

FACING CHANGE

Photos by
Babak Amirfeiz

by
James Flagal

York President Harry Arthurs' recent reforms have forced the present college system to face up to its failures.

Only a leader with vision can be innovative during times of compromise.

During the past six months, York President Harry Arthurs has been faced with such a task. After lengthy debates on the future of both the college system and student government, the question was finally put forth to the President last fall for his consideration. That entailed reading literally thousands of pages of reports, reactions to reports, and then responses to the reactions. Both issues had gone through an intense process of scrutiny by the York community, and at the end of it, the President was confronted with several diverging views. Drafting a proposal of effective reforms which would respect the sentiments on both sides of the issue would be exceedingly difficult.

An examination of the problems within the college system and student government was long overdue. First, there was the college system, which never really lived up to the ideals of its originators, and always failed at integrating commuter students into university life. The colleges were in desperate need of an overhaul; only a handful of students actually benefitted from these institutions, and a significant number were outright hostile to the system. Then, there were York's student governments, organizations which barely received any notice from the vast majority of students, let alone their respect. Reforms were required to give these governments some sort of credibility, so they could actually draw the kind of student support needed to implement effective policy. Elections with less than 6% of voter participation were telling images of the sorry state of student government at York.

In many respects it's hard to distinguish between the two matters, since their areas of jurisdiction overlap so much. It's impossible to discuss changes to the colleges without suggesting a reform of student government. By the end of the summer, two separate camps had formed around the issues. On the one side there were the advocates for voluntary college membership. This idea really came out of the report of student government, written by a commission led by Guelph Provost Paul Gilmor. According to Gilmor, it was best to give students a choice between joining either faculty governments or college governments. Choice, it was thought, would induce students to get more involved in university life, and would force student organizations to be more sensitive to student needs. The Student Relations Committee (SRC) of the Board of Governors based their final paper on the Gilmor Report, and advocates, like SRC members Reya Ali and Provost Tom Meininger, became vocal supporters for voluntary membership.



Student government has always suffered from a lack of credibility at York, and the first thing which Arthurs had to address was how to get more students involved in that process.

But to some voluntary membership meant the end of an institution at York University—namely, college councils. Immediately after the SRC's findings, Masters and college representatives alike rallied to put an end to such recommendations. And in the ensuing debate, college representatives were forced to come to terms with the fact that no matter how loud they protested, faculty organizations were going to get formal recognition by the Administration. For colleges, that meant the potential loss of funds; essentially,

the student government, be it faculty or college, which attracted more members would receive more money. Up until now, the colleges automatically received \$27.50 from each student attending the University, since college membership was mandatory. On the other hand, in the early 1980s, groups like the Creative Arts Board (CAB - a Faculty of Fine Arts organization) and the Faculty of Education Students Association (FESA) began to spring up, filling a gap in services and programmes which the colleges failed to offer. Every year, these groups were forced to lobby college and central student governments for their annual budgetary needs, forcing them to operate on a measly \$8,000-\$10,000, while college councils enjoyed revenues exceeding \$50,000.

College councils eventually came to terms with such organizations existing on the same financial footing, and in an accord signed up at Blue Mountain, they gave formal recognition to this principle. But the fight was not over yet; college representatives still had legitimate concerns about the SRC recommendations. They argued now that these recommendations would force faculty and college governments to lower membership fees in order to attract more students. Thus, students would be left with financially inviable organizations, since governments would not be able to accumulate enough funds to offer the kinds of programmes and services that students require.

These essentially, are the types of opposing views which President Arthurs was forced to deal with last fall. Furthermore, the examination of the Colleges, beginning with the Hare Report last January, never really included much student input, which marred the SRC debate from the start. It not only failed to consider all the proposals resulting from the study of the college system, it also treated student government separately. Like the Gilmor Report, the Hare Commission also called for voluntary membership, and recommended that colleges be given certain mandates; for example, one college would be devoted to the study of public policy, another for women, and so on. However, such recommendations received a cold reaction from the college community, and Masters responding to the report, condemned such an idea.

Then came the President's turn. Three weeks ago, Arthurs finally unveiled the Administration's responses to both reports. His proposals succeeded where the other debates failed. He examined the suggestions of both commissions, and came out with discussion papers which featured complimentary recommendations. He looked at the issues from a holistic perspective, and while both his discussion papers had clearly-defined visions, they also respected the views of all parties involved. On the whole, President Arthurs has presented the York community with some very innovative solutions. Unfortunately, in respecting those diverging opinions, Arthurs may have not stated his solutions strongly enough, or in great enough detail, in order to ensure that his vision of change is fulfilled. There's a real danger that the whole process may stagnate, unless the entire philosophy behind the new system is agreed upon and followed through.

The thrust of the reforms are rather ingenious; they strike an interesting compromise between the two sides and both reports. First, the backdrop of these changes would centre around the transformation of the colleges, with everything else falling into place under a newly-defined college system. The idea is to match each college with a faculty in a sort of "marriage" relationship, as many Masters like to put it. Each college would have a theme, and Arthurs believes that students would be more attracted to colleges, if they actually had a focus. Arthurs is right. Students can barely identify one college from the next, due to a lack of differentiation in the system. What does it matter if a student joins either Vanier or Founders? With that kind of attitude no wonder students barely have any pride in the college they choose to affiliate with. As Ross Rudolph, acting Dean of Arts, points out, most York students identify with their major, not with their college.

The actual reforms which will eventually be adopted must acknowledge this simple reality. The question of how extensive these faculty-college relationships will be is still rather vague. So far, it has been disclosed that Bethune College will affiliate with the Faculty of Science, while Winters is matched with Fine Arts. The remaining five colleges, Vanier, McLaughlin, Founders, Stong, and Calumet, will all be associated with the Faculty of Arts. In the first two cases, more effective colleges should be produced: those students who are in Sciences

or Fine Arts will easily identify with their respective college.

The Arts colleges must also maintain themes which students can quickly identify. It follows then that each Arts college will have to affiliate itself with a specific department, if they are to solve their current identity problems successfully.

However, many colleges are already showing their reluctance to adopt such defined mandates. In their attempt to remain "interdisciplinary," they are creating themes like Multiculturalism, Values and Social Change, and Cultural and Critical Thought. It's high time that college representatives realize what an utter failure this interdisciplinary approach has been. If Arts colleges want students to identify with them, then they will have to be willing to identify with a certain department. Clearer choices allow students to better understand the system's benefits, vague themes will only debilitate the reforms.

Linking departments to specific colleges makes perfect structural sense, especially in establishing a more effective advising system. In the past, advising was done mostly by the professors in each department. Unfortunately, students were often ill-informed about the kinds of courses they required for graduation, and they also found it hard to keep in constant contact with the same advisor for academic support and advice. Over the past two years, the Faculty of Arts has attempted to address these problems through a new advising system, which they refer to as "networking." Basically, the programme matches up each first-year student with either an upper-year student or a professor willing to volunteer his/her time. The programme is designed to help students be more independent, while linking them with someone they can look to for academic advice.

A college system defined along disciplinary lines will especially strengthen this programme. Already the programme is designed for students from the same college to advise one another. In the new system, this advising would take place between students from the same academic background. In the past, student advisors experienced problems in offering advice on certain questions, simply because they were unfamiliar with a certain area of study. The new system, however, would help ensure that new students get advisors who have an understanding of the areas of study they plan to pursue. Student advisors will be able to offer them a taste of that particular discipline, and if they wish to investigate other fields, they will know precisely which college to go to for advice.

Also, fellows should be encouraged to be more active in the newly-revamped advising system. In fact, when the colleges were first established, fellows were intended to advise students; but over the years, as York's population grew, that role disappeared. Now, with the majority of students and fellows from the same discipline belonging to a particular college, those responsibilities could be assumed again. Already in the Faculty of Science, students are assigned a Professor with whom they must make an advising appointment at least twice a year. The same kind of arrangement could be made between students and fellows.

Disciplinary organizations could also take over the task of completing the yearly course evaluations, presently compiled by the CYSF. Departmental representatives could do this job more quickly and efficiently, because they would have more knowledge of the courses and professors being appraised.

A recent issue being hotly-debated within the University further illustrates why such reforms are so desperately needed. Three weeks ago, hundreds of students stormed the Sociology offices in order to protest the department's decision to reject Professor Arnold Itwaru's application for a tenured position. It's ironic that one of the main slogans of the protest is "student voices go unheard." The slogan should really read, "The system failed to get students involved." In fact, there is a provision in the tenure procedure for undergraduate student involvement. Unfortunately, because students failed to organize themselves into a departmental association this year, this provision could not be fulfilled. Other departments such as Economics, Political Science, and Social Sciences also suffer from this lack of strong undergraduate organizations, and without them it's almost impossible to ensure that student voices are being represented in important decisions.

Weak undergraduate organizations can be strengthened, but only through the college system. Colleges offer them the kind of organizational structure that will ensure their viability and continued student participation. But that's only the beginning; affiliating each college with a faculty will encourage more student involvement in other areas of academic planning. It's sad how few students know what goes on in the University Senate, an organization which student senator Paul Dutka refers to as the supreme academic body. Presently, Dutka, who is also the chair of the Student Senate Caucus (SSC), sits on five very important policy-making committees—not because he wants to, but because lack of student participation led him into this predicament. His Senate responsibilities include sitting on the Committee on Admissions Recruitment and Student Assistance, a body which recently decided to raise the University's entrance grade level to 70%. Another one, the Academic Policy and Planning Committee, is about to review the controversial case of Psychology Professor Christopher Holmes. Holmes is presently trying to establish his courses on mystics in the York curriculum.

The SSC is supposed to have 26 members this year, but 13 senators have already resigned, leaving the bulk of their committee responsibility to Dutka. First of all, how can Dutka be expected to effectively represent student opinion on each of these committees with such a heavy burden of responsibility? Secondly, how can he judge the merit of Holmes' courses when he is not even a Psychology major, and probably knows few, if any, who have studied with Holmes.

Every year, Arts senators are elected during the CYSF vote. One of the saddest examples of York politics is that candi-

dates with names beginning with letters at the beginning of the alphabet are usually elected, simply because they are listed first on the ballot. Students with surnames starting with A,B,C, and D often run for office, says Dutka, not because of their ability, but because they feel it will look good on their resume. The dismal performance of student senators, however, could be solved through stronger undergraduate organizations. Already the Faculty of Fine Arts is assured a seat in the Senate, while Arts is slated to receive ten. The rest are distributed among other faculties, including Graduate Studies, Law, Administrative Studies, Glendon, and Atkinson and so on. Student senators should not be elected by the entire student body in any case, simply because that whole process is a sham. Only from within strengthened departmental organizations can truly committed senators be selected.

The students who are outraged over the Itwaru decision should really ask themselves where they were when an undergraduate association for Sociology was so desperately needed. Why don't they run for the Senate, or become more involved in the academic policy-making process? Why? Because undergraduate organizations (except for CAB and FESA) do not have a tradition at York University. College Councils on the other hand do. Co-opting these two entities will not only increase student involvement in the academic decision-making process, it will also enhance the credibility of college councils. Affiliating undergraduate organizations with councils will essentially simplify the system proposed by Arthurs, and solve many of the concerns expressed by student representatives.

The papers released by Arthurs are not this detailed; they merely imply the possibility of such relationships. Instead of calling for organizations like the Creative Arts Board and Winter's College Council to begin sharing a closer relationship, Arthurs simply suggests that faculty-based student governments receive official recognition.

The new faculty governments will initially have to hold a referendum to gain approval for a special student levy; but once they're established, membership will be mandatory. Colleges will maintain their \$27.50 per student until 1990-91; at which point funding will become dependent on the number of students actually signed up in each College. Student representatives expressed concern over two matters on this issue at a breakfast held by the Provost two weeks ago to discuss the President's proposals. Dave Thomas, President of Osgoode's student Council, is worried that York will have too many student governments. CYSF President Drew McCreadie feels that colleges have been demoted from "provinces" to "municipalities" with the establishment of faculty governments. In addition, Wendy Dingman, President of Winters College, believes that too many governments will slice up the student fee, leaving them with insufficient funds to conduct quality programmes.

Other recommendations which received bitter reaction from students included the proposed creation of two funds in 1990-91. The first fund, called the "College Student Activity Fund" will be administered by each Master in consultation with their respective college councils; the second, "The Faculty Activity Fund," is to be administered by each Dean in consultation with the faculty organization if one exists. In the first year, each fund will begin with approximately \$64,000, but will grow according to the number of students who elect not to join the college. In essence, every time a college council fails in attracting students, the funds of the Masters and Deans will benefit financially. It's a strange dilemma, as Vanier Council Member Mark Triumphour points out: "Now there will be no incentive for the Master to attract students to the colleges, because the fewer the students that join, the more money they'll have to put in their slush fund."

Student Representatives are collectively opposed to the establishment of these funds. According to CYSF President Drew McCreadie, "Activity money should be administered by people elected and appointed by students, simply because the fund is made up of money from students." Both Triumphour and McCreadie are right; the funds are potentially detrimental to College growth and should be controlled by students. Provost Meininger is quick to emphasize, however, that bad relations between Masters and college councils are certainly not the norm. This may be true, but the possibility of a master exerting absolute authority over council members must be completely avoided.

Furthermore, it is proposed that these college and faculty activity funds be initially financed through enrollment growth over the next three years. But college representatives have bitterly criticized this proposal, saying that it will effectively freeze their funding level, while they'll be forced to deal with even more students during that period of time. How will they continue to maintain the quality of programming and services under such financial conditions, Vanier Council President Andy McRae asks.

The establishment of these funds can be justifiably prevented by linking undergraduate organizations with college councils. These organizations, which should have representa-

tion on college councils, will organize the academic co-curricular activities as well as ensure a student voice in academic policy-making. Their reps should be elected, and the spending of funds can be done in consultation with the college government. Whatever the details of the arrangement may be, undergraduate organizations are needed, but they must be closely affiliated with the existing structure. Faculty governments will only create another unnecessary level of government at York, a university which is already over bureaucratized. Also, the establishment of a Faculty of Arts government would most certainly rival the CYSF, because of the immense size of that constituency.

Such recommendations will probably send shock waves through the college community; but the widely-held belief in a purely interdisciplinary college system could kill the reform process. Colleges need a mandate and the academic departments need an organization; they're a perfect match.



Many options are available in forming departmental-college relationships. All points out that under the new constitution of the CYSF, some amendments will be needed since students will be voting for representatives through their constituency. What about those students who choose not to affiliate with a college, he asks, how will they vote in a CYSF election? This could very well be solved by establishing each college as an undergraduate organization, representative of one or two departments, depending on the number of students involved. This again would greatly simplify the system, take away the need for faculty governments, and also prevent college governments from facing voluntary membership. Yet the disciplinary approach would most definitely meet with bitter reaction from a community so attached to the old system: a system which has failed so terribly.

And that's what students must remember during this entire process. College representatives mustn't kid themselves; the system needs a complete overhaul. Many representatives are saying that York will always have a substantial amount of apathy, because it is a commuter school. That's not only a cop-out, it's also grossly untrue. The University of Manitoba has far more commuter students per capita, and because of its disciplinary approach, it has been able to develop strong undergraduate organizations which wield high student support. York could achieve the same, but only if the University community is ready to consider every alternative.

Arthurs has handed the York community some very provocative recommendations. They have the potential to solve the endemic student apathy which plagues this campus; yet they also could become lost in a series of half-hearted measures. This is a crucial time of debate, but Arthurs has greatly limited the chance for effective response by demanding that all written reactions be submitted by April 15. More time is necessary for proper debate on these issues. Crucial details should simply not be left unaddressed; they must be worked out in a democratic way. Otherwise, the student body and the Administration will become alienated, which has happened all too often in the past.

In all, Arthurs succeeded where so many others failed. He gave a vision to the process of reform by respecting the history of York. Drastic reforms are needed, and they are sure to produce some bitter reactions. Yet this opposition can be eased, so long as the administration continues to include the entire York community in this process.

The university community must come to terms with what an utter failure the interdisciplinary college has been, and both students and administrators must understand the great importance of undergraduate departmental organizations.

If the colleges decide to take on themes which are too broad, these ambiguous identities may kill the entire process of reform, and not enable students to easily identify with these institutions.