

February 14, 2006 Senate Meeting Minutes

Meeting starts with 26 senators, 5 executive members.

1) Welcome remarks

Andrei Antonenko, GSO president, informs the senate about projects the executive committee is working on:

- Graduate student legal services: met with L. Phillips, the university legal advisor, and revised the RFP according to her advice. Got a list of 6 local lawyers and by the end of the month we will have interviews with them scheduled, with the goal to start the service on April 1st and keep it tentatively until June. The services we are requesting are a free 3-hour legal clinic every other week, where they will advise students about traffic violations, matrimonial disputes, landlord-tenant issues, maybe immigration problems. There will be no court representation. We expect it to cost about \$7-9k per year, and will put it in next year's budget if it proves to work.
- We hired a new webmaster, Richard Laffers, who will soon update and improve the GSO website, and will help us decide and buy another, easier domain for it.
- Presidential task force for campus climate: Andrei and Ari Grossman, the GSA, are in this very active and substantial committee, in the "participation and empowerment" subcommittee. If someone feels that graduate students are not properly represented somewhere in the university, they should talk to Andrei to bring it to the attention of the committee. This effort will not produce data, in the form of a report, but a direct plan for action with dates to be implemented that the university will adopt. It is a different kind of committee, one that will actually bring about actions, and it is very active, with lots of meetings and diverse members.

2) Approval of the agenda and minutes

The agenda is unanimously approved as is, the December 6 minutes are unanimously approved with the following changes in item 5(c) in Dan Woulfin's presentation:

- They will have 2 grad student interns to help with the 7-8 ongoing campaigns [...]

Instead of "... 2 new officers... "

- Interested in working to expand the Student Empowerment series to [...]

Instead of "Expand the Student Empowerment series..."

- Tomorrow there is the SB NYPIRG 25th anniversary, everybody is invited.

Instead of "... b-day party... "

3) Dean L. Martin (LM) presentation

LM gives an update on the internal audit. There were a number of invalid transactions in the past 2 fiscal years, that lead to legal action against 3 people: former GSO treasurer (2003-2005) Rong Su was arrested and pleaded guilty to the charges, and warrants have been issued for former GSO secretary Venkat Pasham (2003-2004) and another former executive who has graduated and is being sought at the moment. 3 other students that received fraudulent checks have been referred to student judiciary and disciplinary action will be taken against them, thus their identities cannot be revealed. The amount of misappropriated money is not that big, but a lot of transactions were involved, about 30. Documents were fabricated in the process, about RAP checks for non-existent conferences, funding of non-existent clubs and other similar

stuff. The university president, being the responsible for the GSO, decided to take the strictest measures for the situation and press criminal charges against the people responsible and independently inflict academic penalties on the ones that are still students. This is a very sad incidence, when people we knew and trusted messed around with other people's money. The current GSO executives brought the issue to the attention of the university, after noticing some questionable documents. In the process of investigating these fraudulent RAP checks, other issues were revealed, for example \$300 checks issued for RAP for some people, instead of the normal \$200, which the recipients kept and cashed. These recipients were referred to the student judiciary. The president and the dean would like to assure that the measures that will be taken to prevent such occurrences in the future, will leave the activity fee still easily usable and functional by the GSO, minimizing the bureaucratic interference.

Senators' questions:

- How far back in time do these findings go?

2 years, there are limits to how far back an audit can check. We will try to do this internal auditing more often from now on. This is not a threat, we just want to make sure that the graduate students' money is used for what it is for.

- The procedure for the vouchers requires that 2 executives sign them (the treasurer and another), and also FSA is supposed to check. So what is happening with the 2nd executive that signed the fraudulent vouchers and FSA's responsibility?

In most of the cases the 2nd signature was missing, wouldn't match a known one or it was ineligible. Also officers were signing one another's vouchers (not in the 2nd year). It is a general good practice that should be implemented that executives do not sign their own reimbursements.

- How much money was stolen?

About \$5k, in things like toilet paper, a Japanese restaurant on July 4th in NJ, overpriced RAP payments... These officers were not in need, they were graduate students with stipends, they just tried to "help themselves" a bit, which is sad. It was not a huge dent in the GSO budget, but shows a bad pattern.

- What will happen to these officers?

It is up to the court. They may be fined, imprisoned, deported (since they are international students) and not be able to study any more or come back to the country. Whatever it will be, it is not worth it to undermine one's position in such a way for a few thousand dollars.

- Maybe it would help if the BC looks at changed in the budget in the past 2 years, look for a policy pattern?

It is hard for the BC and even FSA to keep track of ineligible signatures on fraudulent vouchers, if all conferences claimed really exist, and all such things. But we have to think seriously of how officers get reimbursements, it is not a matter of no trust, but of functionality of the GSO. The BC should try their best to keep an eye on such things and work with the FSA to put things in order.

- What are the suggestions from the auditors?

LM has them and will pass them to the GSO for consideration. They work for the graduate school, not the GSO, so we cannot have their report directly. He will release a summary for the GSO.

- Could we get (some of) the money back?

The current students that went to the judiciary will have to give it back, but the others will most likely not. Maybe they will be ordered by the court to, but it is not in our control. LM does not have any such experience, never seen something like that in his 13 years in Stony Brook, which is a good thing that it is not common.

LM's final comment is that it is sad to give bad news, but the current executives and the university handled the situation well, and we have to move on now.

A discussion follows about how to make the news public. Maybe the GSO should issue a statement and send it to the media, since the situation will become public anyways? Anirban and Kris Baker, GSO speaker, are working on corrective strategies, maybe it would be more appropriate to make an official statement after some concrete action is taken.

4) Committee nominations

After Dan Woulfin's, History senator and chair of the Housing Committee, proposal, motion by Jeffrey Jones, Economics senator, to make the 2 non-voting members of the Housing committee, who are also SARA members, voting. Seconded by Ruchi Gupta, Chemistry senator, approved unanimously. Andrei informs the senate that we do not have a representative to the College of Arts and Sciences senate, and that it is important to get one, because the GSO does not get funds from the College. The senate meets at 3-5pm the first Monday of every month and oversees issues like the undergraduate curriculum, policies and rules (mainly involved with the undergraduates). There are no nominations, Andrei will collect any that may show up later and present them in the next meeting.

5) Budget Committee report

Anirban Dutta, GSO treasurer, presents some proposals for better financial practices:

- For any reimbursement (RAP, events, etc), only original receipts will be accepted. The only exception will be if the department or some other funding source also needs the original, in which case the recipient will have to submit to the GSO a letter stating that from this other source. Anirban is checking many of these receipts, which delays the payments a bit, but it is worth it.
- For reimbursement of an e-ticket, the recipient will have to bring the boarding pass, starting February 14.
- We received 6 bids for external auditors for next year. Some of them are much cheaper than we are paying now. We are going to interview them soon and select one with the criteria of tightest check of the RAP funds and some other technical stuff.

For the profit and loss summary, see relevant documentation. Anirban will show in addition a summary of the P'n'L, starting next senate meeting.

Funding requests, see relevant documentation:

- The Behavioral Ecology Group requests \$900 for a lecture on "Bushmeat trade, extinction dynamics in primate populations, and social foraging". Motion to approve this amount is approved unanimously.
- The Musicians' Alliance for Peace requests \$1000 for a lecture of the Music for Peace Project 2006. Motion to approve this amount is approved unanimously.
- The Graduate Chemical Society requests \$2950 for "A Magical Night for Sylvia", a benefit to raise funds for a Chemistry graduate student who had a car accident. LM will match whatever amount the GSO gives. Motion to approve this amount is approved unanimously.
- The Graduate English Society requests \$380 for their annual SBU Graduate Conference in SBU Manhattan. Motion to approve this amount is approved unanimously.
- The Stony Brook Karaoke Club requests \$700 for their annual karaoke contest. Motion to approve this amount is approved unanimously.
- The SBCSSA requests \$1710 for their Spring Festival 2006 Celebration. No specific date for the event is given because it was postponed from last Sunday because of the weather, and they still do not know the new date. Once they find out, they will let the GSO know. Since the event was originally scheduled for before the senate meeting, senators want to know how they were planning to cover the expenses. The SBCSSA representative says that there was a confusion and they did not apply for funding in the December senate meeting. To correct it they discussed options with the GSO executives and with E.Barnum for the Graduate school, tried to find funding from elsewhere and eventually they were planning to raise the funds among the members of the club. Motion to approve this amount, with the provision of flexible date and time, is approved unanimously.

- SARA requests \$400 for “Around the World in Schomburg”, a diversity event. Motion to approve this amount is approved unanimously.

There is a quorum count, 26 senators are present. Anirban reminds the senators that there is a cap in the Department Allocations line, so people should apply soon, before the funds are finished.

6) Social Concerns Committee report

Paul Fodor, GSO vice president and SCC chair, presents the report.

- The December and January editions of the Graduate are now online.
- The new GSO webmaster is Richard Laffers. We will soon have a dynamic webpage, with a discussion forum. It will not replace the yahoo group, though.
- Petition against the construction of the hotel at the main entrance of the university. Ramona Walls, Ecology and Evolution senator, presents the situation and a draft of the petition, see relevant documentation: Senators seem to be aware of these plans, but this is not the case for the general student body, as the university does not publicize them much. We have to get the word out. The decision to build this hotel is based on outdated policy, as it was originally proposed 20 years ago, and it is in general a bad idea because it will destroy a great forest and will give a bad first impression of the university to visitors.

Questions/comments from the senators:

- Who is going to sign the petition, organizations or individuals? It does not really matter, whatever the senate deems appropriate. The text can be adjusted accordingly.
- The decision was taken back in the 80s based on popular support, to address the need of cheap housing for university visitors. What has changed now to demand to change this decision? Firstly there is no guarantee that this hotel will provide cheaper rates to the university, and furthermore, the objection is not against the hotel itself, but against the proposed location.
- Before the GSO signs any petition, we have to find out what the members think. The senators will do this job, and find out what their departments think.

Andrei proposes to put up a survey to find out, or have individual people sign the petition, to avoid this process. Motion by Monicca Shanthanelson, Neuroscience senator, for the SCC to run an unbiased survey about the proposed construction of a hotel at the entrance of the campus, and then the senate will decide its actions based on its results. Second by Ruchi, motion passes unanimously.

The discussion continues: the exact proposed location should be put on the petition, which has to be modified anyways. As it is now it is not for public viewing. The alternative locations proposed were all small, wooded parking lots north of the Wang center. Ramona claims that it is a bad move to take such a big environmental decision before the environmental study is done.

7) Housing Committee report

Dan presents the report, see relevant documentation.

- The committee has created an anonymous survey to find out what is the status of the on and off campus housing. It will be released as a joint NYPIRG-housing committee report. We are waiting to hear from the webmaster and the NYPIRG people, hopefully the results will be presented at the April meeting.
- Working to expand the publicity of the committee, it is a good thing that it now has also SARA members. They are working with Richard to have a suggestion/complaint box on the website.
- Complaints: the main one in Schomburg is slow repairs. In Chapin the situation is much worse. There are bedbugs and no heat control, which brought one student to the hospital because of a cold. The committee does not have much of an idea on how to go about such huge problems, they keep collecting

complaints and ideas, maybe will put together a Chapin report. Ari proposes that they talk to the on campus housing people.

- What to do with the survey report after it is done: we can publicize it on campus and local media, give it to the administration like last year's SCC report, make it available to future students, especially the off-campus part, try to put it on the off-campus housing website. Dan will talk to Godfrey about that, it should be doable.

8) Rules and Constitution Committee report

There is a quorum count, 23 senators present. Kris presents the proposals by the RCC, see relevant documentation:

- Change the election bylaws to have online elections as a default, and the paper ones as a second option needing approval of the senate. A line was added according to the last meeting's motion, to ensure one vote per person. Motion to approve by Monicca, seconded by Rob Gersch, Genetics senator, vote: 23 for, motion passes.
- Chad Bender, the Lounge Committee chair, explains that the committee has become a too large and cumbersome group, and it is difficult to get quorum. He proposed to the RCC, and the executives have reviewed and agreed, to make the LC a fixed member number one, with 4 voting members, 7 in total. This is not to exclude anyone, just to have the people who have been around long enough and know better voting. Motion to approve by Monicca, seconded by Alton Frabetti, Art senator. Vote: for 23, motion passes.

Shawn Pottorf proposes to make the senator elections at a fixed time of the year, like the executive ones. He will bring this proposal to the RCC.

9) Lounge Committee report

Chad presents the committee report:

- Financial report. For December and January combined, \$1350 were used for subsidy, compared to \$7600 last year, great news! We also did not have any loss from last Sunday's snowstorm cancelations.
- This semester the café has very good programming, lots of events, the Sunday concert series are back, and there are also 2 big concerts.
- The LC has been working to improve the poor food service. The problem is that Godfrey is not there during the day, and the student workers, although numerous, are lost without guidance. Therefore, they hired a daytime supervisor from Chartwells that works at the café 9am-5pm, and kept only 1 student worker. Starting February 1st, there has already been vast improvement and we get bigger business every day. Although this is a more expensive arrangement, it eventually pays off because it is more efficient and will bring more customers. In addition, the time that Godfrey had to spend at the café sometimes during the day, can now be invested in organizing catering events. Lunchtime is now 12-4pm, hope to extend the food service to the evening too.
- The contract between the GSO and FSA for the lounge, requires the committee to give FSA a yearly feedback report. They are working on it, if there are any suggestions, they should be promptly brought to the LC. After submitting the report, it is confidential.
- Chad resigned from the chair of the LC, the new chair is Miranda Moore, Economics senator.

10) GSEU liaison committee report

Ilektra Christidi, GSO secretary and chair of the liaison committee, presents the latest news from the GSEU. Committee members started attending the GSEU rank-and-file meetings, in order to establish some route of communication between the GSO and GSEU that can benefit all graduate students. The highlights of the last GSEU meeting:

- Professional Development Funds are available to GSEU members (TAs and GAs) for research projects. These cover materials needed for the project, software, conference expenses, etc. The first round of applications ends today, it would be good if senators keep an eye at their departments that applications are not lost or denied for no reason, and encourage the students to apply for the second round.
- GSEU officers for Stony Brook are going to be elected (the Chief Steward, Victor Rosado) and discussed (the Business Agent, Mike Murphy) in the next GSEU meeting, scheduled for March 7. It turns out that the University Café will be closed that evening, Ilektra will communicate with the GSEU and lounge people and send out a new date and location, if needed. All GSEU members should come to this meeting and vote, it is a very good development that we will finally get some campus representatives we can work with.
- Any grievances should be forwarded to Victor (his contact information has been forwarded to the senate list), or to any of the members of the liaison committee, if students feel more comfortable to discuss with GSO people.
- There is some interest from GSEU to organize RAs. There is also a unionization campaign going on for other RF employees. Whoever is interested in this issue should come to the upcoming meeting to share their thoughts or report the climate in their department.

Shawn inquired about the availability of union membership cards to fill up. Ilektra will find some and drop them off at the GSO office, for anyone interested to pick up.

11) New business

NYPIRG updates: Scott Zotto presents the past/ongoing NYPIRG events:

- Homeless and Hungry: Jam If You Can, a benefit concert to benefit the homeless, at the University Cafe Friday, March 31 at 9pm.
- Higher Education Lobby Day: NYPIRG's day in Albany speaking one on one with our state legislators about the cost of higher education. It is scheduled for Monday, March 6 all day.
- Small Claims Court Action Center: They continue to receive phone calls daily from the community seeking procedural advice on how to file a small claim.
- Smart Moves, Your Rights, Your Lease, Your Deposit: NYPIRG's second workshop in its Student Empowerment Series. They will inform students about the ins and outs of living off campus. What to look for, what to ask, what to do to protect yourself. Scheduled for Thursday, March 16 at 7pm in SAC 308.
- Off Campus Housing Survey: Working with the GSO Housing Committee, hope to gauge the off campus housing climate for Stony Brook students. This is still in the works and they are hoping to release the results of this survey in April.

A motion to adjourn is made and passed by unanimous consent. The meeting adjourns.