

Report of Student Equity Committee to SSMU Council
January 21st, 2010

Submitted by Jonathan Hann, Equity Commissioner of the SSMU and Chair of Student Equity Committee

The Student Equity Committee is currently addressing 3 items of business within its mandate: a revision of the SSMU Equity Policy, membership, and discussions with Choose Life. The planning of Social Justice Days is also currently underway, parallel to Student Equity Committee through the fulfilment of my mandate as Equity Commissioner.

The SSMU Equity Policy is a document to protect the diverse array of opinions, experiences, and beliefs and all clubs, their membership, and the students we represent. The Equity Committee is currently reviewing this Policy and is very happy with the drafts that we have produced. Unfortunately, we are held back from submitting the policy because of our membership restrictions at the moment.

The membership of the Student Equity Committee is also an area to which we are devoting a significant amount of time. We are currently seeking out representatives on First Peoples and Race and Ethnicity as well as two at-large representatives. Two students, Harleen Toor and Paula Carson, had to leave the committee recently due to their inability to make the significant commitment necessary to handle all of our business this semester. We have already begun receiving applications and look forward to having a full committee before the end of next week. This will enable us to complete our Equity Policy and have many different voices around the table for our discussions with Choose Life.

Finding a reasonable model within the SSMU in which Choose Life can exist is the ultimate goal in the review of Choose Life.

The equity committee has thus far had two meetings with Choose Life. The first meeting was between the Student Equity Commissioner, VP University Affairs and two representatives from Choose Life. The second meeting took place on January 15th at 4:30 pm. This meeting included Natalie Fohl and Paul Cernek from Choose Life and the representative for Women, Lynsey Grosfield, the representative for Persons with Disabilities, Zili Wang, the representative for Queer Peoples, Hannah Augustin, SSMU Councilor Sarah Woolf, VP UA Rebecca Dooley, and Equity Commissioner Jonathan Hann.

We discussed each others' expectations of the relationship during this process and the outcome that these talks, and the document that will be created as a result, will produce. We ensured to Choose Life that the Equity Committee will do everything in their power to create an safe and non-judgmental space where we can both openly discuss the situation at hand and where unedited dialogue may ensue. This would include holding incamera meetings to ensure this open dialogue can develop. We both agreed that having meetings open to the public and media could pose barriers to the safety and comfort of the people around the table. It is important to note that the meetings are closed, but not confidential, and non-committee members will have full knowledge and ability to raise concerns in a more appropriate venue.

The equity committee acknowledges that we are entering uncharted territories and by creating an equitable document and written agreement between Choose Life and SSMU, a precedent will be set.

A rocky start to both meetings gave way to a renewed light after misconceptions and misunderstandings were cleared. In both of these meetings, Choose Life emphasized the fact that they disagree with the review process as they feel like they have done nothing wrong and a double-standard has been created based on their beliefs and values. They wanted clear, defined examples with reference to SSMU's equity policy as to what the infractions have been. The Equity Committee unanimously felt that it should not be the work of this body to debate over decisions already passed at Council. The greatest use of our time would be to face the reality of the situation and move forward in creating a solution rather than linger in the past. Choose Life understands the SSMU's responsibility to create an environment in which groups can coexist, it is with this goal that Choose Life and the committee proceed with their discussions.

After resolving some of these issues, we started to develop initiatives that Choose Life could undertake. We talked about issues that many students and councillors raised over the course of the past year.

Issues raised in our discussion were:

- The distribution of false information.
- The club's affiliation with the National Campus Life Network . (The club ensured us that they are completely autonomous and that any event that they have had in the past or will have in the future are completely of their own choosing and responsibility.)
- The excessive ways in which a club or person can argue their position and negatively effect a vulnerable or marginalized group of students. (This includes shock/shame tactics and drawing unnecessary parallels that oppress and discriminate other groups.)

- The discrepancy between the positivity of their mandate's language and their negative actions as a group. (Educating and fostering an environment of safety and respect seem to be in conflict with the concerns with “shaming” brought out in the equity complaints and discussions at Council).

At the end of the last meeting, Choose Life stated in writing that they are willing to commit to the following:

1. “Not showing images of violence without prior warning to viewers.
2. Ensuring the accuracy of material to the best of [their] ability and, recognizing the possibility of inadvertent inaccuracies, correcting mistaken information.
3. Clearly repudiating hate speech and all forms of violence.”

The committee agreed that these statements were good jumping off points, and committed to bringing our further recommendations to the table at our next meeting on January 29th at which time we will start to craft our first draft of the document.

I am very confident in the abilities of the Equity Committee and Choose Life to create a solution to the equity complaints we have had thus far and foster an environment of respect and safety for all students in the future. Clear headway has been made already and hopefully will continue so that a permanent, revived relationship between SSMU and Choose Life can be established.

Please do not hesitate to contact myself or Vice President Dooley with any further questions that you have about the activities of Student Equity Committee.

Respectfully,

Jonathan Hann
SSMU Equity Commissioner