

ARE STUDENT GOVERNMENTS OBSOLETE?

by Ray Glass

2

ARE STUDENT GOVERNMENTS OBSOLETE ?

by Ray Glass

To some extent, at least, the problems with student governments are similar to those affecting all modern American institutions.

Robert F. Bundy, an educational futurist who is presently serving as an educational consultant to the New York State Education Department, suggests that most modern American institutions pass through two stages, or watersheds, as he calls them. Since most institutions are formed for noble purposes, the first watershed involves an application of new knowledge and skills to produce desirable effects. The institution, then, provides a great deal of services or programs using a relatively small amount of resources.

In the second watershed, the survival of the institution or organization itself becomes the major purpose as an increasing amount of time and resources are spent maintaining the bureaucracy, leadership, continuing existence and other aspects of the organization. Relatively fewer resources are devoted to the organization's programs and services.

In this article I have outlined the problems with student governments, their failure to adequately represent and further the interests of students, the need to develop a new organizational form to serve this purpose, and some of the principles on which that new type of organization should be based. I have defined the problems according to Bundy's watershed theory because student governments have passed their second watershed.

Ray Glass wrote this article when he was Legislative Director of SASU - (Student Association of the State University of New York), prior to that time he was active in the anti-war movement and a voice for Students in New York and the Nation on the issues of financial aid, student rights and equal access to Higher Education. Ray was struck by an automobile on October 1st, 1975 and died a few days later.

What's wrong with Student Governments?

In addition to those problems affecting all Institutions in modern society, student governments suffer from a variety of ills related to their own nature and to the nature of students. Any study of the effectiveness of student governments and the need to replace them with a new organizational form must attempt to discover and understand each of these problems. Below is a discussion of what I consider to be the seven most serious shortcomings of college student governments:

1. Lack of Autonomy

Legally, a university is a corporation and all power and authority to govern and direct the institution is held by its governing board. The governing board delegates some of this authority to the chief administrative officers, lower-level administrators, departments, the faculty senate, etc., and then a few crumbs are delegated to the student government, any or all of which can be taken away at whim.

Legally and politically, a student government exists at the pleasure of the university and is a creature of the university. Student governments do not derive their existence, legitimacy and authority from students, but from governing boards and administrators. The lack of independent existence means that student governments are dependent upon the university - for their sources of funding and for office space.

2. They have no power except over social and recreational activities and service programs. In other areas, (purposes of university learning-teaching process, curriculum, admissions, appointment, promotion and retention of faculty, university budget, etc.), the most student governments have is some influence. In very few colleges, (even in those which have faculty-student governance systems), do students have the power and authority to determine these matters. Advise, recommend, influence - maybe, but decide - no. The decisions are made by legislatures, governing boards, administrators, and faculty (on some matters). The student, even in social activities, is limited, since at most colleges the administration, at least ultimately, has veto power over the use of the student activity fee.

Aside from tinkering with the grading system and course requirements, getting a few new courses offered, or getting "input" into various decisions, student participation in university governance has accomplished little except to co-opt students into helping administer the university for the goals of the administration and the governing board. Most significantly (to administrators) it contributed to the decrease in campus unrest. It has done nothing to change either the fundamental purposes of the university or the educational system or to alter the basic power relationships within the university.

In his book, The Student as Nigger, Jerry Farber referred to student governments as "those little make-believe student governments which govern in about the same way that baby's toy steering wheel drives daddy's car." Let's face it - student governments are sand boxes for adolescents to play government, training grounds for those who aspire to be real life politicians, and a continuation of the "let's pretend" process of electing home room officers in grade school where we learn to be "responsible" (and responsive to those in power) and to work within the system even if the system works counter to our goals.

Student government leaders are usually worse than the student governments themselves because they tend to be status or status quo oriented, have a "don't rock the boat" attitude, and they depend on potential adversaries for recommendations to graduate school, law school, etc. If students are niggers in the university and the educational process, then student government leaders are Uncle Tom boss-niggers.

3. Lack of continuity - the transient nature of students leads to a rapid turnover in the constituency and in the leadership. The effects of this transient leadership is that student governments have no historical perspective and little patience or long-term vision- which results in limiting goals to those which can be accomplished in one year, thereby reducing the chances of accomplishing meaningful change.

4. Lack of support from students. Unfortunately, this is evident to everyone and it hurts in a lot of ways. Since it is obvious that student governments have little support from students, and they have very little influence and no power with faculty and administrators, they are forced to work from a weak position. (Of course, it should be noted that frequently this weak position is exacerbated because the student government compromises and waters down its demands even before approaching the faculty and the administration.)

One must wonder how low a voter turnout it will take before we admit that according to the people who count (students), student governments should be declared dead. Instead, we continue to delude ourselves by trying various P.R. techniques and gimmicks to "cure" apathy rather than to discover the causes of it.

Why is it that students don't care about student government? Could it be because of an unconscious recognition that they are powerless, that student governments are impotent and that student governments are doing nothing to change this? That students are oppressed, but unaware of their oppression? Could it be that activity in student government is virtually meaningless and therefore, students are justified in being apathetic?

If students are to view student government or any other student organization as an effective and meaningful arena for participation, then it has to be so. The student organization has to have power (or be working to take power) and must work on issues more significant than social activities.

5. Bureaucratization, elitism, and undemocratic representation.

Student governments seem to be in the business of building a complex bureaucracy to parallel that of the administration and/or the federal government, one which students don't understand and which acts as a barrier to inexperienced students or student organizations who want to get involved. The budgeting and accounting system for student fees and the new fad of student governments incorporating are only the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

Another common trait of student government people is the elite, cliquish atmosphere among those in leadership positions. The controlling clique of honchos from the student government, newspaper and other related organizations determines and certifies their own successors by grooming their heirs, securing editorial endorsements for them, appointing them to particular committees or granting them other choice assignments, etc. A common trait of student government leaders is a "we-they" attitude. How many conversations have we been involved in when the topic was "why are they so apathetic" or "thick" or whatever? (Maybe "they" are apathetic because our vision and leadership deserve apathy!)

Many student governments have undemocratic representational structures which do not guarantee the representation of all students in a proportional manner (one person, one vote) with a readily identifiable constituency which encourages maximum contact between the representative and the constituents. These less than satisfactory structures exacerbate apathy, widen the gap between student government and students, and personality rather than concrete issues reigns as the basis for election campaigns. Examples of undemocratic or less than satisfactory representational schemes include: an all at-large election; associational representation by clubs, organizations or other interest groups; (and representation by clubs, organizations or other interest groups;) and representation by academic field or class standing. The system which best meets the criteria listed above is one determined by geographical district, by residential unit on campus and by towns or wards or election districts off campus.

6. Time, attention, energy and resources are devoted to peripheral issues, areas and problems.

Aside from the time, attention and resources devoted to the survival and growth of the student government itself, most of a student government's resources are devoted to peripheral areas. Issues such as social, cultural and recreational programs, student services, recognizing and chartering student organizations, administering the student fee budget, food service, book stores, health care, searching for and appointing students to serve on university, faculty or student committees or other bodies, and tinkering with academic policies dominate the attention of student governments.

Even though these issues or programs are directed toward aspects of the quality of student life and are important, they are peripheral because they are not directly related to the fundamental nature and central purpose of what it means to be a college student - which is that student's role in the educational process. Education is the originating nature and purpose of what the university and students are all about, while these other issues and aspects are derivative and marginal.

At this time, the point is simply that student governments devote their resources to peripheral issues and problems. Probably the most obvious example of this shortcoming is to compare the amount of time and attention that student governments devote to the student activity fee budget and that which they devote to the university budget, even though the university budget is usually 10 or 20 times (or more) larger and has a much greater impact on students, education, and the university as a whole.

7. No Philosophy and No Planning

Even more significant than their focus on peripheral issues, student governments do not have a philosophy, any underlying principles, values, goals, or any vision of the purpose of a college education, the role of the student in the educational process, or the role of the educational system in society. Instead, student governments work on an ad hoc, issue by issue, year by year basis that keeps them in a powerless position working on incidental problems with little support from students.

To bring about truly meaningful change, an organization has to adopt a perspective that encompasses more than one year. Because of the lack of continuity and transient nature of students and student leaders and because students are pitted against faculty and administrators who are more experienced and permanent, it is even more necessary for students to develop a philosophy and goals and then plan how to bring about those goals. A student master plan is as essential as a university master plan.

* But - student gets lived some of the most meaningful experiences students have, extra-curricular. So, we have an emphasis on 'education' as core

Before moving to a summary evaluation of the effectiveness of student governments, it is necessary to first discuss two other questions: what is a student, and what should be the purposes of an organization that represents students?

What is a Student?

Strangely enough, student governments are not based on any explicit perception of what it means to be a student or what students have in common with one another as students.

This situation is strange, indeed, because just about the first thing that people who want to organize a labor union (or any other organization) do is to define the community of interest that exists among the people whom they want to join the organization. They are most likely to be successful in organizing the union if they base it upon those interests which the potential members have in common with one another.

For a labor union, the community of interest is obvious. Workers are workers and work in order to make a living. Therefore, their community of interest is based upon their working conditions, particularly economic conditions. The labor union views its major function as improving the working conditions of its members. Labor unions also provide political action, lobbying, services and other programs to their members, but their overriding central purpose is to improve the working conditions of their members.

Likewise, it should be quite obvious what it means to be a student and what students have in common with one another as students. Simply that we are students which means that the only basic thing we have in common with one another as students is our role in the educational process as learners. The primary purpose of a representative student organization, therefore, should be to improve the learning conditions of its student members.

The Role of the Student in the Educational Process

If the central community of interest among students is our role in the educational process, it is necessary to define and understand that role. - What it should be and what it is.

John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead, Harold Taylor, John Holt, Ivan Illich, and almost all educational theorists are in general agreement that education and learning are an active process, that one can only educate oneself, that all learning must be self-initiated and self-directed, and that the only proper role for the student in the education-learning process is as an active participant. In the words of Harold Taylor, "freedom for the student is the necessary condition for learning."

Originally, academic freedom had two traditions - one called lehrfreiheit to protect the teaching and research of the faculty, and one called lehrenfreiheit to protect the active role and freedom of the student to learn. Historian Henry Steele Commager reports that the latter "was designed to provide independence for students. It meant freedom to learn, freedom to study what one wished to study - to go from one university to another, to attend class or stay away - freedom, in short, to run one's own affairs and live one's own life."

Yet, there is probably not one college in the country which guarantees this student academic freedom or has an educational process that reflects anything near self-directed learning with the student as an active participant. The student's role is not that of an active participant, but of a passive recipient of instruction. The present educational system teaches submission, socializes us to passively accept authority and coercion, and to surrender one's individuality to an institution. Despite all the administrative rhetoric to the contrary, students are still niggers.

The classroom, the university and the educational system are oppressive and authoritarian, and students, as a group, are oppressed and exploited by that very system.

Purpose of a Representative Student Organization

If the above is true, then the primary purpose of any organization which represents the interests and welfare of students has to be the radical transformation of the educational process in the university. All other issues, goals and activities should be secondary or complementary to the goal of radical educational reform.

If the present educational system is authoritarian, then tinkering with it can not accomplish meaningful change - radical transformation and overthrowing of the system is necessary. Present liberal reform efforts aimed at putting students on governing boards, revisions in the curriculum and grading system, etc., take the existing system and structure for granted. What is needed is radical, structural reform to alter the power relationships in the existing structure and to transform the system itself.

Student Governments Are Obsolete

It is clear that student governments are presently doing nothing to eliminate this oppression or accomplish the necessary radical changes in the conditions of students or in the educational system.

In the light of the expressed fundamental shortcomings of student governments, it seems likely that student governments are, by their very nature, incapable of restructuring themselves to make it possible for them to accomplish radical change.

Since they are the only student organizations that presently have any legitimacy or substantial funding, and because of their collaborationist nature, student governments stand in the way of carrying out meaningful change and are a threat and obstacle to what a representative student organization should be doing. I must conclude, therefore, that student governments are obsolete, dysfunctional and counter-productive, and, at least in regard to the function of representing the interests and welfare of students, a new organizational form is necessary.

What Needs To Be Done?

1. In general, we and all students must become conscious of our oppression and we must begin to ask the questions as to how we should change the conditions of our oppression and to begin to take adequate steps to deal with the system which oppresses us.

2. We must develop a philosophy based upon a body of underlying values, principles, and assumptions and upon a comprehensive analysis of the present system. Our philosophy must project a vision of what kind of educational system and society we want.

Our analysis must include the past and present role of the student, faculty, administration, and outside forces in the educational process, the role of the university or college in the educational system, the role of the educational system in society, and the purpose, goals, functions and methods of other student organizations.

Once we have developed a philosophy, we must develop goals, objectives, strategies and tactics consistent with it. The development of this philosophy and master plan will require an incredible amount of research, theorizing, planning, discussion and agreement.

3. Because of the focus on radical educational change from a student-as-student basis, it will be necessary to adopt a national perspective and strategy. Meaningful educational change (initial steps would probably include the elimination of grades, credits, examinations, degrees, and departments as we now know them) would be nearly impossible to accomplish on a campus-by-campus basis.

Development and agreement on a national philosophy, goals, and strategy will be difficult enough in itself. Our task will be more complicated than that which originally faced labor union organizers, but, nevertheless, just as labor unions never would have gotten anywhere if there hadn't been general agreement on purposes, so too will students fail if we adopt a philosophy of letting every campus do its own thing.

4. The National Student Association must use its resources to begin the work of developing a national student philosophy of education. We don't need model collective bargaining contracts yet, but we do need a national think tank with plenty of staff and resources, national and regional conferences with radical educational theorists as resource persons, and a network of people across the country committed to and working for the development of this philosophy, master plan and organizational form.

(I should note that I have not writtten off N S A, student governments or people in student government organizations as incapable of joining and helping the cause by financial subsidy or organizing efforts. I'm sure some student government organizations and people will oppose this effort, but our task will be difficult enough without writing off any potential bases of support.)

5. We must develop a new organizational form which builds into its essence, structure, purposes, elements, and means features to counter-act and overcome the shortcomings of student governments. Tinkering with student government structures, holding more referenda, conducting a high powered P. R. campaign or other gimmicks will not be sufficient to accomplish radical educational reform. Radical goals will require radical changes in organization, strategy and tactics.

Given the nature of the shortcomings of student governments, and the requirement of working for radical educational reform, I believe the only organizational form which will be sufficient to meet our purposes is unionism. A union is a collective agent to advocate and further the common interests, needs and welfare of a group of people, which is built upon the community of interest of the members of that group.

Nature of a Student Union

A student union should be a voluntary association of students funded by voluntary, individual dues from students, dependent in all respects on students and independent of all other people, agencies or forces, which so overwhelmingly speaks for students that it becomes recognized by the university as the exclusive collective bargaining agent for students on all matters affecting the students of that university as students. The primary purpose of a student union should be to accomplish a radical transformation of the educational process in the university.

Collective bargaining is an organized and civilized forum for the settlement of issues and disputes between parties which are in an adversary relationship. Agreements reached in the bargaining and negotiations between the parties are sealed in a contract which is binding on all parties. If the educational system is oppressive and students as a group are oppressed by this system, then it would seem to follow that students should

adopt an adversary relationship to the system and those responsible for governing and administering it. Collective bargaining would, therefore, appear to be an appropriate forum for the settlement of issues between students and the university.

With radical educational reform as the primary purpose of the union, the collective bargaining agreement will be the most important program provided by the union. In addition to educational reform and collective bargaining, other functions of the union could include internal university advocacy, legislative lobbying, political action, and various service programs.

The leadership of the union should be democratically elected by the members and all decisions should be made democratically. The union must develop a radical base with a capacity for prolonged resistance, dedication and endurance. The initial organizing drives will take years. While philosophy, goals, structures and strategies are being determined, there will be a need for a massive, sustained educational campaign and then a recognition drive which might require a student strike. The initial contracts will inevitably require full scale, sustained student strikes. We will never get power or meaningful changes by having the administration give them to us. No more than was the case with labor unions. We will have to take the power by offering the university a choice between no university or one which meets our goals. The only power students have now is to say "NO" - to stop or disrupt the educational system until we are satisfied with it.

The union should be entirely financed by students through dues and services program income. Before and during the organizing drive, seed money and financial subsidies will probably be needed from the student government or some other source. The voluntary nature of dues will probably be a difficult principle to live with. The rapid turn-over of students and the large number of part-time and commuter students will make it very difficult to maintain a membership base. On the other hand, since the mandatory dues which labor unions charge have probably done more to facilitate their entrenchment, removal from rank and file, and conservative policies than any other factor, it should be worth the effort and the risk.

One major initial problem will be the relationship between the student government and the student union. The student government (probably with a mandatory fee) could continue to act as the major organizer and promoter of extracurricular activities. It could also, at least initially, subsidize the operations of the student union. The union should be primarily an advocate and catalyst of change, not an administering agency. In order to prevent the creation of a top heavy bureaucracy and to insure concentration of attention and resources on radical change, the union should severely restrict the number of services and other programs it administers.

We must also be conscious at the outset that if student unions are successful, at some point they will no longer be

necessary. Once the university and the educational system and process are satisfactorily transformed, the union will have outlived its original purposes and the adversary relationship will have to be replaced by a cooperative learning community.

Potential Pitfalls in Student Unionism Movement

Despite the very short period of time in which student unionism has been given serious consideration, several problems and pitfalls have already developed which, if they go unchecked, will set back or abort the movement at this early stage.

1. Lack of patience - The natural reaction to the idea is to immediately embrace it as a panacea, and plunge forward with a lot of half-baked, ill-conceived notions which will probably set back the ultimate goals. As a point of reference, students have been talking about the idea of student unions for more than 10 years now and we're still not past the preliminary theoretical work. If the union develops and adopts a radical philosophy and a set of goals and strategies student unionization will initially unite all factions - faculty, administration, legislature and public against us. Our goals and strategies must be well thought out if we are to succeed against these adversaries.

2. Student unionization as a reaction to faculty unionization. Faculty are workers with working conditions which represent a community of interest much more tangible and easier to organize around than anything students have. Faculty unionization is simply an extension of labor unions to a new group of workers. Students as a whole are not workers and any attempt to rationalize them as being such is just plain foolish. The proper analogy between the labor union movement and the student union movement is to compare the student movement now to the labor movement 80-100 years ago.

3. Legislative approach - Several student leaders have recommended that our strategy be lobbying to get legislatures to authorize student collective bargaining and unionization. This proposal is terribly naive and unrealistic. Legislation is a reflection of existing power relationships. No legislature is going to give students anything, especially power. Power is never given away, but must be seized. Furthermore, student power is not a legal principle, it is an educational principle. It should also be noted that legislation authorizing collective bargaining by labor unions was not passed until over 30 years after labor collective bargaining was a reality.

4. Instant unionization - a romantic, adventurist method to develop student unions. It is impossible to create a meaningful student union by merely eliminating the mandatory fee, circulating pledge cards, changing the name of the local student government to local student union, or performing other wizardry.

The perfect example of how not to create a student union was the Stockton State (New Jersey) fiasco. Blessed with a

recently announced tuition increase and an impending faculty union strike, the Stockton Student Union (SSU) launched an organizing drive and got 1,100 out of 2,500 students to sign pledge cards. The organizers then realized that they needed money to finance the union's operations and decided to levy dues, whereupon membership fell to something like 50 members. Their highly proclaimed "contract" did nothing except barely maintain the status quo. It did not initiate any reforms (liberal or radical) for students, but only acted to restrict the impact on students of the faculty union contract. The student contract even bargained away the right of the SSU to participate in any way in the faculty union negotiations.

Another example of the irrational "instant union" craze occurred at the 1973 NSA Congress when uninformed delegates responded to the demagoguery of mis-informed student union zealots by passing a resolution designating NSA as the national collective bargaining agent for all students in the country (without, of course, bothering to find out what the students thought about it).

5. Confusing reactions to faculty collective bargaining with student unionization.

It is essential that we make a distinction between short-term actions to reduce and restrict the immediate impact of faculty collective bargaining and long-term actions to organize student unions. Until the day when student unions are operational (and that day is at least years away), certain actions can and should be taken to restrict faculty collective bargaining: permitting third party student observers to speak and protect student interests during negotiations, publication of the proposed contract before ratification by the two parties with public hearings held on its provisions and approval required by the university's governing board on the basis of the educational merits of the contract, and restrict the negotiable issues to exclude specific university governance issues. This final restriction could be dangerous because the very issues we would want to keep faculty collective bargaining agreements away from now are likely to be the very issues we would want student unions to deal with.

6. Basis of the student community of interest, organizing drive and of student unionism - (or how to sneak the student union in through the back door).

The question here is on what basis and on what issues the student union movement should exist. I have contended that in order to tap the basic community of interest among students it is necessary that the primary goal be radical educational reform and that all other issues or programs be secondary or complementary to this goal. A few student union activists, however, believe that the student union can be organized on the basis of peripheral issues such as tuition, financial aid and other economics (a misapplication of the labor union model) or by luring students into a political movement by offering irresistible consumer service programs (a perversion of unionism).

A disappointing example of this mistake is being made by the otherwise comprehensive and advanced Student Organizing Project at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Representatives of this Project led a workshop on student unionization at the 1974 NSA Congress in which they spoke supportively of "the back door way of getting people into the union" and that the union should try to go as far as possible toward "being everything to everybody."

Unless we resolve that developing student unions is going to be a very long and very difficult task and forget about easy, instant solutions, we might as well scrap the whole idea and go back to tinkering with student governments because, otherwise, we'll be wasting our time.

7. Blind, Unthinking (Mis-) Application of the Labor Union Model.

In addition to trying to apply labor issues (economics and working conditions) to students and the idea of mandatory (closed shop) dues, we should be ever vigilant to learn from (and not repeat) the mistakes of labor unions and other organizations and institutions.

Conclusion

The philosophy and strategy of student unionization outlined in this article is extremely ambitious and will take years to conceive and years to develop and probably decades before it succeeds in radically transforming the educational system in society. The author of this article believes, however, that this is the only way in which these goals will be accomplished, and that if, through this process, we could develop an educational system which is responsive to the needs of humanity and the planet and which also truly reflects the ideals of education, learning, and the active participation of students, it seems that it would be well worth the effort, the work, the patience and the risk.