Student Societies Summit

Meeting #1 – October 7, 2013, Governing Council Chambers

Attendance:

Faculty Summit Members: Prof. Joe Desloges (Chair), Prof. Donald Ainslie, Prof. Linda White, Prof. Graham White

Student Participants: Yolen Bollo-Kamara (UTSU), Anges So (UTSU), Raymond Noronha (UTMSU), Melissa Theodore (UTMSU), Dylan Chavin Smith (ASSU), Mauricio Curbelo (EngSoc), Thomas Santerre (EngSoc), Mary Stefanidis (ICSS), Ryan Lamers (ICSS), Kim Blakely (MedSoc), David Bastien (MedSoc), Ashkan Azimi (NCSC), Craig Maniscalco (NCSC), Anthony O'Brien (PHEUA), Alex Zappone (SMCSU), Brendan Stevens (SLS), Peter Flynn (SLS), Benjamin Crase (TCM), Maha Naqi (TCM), Ryan Phillips (UCLit), Jelena Savic (VUSAC), Zack Medow (VUSAC), Rhys Smith (WCSA), Michael Amiraslani (WCSA)

Administration: Prof. Jill Matus (Vice Provost, Students) Prof. Mark McGowan, David Newman

Regrets: Prof. Brian Langille, Shawn Xiao Tian (ASSU), Jessica Leung (FMUA), Craig Cuizon (PHEUA), Teresa Maida (STU), Nishi Kumar (UCLit)

Welcome:

Prof. Desloges welcomed all the student participants and thanked them for the important work they do to enhance student experiences at the University. The value of all the perspectives at the table was highlighted as key to this process; participants were asked to ensure that they are brief and succinct with their comments to ensure that all views are shared. Participants were also reminded to submit their UTORids to vp.students@utoronto.ca to ensure that they can be added to the Portal group, where submissions and notes will shared.

Personal Introductions:

All student participants were invited to introduce themselves, including information about the student society that they represent and the program of study that they are enrolled in. The faculty summit members and representatives from the administration were then invited to introduce themselves and their role in the Summit.

Role of Faculty at the Summit

The faculty summit members are here for their practical and theoretical perspectives on governance and democratic practices. As such, they will be acting

solely as individual academics and not representatives of specific divisional units, administration, or governance. This allows them to express comments based solely on their own personal perspective and academic expertise.

Mandate/Outcomes of the Summit

The Chair provided an overview of the recent history of events that lead to Governing Council requesting that the Provost undertake a process to review issues pertaining to student societies - particularly those associated with the University of Toronto Students' Union (UTSU) so that the Student Commons project can proceed through governance. Participants were reminded of the mandate of the Summit, which is to see how distinct interests of diverse student societies can be supported and respected in a democratic manner.

Eight outcomes of the Summit were identified:

- To obtain a clear understanding of the role of student societies:,
- To develop clear principles around student government;
- To understand what constitutes reform amongst student governments;
- To identify where there is consensus and where there is not;
- To examine what it might take to deal with non-consensus items;
- To develop a framework of resolution on the agreed set of principles;
- When consensus cannot be reached, to develop alternative approaches; and
- To report on what has been resolved and what issues remain outstanding to Governing Council

The expected process to accomplish these outcomes is to allow for open and collegial dialogue. Feedback from all participants will be used to frame key questions in an effort to achieve agreement.

Student Societies: Principles and Roles

Prof. Donald Ainslie provided an overview on this topic, noting that students benefit from co-curricular engagement, play an important role in governance, and that they have common interests that require advocacy on many levels. It was also identified that students pay mandatory fees to their respective student societies and that even if students do not benefit directly from these fees, there should be indirect benefits. The following questions were posed to participants to initiate the discussion on this topic:

- What justifies students paying for the work you do?
- What are the right principles to use on how student societies should divide their level of service and opportunities?

- What are the benefits provided through services and opportunities that are beneficial to all students?

The following key points were raised during discussion:

- Concerns over some divisional student societies benefiting from the UTSU more than others (e.g., UTMSU has a seat on UTSU Executive, etc.)
- There is general disagreement on what constitutes fair, open, and democratic principles and reasonable processes
- Concerns were highlighted over the fee transfer from UTSU to UTMSU; UTMSU committed to investigate how these amounts were determined
- UTSU, and all other student societies, collect their fees based on student referenda; which are often the result of identifying gaps and undertaking commissions to better understand general student need
- Divisional student societies are better situated to contribute to a sense of community, identity, and school spirit
- Indirect benefits of student societies include advocacy and institutional reputation

Democratic Processes: Principles

Prof. Graham White provided an overview on this topic and explained that this is a complex process and though its outcome will never be perfect, it still is worth doing. To determine whether a student society is operating in a democratic way it should have free and fair elections that are accepted and acknowledged by the vast majority, while balancing minority rights; they should have fair and reasonable processes and be constructed legitimately; and when considering reform, there should be widespread buy-in that the process and the outcomes are fair.

The following key points were raised in the discussion:

- Student societies that held referenda last Spring to divert fees from the UTSU identified that they did so after repeated requests to the UTSU to make change
    - o NOTE: Prof. Graham White clarified the difference between a referendum and a plebiscite, noting that plebiscites are not legally binding. As a result, the votes regarding fee diversion in Spring 2013 can be considered as plebiscites even though their respective constitutions might only articulate referenda.
- Student leaders are transitory in nature; decisions can have longstanding impacts; outcomes should be agile to respond to change over time
    - o It was noted by some participants that UTSU has full-time staff and is not impacted by the transitory nature of students and further suggest that their mission is driven by their staff and their external affiliations

- Elections currently have very low voter turnout, which raised questions about legitimacy
- Electoral reform was considered possible through concepts like non-partisan declaration, etc.
- Some participants stated that there is enough dissatisfaction that the current system is not legitimate; others asked UTSU to indicate what had been accomplished on reform
- All student societies are bound by their current by-laws and constitutions
- A need for strong process was identified to ensure there is consistency
- A need for better communication was noted
- Some participants noted a general dissatisfaction with the UTSU elections processes

Orders of Governance: Principles

Prof. Linda White introduced this final item that will be used to start the dialogue in the next meeting(s), focusing on institutions and governance. The analogy of games can be used to consider rationalist institutions: games have complex rules, but they can be altered based on various factors. In games, when rules don't match expectations, the questions raised result in either resolution or disbandment. The objective in the Summit is to "keep playing" and see how this is possible.

The following questions were posed for discussion at upcoming meetings:

- What if we started with a fresh slate, what would it look like? What would the ideal structure of democratic governance be?
- What aspects of the current structure work well?
- What would you like to see changed?

Discussion Items for the Next Meeting of the Summit

The Chair repeated the questions posed by Prof. Linda White, noting that they will begin the process of the Summit. Participants were thanked for their dedication to the process and for sharing their perspectives.

Prof. Jill Matus reminded participants to submit their UTORids to vp.students@utoronto.ca to be added to the Portal. Written submissions provided for the Summit will be posted to the Portal, along with all other materials including summary notes.

Meeting adjourned at 5:01pm