

CASA spearheads 'national' survey
Data will only be collected from five provinces, however
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HALIFAX (CUP) – A national survey being conducted this month is hoping to generate hard data to aid student associations' lobbying efforts, though its scope will only reach five provinces.

The Canadian Student Survey is designed and run by student organizations, and is the first such project in the country. Unlike past confidential reports conducted through research groups like the National Survey of Student Engagement, this project will publicly publish its findings and the students will own the data.

"It's filling a void," says Arati Sharma, national director of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA). "Canada doesn't do a fantastic job of data collection when it comes to post-secondary education. I think there's a real gap in the research side of post-secondary education and the actual system."

The voluntary survey launched Nov. 9 and will remain open for three weeks. Members from CASA-affiliated student unions, plus a few non-CASA members, are participating. Each school must have approval from its respective research ethics board in order to participate. The cost for each university is roughly \$1,000. On top of those fees, CASA is putting \$30,000 towards the project.

The Canadian Education Project, a new Toronto-based education research group, is co-initiating the survey. The group is a branch of the better-known Educational Policy Institute (EPI), based in the United States. EPI will analyze the data and publish it in a report, but the students still own the data, says Sharma.

Other student groups have partnered with CASA on the initiative, including the Alliance of Nova Scotia Student Associations (ANSSA), the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) and the Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS).

But although the survey's website says the project aims "to publish national and institutional-level reports," the data will only be obtained from 19 universities in five provinces.

CASA is associated with 23 student unions across the country, but 14 of its affiliated schools are participating. The remaining five universities in the study are not CASA members.

St. Thomas University's Student Union (STUSU) isn't participating because of several concerns surrounding the project.

Ella Henry, STUSU's vice president of education, says she's still unclear about the project's details since she first heard about it from the executive director of the New Brunswick Student Alliance.

"What we would really like is an explanation because it's very frustrating to find out, not from CASA, but from conversations with a different organization that CASA agreed to contribute this money and then

after several phone calls and e-mails, not have an answer as to where that \$30,000 came from,” she says.

The union might have participated, but the school’s research ethics board had concerns with the project including its lack of scholarly research, says Henry. She contacted Sharma, who told her EPI would get in contact with her about her concerns. They never did, according to Henry. The project launched, without STUSU.

“I think it was a really rushed process and I don’t think the decision to fund that was done very openly or very accountably to members,” Henry says.

Sharma says the survey launched quickly to gather data at a time when students were more likely able to participate.

“The timeline was a little tight, but, I mean, each one of our student associations was consulted,” she says.

But Henry says by the time Sharma contacted her again, the decision to launch the project had already been made.

“We were consulted on whether the STUSU would like to participate, not whether we thought CASA should spend \$30,000 on the survey,” she says, adding that CASA’s budget can’t cover that amount for a project.

When asked about how CASA produced the \$30,000, Sharma said to speak with the association’s treasurer. He didn’t respond before this article originally went to print in Dalhousie Gazette, a Canadian University Press newspaper.

Mark Coffin, executive director of ANSSA, says the decision to partner with the project stems from the need to understand issues concerning students as a whole.

“You hear a lot of anecdotal evidence from students,” he says. “The problems they’ve faced in student financial assistance and the problems they face paying back their debt or the views they have on where money should be going.”

“We want to put weight behind the advocacy efforts that we’re doing right now,” he adds.

ANSSA is contributing \$3,000 towards the project. The money will help fund the survey’s implementation at the five ANSSA-affiliated universities. CASA is funding the remaining participation costs.

Rob LeForte, the Dalhousie Student Union’s vice-president education, says the DSU is participating in the project to uncover information about its own students, and also “to have Dal students represented in that national data. We wouldn’t want to see them left out of reports that were being generated and going to be presented to everyone federally and provincially.”

The DSU decided to allocate a portion of its ANSSA fees to the survey after it learned about it at an ANSSA retreat last August. Dal students each pay \$2.50 towards ANSSA, amounting to roughly \$35,000 per year.

The DSU is hosting CASA's Annual General Meeting this week. The STUSU is planning to put forward a motion asking for financial and decision-making details about the process leading up to the survey.