Western Engineering Student Society’s Team – Annual General Meeting and Retreat 2019

Report

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In Attendance:

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Although I do not hold an official position within the ESSS, I am always honoured to be selected as a representative for SFU at a conference. The Western Engineering Student Society’s Team Annual General Meeting and Retreat (WESST AGMR) provides a unique opportunity to not only connect with schools across western Canada, but also see how they handle student events, cultivate school spirit, and get a peek into how western Canadian schools are presented and represented in larger organizations. Within this report, I will be providing a general overview of the sessions I attended during the conference, as well as ideas and activities I believe that the ESSS should look into/implement to better foster a sense of faculty spirit amongst the engineering student body.
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Report
WESST 210

Since I was not the head delegate, nor was this the first WESST AGMR I have been to, I took part in the “Leadership” stream of presentations, meant for slightly experienced delegates to give them a better idea of what WESST does, and how to improve events held at your local university. The first presentation was “WESST 210”, which provided a more in depth look at WESST at what it means to be WESST member, and what WESST provides for its members. It also briefly touched on how to bid for conference hosting. It was an informative session, but mostly served to provide context for people who had never interacted with WESST before. As I had defended our involvement in WESST a few years ago when the motion to leave it was presented, I found the session to be a nice refresher, but ultimately did not provide any new information.

Events Roundtable

Next was a roundtable discussion on events held by other student societies. I found this one to be very interesting opportunity to discover how to cultivate a sense of “engineering spirit” that much older engineering departments have. I found that the events we hold during frosh are very similar to what other schools do and as such should be continued (scavenger hunts both on and off campus, schoolyard sports like dodgeball, etc.). However, many other schools supplement frosh with activities throughout the year. Many of them are usually related to drinking, called “socials”, sometimes focused on a particular theme and/or idea (an example being a “graffiti social”, where everyone brings a white T-shirt which can then be drawn on by markers provided by the organizers throughout the night). However, they also mentioned low-commitment activities, such as something referred to as “snow-golf”. Snow Golf involves setting up targets in a field and then attempting to hit them with a tennis ball. The trick is that the players have to hit the tennis ball using anything but a tennis racket or golf club, with more points being given for using more outlandish ‘clubs’. Other events include general sport
tournaments, such as dodgeball and spongee (effectively hockey but played with shoes rather than skates). As well, they mentioned participating in an engineering week, the specifics of which are quoted below:

EngWeek, held in the last week of January, exists to celebrate engineering and its traditions and to raise the profile of engineering in the University community, while having some fun in the process. Events will be held each day of the week providing engineering students with ample opportunity to get in on the fun. To cap off EngWeek, UMES hosts a social at which the winning team of EngWeek is announced. In past years, students have enjoyed a free pancake breakfast, presentations from the Faculty, Spongee tournaments, and have been able to compete in various events against faculty members. As a part of EngWeek, students will have a chance to show off various costumes during the dress-up days. (University of Manitoba Engineering Society Website)

Other discussion turned to events that happen during Pi Week, such as donation incentives to pie faculty (Side-note: See if you can convince Craig Chapman to participate in the pie-ing this year, I’m very certain a lot of people would pay good money to be able to do so). It was interesting to learn that our Polar Plunge was a unique event among the schools present, other schools may also do charity events, but only we throw people into freezing water for a good cause. I asked a question about to more thoroughly stoke a sense of “faculty spirit” and was recommended publishing a zine, similar to the “Red Lion” created by the University of Manitoba. My takeaway from this talk was that the key to maintaining a sense of faculty spirit is through constant engagement with the student body, either indirectly (such as through the zine), or directly through events throughout the school year. I would like to see more events planned throughout the year to foster this engagement. Obviously certain factors have made this difficult, chief among them being the limiting of overall funding due to our lack of student fees, and lack
of available space for events with the closure of the student pub. However, certain events such as snow golf (or something similar) could be very easily implemented in the various green spaces not currently under construction; this also has the added benefit of creating events not centered around drinking, making them more accessible to people within the faculty that do not drink. In terms of funding, we could possibly look into acquiring sponsorship deals from local companies, using this to help fund student events. As well, I believe we should also start taking part in Eng Week, both to provide the aforementioned student engagement, but also to allow us to more directly take part in the event with other schools, allowing for engagement with other schools and strengthening bonds between schools. Finally, an engineering society based zine, packed with community made content, could be a nice way to provide a way to greater highlight the work done by the ESSS as a whole, while also providing some much needed levity.

Running Engineering Competitions

The next presentation was “Running Engineering Competitions”, which mostly covered the overall events that occur at local, western, and Canadian engineering competitions, as well as advice for running these competitions. I was surprised to learn that only recently were the rules for these competitions standardized, with the Canadian competition rules now acting as a basis for all other competitions. The main takeaway from this presentation is “things will go wrong; it is your job to ensure they go wrong in the least worst way possible”. Along with giving a general overview of each of the events, various tips were given on how to make the competition work as smoothly as possible. Some of the more salient tips were:

1. Ensure that you have an excess of materials for your junior and senior design competitions; or limit the amount of materials each team is given to a fixed number, to ensure that one team does not monopolize a certain amount of material.
2. Double-check which events need technical expertise and which don’t, so you can prioritize which judges should go to which events rather than stretching them over many different events.

3. Sponsorship for Western competitions (and possibly local competitions) can be a good way to get funding, or possibly even judges with technical expertise.

4. Ensure the grading matrices for each event (found in the now standardized rules) are used to allow for fair grading of events.

5. Don’t just have all the competitors show up at the beginning of the competition, as it can create a lot of problems having people just mill about. Let them know when they’re events are starting so they can show up only when they need to.

6. Try to ensure that all of cases are worded as clearly as possible, as well as ensuring that prompt communication lines are available for any questions that may crop up (both during the competition and before, for cases that have to be presented before competition day proper). Nobody likes to lose time simply because they were confused and didn’t have access to clarification.

7. Have back up plans for your back up plans.

Overall, this presentation was very informative, and I hope this information can be used by SFU to streamline its local competition; and possibly even give us the confidence to host WEC at some point.

**GA 101 and Policy**

The next presentation was “GA 101 and Policy”, which covered how to write policy/motions and covered what the general assembly covers. Again, as someone who has participated in the ESSS for some time, I was mostly familiar with the procedures for writing motions and generally understood the purpose of the general assembly. However, it’s review of
Robert’s Rules gestures may finally be the thing I needed to remember which was which. Overall, it was very informative, and I’d imagine very useful to people who may not be familiar with the processes of WESST (and by extension student societies).

**Mental Health Resources for your Society**

The last presentation was “Mental Health Resources for your Society”, which covered various mental health resources available to all student societies, as well as highlighting some of the University of Manitoba’s particular resources, both within their faculty and from the university at large. From this particular presentation, it was clear that while maybe resources at SFU exist, they are very poorly advertised. Indeed, as someone who is currently in the counseling program at SFU, I was surprised how many hoops had to be jumped through to enter into it, and then further surprised by how much was truly available once you were. Things such as thesis support groups could be invaluable to people taking honour’s degrees, while general counseling could certainly be beneficial to faculty that is as stressful as engineering is. I believe the problem is that these resources are not clearly indicated to most of the student body. I believe a collated collection of all available resources and how to access them, found somewhere front and center (such as prominently on the ESSS website) would help alleviate this problem.

**Extra! Extra! Engaging your Student Body and Conclusion**

The last presentation “Extra! Extra! Engaging your Student Body” was unfortunately due to some local problems. Overall, I found the experience of this AGMR enlightening and entertaining. Although this will probably be the last AGMR I ever attend, I hope the recommendations and knowledge I have gained from this retreat both helps to guide the ESSS to new heights and helps me in my professional development as an engineer.