What Do You Think... ... of Student Government?

On Jan. 22 this box appeared for the first time on the front page of the Oregon Daily Emerald. And from that day to this it has been a regular feature on page one.

Today, we're analyzing the results so far-attempting to discover what Student Government means to you.

Twenty answers, we'll admit, don't indicate the opinion of about 4,000 students. To get a good representative sample of the student body, as we discovered fall term, several hundred student opinions are needed.

But we do think the answers were indicative, at least in part, of some of the problems which student government here faces.

We hope this daily question has made you do some thinking. Perhaps you've come to some conclusion about Student Government on the basis of the answers.

Why not compare yours with ours?

What do you think of student nessmen to turn out citizens, not government?

That question has appeared on the front page of the Emerald for the last 20 issues. And below the question were the answers of 20 Oregon students.

The answers stacked up something like this:

Five students said Oregon's student government is good; two of the five said student government provided worthwhile training in democracy.

Ten students were critical of student government. These students said student government is impersonal and leaves out capable people, too far removed from students, takes too much time from studies, lacks a concrete purpose and has a poor attendance record.

Three students said that the University administration interferes too much with student government.

Seven students stated that participation in student government

Four students criticized Oregon's system of preferential vot-

One Wanted More

One student said student government should be enlarged; one suggested it was covering too much area now.

(The number of student opinions listed here will exceed the 20 answers as some students commented on several phases of student government.)

We'd like to break down these opinions and see what's behind them. We shall base our discussion on the ASUO senate which is the largest and most representative of student governing

Two Arguments

There are two principal arguments for student government of this type: (1) It teaches democratic processes and (2) it permits students to solve problems which might otherwise not receive attention.

In the United States there has developed the idea of "good citizenship training" as a goal of education. Schools are instructed by parents, politicians and busi-

scholars. Student government is presumably an aid in this process.

This theory appears generally to be sound. A democratic society needs to produce intelligent men and women who are aware of their social responsibilities. But we believe that the help supplied by student government is very limited.

Once Each Year

The student-body, as a whole, has an opportunity to directly participate in this process but once a year-at the time of ASUO elections in the spring. Last year about 51 per cent of the student-body eligible to vote actually cast ballots. This is a percentage which is lower than that of the recent national elec-

Several factors limit the "teaching" capacity of the "body politic," the ASUO senate. Some members tend to be "repeaters," once they get on the senate they seem to stay. This narrows the number of "pupils." The issues which the ASUO senate grapples with are few. The pay telephone controversy was one. It is possible that mass student discontent might have produced a temporary organization to solve this problem. However, this lies in the field of speculation and the efforts of the senate cannot be disregarded, no matter how uncoordinated and feeble they seemed at times.

Real Issues Rare

It is rare that an issue such as pay telephones arises. The normal work of the senate is composed of selection of committee heads, handling elections, making investigations and recommendations. Much of the business which passes through the senate's hands is concerned with self-perpetuation. The senate selects a Homecoming chairman in the fall who tells the students in the spring what a grand job he did, who is elected to the senate, who picks a Homecoming chairman who . . .

The senate in actuality has little power when it comes to making decisions. The president of the University holds the ultimate responsibility for the total University program.

Hence, it may be seen that the ability to participate in the "democratic training program" is limited by (1) little direct student body participation; (2) "repeaters"; (3) lack of real issues; and (4) restricted pow-

A Sounding Board

The second argument advanced for student government, that it permits students to solve problems, disappears when one realizes that students have no power to solve problems but can only recommend and suggest. The senate, at times, becomes an effective pressure group and a student sounding board for the administration, but when the decision is made it is usually one suggested or approved by the administration. We do not regard this as particularly offensive. The administration carries the responsibility, not the students. Students come and go but the administration is permanent. And there are pressures which students can apply-mass action, word-of-mouth criticism- which will sway the administration toward a desperately needed reform.

Several students quizzed in "What Do You Think of Student Government?" said student government is too impersonal and too far removed from the students. This does not appear to be a valid criticism. Senate meetings are publicized in the Emerald. Meetings are open to the public. Senate minutes are available upon request. Senate leaders are spread among a number and variety of living organizations.

Lacking Purpose?

One student said that student government lacks a purpose. The ASUO constitution states the purpose of the Associated Students of the University of Oregon. It says:

"We the students of the University of Oregon in order to establish a representative government; to encourage the development of leaders and participants for the community and the sovereign state of Oregon; to stimulate an awareness of the rights and responsibilities of students in relation to the community; to improve student cultural, social, and physical welfare, and to promote the general welfare of this institution, do hereby ordain and establish this Constitution."

Attendance Good

Another student states that members of student government have a poor attendance record. During fall term of this year 12 senators had perfect attendance records and none of the senators were absent more than twice."

Student government leaves out capable people, a student asserts. In some aspects this is true. The undeveloped leader, the individual who lacks initiative or drive, tends to become lost in the mass of the student body. He is cultivated to some degree in the lower echelons of student government-the committees. But a great deal of his success in student government depends upon his ability to push himself. However, this qualification is not limited to the University; a similar situation exists in "the outside world."

It's Their Job

Three students said that the University administration meddles too much in student government. We cite again the fact that the final responsibility rests upon the administration. The ASUO constitution recognizes this when it says, " . . . the President of the University of Oregon has the ultimate responsibility for the total University program."

Seven students declared that there was poor participation in student government.

No Great Interest

Students are not profoundly interested in student government. Spring term elections create some attention but it is only transitory. The reason may lie in the fact that student government has no real power, that it is only playing at politics. Apathy to government is not uncommon in other circles. Government is often regarded as dull and uninteresting.

Proponets of a strong, active student government spend a great deal of time trying to think of methods of-interesting students. The results are usually the raising of synthetic issues or the magnification of small problems. Students will become interested in student government when a problem of real significance arises. Again, the pay phone battle serves as an ex-

ample. Between issues they will not be tricked into participation.

Student Doesn't Know

Four students reacted unfavorably to Oregon's preferential voting system. Few persons actually understand the method used to elect ASUO officials. Ig. norance has resulted in black comments about the unfairness of the system. It is granted that drawbacks to the system may h found (and the senate recent) discussed some of these hand caps). However, the general student knows little about how preferential voting works and care less. The generalization that preferential voting is "bad" had become a popular one.

What conclusions can be drawn from the 20 answers to "What Do You Think of Student Government?"

Three Conclusions

We would say these:

- 1. Students are generally uninterested in student government because it raises no real issues which vitally affect them.
- 2. There is a great deal of ignorance concerning the operation of student government. This may be interpreted to mean, again, a lack of interest, because informative sources are available to students.
- 3. Students are aware of stud dent failure to participate actively in student government but they have no immediate solution nor are they inclined to seek one,

We submit that these conclusions are supported only by personal observation and the comments of 20 Oregon students, picked at random from the campus. We believe that in general they are true conclusions and have a strong basis in fact.



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