough time to plan for the event. By advertising events earlier, it will help to reach more students and increase more interest. Posting events at least two weeks in advance is suggested.

Long Term Solutions

These solutions are suggested for the following school year.

1. *Advertising students to follow SUS on social media.* 20% of surveyed students didn't know that you could volunteer with SUS (Figure 4), and 8.3% of students didn't know that SUS had events (Figure 2). The SUS Facebook page is consistent at advertising events to students who already follow the page, though is not helpful to students who do not follow the page. In order to stay up to date on events with SUS, it is suggested to advertise students to follow the Facebook page and Instagram in the first week of class, especially for first year students. Doing so may inform more students throughout the year about events going on with SUS.
2. *Collaborating with other department organizations.* Clubs such as BIOSOC (the biology student government) or CSSS (the computer science student government) represent science students in each department. Working with these organizations will not only unite students in those departments to students in other departments, it may also promote inclusivity and diversity within SUS.

3. *Creating a transfer student program.* Transfer students are often overlooked when deciding on marketing strategies. Transfer students are often in higher years, though do not have established friend groups. It can be difficult for transfer students to make friends since most other students have established friend groups. Establishing a transfer student program could create a community for transfer students within the context of SUS.
4. *Starting science student exclusive traditions.* Engineering students tend to feel closer together due to their exclusive rituals, especially at UBC. By creating science exclusive rituals, it may help to improve science pride and promote participation.

Conclusion

Summary and Overall Interpretation of Results

In summary, the Science Undergraduate Society has an opportunity to increase the participation within the organization and to improve the university experience of more students. It was found that most students chose not to participate in the organization due to previous negative perception or did not feel welcome in the organization. Students also felt that the organization was not accommodating to their schedules or their majors. While the organization has many initiatives to increase participation, the election data shows that these are areas for improvement.

Recommendations

This report recommends a combination of short-term and long-term solutions to increase participation. Recommended short term solutions include holding more events outside of the science building, and advertising events at least two weeks before each event. Long term solutions include increasing advertising for students to like the SUS Facebook page, collaborating with other science departments for events, creating a transfer student program, and starting science exclusive traditions.

Appendix

Appendix A. Survey Questions

- 1) What year are you in? _____
- 2) Have you ever attended a SUS event? (yes/no)
- 3) If you have never attended a SUS event, how come?
 - a. I didn't know they had events
 - b. I was busy
 - c. I didn't have anyone to go with
 - d. It didn't look interesting
 - e. I did attend an event
 - f. other
- 4) Have you ever voted in SUS elections through the AMS website? (yes/no)
- 5) If you have never voted, how come?
 - a. I didn't know I could vote
 - b. I don't know when the voting period is
 - c. I don't know how to vote
 - d. I didn't know who to vote for
 - e. I didn't care
 - f. I did vote
 - g. other
- 6) Have you ever volunteered or ran for an elected position in SUS? (yes/no)
- 7) If you have never volunteered or ran for a position in SUS, how come?
 - a. I didn't know you could volunteer with SUS
 - b. I don't have time to volunteer
 - c. I am not interested in volunteering
 - d. I have volunteered
 - e. Other
- 8) Are there any positive or negative comments that you have about participating in SUS?

Appendix B. Interview Questions

- 1) What year are you in? _____
- 2) What is your role within SUS?
- 3) Why did you choose to participate in SUS?
- 4) Is SUS currently doing anything to increase participation in voting, events or volunteering?
- 5) Do you think that participation is an issue in SUS?
- 6) If so, what do you think SUS could do to increase participation?

References

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