

# How to build a better student government

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papers, and created a new level of student government: the faculty council.

Nice work, Harry. But you ought to send the results down to the Department of Redundancy Department. You see, we now have a bunch of rather over-represented students: the college councils, the faculty councils and the YFS (not to mention a heap of clubs and services) are all clawing at the same chunks of warm flesh.

Most impartial observers will tell you the faculty councils are the solution. They make sense. They represent students where they need it and they don't encourage redundancy and silly infighting.

One problem, though: student tuition money (in the form of a \$28.50 tuition levy) still goes to the college councils. Some of the faculty councils have managed to get small levies, but they really should be taking over the budgets of the soon-to-be-obsolete college councils.

The YFS needs the faculty councils. If things are going to improve, it's going to depend on them.

5) **Too much administrative nonsense being done by politicians.** Those people we elect — what do they do with their time? You'd be surprised. This year, the biggest chunk of their time was spent managing the Blue Cross health insurance plan. Probably the second biggest was spent helping college councils out with their orientation programs. Neither of these things are terribly political tasks — and they both prevented anything new

or constructive from happening in the YFS offices.

This leads right back to item 1, the volunteer problem. This sort of work should be done by student volunteers. By doing this low-level work they'll get the experience they need to promote themselves into higher positions — and when they get to those higher positions they will have real experience and no cumbersome administrative jobs to do.

6) **The real student government is owned by the university.** The Office of Student Affairs, a branch of the university administration, is our real student government. They have legal authority over all student matters (they can override any YFS action) and they run most of the 'services' which student governments provide at other schools: housing, foreign students, and, especially, complaints.

Democratic student government at York is really a bit of a joke, as most insiders know, since this office, run by unelected and unaccountable university officials, is the mother of all student governments.

9) **The YFS doesn't really exist.** Not as far as York University is concerned. It has no role in the operations of the university, and it isn't mentioned in any of the acts or regulations which govern this place. York's two central governing bodies — the Senate and the Board of Governors — can ignore student government as much as they please, and they usually do. There are

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a few token student positions on boards and committees, and that's it. The YFS is really little more than a lobby group, representing the university's largest constituency.

**The eight-point program to destroy the YFS\* (and replace it with something better)**

1) **Fortify the faculty councils with college dollars.** A strange place to start, but a good place. Right now every student gives \$28.50 to their college.

This is a poor use of money for several reasons: first, it creates redundancy (we have seven little governments doing things which could easily be done by one big umbrella-government). Second, it creates friction (the college councils are endlessly at war with the YFS and each other, and they don't do much themselves). Third, it creates an imbalance (the vast majority of this money ends up in the hands of residence students — who represent about six per cent of the undergraduate population. Commuter students get almost

nothing from college governments).

By transferring this money to faculty councils (not all the money — at least six per cent should still go to the college councils, which will become residence councils), we'll be creating a more meaningful system of student government. Most students have a much stronger allegiance to their faculty (which represents their vocation) than to their college (which represents very little). The faculty councils will be able to help out students where they need it.

This step should begin immediately, since it will take time to get things rolling on the faculty council level. The \$28.50 levy should be transferred to a "faculty pool," where it will be divided up according to the relative sizes and needs of the faculties.

We already have two excellent models: the Faculty of Education Student Association and the Creative Arts Student Association (which represents Fine Arts students). These organizations have managed to find some funding, and they're using it to bring services to students who were previously rather marginalized.

2) **Elect YFS councillors on the faculty level instead of the college level.**

This goes hand-in-hand with the previous step. By getting the colleges out of the council chamber (where most of them never wanted to be in the first place), we'll be creating a more cooperative environment. The faculty government reps and the YFS executive will feel and act more like they're part of the same organization — because they'll be representing exactly the same students. They'll still argue and disagree — and that's important — but the debate will be predicated on common goals. They'll actually want to do work together instead of sneering at each other from across the room.

3) **Turn the councillors into workers.** Right now all they do is attend infrequent meetings (or not). If we want to get things going, we'll have to put them to work. They should chair committees, work with the executive, put in office hours and organize volunteers.

For some incentive, councillor positions should come with a \$1000 honourarium. The YFS can easily budget for this — especially if they account for the money they'll save with the extra office help.

The council will operate more like the house of commons: individual members will compete for juicy committee positions and inner-circle connections. People will actually climb over each other to do work! This will be a refreshing change from the current lugubrious scene in the council chamber.

And the YFS can write a firm job description for councillors — a minimum-necessary-work contract. Voters will know who's been naughty and who's been nice when it comes time to stuff the ballot box every year.

4) **Set up a system of hard-working committees.** In any reasonable government, this is where the work gets done. In the present YFS, there's only one important committee: the executive. We need something for the councillors, volunteers and executives to work on together, so let's do some restructuring.

At the centre of the operation should be a Priorities and Planning committee. This is where the big schemes will be hatched. Then we can have committees for each of functions the YFS performs (a social events

committee, an external relations committee, an information campaigns committee and so on). As the YFS expands, it will develop new committees (an off-campus housing committee, a foreign students committee...).

5) **Turn the YFS into a volunteer-based organization.** The hundreds of students who sign up to volunteer every year should be given something to do. Each of them should be assigned to a councillor, an executive or a committee. Students want to get involved — and they should be given real hands-on power in return.

They should organize a YFS Interns' Society — a volunteers' union, which should be officially recognized. Decisions made by the Society should carry real weight with the YFS council and executive. These are the people who will change the YFS from a club into an institution.

6) **Move into the Office of Student Affairs.** You know the office. It's in central square. It's where you go if you've got complaints, if you want information, if you're a foreign student, a student with a disability, if you're looking to rent a house. In other words, if you've got student business.

These are all ideal functions for student government. And they should be operated by a democratically-run institution. As they are, they're an awkward appendage of the university administration — one which should be lanced (but we have to make sure the university transfers the budgets along with the offices). If the university takes its students seriously, it will be happy to cooperate in this move.

7) **Invent the YFS.** Right now it's a bit of a chimera. It isn't a part of the university in any sense: just try to find it in the books.

Here's what we need to do: reopen the York University Act, the Ontario law which defines York as an institution, and re-draft it to include student government. While we're at it we can do some work on the Board of Governors, that little feudal instrument of totalitarian power at the heart of the university. In fact, we can combine the two: include a clause which says that Board of Governors decisions can't pass until they've been ratified by the student government (the opposite is true right now).

This will take some work: the Old Boys who run York will squirm and holler. But, as a fight for democratic principles, it will get lots of public attention, and it's just the sort of underdog-supporting issue that NDP governments are supposed to love. Aren't they?

8) **Reorganize everything.** So now we've got a student government which has a real role, a real identity, real power, a whole bunch of people working for it and, not doubt, a very high visibility both on and off campus.

We can't even predict how this step will look. The inner workings of the YFS will become fluid and labyrinthine. Executive positions and organizational structures will be redefined; the constitution will be rewritten; and the council meetings — those tedious, interminable council meetings — will take on a whole new life. They will become a spectator sport, better than Hockey Night in Canada.

And the best part: *everyone will be talking about it.* It will affect every student's life. It will be every student's doorway into the university. It will be the thing that holds us together on this dismal little strip of greybelt tundra. It will be the subject of heated battles and potent politicking.

It will be a real student government for York. And all it needs is somebody to give it a kick-start.

## Council Members Attendance List May 1991—January 1992

	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.
1 Michelle Hugues President	✓				✓	✓			✓
2 Ziad Hafez VP Finance	✓				✓	✓			
3 Elissa Horsecroft VP Equality & Social Affairs	✓				✓	✓			✓
4 Nikki Gershboin VP Internal	✓				✓	✓			✓
5 Rob Cento VP External	✓				✓	✓			✓
6 Mike Holt Stong	✓				✓	✓			✓
7 Adam Clayton Stong	✓								
8 Tina Roesch Winters					✓	✓			✓
9 Rhys Bowman FESA*									✓
10 Jean-Noel Grenier Calumet	✓				✓	✓			✓
11 Sheldon Bergson Bethune	✓				✓	✓			✓
12 Elan Thomas Bethune									✓
13 Dianne Parton Calumet	✓				✓				✓
14 Matt Clarke Vanier					✓				✓
15 Tim Anderson McLaughlin					✓	✓			✓
16 Andrew Feldstein Osgoode	✓				✓	✓			
17 Glen Johnson Osgoode	✓				✓				✓
18 Nick Adeti-Bastine Atkinson	✓				✓	✓			✓
19 Allan MacDonald Founders	✓				✓	✓			
20 Doug Souilliere Atkinson	✓				✓				
21 Cassandra Doulis Vanier**									
22 Susie Ranalli FESA*						✓			✓
23 Jim Ball McLaughlin									✓
24 Breanne Munro Founders	✓								
25 George Sanghera McLaughlin**	✓								
26 Brod Abrahms Winters						✓			

\* Faculty of Education Student Association

■ No meetings due to lack of quorum (less than 13 members)

\*\* Impeached and/or Quit