

BOARD EDITORIALS

OPEN THE DOORS

With faith in student elections hanging in the balance, the Board of Elections should continue operating under the public eye for all to see.

Almost a week has passed since campaign violations first were alleged in the student body president runoff election, and students just now have an idea what's really going on.

The Board of Elections released Sunday a document explaining the rationale for its decision to hold disqualification hearings for both Matt Calabria and Lily West, the runoff election candidates.

Members of the BOE should be commended for sharing their findings thus far.

It's refreshing to see that the board is sharing information openly for once because for too long, it had held closed meetings to conduct election-related business and discuss "sensitive" information.

From the controversy's outset, the board had the chance to reduce some of the confusion by giving students access to information about the ensuing investigation.

But instead, the BOE took a hush-hush approach. It has closed its meetings to the public. It has waited or refused to release important documents. It has operated under a veil of secrecy, supposedly in order to make sure that the integrity of the investigation isn't compromised.

Members of the board might believe that if they close the meetings to all people not directly involved with the investigation, students wouldn't be led astray by potentially false accusations and witness accounts, but that would be underestimating students' ability to digest the details.

Eventually, the board will decide how to proceed. At some point, students will know whether or not the current standing of the election, an uncertified seven-vote win for West, will be allowed to stand.

However, if the BOE continues its closed-meeting approach, it might lose students' trust. For days, the student body hasn't been able to find out all there is to know about the alleged campaign violations. Rumors and misinformation have been wildly flying

about, and the integrity of both the BOE and the election itself are at stake.

The board isn't conducting the type of personnel decision that demands confidentiality and is made behind closed doors. This isn't an investigation into a person's private affairs.

The opposite is true. As soon as Calabria and West — and the other six student body president candidates, for that matter — collected the 800 signatures required to get their names on the ballot, they became public figures on campus.

In running for student body president, each of them knew that their platforms would be dissected, their personalities would be judged and their campaign tactics would be put under the microscope.

Each year, the election is a public affair. Students vote for a leader, and they maintain a vested interest in how the contest is run and how an outcome is reached. Should the BOE continue to shut students and reporters out, it would be ignoring that fact.

"Our first priority is ensuring a fair election," board member Megan Mitchell told The Daily Tar Heel on Wednesday. "It's not the public's knowledge of what's going on."

That kind of perspective is misguided.

After the allegations were made, perhaps BOE members thought they had to choose between "ensuring a fair election" and letting students in on any investigation. But by exercising the right amount of control, the board could have met both priorities.

Indeed, the BOE should take the necessary steps to guarantee that the investigation runs smoothly and fairly and that as little debris remains as possible. But shutting students out of the process is not a necessary step.

It is vital that the board continue to make crucial information public, as it did Sunday. Students are involved to the point where they have a right to know the "sensitive" details.

FAIR AND EXPEDIENT

The Board of Elections should continue investigating alleged violations in an efficient and timely manner to protect student self-governance.

With the fate of the 2004 student body president race still up in the air, there are many questions as to whether the student who eventually assumes office will have any legitimacy in the eyes of students, administrators or University trustees.

The Board of Elections and the Student Supreme Court, should it become involved, should attempt to resolve this debacle as quickly as possible to salvage the leadership of the next student body president.

Even in the absence of the rampant allegations of campaign violations, some of which may turn out to be very serious, the extraordinarily tight nature of the runoff election prevents either of the candidates from claiming a mandate from the student body.

With the uncertified results showing candidate Lily West leading Matt Calabria by seven votes, there is obviously no clear favorite among students.

And while some, under the mistaken impression that "student elections don't really matter," are not following the chaos closely, the results have scary implications for coming years.

This election, above all else, determines who will represent students as a member of the UNC Board of Trustees.

Of the 13 members of the BOT, the student body president is the only trustee who is not appointed by either the N.C. General Assembly or the governor.

If the next student body president is to have any hope of gaining the respect of other trustees, he or she must hold a legitimate claim to the office.

As the student body saw during the course of the past year, trustees and administrators do not always keep student interests near and dear to their hearts.

An effective leader in the office of student body president is the only tool students have to be sure their priorities are not forgotten or ignored by the leadership of the University.

So while some students might mislabel campus politics as an obnoxious popularity contest, the student body president elections are an infinitely important way for students to ensure that they are represented in a vocal and compelling fashion.

At best, the protracted investigation and delayed certification of the election risk damaging the faith of the student body in its leadership.

At its worst, a student body president, whose legitimacy is in question, jeopardizes the respectability of student leaders among University administrators and trustees.

If the chancellor or members of the BOT come to believe that students cannot be trusted to govern themselves, as seen in their candidates for elected office or the bodies that oversee those elections, then students can count on being left out of the loop in future decision-making processes.

It is absolutely essential that elections officials solve this mess quickly and fairly, lest University officials become inclined to pursue the removal of "self" from the phrase "student self-governance."

Though The Daily Tar Heel Editorial Board endorsed one candidate's vision as the best for students and the University, the best possible outcome for all parties is a quick and fair one.

Ultimately the outcome of this individual race is not as important as attempting to prevent the erosion of a dearly treasured, well-established tradition of student self-governance.

If the BOE, in its open hearing at 5 p.m. Tuesday, continues its work to complete this investigation in a fair and expedient fashion, it can help keep student self-governance from harm's way.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The above editorials are the opinions of solely The Daily Tar Heel Editorial Board, and were reached after open debate. The board consists of seven board members, the editorial page associate editor, the editorial page editor and the DTH editor. The 2003-04 DTH editor decided not to vote on the board and not to write board editorials.

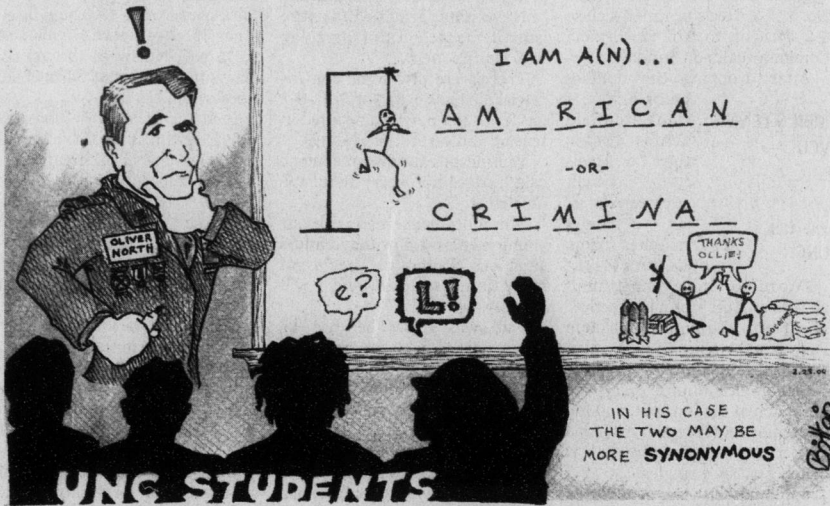
ON THE DAY'S NEWS

"He that puts on a public gown must put off a private person."

THOMAS FULLER, ENGLISH SCHOLAR

EDITORIAL CARTOON

By Britt Peck, bmpeck@email.unc.edu



COMMENTARY

Election fiasco puts concept of self-governance in danger

As a University-news geek, I am fully engrossed in the student body presidential election debacle.

In my four years of watching student politics, I've never seen anything like it. The uncertified election results show an uncommonly narrow victory.

Student leaders are dusting off arcane sections of the Student Code to determine the best course. (Honestly, how many of you actually knew we had a code?)

The mysterious Student Supreme Court might have to convene for the first time since 1995.

The Student Attorney General is advising the Board of Elections, and the board asked a number of witnesses to submit what amounts to written testimony regarding alleged campaign violations.

Finally, there's a spirited fight between the press and the board over how much of these proceedings should be public.

We have all the makings of a real world election scandal. Well, almost.

The response I got from my boyfriend, a Scottish journalist far removed from UNC culture, revealed a different perspective.

"So, are there any adults involved here?" he asked after I shared details of the scandal with him.

No, I told him. "Right," he said. The unasked question was suspended on the transatlantic phone line: What, exactly, is the big deal?

In a way, he's right. It is just a student election at UNC.

The course of the most powerful nation in the world does not hang in the balance as it did almost four years ago when a series of problems in Florida brought a presidential election to its knees.

Nations are not watching the



STEPHANIE HORVATH NOT THE BELL OR THE WELL

ernance. In the coming weeks we'll see firsthand if the government students created can stand up to tough tests.

Using the guidelines and procedures we have, will we be able to find a reasonable solution without calling in the grown-ups?

We might discover that parts of the Student Code and the construction of our government need reform. The conclusions we come to might lead us to change government structures.

It is a big deal to the University community. Nations might not be watching, but I bet the administration and the UNC Board of Trustees are.

How our leaders handle themselves and the allegations will show these adults whether students are capable of the privilege of self-governance.

They granted it to us and also can take it away.

An organized, dependable student voice is imperative in a time of unreasonable tuition increases, budget cuts from the legislature and new ventures, such as Carolina North, that will alter the course of the University.

In light of all this, it should be a big deal to students. No matter how tired, bored and frustrated they get with the proceedings, they should care enough to stay informed, and they should care enough to demand that their leaders handle themselves and these problems in the best manner possible.

Our election woes might not make the network news or even the inside pages of The Chapel Hill News, but how we handle them will determine the UNC we leave for future generations.

Contact Stephanie Horvath at shorvath@email.unc.edu.

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The Daily Tar Heel

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READERS' FORUM

White should understand importance of free speech

TO THE EDITOR: Kelly White and Trevor Hoppe's response to Brentley Tanner's Feb. 12 column, in which he paraphrased a student's beliefs about homosexuality, more than likely represented how many UNC students feel about this sensitive issue.

However, White and Hoppe must remember that the First Amendment isn't limited to issues with which the beholder agrees.

White should know the importance of freedom of speech — especially since it was only a few months ago she was fighting for it when she and fellow protesters went to court to defend their right to express anti-war sentiments at last season's UNC-Virginia game.

When they ran onto the Smith Center court displaying anti-war banners, White and her friends offended many UNC alumni and students, as evidenced by numerous critical letters to the editor.

The student's comments in class and the war protest during the UVa. game were both forms of political expression, so what's the difference?

How ironic is it that one who is worried about the "backlash that would have us all shut up," would intentionally defy Smith Center regulations by running onto the court during a nationally televised game?

Why is it OK to express one's beliefs and opinions in one instance

but wrong to do so in another? If one argues for free speech, then one should be consistent in their argument in all situations.

I personally disagree with the student quoted in Tanner's column, but his freedom to express his beliefs should not be contingent upon my concurrence.

C.J. Langley Senior Psychology

Candidates are to blame, not the Board of Elections

TO THE EDITOR:

I am writing in response to Bernard Holloway's comment that this year's student body president election ordeal "could be something like Florida to the point that the student body loses faith in the ability of students to oversee their elections."

In this statement Mr. Holloway questions the integrity of the Board of Elections. I think Bernard, and others, including The Daily Tar Heel's coverage, are questioning the wrong people in this situation.

I question the integrity of the candidates for they committed numerous violations. It isn't the Board of Elections under investigation; it is the candidates themselves.

At the beginning of the election season candidates signed a pledge for a clean campaign. UNC students take honor pledges very seriously.

If student body president candidates can't take an honor pledge

sincerely then how can we trust the integrity of the candidates and their ability to represent us?

This questionable election makes me doubt the ability of students to hold positions such as student body president; it does not put into question the capability of students to run the BOE.

Ashley Castevens, in Wednesday's article, said the allegations are a result of a campaign season containing numerous hostilities between candidates.

It's time candidates accept responsibility for their actions. It is fairly easy, when handed a set of rules, to follow them and expect those who work for you to do the same — and it reflects poorly upon your campaign when you don't.

It reflects even more poorly when you try to put blame on someone else.

David Nestler Freshman Geography

TO SUBMIT A LETTER:

The Daily Tar Heel welcomes reader comments. Letters to the editor should be no longer than 300 words and must be typed, double-spaced, dated and signed by no more than two people. Students should include their year, major and phone number. Faculty and staff should include their title, department and phone number. The DTH reserves the right to edit letters for space, clarity and vulgarity. Publication is not guaranteed. Bring letters to the DTH office at Suite 104, Carolina Union, mail them to P.O. Box 3257, Chapel Hill, NC 27515 or e-mail them to editdesk@unc.edu.

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