

Should York retain its membership in OFS?

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Excalibur's Gary Symons and James Flagal square off on the issues behind the upcoming referendum which will decide York's position on the Ontario Federation of Students.

Work to improve OFS from within rather than opting out

By GARY SYMONS

How wonderful. Two weeks ago I was pondering my financial situation in terms of the affordability of macaroni dinner. Last week, thanks to our enterprising student government, I was faced with a much more attractive dilemma: for voting to pull out of OFS, a CYSF campaign poster promised I would have \$30,000 with which to a) buy a new sports car; b) eat at McDonald's for the next 10,000 days (27 years and five months, not taking inflation into account); or c) travel Europe for a year.

Hastily shedding all my prior convictions and principles, I aimed by avaricious feet in the direction of the CYSF offices to sign the necessary blood pact and pick up my cheque.

Alack and alas! I had made, I was informed, a false assumption. The money, the trip to Europe, the attractive sports car, and the lifetime pass to Ronald McDonald Land were not for me. Instead, the 30 grand would go, not to OFS, nor to myself or any other York student, but to CYSF. No wonder they want us to vote YES; CYSF has needed a sports car for years.

Pondering all this over a plate of macaroni dinner, I decided that the YES campaign posters are even more confusing than the original idea to pull out of OFS. The argument for withdrawing York's membership is that OFS doesn't do its job properly, and particularly fails to represent the interests of York. CYSF President Reya Ali contends that CYSF could do a better job of representing the interests of York students to the government than OFS does, if only it had the \$30,000 membership fee. With that money Ali intends to hire a full-time researcher/lobbyist that would, essentially, be the core of a "mini" OFS.

There is also the contention by CYSF that, since it is one of the most severely underfunded student governments in Ontario, it cannot spend the \$30,000 membership fee and remain effective. In this at least the executive is absolutely right; CYSF is currently a disorganized, fragmented and ineffective body, and a lot of their problems stem directly from the fact that they are relative paupers in comparison with the other student councils in the province. The University of Western Ontario students, for instance, have 2.6 million dollars to play with every year, Carleton and Sir Wilfred Laurier both have over one million, and the Ryerson Polytechnical Institute gets \$1.25 million. CYSF's operating budget, on the other hand, comes to a paltry \$235,000, and out of this they must also pay the \$30,000 OFS membership fee which other post-secondary student councils pay out of a separate levy paid more or less directly by students.

In light of these depressing statistics CYSF executive frustration is understandable, even if their plan to pull out of OFS isn't justifiable.

The real issue in this referendum, of course, has little to do with OFS and much to do with the \$30,000 that Ali & Co. feel is better spent at home. While Ali does seem to believe that OFS lobbyists aren't as effective as their literature makes out, CYSF's motives were laid bare when he told me on Monday that CYSF needs at least \$500,000 to operate properly. At the same time, however, Ali and the CYSF executive are well aware of where to get far more substantial revenues than would be provided by simply pulling our cash out of OFS.

The largest amount would come from the restructuring of CYSF, a project Ali has worked on since last spring, which would see Calumet, Bethune and Glendon colleges, as well as Osgoode Hall, rejoin a reorganized central student government. If all four college level student councils do decide to rejoin, Ali estimates CYSF will add about \$93,000 to their operating revenues.

Another avenue to increase CYSF's revenues would be to ask York students and the Board of Governors to allow a change in the way we pay our membership fees in OFS. Currently, CYSF pays the fee out of its operating budget, while other universities have instituted a separate levy to be paid by each student. Not only does York's system hamper the efforts of CYSF, it also means that York gets shortchanged at OFS since each institution's voting power within the provincial federation is calculated on a per capita basis; in effect, limiting York's influence in OFS to that of much smaller institutions.

Well aware of both these problems, Ali had planned a little over a month ago to attempt to institute such a system but was subsequently voted down by the general council. That's too bad, because while the system would cost each York student three dollars (or a week's worth of macaroni dinner) each, it would have given CYSF the \$30,000 it needs to establish its own external affairs organization and increase our influence in OFS policy-making.

Finally—and here too Ali has ambitions, if not expectations—CYSF could involve itself in a few money making enterprises such as photocopying and typewriting services or operating a pub. While it's hard to estimate even roughly how much return CYSF could expect from such entrepreneurial ventures, it's an idea that's been tried with great success at other campuses across Canada. Just by bringing the colleges back into CYSF, a move that would benefit both sides, and by instituting a per student levy for OFS, CYSF could increase their operating revenue by about \$123,000, giving them a total annual budget of \$358,000 and still retaining the services of OFS.

Another point that has to be made is that, despite Director of External Affairs Sandra Antoniani's claims to the contrary, OFS does do a creditable job of lobbying the government on a broad range of student related issues such as the underfunding of universities, affordable housing student assistance, summer employment, and, of course, limiting tuition costs. Moreover, they do so on a budget of only \$430,000 a year—less than the total spending of the various levels of student government at York.

In my opinion, and I speak from the perspective of one who has watched the performance of both organizations for three years, OFS has actually fulfilled its function far better than our own poorly funded and decentralized CYSF, but far more important is the fact that, whether OFS is doing a good job or not, Ontario students absolutely need a central lobbying organization. If CYSF really believes that they aren't doing that job, then it is their responsibility to pressure them into doing these improvements, and not simply trying to add to its own revenue by opting out of the kind of valuable service that the OFS provides. By doing so, CYSF is doing neither itself nor the students it represents any good at all.

On February 6, I'm going to vote NO.

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OFS fails to lobby effectively, ignores York's 'unique needs'

By JAMES FLAGAL

What do you think of when you hear about Ivy League Universities? Princeton? Harvard? York? Definitely not York but perhaps institutions like Western and Queens could fit that category along with York's sister institution the University of Toronto.

In the States, it's reasonable that certain schools exist which offer a higher quality, since the higher price for education is paid. In Ontario, a two tier university system has emerged, according to Liz Lovis of the Ontario Federation of Students (OFS) and Reya Ali president of CYSF. Yet taxpayers still pay their designated dues throughout the province, and university fees are still roughly equal. How can a two tier university system evolve if everyone is paying the same? Who's to blame?

The blame is directed at the present funding system in use by the government. Recently, Ali released a brief to the minister outlining York's present concern over grants allocation. CYSF's brief is both brilliant in drawing attention to York's current dilemma under the present funding formula and creative in proposing resolutions to rectify the problems of the imbalanced university system. The report's major intent was to resolve the contradiction between a government that promises Post Secondary Education to all students with an average of 60 percent, and an allocation scheme which gives more funds to universities which decrease their enrollment.

York presently fulfills the government's prerequisite of accessibility offering easy admissions when compared to other institutions like U of T or Western. As a result, York's student population has exploded in the past decade from 24,000 to 40,000. Normally one would assume that when enrollment is increased, funding should automatically increase to that institution. Correct? Nope, the government has created a funding formula which makes accessibility and high quality education incompatible. While York's enrollment has increased its student funding ratio has steadily decreased.

For example, with the present situation of York's growing population in the past decade, the government is only funding approximately 31,500 or roughly 80 percent of York's student body. However if York were to decrease its enrollment from 40,000 to 24,000 in the same time period, its allocations would be even greater receiving grants for 32,900 students or 130 percent of its enrollment. This is largely because the funding formula takes into account past enrollment in drawing out allocations, not future prospective figures. The funding formula currently discriminates, penalizing those universities for growing while benefiting others like Queens and Western for shrinking. Those universities that have decreased enrollment in the past decade are presently receiving more than 100 percent of their respective funding levels, drawing a huge inconsistency between where money goes and those institutions like York who lose for endorsing an accessibility policy.

The consequence of this imbalanced funding formula is the emergence of a two tier system where a handful of institutions benefit off other institutions' losses. York annually is losing millions of dollars at the expense of this unfair formula. Consequently the quality of education it can offer its students is suffering. This can be felt every day at York by the lack of capital funds causing overcrowding in classes, faculty facilities and student study areas. In fact, York is the most overcrowded university next only to Wilfred Laurier, yet its funding has not increased enough to accommodate its changing demographics. How long can York uphold its accessibility program while dealing with a formula which penalizes those institutions which increase enrollment?

This discussion of the present two tier university system affects a whole other issue being debated today; the issue of withdrawing from OFS. The Ontario Federation of Students was founded as a lobby group to represent common interests shared by post-secondary students at the government level. Unfortunately, that area

of overlap has been shrinking in the university system for some time.

Lovis, herself, recognized the growing division when alluding to the present two tier system. Clearly York's concerns are barely Western's when a funding formula exists which benefits one institution while hurting the other. The OFS was founded on consensus, yet currently conflict does exist in the university system between the Ivy leaguers who wish to maintain their status, and subordinate institutions like York who want their fair slice of the budgetary pie. Can the OFS effectively represent a divided system which involves members who desire opposite goals?

The issue which has been drawn out in this campaign is whether or not the \$30,000 is worth the money for OFS membership. This, however, is only of secondary importance. What should be of primary concern is the effectiveness of OFS.

At a recent meeting between Ali and Gregory Sorbara, minister of Colleges and Universities, an aide to Sorbara discussed funding problems with Ali. In part of CYSF's report, Ali demands that the government assure that designated federal funds for post-secondary education are not transferred to other policy areas such as health. The PC government often extracted funds from the post-secondary purse because in the public's opinion it was of secondary importance compared to other policy areas. "A government needs political will to change something," the aide said, "and this will come from public pressure or support." He used the senior citizens as an example of a group who effectively mobilized public opinion and lobbied the government effectively, thus forcing Ottawa to reconsider cutting certain pension programs. "Unfortunately," the aide added, "public opinion in the post-secondary area is somewhat apathetic. Somehow these institutions must find a way to mobilize public opinion to force politicians to change the current system." Isn't this OFS's main duty? OFS seems ineffective at drawing attention to the system's needs and bringing them to the forefront.

During the meeting Ali told Sorbara that York will need an artificial injection of funds plus the installation of a rough equity funding formula if York is to get back on par with other universities. York has individual needs and possesses unique problems which must be addressed, yet the chronic underfunding cycle continues to plague this institution with no relief in sight. Are York's needs being heard with the present lobbying method? Can OFS honestly represent York's needs and guarantee that they will be dealt with?

Ideally, a united student front is important to effectively lobby government. Realistically, the system contains too many diverse goals to be represented in one lobbying group. The university system is arriving at a point where the voice of many is diluting the voice of one so much that certain institutions are not being heard, York being one. If OFS had any foresight they would have fought tooth and nail to remove the present funding formula which will also be the end of OFS as the opposing factions within lobby groups grow.

Therefore, OFS fails on two levels: It fails in mobilizing public opinion to create that political will Sorbara's aide describes. And it failed in representing York's unique needs which are ever more desperate.

One must be aware that a withdrawal from OFS will not necessarily mean York can effectively lobby alone. Ali points out that he can visit the minister alone, and with a permanent researcher York can more effectively demonstrate their needs to the government and be heard. This, however, will not be determined for some time. But this is not the issue at hand.

What is at issue is York's present condition of overcrowding and endangered education quality which must be addressed in the near future. It seems the OFS is ineffective in changing these trends. What is a truth is that York must somehow reverse these trends, and since the conventional methods are not working, one could say—IT'S TIME FOR A CHANGE!