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(GRADUATE STUDENTS' UNION)
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

TEL 928-2391

16 BANCROFT AVE.,
TORONTO 5, ONTARIO

IN SEARCH OF RELEVANCE: PROSPECTS AND PERSPECTIVES
FOR THE GRADUATE STUDENTS' UNION, 1970-1971

Report to the General Council, May 26, 1970

In the very recent past GSU has been handicapped by a governing structure which has been highly dysfunctional, to say the least. Individuals who were elected in campuswide elections to sit on an executive council, found themselves sitting in the air, with no organic contact with any group or any department. Thus even the best intentioned individuals were caught within a system that forced them into a prolonged irrelevance; consequently much of the involvement of the previous executives creates the distinct feeling of elaborate shadow boxing. The previous executive itself was aware of the structural problems affecting its relevance. Thus last fall it hired myself as an organizer and at the same time started to move towards a more rational, representative structure.

The present council is the first chance of the GSU to play a meaningful role on the campus. It is in fact the only truly representative structure amongst campus organizations, thus in a far better position than, say, the SAC council which is handicapped by an obsolete college structure. Our representatives are directly elected or appointed by their respective departments, thus they have the structural framework within which they can act responsibly and achieve real relevance. For the first time it is going to be both meaningful and productive to talk about the role of the GSU and its short term and long term goals. For the first time it is possible to go beyond the day-to-day operations and create a practical vision of what GSU ought to be and could be.

Last fall when I started working for the GSU we entered the term without any plans or programs - beyond those of wine and cheese party and dance variety, and once a week movies. We had no orientation program or information and we had no way of communicating with our 6300 members. By the time I got in touch with people in various departments to find out about

the state of affairs in them and to encourage them to get organized into course unions, the momentum was often lost both for the GSU and the departmental organizations. It is quite obvious that people would have to be involved in organizational efforts early in the fall, that plans would have to be ready at registration time and that communications systems would have to be ready to operate in the fall. Last term our masscommunication was non-existent: our first newsletter went out in February only to be followed by another publication, St. George's Dragon the same month!

We now have the opportunity to start afresh with plans for a dynamic fall program both in the departments and within GSU. We should make sure that another year is not going to be wasted.

Before we get into a discussion on specific programs and approaches, I'll briefly deal with some general features of the university experience.

We have at University of Toronto a massuniversity at undergraduate and graduate level. We have a fragmented campus, fragmented into undergraduates and graduates, into colleges, into departments, into buildings spread over a wide space. The one connecting line has been the VARSITY, although it has in my estimate served its connecting function rather poorly; it has tended to be another world unto itself. Lack of good communal space, in the case of the student body the lack of a student run and controlled building maintains this fragmentation at a high level. The two separate student organizations naturally make a further abstraction out of something which ought to be an organic unity: the relationship between students at different levels of their education. This is not the time and place to discuss the merits or lack of merits of having two separate governing bodies, but the present situation is quite clear: graduates and undergraduates exist in two separate and mutually exclusive universes.

At the departmental level the graduate student is somewhat better off than the undergraduate, although neither has much to be happy about. Our graduate departments are getting organized, slowly but surely, and perhaps already next year we will have well-functioning departmental organizations all across the university, and with well-functioning I mean dynamic and relevant to the needs of the student body and with some sense of continuity from year to year.

Amongst the graduate student population we have full-time (ca 5000) and part-time (ca 1300) students, with their different degrees of involvement and therefore different needs. We have male and female students, married and single, Canadians and non-Canadians, and we have those on and around the campus and others far removed from it, again all these with different

experiences and different needs. Criss-crossing these categories we have the fields of study with their own demands and necessities. From the point of view of the GSU, we have to keep these different sub-populations in mind as well as recognizing the overall unifying experiences when they exist. A good index of a well-functioning organization is that it would respond to the articulated and unarticulated needs on the part of its various constituencies. This is what we should strive towards.

To build a relevant organization, we will start with the departmental unions. These are the only organizations that can connect with all students in the university and can connect the students with each other. They are also the ones who would have access to fast feedback from the student body, in terms of what the problems are and how the students' needs could be expressed through specific programs and policies. Course unions should in fact be the Graduate Students' Union in operation at the grass roots level. They can generate involvement and push for policies about specific things in the department as well as about the overall operation of the university. Thus we should talk seriously about what course unions should be doing and how they should connect with each other.

From the point of view of the student the course unions have their tasks laid out for them. Students need information about the department, its general orientation and its decisionmaking structures; they need advise on how to choose a field or a supervisor, this involving a critical evaluation of the course content and the experience of previous students. There has to be a continuous discussion in the course unions about the employment situation, this discussion involving the department in responsible fact finding in contrast to the present know-nothing attitude of most of them. Course unions have to develop methods of dealing effectively with grievances, thus assuming a much more directly helpful role vis a vis students. (Depending on the situation grievances can be handled either at the course union level or at the GSU level.) Course unions also come into contact with that large body of foreign students, particularly from the non-Western world, who encounter all kinds of difficulties, starting with the spoken language. In general the foreign students who specially suffer from lack of representation, cannot be left solely to the International Student Centre, which has primarily a social and recreational function.

A practical plan for the departmental organizations would be as follows (with their own modifications):

- 1) getting organized as a course union - call an organizing meeting of all students; discuss tasks; prepare constitution; have election
- 2) preparation for fall enrollment; have orientation materials ready, i.e. information as to what people are getting themselves into in the department; informing them about the course union; describing past

concerns and achievements, presenting some perspectives for the year; getting information about new students so they can get involved.

- 3) starting a regular newsletter or bulletin with the first issue being available hopefully at registration time; the newsletter should LOOK EFFECTIVE (see Communications Workshop, under GSU activities); should be regular and relevant and involve people in producing it. THE NEWSLETTER IS A MUST FOR MOST DEPARTMENTS.
- 4) organize seminars on where the field is going (these in addition to the strictly professional seminars); the idea is to institute critical evaluation of the field that would involve graduate students in a discussion of the aims and goals and problems in their fields, and would thus prevent an early and total and extremely narrow specialization.
- 5) setting up a permanent committee on employment with graduates and staff, to provide accurate and truthful information on the situation.
- 6) if alienation is rampant in the department - and even if it isn't - a simple, functional and action-oriented questionnaire will be helpful and will guide the action of the course union.
- 7) a clinical analysis of decisionmaking in the department is essential for good functioning. Through it the course union will avoid sending representatives on committees that are total duds and a waste of time for everyone involved. The basic principle should be that committee work should not be undertaken just because it is being offered by the faculty, as nothing can be as demoralizing as sitting on committees which have no real power and nothing turns people as surely off serious politics.
- 8) the course union has to find functional space for students to get together with each other - if students do not have a chance to meet face-to-face in informal contexts, they will be very hard to organize into anything; that is, one cannot create cohesion without contact.

The GSU should continue allocating funds to the course unions on a \$2.00 per capita basis. Presently this appears to be a sufficient amount to get things going.

The departmental representative at the GSU council is the link between different departments. His/her role is an active one of making sure that information flows between the micro and macro levels; that good ideas and meaningful experiences from other course unions are brought back to his own union; that suggestions vis a vis overall programs and policies brought up at the course union level are translated into action at the GSU level and vice versa. E.G. if foreign students in one department are having difficulties with the spoken language, then a suggestion could be brought up at the GSU level for sponsoring or aiding in setting up a good, effective course in spoken English. E.g. chemistry students might be interested in a special accident insurance; they should bring it up at GSU level and involve other interested groups. The council representative would have to make sure that he reports regularly back to his constituency, via general and executive meetings and especially via the departmental newsletter.

If the course union is the lifeline of student involvement with its real concerns about specifics, the GSU itself should see its role as one of co-ordinating activities, executing decisions, providing overall communication, doing action-research on relevant topics, initiating programs that are useful and desirable; all in all, functioning actively as the connecting agent. By the nature of the operation the course unions will be dealing with the student as a student and as a future professional, whereas GSU's task is to relate to the totality of the university experience, the students' social, recreational, educational and communal interests. It goes without saying that both these levels, the course union and the GSU, relate to each other in a dynamic, continuously interacting fashion, and not as two neat, abstract and mutually exclusive categories. The tasks of the GSU are similarly quite obvious:

- 1) a regular newspaper would have to be going out to the constituency, the first issue being available at registration time. Ideally VARSITY would serve the interests of the total student body, but it appears presently to be incapable of doing so. It would, however, be useful to find out whether fall VARSITY would be able to drastically reorient itself. Failing that, a graduate student newspaper is a must. We will need a publication committee of 3-4 people to work on this proposal.
- 2) The existing wine and cheese party and dance programs, as well as the commercial movie program ought to continue as long as there is a need for them and as long as they are essentially self-supporting.
- 3) Our sports program should be co-ordinated and additional activities included, e.g. there should be programs for female graduates as well. Subsidies

should be available for those activities that are not available from elsewhere on the campus. A sports co-ordinator should evaluate the existing programs, suggest improvements and prepare a rough estimate of cost. A sports and/or physical health enthusiast should volunteer to be the co-ordinator.

- 4) A movie program/ filmclub program should be organized to familiarize the campus with excellent films not otherwise seen. I refer specifically to outstanding National Film Board films, BDC films, American, European and third world documentaries which are practically unknown to most people. This would involve 2-3 interested and inspired people getting together, drawing up a good program, publicizing it in the fall, and perhaps organizing discussions around these films. The cost would involve paying someone to run the projector and the cost of films which is either nil or relatively low; the program could be either totally subsidized or available at nominal cost.
- 5) The employment report will be available for mass distribution in the fall and will most certainly generate discussions and activities around it. GSU should be prepared to act on a number of recommendations.
- 6) The woman question would have to be discussed openly by the GSU. Presently women are thoroughly underrepresented on campus governing bodies; despite their growing numbers they have not made their presence felt. The university remains very much a monastery for academic men, and would have to be changed. I propose an action-research project to be undertaken in the fall, with the possible outcome of an active women's caucus in the GSU. It should be noted that when the employment situation gets tough, it affects female graduates, particularly the married ones, far more severely than the males. (I have a taped interview with a female PhD who couldn't get a job application form, because she was married to another graduate student. Similar objections are not being raised in the case of male students who are married.)
- 7) A practical communications workshop should be organized in co-operation with SAC, to teach useful skills to members of course unions. Every course union should be able to put out a good looking, readable newsletter; they should learn to make posters and notices that will be seen; should learn basic things about lettering, layout and design;

should learn to operate a Gestetner.

This workshop should take place in early October.

- 8) GSU should evaluate its positions on each and all committees it presently participates in. The same rule applies here as well as with the course unions: people's time should not be wasted on token participation on every imaginable committee. We should be selective and critical and refuse make-work projects in this line.
- 9) A serious efforts should be invested in organizing the TAs. The prospects of that are already being investigated by a committee of the general council.

The above have been just a few most obvious things GSU can start planning for right now. In addition to this essentially campus role, GSU has another one, a national role. This is the largest university with the largest graduate student body. We are financially in the position to operate a national information centre for the benefit of other graduate student organizations. It is a matter of notifying the rest of the universities that we are a) interested in what they are doing and would like to hear about specific things, and b) that we will be collecting materials on a number of issues and they can write to us for information. This is a function that is not only useful to us and everybody else, but also stimulating and inspiring to our own operation.

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Renewal of contract

I am interested in continuing as an organizer/co-ordinator/researcher for the GSU if

- a) there is an approval in principle of the proposed program perspective on the part of the council and a real indication that the council and the executive are going to be serious about getting things done this year.
- b) that my salary which is presently \$100/ week would be increased to \$125.00/week and be processed through the university payroll, thus providing me with normal employee benefits.

Marjaleena Repo