Provost Gilmor grilled on reports

Paul Gilmor, the Provost of the University of Guelph for the last 20 years, was commissioned by the Student Relations Committee of the Board of Governors in February 1986 to study goals, funding and organization of student governments at York. Gilmor's recommendations have met with mixed reactions from the York community, with the colleges the most outspoken in protest. *Excal's* **Zena McBride** and **Lorne Manly** spoke to Gilmor two weeks ago about his proposals and philosphy regarding student government.

EXCAL: How did you become involved in this endeavour?

GILMOR: I was invited by the chairman of the Student Relations Committee (SRC) to assist that committee in addressing some concerns they had around the role and place of student government on the York campus. They were motivated to take on a review as a result of several years of discussion on the York campus, most specifically, a report that they had received (called) "The Nature and Funding of Student Government at York University." I said I would (assist) if they thought I could make some kind of contribution.

EXCAL: What were you first struck with when you started looking at York?

GILMOR: At first, I thought we had a fairly straightforward problem, and the more I engaged the issues with more and more people, the more complex the whole matter was to me. That, I think, was certainly one of my early learnings about the task, that one could not simplify the problem down to one or two basic premises. It was complicated by history, structure, and people, and it took a little more time and energy than I anticipated.

The other thing that struck me about York is, one, its size, but more importantly, I remain impressed with the colleges. I think they provide a tremendous learning opportunity for many students.

EXCAL: How did you come to make these recommendations? What caused you to come up with those particular solutions?

GILMOR: I follow the basic philosophical view that students should control their own destiny when it comes to student government. I started with the premise that it's important for students to feel they have, and in fact do have, responsibility and accountability for their own representative organizations. The other general principle is that students themselves have some way of holding acountable those that serve their interests, and I include financial accountabilty as well.

The second premise was that you can have a stratified student government. It exists in almost every university that I know if in North America, the UK, or Australia and New Zealand.

(Another) premise that I came to after a while was that central student government at York could benefit by some strengthening, and that some of the problems that were there, were related to financial structure. I think there is value in knowing that there is a student organization that can speak on issues of university-wide concern, and do so with some credibility and integrity in terms of constituency.

From that perspective I was motivated to look at ways of ensuring a reasonable voice on campus-wide issues at both the undergraduate and graduate level.

EXCAL: What were the problems that you found with central student government?

GILMOR: I think that the instability that is created when, at any moment, your financial base can be withdrawn and has to be negotiated on an ongoing routine, makes it pretty hard to plan.

I also found that in terms of providing leadership, there was some confusion around the roles that were being served by central government, and by college-based, or local, government. (There was a) need for some role differentiation between who's representing what group of students on what issue at what time, and a need to stabilize the resource base that would allow a central student government to function effectively.

(There was also a need) to make sure that students can see the connection between the government they're representing and the fees they are directly or indirectly paying—in this case, indirectly because it's a grant system—and knowing they're empowered in some way to change that.

EXCAL: How would that money be divided? Right now, it's under the grant system, how could that be changed?

GILMOR: Well, this is a perplexing issue, and it's not one that I assume that I have solved. I think that the direction I am headed in with the report, at least to this stage, is to try to wean York away from the grant system towards a more direct approach to funding allocation, where students will know how much money is being spent on their behalf by a particular organization, and can, in fact, agree to increase or decrease that commitment. I think there is value in knowing that there is a student organization that can speak on issues of university-wide concern, and do so with some credibility and integrity in terms of constituency.

The difficulty is how to (do this) without upsetting existing programmes and commitments, and yet not being boxed in forever . . . In the long term, my preference would be a fee identified with the particular organization that the student belonged to. It seemed to me, that was one way in allowing that transition to occur without any major crises generated on the financial side, as one has a reasonable idea of how many students will be associated with the non-faculty colleges, as well as those that are associated with the faculties.

So my hope is that that would be a stepping stone towards a long-term solution, but I keep coming back to the point that there is no easy trail from where we are know to where I'd like to see student government at York be. There may be other options, and I hope that those options will be discussed by the SRC. I think in the final analysis, that kind of process issue can best be addressed by those who are closest to it. I have some impressions, I've shared those, but they need to be tested against those who in fact will have to make it happen.

EXCALIBUR: If faculty-based student governments come into effect, in addition to the college governments already in existence, we will have an even greater number of student governments. As a result, the pie will be even smaller and there will be less of a clear student voice on issues. This has been a major concern about your Report.

GILMOR: I don't think it would assure that (too many representive groups). I think (there would be) perhaps three or four more representatives, but given the size of it now, I'm not sure it's going to sway that kind of forum one way or another . . .

If students feel strongly enough around a defined community where they could establish a constituency, then it would be fair for students in Education, or students in Law, or students in McLaughlin College, to have a student government.

EXCAL: What about the departments in the Faculty of Arts?

GILMOR: I would not see departments as college governments. I'm really talking about large-scale organizations, where there's a very clear constituency.

The definition of constituency, I've really thrown back to SRC; I can suggest what kinds of criteria might be there, but the writing of those criteria is a matter for York to sort out.

I think that it's illogical to say that in the case of Law (i.e. Osgoode), that's an acceptable jurisdiction or constituency to have represented, and to say no, it's not in Education (i.e. FESA). How do you justify that dichotomy? I'm sure I would have had just as much reaction if I had suggested that only Non-Faculty Colleges should have representation.

So, in the spirit of democracy, and more voices perhaps making wise decisions—with some specialization in terms of structure—size would not be the problem I think some people feel it would be.

EXCAL: Today, when a student enters first year, they have a tough enough time deciding what college to pick, and usually it's decided for them randomly. With the added choice of faculty, won't the decision become that much tougher?

GILMOR: That's not the experience in other universities that have both colleges and central student governments. I think that what it will do is require those who have a constituency to do a good job of making clear what it is they offer, and it will be, I think, quite productive.

It will be important for students to know that it is they're getting themselves into. Not to get there and then find out later that the decision they made was the wrong decision. It seems to be that it requires the University, and/or central student government, and/or local student government (faculty or non-faculty colleges) to be clear in articulating the kind of community they are, for incoming students. I think that's terrific. That's to me, the way it should be.

I think those are important decisions, and students should be empowered before they are committed to know what it is they are going to experience.

EXCAL: Would there be no chance of bias, let's say the advisor signing them in is from a certain college.

GILMOR: Well, I'm sure there'll be a healthy competition, but I would also come back to the basic premise I made, that York is more than its constituent parts. We all have an obligation to ensure a student is well informed and makes a good decision for him—or herself, and our self-interest should not get in the way of good decision. And if we fail there, I think we've got a more serious problem.

For those who can't make up their minds, or find that kind of decision making too difficult, or don't care, I think you have to have an arbitrary allocation system. But I think you don't arbitrarily handle everybody, you need to allow people to make some judgements.

I honestly believe that universities need to be clearer about who they are and who they are not, so that students can make good decisions in terms of choice and match. At York there's a tremendous opportunity here with the colleges, and the wide range of communities. Bethune is very different than McLaughlin. Shouldn't a first-year student coming in make that decision know that? It strikes me as not very kind to say that student's view doesn't matter. I think one needs to encourage that.

EXCAL: One of your recommendations is that the local governments won't be able to opt out of central student government. Let's say Calumet and Bethune become part, no more trust fund arrangements. So really, it's forcing these governments that right now don't want to be part of CYSF to be part of CYSF. Would it be worth it to force them, because they just won't do anything. How will that solve their problems?