

Students lend their voices to university issues

Contribute as members of Governing Council

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Simcoe Hall has taken on a whole new meaning for Saswati Deb, an undergraduate student governor. Just a few years ago as a new student walking around U of T, she often wondered what kind of activities took place at the historic building on King's College Circle. Today, she's part of the action inside, representing more than 40,000 students on Governing Council and sitting opposite other governors seven times a year to approve key decisions that affect all members of the university community.

"It is a huge privilege sitting on governing council and being able to sit amongst the president and the chair and all these people who have a lot of knowledge that they can share about how the university works," said Deb, first elected in 2006. She is now a second-time elected student governor and a fourth-year criminology student.

Student governors have been participating in Governing Council since the 1970s, and in a little over three decades they have played a very important role in shaping the way decisions are made and approved by the 50-member governing body.

Eight elected students represent their constituents at all three campuses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels; each also serves on a maximum of two other council boards or committees. Of the eight student governors, two are graduate students, four are full-time undergraduates and two are part-time undergraduates.

First-time student governor Alex Kenjeev says his governance role has enhanced his graduate student experience at the university.

"Most of the time, we think about our own narrow needs as constituents in this or that faculty, college, or department--or even worse, as students, as opposed to professors, as opposed to staff. As a governor, though, you are forced to consider the larger trade-offs and the wider strategy of how to build a globally recognized, top-tier research university."

Louis Charpentier, secretary of Governing Council, says student governors are required to climb a relatively steep learning curve because they generally serve only one year, but bring a unique perspective to university governance.

"Like all governors, they have to be informed and thoughtful in their interventions, and learning the complexities of our University is no small task. As well, in some ways, they have an important role in sharing with fellow governors what the student experience is for them, so there's an educational role," said Charpentier.

Part-time undergraduate and student governor Estefania Toledo said her role as student governor helped her take a leading role in the lobby for a Student Commons at the St. George campus.

"I was able to communicate the needs of students and work with individuals across the university to help create a proposal for Governing Council that would encompass a building that would meet the needs of students and address the student experience on campus," she said.

Mature, part-time student Kenneth Davy says student voices need to continue to be heard at the highest level of governance. He was one of the student governors who convinced council to re-examine the distribution of students for one of this year's committees.

"Student governors not only sit on the large councils, but also on the smaller working committees and it is through these smaller committees that the proposals for change is created. At this level student governors can contribute the ideas presented to them with the greatest potential for influence."

Jack Petch, chair of Governing Council, notes our student governors bring the student perspective in the decision making process to Governing Council and its committees.

"Our student governors, both past and present, have provided direct and personal insight to governance, a valuable and integral contribution to enable sound decisions for the betterment of all at the University of Toronto," said Petch. "We are grateful to each of our current student governors for their participation and commitment."