

A Mess at York: Student Government Report Exposes Neglect

By ELLIOTT SHIFF

Over the past few years student government at York has become increasingly fractured and ineffective. Realizing that the problem needed to be looked into, Provost Tom Meininger, together with Board of Governors representatives Pam Fruitman and Martin Zarnett recently produced a report that attempted a diagnosis. Entitled *The Nature and Funding of Student Government at York University: Background, Current Situation and Issues*, the report outlined a disturbing picture.

Presently York has 14 separate funded student governments. Each of these governments is a legally distinct entity and there is a great deal of variation in how they operate. Only eight (54% of students) are members of CYSF, which is supposed to be the central government. Quite clearly, at this point in time CYSF is incapable of acting as an effective central government in which campus wide issues concerning the student body can be discussed and acted on.

If York's central student government is to be effective, it must be able to deal effectively with the numerous clubs and associations on campus. According to the report, the current system of government, based largely on the colleges, disproportionately benefits residence students, who number only about 2,000 of York's 40,000 students. But as the burgeoning clubs and associations on campus indicate, commuter students do take an extracurricular interest in York. Right now, however, finding funding in an unnecessarily difficult task for these organizations.

According to the present system, these groups are not answerable to anyone. They can apply to any student government for financial assistance. Because there is no policy or procedure on this matter, many groups approach several governments for money, reducing themselves to beggars.

Because these clubs and associations are a major area of participation for commuter students, their contributions should be recognized and their funding organized. A strong affiliation of clubs with the Colleges would serve to enhance the standing of the Colleges in the eyes of many commuter students while at

the same time putting due emphasis on the value of clubs at York. Presently, many commuter students have no meaningful affiliation with their colleges, being more akin to the Ross Building and the Curtis Lecture Halls than the College stamped on their sessional validation cards. Although no one can expect 100 percent participation from students at a commuter university, an effective student government has to accommodate and coordinate with clubs and associations to give them a chance.

Another stumbling block in the way of strong central student government here is the complicated issue of Trust Funds. Ironically, the Trust Fund was originally seen as a way of unifying college student governments with CYSF. The idea, according to the Student Relations Committee, which approved the Trust Fund arrangement in 1979, was that "all students (excluding Atkinson) should be obliged to contribute to the costs of providing central student run services and activities." Those affiliated directly with CYSF would pay directly into CYSF while the student government fees of non-affiliated members would be collected by the University, to be jointly administered by CYSF and the non-member constituency. Upon joint agreement, funds from these accounts were to be allocated to central run student activities. If a non-member constituency were to become a member of CYSF, then the fund would be transferred to CYSF.

When the Trust Fund agreement was drafted, it was understood that there would be no opting out of the trust account by the non-member constituencies. What has happened, however, is that due to neglect on the part of CYSF and opportunism of the non-member constituencies, a large amount of the Trust Fund money has come to be regarded as spending money by the non-member constituencies, and has been used to support local services and activities. In most cases it is more profitable for non-members to remain out of CYSF and collect this money for their own use. This practice must be discontinued if there is to be any hope of improving the effectiveness of central government.

A third problem that the report points out is that student govern-

ments are not submitting proper audits at the end of each year. In essence, students at York know very little about how they contribute to student government and have little opportunity to learn how their money is used. Rough financial statements are sometimes approved by local governments and published in the College papers, but generally the statements are very inadequate. The report points to Masters and Deans to become more involved in the auditing process. Winters College Master Maurice Elliot agrees in harsher terms—"Masters have not been exercising their proper function as carefully and effectively as they could have." Elliot adds, "A possible reason is that they have not been encouraged to do so." Whoever is at fault here, the fact remains that nine of the 14 governments aren't even bothering to submit audits.

As a whole, these problems reflect the general malaise that has thwarted effective student government at York for many years. But none of these problems are insurmountable. The first priority in any effort to reform government must be to convince the 14 local governments that it is in everyone's best interest to have a unified campus wide voice. While each government has local interests, some more than others, there are certainly important common issues that effect all of them.

Due mainly to neglect, student government at York, both locally and centrally, is a mess. If nothing else, the report on student government has dug up characteristics of this neglect, and has sparked a great deal of discussion on how the situation can be rectified.



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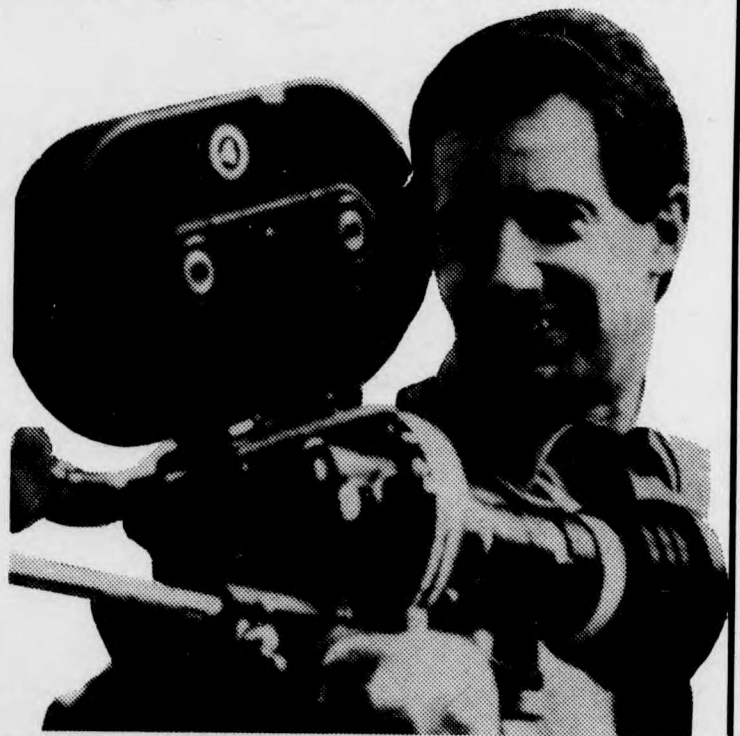
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