

Endorsements irrelevant given flawed government

Once again spring has rolled around and the University student body is faced with another election to choose candidates for the ASUO Executive, Incidental Fee Committee and Student Senate.

And once again the *Emerald* is faced with endorsing a handful of candidates to fill various positions. But this year, the paper will take a different approach.

This year the *Emerald* will endorse no one.

It's not because the candidates the *Emerald* editorial board interviewed over the past four days lacked merit. Many were well-qualified and presented favorable ideas and policies. But given the present structure of the ASUO Executive and IFC, and these bodies' inability to put petty internal politics aside, these candidates would not flourish.

This year the *Emerald* will endorse reform, not just for political ideals, but for the political structure itself.

The IFC, under the guise of an apolitical body, has year in and year out played the political game, regardless of who is in office. Board members use the forum to attack one another or to forward personal agendas against specific groups. The result is a disruptive process that meets often, accomplishes little and ends in political infighting.

Recently, the flap over who tampered with the minutes from the IFC's Jan. 31 meeting did not produce a guilty party. Instead, the controversy served to show the political divisions among those serving on an apolitical body.

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Ironically, the causes for much of this infighting are the constraints placed upon the body itself. IFC members are not permitted to take the type of political stances that are required when dealing with tough issues such as budget cuts or determining whether a group is actually serving the campus.

For a glimpse of these constraints, one need only look at what the candidates themselves say. During endorsement interviews, the *ODE* editorial board faced a broken record of responses as to the IFC's stated neutrality. Each candidate said political views should not be a part of the IFC process. Two problems exist with that argument. First, it is impossible for members of a governing body to put biases aside. Second, students are unable to distinguish between candidates who spout identical messages, thus stifling the democratic process.

All the candidates did spout the same basic, politically correct message. All, that is, except one.

One candidate proposed zero-funding gay and lesbian and pro-abortion groups because they did not promote "family and community values." He was too outlandish to even consider, but he was dead-on when he said the IFC is a political body and should be treated as such.

That's how bad the interviews were.

The *ODE* board agreed that the IFC is and should be a political body, and that fact should not be hidden behind a veil of neutrality. The IFC should be allowed to debate a group's merits, and members should be allowed to include political ideology in the debate. Tough decisions, such as budget cutting, can only be made through intense debate.

Board members cannot do so under the current, stifling system. Therefore, the system must be changed to create a free marketplace of ideas where critical and controversial issues can be debated and decided.

As if IFC endorsements weren't difficult enough, interviewing ASUO presidential candidates wasn't much better. The editorial board heard many buzzwords (student empowerment, diversity, accessibility), but few solutions to campus problems.

Students should ask themselves, just as the editorial board did, what student government has done for them. Probably not a whole lot. Although executive officers walk into EMU Suite 4 every June with wonderful and innovative ideas, a year later they turn the job over to their successors, having accomplished little in terms of benefiting students.

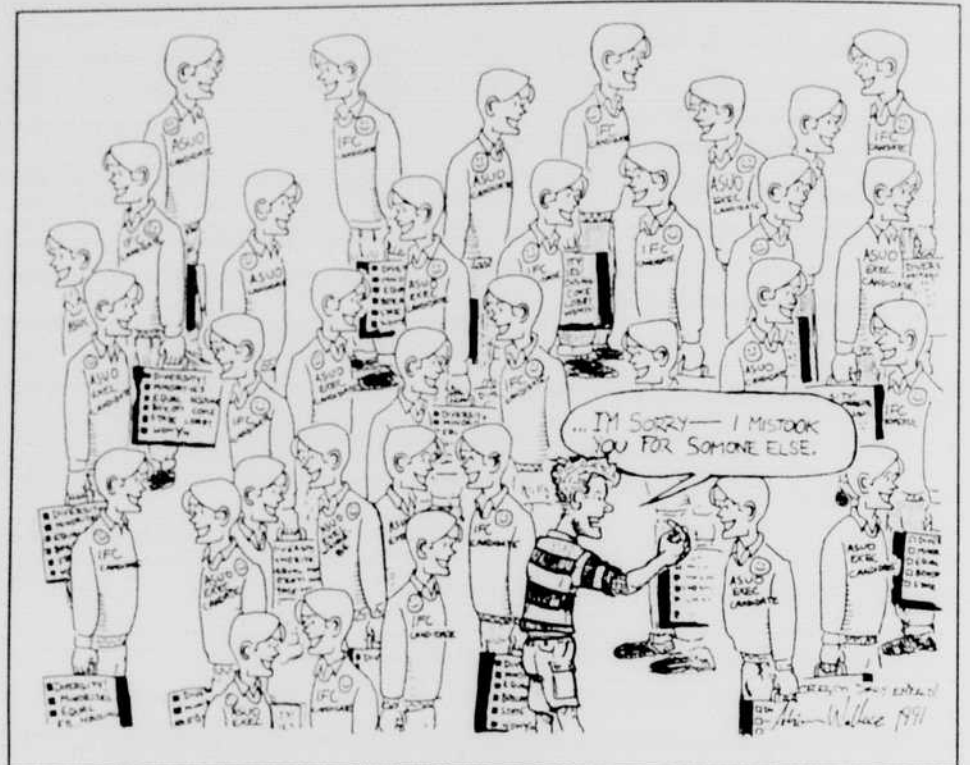
Perhaps the problem is that ASUO officers — particularly the president and vice president — put much of their time into things they can't control. The state Legislature, higher education funding and diversity, diversity, diversity. How much impact does a six- or seven- or 10-month-old student administration have on legislative decisions? Does anyone really believe the ASUO president can sway votes on budget cuts one way or another? And what the heck is diversity, anyway? Everyone works for creating it, everyone wants to celebrate it, but beyond a few symposiums and workshops, has anyone tried to find out what it is? ... Nope.

Student government could benefit its constituents by concentrating its commendable energy and effort into projects more tangible and closer to home. We do not suggest student leaders ignore funding problems or the budget hack-fest through which we are now suffering. Send up carloads of student lobbyists. Write letters. Sign petitions. But student government should pull more weight on campus.

Members of the executive and the IFC should use their time working to find out exactly where the \$4.3 million in student incidental fees goes every year instead of finding the best strategies to lobby state legislators from Bend. Maybe the Student Senate could be brought in to the student government process to do more than just rubber-stamp administrative decisions. Maybe the senate could work with the IFC to decide which groups get funded.

The old anarchist bumper sticker says it best: "Nobody for President." We'll add our own slogan: "Nobody for IFC." That's not always the best solution, but talented presidents, committee members and candidates are becoming useless and irrelevant under the current system.

By voting, the few students who do care to vote would again be participating in an exercise of futility. Radical reform is needed. The structure of student government must be fixed — soon.



What to do? Change system, focus on University problems

Criticism is worthless unless solutions are offered. With that in mind, the *Emerald* will not end the issue of reform on a nihilistic note.

The Incidental Fee Committee should become an advisory board to the Student Senate, which would allow the IFC to openly become the political body it has covertly been for years. The IFC would debate funding student groups, but be limited to making funding recommendations to the full senate. The senate would be responsible for voting to approve funds, which would be the first practical duty the senate has had in years.

IFC candidates would be free to make their political ideas known to students instead of concealing them until after elections. The candidates would face the marketplace of ideas, being accepted or rejected based on who the students want to represent them.

Although the IFC's political whims would be healthy and useful when debating a student group's merits, they would be tempered by putting the decision-making power in the hands of a larger group of student senators. The IFC's opinion would be just that — an opinion — with students from a variety of campus communities making actual, more balanced, decisions.

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Think of it. IFC candidates could campaign and be elected on their honest political viewpoints, not beliefs hidden behind the shroud of political correctness, real or imagined. The power of allocating \$4.3 million would go from a seven-member group of often bickering students to the Student Senate, protecting those funds from volatile political tempests in the IFC.

Also, it would give the student senators something to do. As it is, they make \$35 a month to pass empty resolutions and approve academic policies that are passed by the University Senate anyway.

The discussions and debates that would follow such a structure change would promote effective student government and energize students to participate in the elections process. Issues, and

not just pleas, would prompt students to vote.

However, some safeguards should remain in the ASUO Constitution to guard against groups being zero-funded at the drop of a hat. Also, the ASUO Executive would exercise its checks-and-balances powers by continuing to hold approval and veto power over Student Senate decisions. In turn, the senate could override an ASUO presidential veto, and if controversy remained, the issue could go before the student body for a vote.

This is an intricate system of checks and balances between executive and legislative branches that has managed to work for two centuries in the United States and for more than 100 years in the state of Oregon, and it will work for the University's student government.

Any reformed government would be useless without strong, central leadership, something that has been missing at the University for years. The executive should be devoted to forming one, united student voice. Currently, the eyes of the president and vice president look to the capital in Salem. They look to Johnson Hall. In fact, they seem to look to everywhere but the students and their needs.

Yes, funding is the most important issue facing the University and its students. But what good has the executive been able to do in the lobbying role it has created for itself? Not much. Budget cuts were made years ago. Measure 5 passed. More budget cuts are pending. It's painful to say, but perhaps we should resign ourselves to the fact that this problem is too big for us to control.

The problem is the Executive hasn't done enough to energize an apathetic student body here at home. By uniting the student body, by holding student groups accountable for their own spending, perhaps we could show the state, its legislators, our administration and the voters we are worthy of their attention, their consideration and their money.

Students will make up their own minds as to whether they want to participate in the system by voting in this week's elections (although judging from recent voter turnout figures, many may decide to do other things with their time.)

If you do go to the polls Wednesday and Thursday, at least tell your leaders you want a government that spends your money responsibly, that has its attention focused here, and that works. Write on your ballot, "I want a government that works for me," and press our future leaders for change.

It's not just worth thinking about. It's worth doing.