

Campus Candidates Fight For Office

All six officer positions contested this year for the first time since 2003

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Though the extended primary election season may have cooled off, our own elections just got a little more interesting.

The Student Union Assembly (SUA) of UC Santa Cruz holds elections every spring for the six officer positions. Often candidates run independently, but sometimes they run in "slates," or groups of candidates who campaign based on similar principles and endorse one another.

Students First!, a political group that forms a slate each year, has succeeded in sweeping every SUA officer position from 2004 to 2007, with only one exception. This year, a new slate of candidates called Slugs First has stepped up, trying to win some seats in SUA.

Jamal Atiba, a third-year student from College Nine, successfully ran against the slated Students First candidate for the position of commissioner of academic affairs (CAA) last year, making him the first-ever SUA officer from College Nine and the only non-Students First officer since spring 2004. Now, he is running for re-election as part of Slugs First.

Looking ahead to the election, Atiba explained that Slugs First had a lot of work to do to convince students to participate in the election process.

"Students First definitely has the advantage," Atiba said. "There's a lot of apathy on campus. Of the minority population that does vote, they support Students First. They're very good at getting people who support them to come out and vote. [Other students] don't get involved, and Students First is able to win year after year."

Finding people to run for office has also always been a challenge. This year, for the first time since SUA formed its current officer positions in 2003, all six positions are contested. Since then, Students First candidates have run unopposed many times. In 2006, five of the six contests were unopposed, with fourth-year Joe Dotson running as the only opposition against Students First and ultimately losing the election by 20 votes.

Slugs First candidates complain that the process of choosing Students First candidates gives too much power to the selection committee, especially because candidates so often run unopposed.

Students First candidates are chosen by a selection committee from the Ethnic Student Organization Council (ESOC), which is made up of members from African/Black Student Alliance (A/BSA), Asian Pacific Islander Student Alliance (APISA), Filipino Student Association, Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/a de Aztlan (MEChA), and the Student Alliance of North American Indians (SANAI), though SANAI was not able to participate this year for logistical reasons, explained Danilo Paniagua, the ESOC representative from MEChA.

But because of this model, and the design of the SUA, Atiba said, it often leads to skewed representation. The ESOC, A/BSA, APISA, MEChA, SANAI, and the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Network all have voting representatives in the SUA general body.

"So we get this double, triple, quadruple representation [of certain groups] in SUA,

which some people are not a fan of," Atiba said. "With Students First, especially when these positions have no competition, it's basically the slate selection committee who decides, for all students, who the officers are going to be."

Still, SUA external vice chair Hailey Snow countered that the lack of diversity on campus was exactly why they focused on these groups. Students First focuses on "Access, affordability, and underrepresented communities on campus," she said, and added that the slate concentrates on building and maintaining their electoral base. Snow also refuted the notion of Students First as controlled by the slate committee.

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Matthew Palm,

SUA treasurer and Students First candidate for CAA

"Students First isn't something that's a legacy from year to year," said Snow, who was elected under Students First in 2007. "Everything is new from year to year. It's new people, a new experience."

Despite the disagreement on both sides, both Atiba and Snow quickly acknowledge the frequent turmoil and inefficiency within SUA's weekly general body assemblies.

As a result of the commotion, it is hard to find people to go to SUA, according to Caleb Cimmiyotti, Crown Senate secretary and Slugs First candidate for SUA chair.

"There are several colleges that are actually struggling to find people willing to go to SUA meetings," he said. "They find that it's an ineffective space for their voice to carry any weight."

Eric Nguyen, vice chair of Cowell Senate and Slugs First candidate for organizing director, said that they had also noticed problems with the Tuesday meetings.

"There's a serious disenfranchisement that's been noticed, I think, at many of the colleges. It's really difficult to find students to recruit, and retaining them," Nguyen said, adding that many of these individuals remained active in Cowell government. "They don't feel that comfortable in SUA."

A letter from Matthew Palm, SUA treasurer and Students First candidate for CAA, addressed a number of persisting internal issues. "These conflicts are hindering the SUA and preventing us from getting things done smoothly," read Palm's letter.

The UCSC SUA has an unusual construction, assigning equal power to the six officer positions rather than a traditional "Associated Student Body" makeup with a clear hierarchy, Palm explained. In his letter, he wrote, "No clear bylaws have been established which dictate officer relations and how six equal offices work

together effectively."

"We waste so much time arguing over what we think the 'process' is," Snow agreed.

Still, both Palm and Snow stressed that criticisms against SUA often stem from problems in the Tuesday meetings, but fail to acknowledge that these make up a small portion of an SUA officer's duties.

"I think that some of the opposition has really good ideas for the general body, but [Slugs First candidates] have no idea what an officer position is going to take," Snow said. "I think that a lot of people are unhappy with the general body space of SUA, and so a lot of people are running for office to reform that.

But I think you're in for a surprise if you think that is a majority of your job."

Palm also explained that much of an officer's job includes lobbying Congress and the governor, organizing rallies and demonstrations, registering people to vote, and other duties. Palm also criticized Atiba's office, saying that it had not produced very many programs or events over the year, and that it was not making good use of its budget.

"The Tuesday general body meetings can get kind of hectic, but that's just how it is," Palm said. "If an argument happens, an argument happens. Ninety percent of SUA is not those two-hour meetings."

Both Atiba and Snow specifically blamed student apathy on campus as a major determinant in these elections.

"A year goes by, and you don't even hear about SUA, and then at the end of year, in May, you're asked to participate in elections," Atiba said. "You see this group called Students First. Wow, they're for the students, ethnic studies, faculty of color, and diversity. They have these taglines, this platform that speaks to most of the campus. The campus is thrown in, asked to participate, and it looks great on the surface.... They don't really know or care what goes on."

Most of all, Snow stressed, it's hard for anyone to judge an officer's job based on the general body assemblies, but that more participation in the election process could only help.

"I think that apathy discourages democracy on campus...[not] that Students First has a monopoly on winning student government. If people interview and aren't slated, and choose not to run, they actually believe in their issues, and stick around and intern in offices," Snow said. "Then there are also people who aren't slated for Students First and still choose to run, and more power to them."

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