



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
**STUDENTS'
UNION**

IDENTITY MATTERS!

**A STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATE INVOLVEMENT AND
LEADERSHIP IN STUDENT GOVERNMENT AT UALBERTA**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The findings of this study show that identity matters in undergraduate involvement and leadership in student government at University of Alberta. Identity affects both desire and confidence to seek elected office in student government, including at the highest levels. It shapes experiences of campaigning, mostly for Students' Union (SU) Executive positions, and is a significant determinant of experience of serving in elected office at all levels, although to varying extent and depending on the dimension of identity. Some key highlights from the findings include:

- Gender plays a more significant role than race in confidence to seek elected office at the highest levels of student government, whereas race is more significant determinant of overall desire to seek leadership positions. Sexual orientation, however, does not have a significant influence on either, possibly because sexual orientation is less visible than race or gender.
- Women are more likely to indicate that their identity shapes their campaigning experience than men. Their gender influences how they present themselves publicly (dress, makeup, voice projection), their one-on-one interactions with potential voters, and the likelihood of being portrayed negatively by volunteers of opponent campaigns. Additionally, they are almost always more likely to experience negative attitudes/comments from potential voters (especially male voters) on their ability "to do the job" in one-on-one interactions.
- Gender and race, especially when combined, have a negative influence on serving in student representative capacity at the Faculty Association (FA) and Students' Council levels but it is difficult to separate which identity factor is a more significant determinant (based on the sample size of the targeted surveys). At the SU Executive level, women, visible minorities and sexual minorities observe that their identities shape their experiences of serving in their roles, particularly their interactions with stakeholders such as, administrators of the University of Alberta and elected officials at the provincial and federal level.
- Age is not a dimension of identity that this study focuses on, however, all former SU Executives spontaneously observe that it has a significant impact on their experience of serving in their elected roles. It shapes their interactions with older university administrators because they are often characterized as young and idealistic and their positions and arguments dismissed as immature and without life experience.
- In regards to external stakeholders, both women and visible minorities discuss the tendency to "over-prepare" to be seen as worthy and exemplary for their gender and race, beyond being professional and credible. They, however, do not indicate any negative experiences with internal stakeholders, possibly because such interactions are brief and less recurrent.
- Among members of the SU Executive, most participants indicate having positive and collegial relationships with their fellow executives. Some female executives, however, stress that their male colleagues may act "entitled" without being aware but that they never "call out" these male executives on their behavior. In contrast, a few men of colour indicate similar experiences with their Caucasian male colleagues and felt comfortable verbalizing disagreements with such inappropriate behavior.

I. RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH



Women constitute 56 percent of undergraduate students at the University of Alberta, yet data collected by the Chief Returning Officer of the Students' Union (SU) suggests that female candidates are underrepresented in Students' Council (SC) and SU Executive positions. Between 2005 and 2016, women on average had held 30 percent of SC seats. The highest female representation in Students' Council was 2011-12 when women constituted 45 percent of student councillors. However, this number has somewhat steadily declined since then. It currently stands at 35 percent. Similarly, between 2005 and 2016, only 25.5 percent of the 102 candidates who contested in SU Executive elections were women. Furthermore, only five women in the past twelve years were candidates for the President's Office, of which three were elected into office in 2009, 2015 and 2017. Between 2010 and 2014, there were no female students in any year amongst a five-member SU Executive team. Yet, the case of University of Alberta is not an exception, as the underrepresentation of women in post-secondary student government is a wider phenomenon.

In 2016, women constituted 58.8 percent of the Alberta undergraduate population, but they represented 44.5 percent of student councillors and 42 percent of elected student executive positions at seven large post-secondary institutions (Universities of Alberta, Calgary, Lethbridge, Mount Royal and Grant MacEwan, Southern and Northern Alberta Institutes of Technology). Only two of the seven student association presidents were women. Nationally as well, in 2016 women held approximately 43 percent of executive positions in undergraduate student government at U15¹ post-secondary schools although they constituted 56 percent of the Canadian undergraduate population. The lack of availability of longitudinal data at the provincial and national level makes it difficult to ascertain how prevalent this issue is, however, this pattern of underrepresentation is not out of line with broader underrepresentation of women in democratic politics. Within the insufficient number of studies available on this issue, one report in the American context showed that women make up only one-third of student body presidents even though women outnumber men in post-secondary participation. More importantly, research undertaken by the American University's Women and Politics Centre suggests that "holding student leadership positions is often the foundation for holding higher political offices"².

It is further striking (but not surprising) that women are equally or proportionately represented in elected student leadership positions at the faculty association (FA)³ level at University of Alberta. Longitudinal data shows that even in the Faculty of Engineering, where women constitute a minority of the undergraduate population, they outnumber men in elected leadership positions. This gap between equal or proportionate representation between faculty and institutional level is consistent with findings of a report published in 2011 by the Princeton Committee on Undergraduate Women's Leadership. The report highlighted that women may choose less visible positions (such as, at the faculty level) and/or may be discouraged to seek the highest leadership positions (at the institutional level). Yet the report also highlights that women undertake a greater share of work in student organizations⁴. Hence, one might hypothesize that gender has a role in underrepresentation of women at the highest levels of student government. The lack of studies on this issue, especially in

- 1 The group of Canada's leading research-intensive universities.
- 2 www.aauw.org/2009/05/12/women-in-congress-student-government-as-a-pathway-to-power/
- 3 Faculty Associations represent and provide services to all their faculty's students. This includes, but is not limited to: representing the students in their faculty on a number of committees; coordinating social events; and providing services such as study groups, microwaves, grad photos, grants, and more. There are a total of fourteen FAs.
- 4 www.princeton.edu/reports/2011/leadership/lessons/



the Canadian context, makes it difficult to say for certain. Hence, one of the questions this study seeks to answer is: Does (and how does) gender matter in undergraduate involvement and decision to seek leadership roles in student government?

While it is relatively easy to assess the representation of women in student government, the same cannot be said for visible, gender and sexual minorities⁵. This is largely due to the lack of corresponding data at the organizational (the SU), institutional (the University of Alberta) and societal level (especially for gender and sexual minorities), notwithstanding the challenges associated with collecting such data at the individual level. Furthermore, this also makes it difficult to assess the representation of women who are also visible and/or sexual minorities⁵ and understand whether and what kind of barriers they may face in seeking elected office in student government. In the Canadian context, political scientists have studied the role of race in under-representation of visible minorities in democratic politics⁶. However, studies examining the role of gender and sexual identities in seeking elected office are rare. It is, therefore, not illogical to assume that they face barriers to entering (and serving in) post-secondary student politics based on the evidence of various forms of discrimination they experience in the wider society. Furthermore, it is also established that beyond the role of individual identities, such as gender, gender identity, race, indigeneity, and sexual identities, intersecting identities shape individual experiences whether in politics or society more broadly⁷. Therefore, asking whether and how gender only matters in undergraduate student governance will yield an incomplete picture due to the diversity of the undergraduate student population at University of Alberta and as the first-ever study of whether and how gender, race, and sexual identity matters in undergraduate student government. Therefore, the primary question guiding this research is: **Does (and how does) identity matter in undergraduate involvement and desire to seek elected office in post-secondary student government?**

This report presents the findings of this study launched in February 2017, which has been undertaken by a team of researchers in the Research and Political Affairs department at the Students' Union of University of Alberta. Below, the report presents the methodology and findings of the study.

- 5 The Government of Canada's *Employment Equity Act* defines visible minorities as 'persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour.' Categories in the Visible minority variable include South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Arab, South-east Asian, West Asian, Korean, Japanese.
- 6 Bird, Karen. "The political representation of visible minorities in electoral democracies: A comparison of France, Denmark, and Canada." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 11, no. 4 (2005): 425-465.
- 7 Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color." *Stanford law review* (1991): 1241-1299.

II. HOW DID WE DO THIS STUDY?



This was an exploratory study, and it used a mixed-method approach to data collection. A focus on intersectionality was at the core of the study design and analysis. An intersectional approach to research design acknowledges that multiple overlapping identities can have an impact on a person's experience, be their gender, racial/ethnic, sexual or other identities. This approach involved collection of particular identity-specific information (gender, race, indigeneity, sexual orientation) from study participants over and above usual demographics (home faculty, age, year of study, domestic/international, full/part time).

SAMPLE PROFILE

The exploratory nature of the study was complemented by undertaking a census survey among the undergraduate population which helped assess the demographic distribution of the population especially since data on race and sexual identities was not available. This was accompanied by targeted surveys to Student Councillors and FA Executives who currently hold elected leadership roles in student government and have experience in running for office and serving in representative roles. Finally, the study also invited former SU Executives (2013-17) to participate, nearly all of whom had held at least one elected position in student government before being elected to the position of SU Executive and had experience in serving as elected officials at different levels of student government. The involvement of different profiles of participants helped to triangulate the data collected, improved the reliability of the data and draw inferential conclusions.

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS AND SAMPLE SIZE

The study used a mixed methods approach and included both quantitative (census and targeted administered surveys) and qualitative data collection (in-depth interviews) tools.

A census survey was administered to the entire undergraduate population in January 2017 through the monthly Students' Union newsletter. It collected data on student involvement and participation in campus life (defined as student groups, clubs, representative associations such as faculty and departmental associations, SC and SU Executive positions), including desire to seek elected leadership roles for those involved but not in leadership roles. The survey involved a prize draw of two \$50 and two \$25 University Bookstore gift cards to encourage a higher response rate. A total of 1967 students responded to the survey, with 1957 responses utilised for analysis after data cleaning to remove illegible responses. The margin of error would be ± 2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Two additional and targeted surveys were administered to FA Executives and Student Councillors to collect information on whether and how their identity influenced their decision to seek elected roles, run for office and serve in them. Both surveys were administered by the Students' Union's Office of Discover Governance to current FA Executives and Councillors on February 28. The FA survey received 30 responses from 94 current sitting FA executives, leading to a response rate of 32 percent. The Council survey received 17 responses from 32 sitting councillors, leading to a response rate of 53 percent.



One-on-one interviews were conducted with former members of the Students' Union executives that had held office between 2013-2017. A total of 17 individuals had held office during this period (with some executives holding office more than once), and a total of 15 interviews (those responding to request for an interview) were conducted by the team of researchers who also transcribed the interviews and analysed them. The gender of the researcher and the participant was deliberately matched. These interviews were conducted using a mix of remote video calling and in-person interviews based on participants' physical availability.

All data for this project was collected in English.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis and report writing was carried out between April and August 2017.

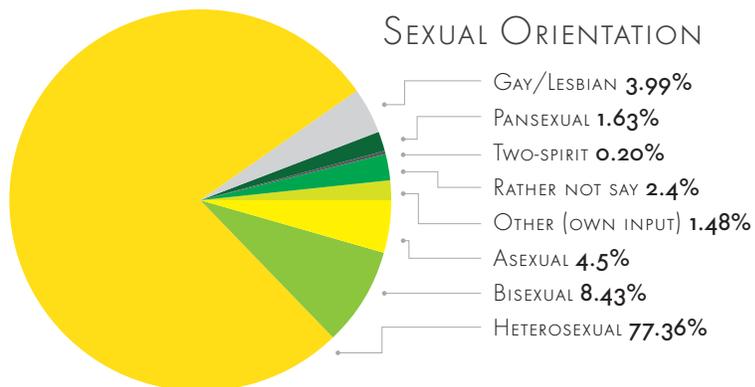
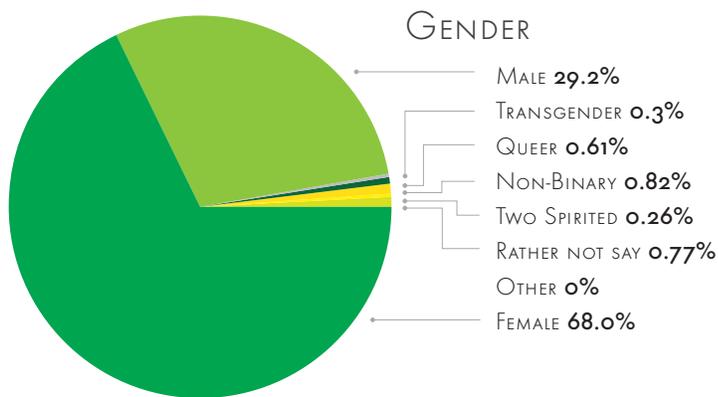
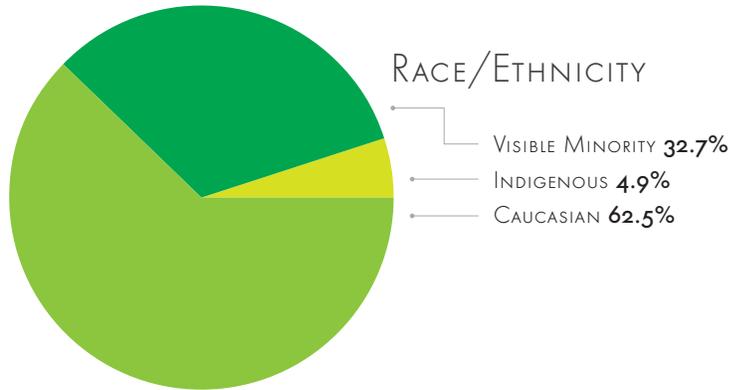
Analysis of quantitative data was conducted primarily using Microsoft Excel and included both descriptive (simple summaries about the sample and measures) and inferential (drawing conclusions for generalisation) statistical analysis. The data collected through the census survey is unweighted since other than gender (male/female/other) the researchers did not have access to demographic distribution by race and sexual orientation. In undertaking quantitative analysis researchers have been particularly attentive to how the intersection of multiple identities (gender, race, indigeneity, gender and sexual orientation identity) shaped research findings. Reporting highlights any significant differences that emerged.

In the case of qualitative analysis (responses to open ended survey questions and interviews), themes were developed through multiple readings of the data. Data analysis throughout the project relied on a collaborative effort by the team of researchers. For example, in the case of qualitative analysis, a second researcher would randomly cross check themes of interview data or coding of open ended survey responses developed by the first researcher based on original responses to open-ended survey questions and interview data. This process eliminated personal bias and ensured consistency in data interpretation.

III. WHO PARTICIPATED IN THIS STUDY?

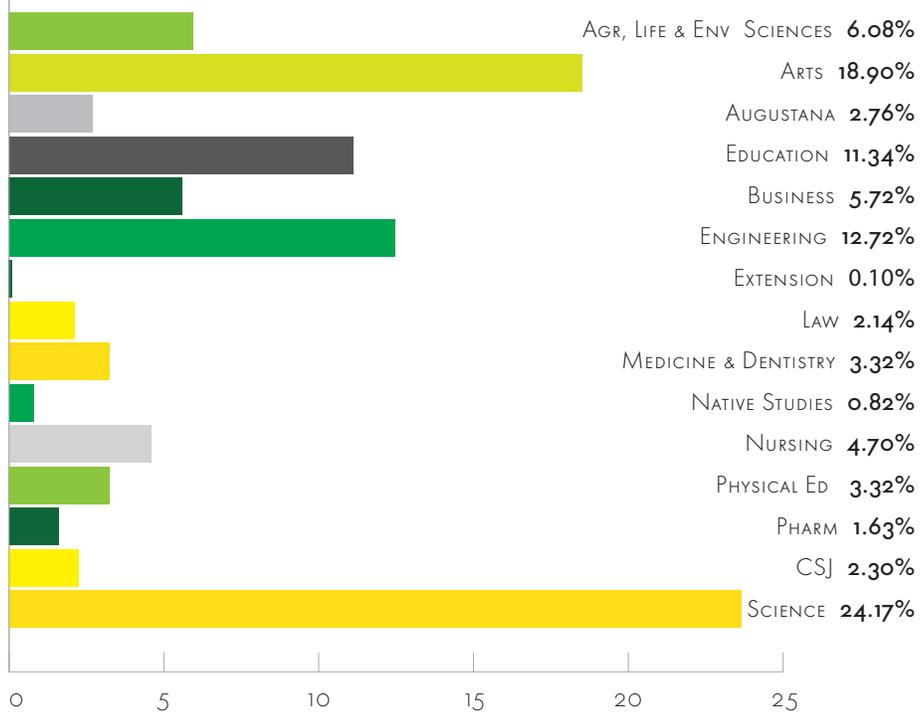


The following is a demographic breakdown of participants in the census survey.

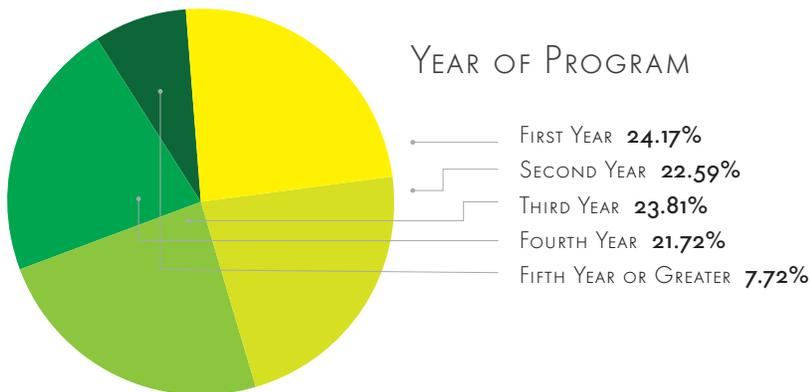




PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS VS. FACULTY



YEAR OF PROGRAM





DEMOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION: FA EXECUTIVES, STUDENT COUNCILLORS AND SU EXECUTIVES

	Faculty Association	Students' Council	SU Executive
Responses	30	17	15
Gender			
Female	19	7	5
Male	11	10	10
Race			
Caucasian	24	8	6
Visible Minority	4	8	9
Indigenous	2	1	-
Sexual Orientation			
Heterosexual	25	13	10
Sexual Minority	3	4	4
Declined to identify	2	-	1

IV. WHAT DID WE LEARN?



Identity matters in undergraduate involvement and leadership in student government at the University of Alberta. It affects desire and confidence in seeking elected office. Furthermore, identity shapes experiences of serving in elected office at all levels (faculty and institutional) although to varying extent, and in interactions with peers, support staff, and stakeholders. In the case of campaigning, however, the influence of identity is most prominent at the SU Executive level, very likely due to the competitiveness of the campaign races at that level. Below these findings are discussed in greater detail.

INVOLVEMENT IN CAMPUS LIFE AND DESIRE TO SEEK ELECTED OFFICE IN STUDENT GOVERNMENT

Overall, the findings do not suggest any significant differences by gender, race, sexual orientation and indigeneity in the likelihood of being involved in campus life (student groups, clubs, representative associations, department or faculty associations, Students' Council and Students' Union). Factors such as lack of time, lack of interest, and lack of awareness of opportunities for involvement were indicated as the most significant reasons for not being involved. A small proportion of the survey participants (2 percent) indicated that "lack of inclusive environment" was the most important factor in not being involved in campus life. More than half of these participants were women who were also either asexual or bisexual.

15.5 percent of surveyed participants were involved in campus life but had never held a leadership role. Slightly more than half indicated having considered such positions. Visible minorities were more likely to have considered such positions although no significant differences emerged by gender or sexual orientation. This suggests that there are no gender and sexual identity-based differences in desire for such positions. This is noteworthy given the under-representation of women in Student Council and SU Executive positions. The presence of interest but the lack of representation (including poor representation among candidates) may be tied to experiences of discrimination women face in their everyday university life. For example, in the census survey, 7.5 percent women indicated negative experiences of gender on their overall university experience. Women (both visible minorities and Indigenous participants) were also significantly more likely to have experienced discrimination on campus (75 and 64.70 percent, respectively). In response to open ended questions about the specific experience of discrimination, they most frequently cited their relationship to (male) peers and/or (male) instructors. The majority of these women were from Engineering, Science, Law and Medicine and indicated experiences of sexual harassment and being underestimated in their academic, professional and peer-learning settings. Such experiences often affects self-confidence, which may explain why women might be less willing to seek elected leadership roles.



“I find professors are less receptive to female student’s ideas in classrooms. In the profession of law overall, women are underrepresented and undervalued. This attitude is reflected by some of the students and staff in the faculty.”

– Student, Female, Visible Minority, Law

“I have been sexually harassed on campus by other male students as a consequence of my gender identity. Because I navigate through this world as female, I am assumed to be available to the majority of males in the faculty. I experience male classmates talking over me, among other forms of microaggressions, and I have felt uncomfortable in many courses due to these discussions.”

– Student, Female, Visible Minority, Arts

The lack of knowledge of representation of gender minorities and sexual minorities makes it difficult to assess how representation is tied to desire for leadership roles in student government. However, gender minorities and sexual minorities were more likely to indicate negative experiences of their identities, respectively on their overall university experience. Similarly, individuals who were both gender and sexual minorities were significantly more likely to face discrimination on this campus. These experiences likely act as deterrents in seeking to run and hold office in student government, but this is difficult to confirm due to lack of data on representation.

The three most frequently cited reasons for not seeking leadership position were:

- 1) not enough time;
- 2) lack of knowledge of position;
- 3) lack of skills (campaigning, public speaking, debating, use of social media).

Women were more likely to indicate “not enough time”, but it might be hasty to interpret this as pure busyness since the second and third most frequently cited reasons for not pursuing leadership position are “lack of adequate knowledge of position” and “lack of skills”. It is very likely that “not enough time” denotes the perception of time required to acquire the skills and knowledge considered to be minimum requirements to seek candidacy for elected positions. This may be because women tend to be underestimated in their ability to undertake such roles. For example, three former female SU Execs discussed being underestimated (for being women) by potential voters on the campaign trail. Women, therefore, may feel a greater need to invest time and energy in preparing to run for elected office than men and are more likely to dismiss themselves as worthy candidates.

“Because I did more one-on-ones⁸ for the executive election, I faced more situations where I was asked whether I will be able to handle it because of my gender...”

– SU Executive, Female, Visible Minority, Heterosexual

8 One-on-ones are face-to-face encounters between an election candidate and a voter where the former presents their platform points to the latter in hope of gaining their support.



Slightly less than a quarter (24%) of total survey participants had been involved in a leadership role (past and/or present) in campus life. On being asked about the influence of gender and/or sexual orientation on leadership experience, women were more likely to mention both positive and negative experiences (as opposed to men who were more likely to indicate “no influence”) indicating the significance of gender in influencing leadership experience.

WILLINGNESS TO SEEK FURTHER ELECTED LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN STUDENT GOVERNMENT

FA Executives and Student Councillors were asked about their willingness to seek elected positions at the institutional level (that is Students’ Union Executive Level). Overall visible minorities were more likely to be interested in running for such positions than Caucasians⁹, irrespective of gender. This is consistent with the census survey findings. It is likely that the experience of being a visible minority influences willingness for further leadership roles. This supposition is based on interview data in which participants of colour (including women) indicated being motivated by experiences of discrimination (self-experiences or witnessing), desire for social change and social justice, and inspired by the representation of people of colour in important political positions. It is also likely that the growing prominence of identity politics in SU Executive elections over the years provides visible minority candidates with a potential pool of similar voters they are more likely to receive support from (and therefore win). For example, at least three former SU Executives who were also visible minorities discussed the role of support from “cultural communities” (international students, particular ethnic populations) in their campaigns and possibly in their victories. In contrast, a Caucasian SU Executive perceived that “White” candidates could not appeal to such cultural/ethnic communities, especially if the opponent is a visible minority and additionally, cannot expect exclusive support from the “White” population because “Whiteness” does not suggest a shared bond.

“My opponents filed a complaint to the CRO about my campaigns use of Chinese social media, that was a big one... I think I almost strengthened my own campaign team, in the sense that ‘oh, they’re only complaining because they didn’t know this was available... [People often assumed about me] ‘Oh, he’s Chinese, he’ll get the Chinese vote.’”

- SU Executive, Male, Visible Minority, Heterosexual

However, within visible minorities at the FA level, men were more likely to feel confident and also more likely to seek leadership positions. In contrast, among Caucasians, men were less likely to seek leadership positions in campus life even though they were more likely to feel confident about running. Women, therefore, are less likely to feel confident in running irrespective of their interest levels which explains the gender parity at the faculty association level and perhaps the disparity at the Students’ Union Executive level.

⁹ The term is used as an umbrella concept to refer to all individuals who do not identify as “visible minority”, a term used by Statistics Canada to refer to “persons, other than aboriginal people, who are non-caucasian in race or non-white in colour”. We recognize and respect that there may be individuals who do not identify with the binary of “caucasian/visible minority”.



At the Students' Council level, gender determined greater likelihood of running for Students' Union Executive positions but not levels of confidence, whereas race shaped both likelihood and levels of confidence. In other words, male Councillors were more likely to run for SU Executive positions and feel confident about it irrespective of their race. Women of colour, on the other hand were more likely to have self-doubt about running and also less likely to run for SU Executive positions. No noticeable differences are found based on sexuality.

Among former SU Executives, there are important gender-based differences in motivations to seek SU Executive positions. First, women are more likely to consider running for these positions when encouraged by others, even when they have several years of experience in student government (in Students' Council and/or in FA). Several female participants indicate being told by peers "you should run" at least a year or two before they have made a firm decision to run. Men (irrespective of sexuality and race/ethnicity), in contrast, indicate that the decision to run is an entirely personal choice and peer support and encouragement was simply reassuring. Additionally, there seems to be a "wait and prepare" period for some women SU Executives, at times extending over a year or more, whereas men do not exhibit similar trends. This difference likely stems from a combination of lack of adequate confidence and perception of lack of adequate skills and knowledge, as evidenced by findings of the census survey. This is also apparent in the fact that nearly all but one former women SU Executives used words such as "self-doubt", "hesitation", and "anxiety" to describe their feelings while learning about campaigning, which is not observed among male participants. A few male SU Executives indicate that they have frequently observed self-doubt among female peers (at the Council or FA level) even when they perceive the latter to be highly qualified and skilled with a greater likelihood of winning.

"In [an SU election], the Gateway asked councillors why they didn't run for an executive position, and [a female councillor I knew well], who was one of the best councillors that I've ever had the privilege to serve with, genius, phenomenal at policy, she would have made one of the best executives this university had ever seen. She said: 'I don't know enough, I don't have enough experience, maybe In a few years.' I had the same answer, but I was only in my first year on council, and she was in her third."

- SU Executive, Male, Caucasian, Heterosexual.

Visible minorities were almost always likely to cite negative experiences of discrimination and racism (whether personal or as a witness, whether on campus or beyond) as one of the major motivations to seek executive positions. Few of them also identified the election of Barack Obama as the President of United States as an important influence in their decision to run for executive positions.



“Growing up before politics, I experienced a lot of things in the X community around being a girl like domestic violence, cultural norms and their impact on girls, I hated them, and they turned me into a political person. So politics entered my personal life, distancing me from my family. In that sense, it did impact my politics and wanting to be involved.”

- SU Executive, Female, Visible Minority, Heterosexual

“But, stuff like Obama getting elected, as cliché as it may be, those kind things have a big impact, and you hear this all the time, seeing people similar to you getting elected and that motivating you to run personally, I think that played for sure a role. Made me go: ‘yeah, I can do this, I’m fired up.’ It motivated me to run.”

- SU Executive, Male, Visible Minority, Heterosexual

“One of the things I have seen very often, if you don’t see yourself reflected in the structures of power, then you don’t actually want to be a part of it.”

- SU Executive, Male, Visible Minority, Heterosexual

CAMPAIGNING EXPERIENCE

The scope and dynamics of campaigning at Faculty Association and Student Council levels are comparatively smaller and less competitive (including frequent uncontested races) than at the SU Executive level. However, the majority of participants, irrespective of gender, race/indigeneity, and sexual orientation indicated that their identity has not influenced (positively or negatively) their campaigning experience.

When asked about advice for future candidates, men are more likely to emphasize the importance of highlighting merit and capabilities without referencing identity whereas women are more likely to encourage potential candidates to consider the significance of “representation”. At the Faculty Association level, few visible minorities underscore that race would have an impact on their experiences of serving in a leadership role. In contrast, all women Councillors surveyed highlight that a candidate’s gender will have an influence on their experience of serving in their role.

“People expected me to speak for the whole of my people, which is extremely unfair to those that do not have the same experience as me.”

- Councillor, Female, Visible Minority, Heterosexual



Women are more likely to indicate that their identity shapes their campaigning experience than men, which includes instances of how they may present themselves publicly (dress, makeup, voice projection) because of their gender, their one-on-one interactions with potential voters, and how they are portrayed by volunteers of opponent campaigns. They characterize their experience of portraying themselves as being excessively self-conscious and use terms such as “strategic” to describe their own perceptions of their self-portrayal efforts.

“I strategically chose a high collared, covered up shirt in the poster... I spent a lot of time deciding what I was going to wear in the poster, more so than [in other elections],”

– SU Executive, Female, Caucasian, Heterosexual

Additionally, they are almost always more likely to experience negative attitudes/ comments from potential voters (especially male voters) on their ability/capacity “to do the job” in one-on-one interactions. Finally, few also mention sexist attitudes from volunteers from opponent campaigns to portray themselves as less competent.

“I came across instances where students said ‘Oh you are female, are you sure you are going to be able to handle the stress?’ I would just question on my own abilities. Or sometimes I will get comments like I will vote for you because you are cute. Not because they have seen my platform and think I can do the job. That’s quite memorable because I never thought it would bug me so much, but it did.”

– SU Executive, Female, Visible Minority, Heterosexual

In contrast, men who are also visible or sexual minorities observed that their identities shaped their campaigning experience (in both positive and negative ways) because they stand out from their opponents (Caucasian, cis-gendered, heterosexual men).

“One of the strengths of being a gay man is you are perceived to have feminine qualities, and that gave me space to advocate for things that were more feminine than things that a straight man could advocate for. In particular, I spent a lot of time on a compassion policy for students with disabilities, religious students, or students facing mental illness, so they could have their term work accommodated or differed in some sense. I think being gay there was more space for me to focus on issues that affect other marginalized populations and gave credibility when speaking about them.”

– SU Executive, Male, Caucasian, Gay/Lesbian



“At the time I said, I’m going to win some votes because I’m a male, and I’m going to lose some votes because I’m not female. At that point, there’s nothing I can do about it; you just hope it balances out, and at the end, the best candidate gets elected.”

- SU Executive, Male, Visible Minority, Heterosexual

“Sexual identity isn’t something people see when I go up and talk to them.”

- SU Executive, Male and Queer, Caucasian, Pansexual

Three former SU Executives spontaneously raised the issue of class. Two female executives discuss how class shapes campaigning, noting that having the means to purchase food on campus, access to a vehicle, and capacity to miss three weeks of school to campaign are luxuries not available to all.

“Class is a thing that I’m not sure if we talk enough about. It matters if you have to prepare your meals, do your laundry. It’s important to consider family as a support system. How much does your family’s resources, your social capital, inform how people think of you or how people think you belong in a certain place? And if you don’t have all of that, you do have to work five times as hard, and if you have someone who is running that has a smoother path, then it also impacts your motivation to do it.”

- SU Executive, Female, Visible Minority, Declined to identify sexuality

“Class may come up if they feel like they have to buy nice clothes for the campaign etc. It shouldn’t have to be like that, but unfortunately, it is.”

- SU Executive, Female, Visible Minority, Heterosexual



SERVING IN ELECTED LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN STUDENT GOVERNMENT

Gender and race have a negative influence on serving in student representative roles at the faculty association level, but it is difficult to separate (based on this survey and sample size) which one is a more significant determinant. A small proportion of visible minority and Indigenous participants indicate that gender has negatively influenced their experience as an FA executive. All of these participants are women. As well, both men and women of colour cite instances of “subtle” racism in their interaction with constituent members and university administrators.

“It is good to see minorities in a position of representation, but there has also been subtle/unconscious racism”.

- FA, Female, Visible Minority, Heterosexual

At the Students’ Council level also women are also more likely to indicate that gender has a negative influence on their experience of serving as a Councilor. Further, women of colour are more likely to indicate this. Sexual minorities at the FA and Student Council levels do not report their sexual identities as having any influence on their experiences of serving. This, again, may be due to the lack of public knowledge of one’s sexual orientation. Women and men who are also visible and/or sexual minorities are more likely to indicate that their identity (comprised of gender, race, indigeneity, sexual orientation) has both positively and negatively influenced their interactions with fellow Councillors.

At the SU Executive level, women, visible and sexual minorities observe that their identities shape their experiences of serving in their roles, particularly their interactions with stakeholders such as administrators of the University of Alberta and elected officials at the provincial and federal level. Women are more likely to cite negative interaction with internal stakeholders (university administrators) whereas visible minorities indicate experiences of “feeling out of place” and “standing out” in an interactive space, which they link to difficulties of establishing a positive working relationship and achieving their goals. The experience of sexual minorities, however, vary widely from extreme negative experiences to no influence, over a period of four years.

“When I would give class talks, I could here people listening to each other: ‘Do you think that guy’s gay?’ or, ‘That guy has a gay lisp’, or ‘he sounds like a faggot’...I think the whole process of being a caricature for other people was harmful as a whole, not just being called ‘faggot’ by a couple of engineers...”

- SU Executive, Male, Caucasian, Gay/Lesbian



“It was strange because people had prior knowledge of my gay status, but it was weird that they would bring it up. I thought they didn’t need to (even in a neutral way).”

– SU Executive, Male, Caucasian, Gay/Lesbian

This may be symptomatic of wider changes in social attitudes toward sexual minorities. However, in regards to external stakeholders, both women and visible minorities discuss the tendency to “over-prepare” to be seen as worthy and exemplary for their gender and race, beyond being professional and credible. They, however, do not indicate any negative experiences possibly because such interactions are brief and not as recurring as that with international stakeholders.

“Maybe I should lower the Black level just a little bit when I go into a meeting, and not be fully who I am, because it is one of those things where there is a lot of times where... The majority of them are white, and the majority of their friend circle is white, there is that question of how me can I be. There are all these instances where you feel like you have to work to make them more comfortable.”

– SU Executive, Male, Visible Minority, Heterosexual

Age is not a dimension of identity that the study focuses on. However, all former Students’ Union executives spontaneously note that age is the most significant determinant of their experience of serving in their representative role, especially in their interactions with administrators of the University of Alberta. Participants observe that they are often characterized by university administrators as young and idealistic, and their positions and arguments dismissed as immature and without life experience. Majority of former women executives indicate age combined with gender create particular challenges in some instances in establishing credibility and be taken seriously by largely older, Caucasian and male university administrators.

“Previously, as a councillor I had been to Exec organized events where some University senators may have called other female students or me “sweetie” – mostly by old men.”

– SU Executive, Female, Visible Minority, Heterosexual

“They also sometimes look at you as quite antagonistic, you know, because you’re the student rep... There may be preconceived notions because I’m a person of colour as well, that’s where it became challenging. BOG, Senate, that was really tough.”

– SU Executive, Male, Visible Minority, Heterosexual



In regards to interactions amongst members of the SU Executives, most indicate a positive relationship. Some female executives, however, stress that their male colleagues may act “entitled” without being aware but that they never “call out” these male executives on their behaviour. In contrast, a few men of colour indicate similar experiences with their male, Caucasian colleagues and felt comfortable verbalizing disagreements with such inappropriate behaviour. In contrast, few sexual minorities in student executive positions indicated being often “burdened” with the sole responsibility of representing, resolving, and advancing interests of other sexual minorities in ways that can be exclusionary and isolating. Former SU Executives also highlighted very few instances of negative experiences of interactions with SU staff (such as homophobic attitude from a staff member). One male, visible minority, executive emphasized feelings of uncertainty/self-doubt around senior management team which was primarily white.