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# Student Voice

December 5, 1997

Volume 1, Issue 1

## How Can We Improve Our Community?

In an effort to answer this question, a group of fifteen students organized a forum addressing the extent of student input in decision making at PC. To do this we formed a panel consisting of people we considered part of the decision making process at our college. These people were - Dr. Thomas King (Vice President of Faculty Senate), Father Stuart McPhail (Vice President of Student Services), Dr. Thomas Canavan (Dean of Students), (President Congress), Moitoso Al-turn-out mately 50 important issues in the course of discussion. At the forefront of these issues was the role of Student Congress and its ability

"The Office of the President has the final say in what is done."

represent the student body efficiently. Serving as the most influential student organization on campus, some students present did not feel that their opinions were in-line with those of Congress. Besides student voice, faculty voice was examined as to its effects on decisions of the college, along with the accessibility of the board of trustees as the body responsible for the college's budget. In the end, the source most influential in deciding what directly affects the life of students seemed to be the Office of the President. Although the student body and faculty are allowed an opinion in how policy should be framed, the Office of the President has the final say in what is done.

This conclusion should not be viewed as final. We the students constitute the economic and social backbone of our community - there's no reason why we should not have a clear voice in how this community is governed.

## Who Governs Whom?

At a time when discontent in our governing bodies is the prevailing attitude of the American public, many critics of modern democracy have called for more localized spaces for participatory politics to take place. Colleges and universities provide public space necessary for fostering citizenship, which may be the key to revitalizing our faith and practice in self-government. Providence College, in its mission statement, claims to provide an education that does this: "Providence College prepares its student to be responsible and productive citizens to serve in their own society and the greater world community." Seemingly, this implies that we, as students, are being prepared to participate in the institutions that govern our lives. If this were true, wouldn't it mean participating in the decisions that effect everyday life on campus? Based on

our research with students, some of the decisions being made for them include course offerings and time placements, dorm policies, office locations, food options, library and computer lab operations, and even activities chosen by their peers. If student interests aren't fairly represented at an elementary decision making level, then what is the hope of their input being considered in more significant decisions that affect their lives? Students have reported that there is no hope, specifically in matters of racial and class population on campus, tuition, employment, faculty and staff hiring, resource allocation, and structures of governance.

Reports have shown that shared governance of the college has decreased. Some have noted a quixotic fear of secularization and loss of

## Student Poll Results Explained

A student poll that surveyed over 200 students received some very interesting results in regards to student opinion and student involvement. Most students felt that student voice was very important to the students but the administration did share in this feeling of this importance. Also many students seemed willing to participate but lacked the time needed for effective participation.

In one of the poll questions over 50% of the students who responded felt that student opinion did not matter at all to the College when important decisions are being made. This is a very disturbing result. Students should not feel that their voices do not matter, they should feel that they are an integral part of the College.

According to the results of a survey conducted at PC last year, students are more content here on average than other students nation wide. This is a rather misleading statistic because students

can be satisfied with their school on a whole and answer so in the survey, but still have many issues they are concerned with. This can clearly be seen in the responses to our surveys. Students have real problems with security, diversity, the curriculum, and violence. These issues may have different ends but the means are still very much the same, a need for student voice in the correction of these problems.

There is a great feeling of apathy and much of this has to do with the feeling that the administration does not make decisions based on student opinion. Because of this students have adopted the "I don't care" attitude. With many students having this attitude it is much easier for the administration to ignore requests of the few and let the apathy of the many rule. We, as students, make up the majority of the campus and should have more of a voice than we do. We need to utilize our collective voice and gain a say in the governance of the College.

## Who Governs Whom?, cont.

control over the college as reasons for this shift in power. Most notably has been the two-tiered system of governance, created on June 30, 1992, which eliminated faculty, student and alumni representation. This structure worked to ensure a Dominican majority on the Corporation level, and more control of important decisions placed in the hands of the President and his cabinet. The authority was demonstrated last Spring when the president vetoed the faculty Senate's revision of the college curriculum, which was passed by a majority of senators. This blatant exercise of power demonstrates that the authority of the school flows from one place, overhead. At a college which claims to prepare its students to be responsible and productive citizens, students, and in some cases faculty, have been given less responsibility for the

governance of their lives. If we, as a college, are truly concerned with our students ability to govern, we must reexamine our methods of subjugation, and seek to empower.

I'm sure that this news won't surprise those who have felt powerless in making decisions that affect their lives. The fact is, Americans have come to accept this as democracy. That is exactly why we must create structures at our local level which return government to the people. Undoubtedly, a restructuring of our governing body to include equal representation will be difficult, but as Dorothy Day has told us "It is not that Christianity was tried and found wanting. It was found difficult, and thus not tried." Let us hope that we don't have to make the same claim about self-government.

## Student Governments at Other Schools Explored

Student government in theory should play somewhat of an important role in the governance of the College. Student legislators are very devoted to their work. Two local institutions reward their student government with compensation.

At Stonehill College in Massachusetts, the president of the student government receives \$2500 annually while the rest of the executive board receives between \$1500-\$2000. Students sit on 10

voting boards of the College and are currently working on issues such as HIV testing and campus condom distribution.

At URI, the president is paid \$2500 as well. They recently have had a decline in power and now play an advisory role to administration, similar to the role of Student Congress here.

Student officials have an important role. They have a difficult job and deserve compensation.