

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF GENERAL STUDIES
GENERAL STUDIES STUDENT COUNCIL



GSSC meeting minutes – 7:30pm, April 26 2005 – Satow Room, 5th Floor Lerner

Ariel Beery: We will have a short meeting leaving room for transitioning. We will start by introducing ourselves. I am Ariel, the Student Body President, and I hope to see the next council make GS a better place.

Mariana Astakhova: I am the VP Finance. I will be VP Finance next year too. I hope to learn from my mistakes this year, and make next year's event cheaper.

Omri Chaimovitz: I am the Student Services Rep. I will not be on council next year, but involved. This position is about advocacy and getting others involved. You need to constantly be on top of people advocating GS issues.

Kasia Brathewaite: I am the Parent's Liaison this year and the next. My job is to have the parents feel part of the community, and to have a place for these kids too.

Josh Niehaus: I am the 1st year Class President, and will be the Junior Class President. Hope to do more next year. To be more effective.

Matan Ariel: outgoing Senator working on grievance procedures, university diplomas, and housing issues.

Paige Lampkin: I will be the 1st Year Class President, and hope to make GS more visible.

David Friedlander: I am the incoming VP Student Life. I hope to make student life spectacular and joyful.

Abbey Dubin: outgoing Sophomore Class President.

Akiva Zablocki: outgoing Junior Class President, incoming Senior Class President. I have learned that the best thing is to prepare in advance for the full year.

Jean-Michel Tijerina: incoming Senior Class VP. Hope to do a good job with graduation events.

Claudia Barrera: outgoing senior president. I am graduating. Advice - start the year as a team!

Jessica Negron Zappoli: I am the COI rep. I will stay involved on council.

Scott Stewart: congratulations to Chris for winning the Senate race. I will be involved some other way. [applause].

Erica Jackson: I was this year's New Media Chair. Redesigned the website, created the

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discussion boards.

Amy Shadden Broadway: I am here to see what is available on council. I am the chicken.

Shuky Ehrenberg: I am the outgoing ESC Liaison. Next year I will be involved in some way.

Tyson VandenAkker: Incoming Delegate at-Large.

Gil Schwartz: incoming Liaison from List College Student Council.

Jeremy Varda: here to get involved.

Jason Dixon: incoming VP Communications. Want to get involved, and have a degree in journalism. We will continue to build on Erica's fine work with the website.

Chris Riano: This year I did a bit of anything in an unofficial capacity. I will be the Senator these next 2 years.

Gabriella Theisen: incoming Sophomore Class President.

Danielle Klein: incoming Social Chair. I want to increase number of people who come to events.

Rachel House: Sophomore Class VP.

Gabrielle Breen: Academic and COI.

Pavan Surapaneni: outgoing VP external. Next year I will have a life. Advice - when the e-board says there is no money, they are lying.

Stephen Davis: incoming Student Body President. We have a lot of work, but we have a great team.

Ariel Beery: I propose a toast for a smooth transition. May we find a new life for GS.

Pavan Surapaneni: Thursday will be the Backyard event. We need volunteers from 4-8pm. Stephen will collect the volunteers. We need as much help as possible. GS students might not be able to drink alcohol during the event.

Ariel Beery: Old Business. Housing:

Matan Ariel: housing – email went out to council, presents a brief summary (8 pages of

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student responses about housing). Asks for questions. In no questions, would like a vote from council to publish report.

Ariel Beery calls for a vote, Josh Niehaus seconds. 7/0/2

Matan Ariel: Grievance procedure -- brief overview, focusing in lack of student representation. Presents a letter to VP Dirks. The letter requests a meeting on the subject.

Omri motions to approve, 7/0/1, motion passed, subject to minor editorial changes by Abbey.

Ariel: Challenges. Controversy. The GSSC deserves dedication. We are not like the other councils. We are not graduates. We have JTS. We had a good year. On almost every week we had at least one event. On some we had 3. We did an amazing job. GS is in the Spec. The website is a place to go to. Parents were being taken care of. We had regular work. The formal was great. The Sunday Brunches was a regular event. Next year's challenges: 1) community. We don't really know what this community is and what it could be. We need to ask the right questions, and to as many people as possible. We don't have a bubble like CC. We are kind of like an ad-hoc experience. There is no committeemen. There is so much out there.

2) governance. Will GSers influence the university? Will undergraduates have a say in what happens on campus? We are not a club. It is a democratic body that can push issues it sees as important. Believe in what you believe, and say what you feel. We should have debate. We should have governance.

We can do both things.

Don't fear to confront an administrator. Administration can wait-out students.

Shortcomings. I did not get to know all of council personally. I did not meet with all the administration. Invite the administration to dinner.

Not a good structure. We should have had more discussion at council, not at committees.

I had no clue what a president is supposed to do. I spent too much time learning the job.

Council members need to have a good transition.¹

Mariana: we should start to think about the budget as our personal money. Students pay a lot, and every penny counts. When we allocate, we should keep in mind the students who paid. Treat the funds more personally. Plan accordingly, and be efficient. I should communicate more what goes on with ABC.

We should follow our guidelines. We should not do things in the last moment.

Omri: I would like to point out the great things that other council members did. It is really important that we work as a team. We should also get together outside of council meetings. We should not be gentle. The institution does not move quickly. Pass the progress along to others after you. Communicate more with others. Have a "top 10" list for the council to work as a group.

Shortcoming: I should have "harassed" the administration more. Just show up at the door

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and make a meeting. Get involved with the Policy Committee.

Josh: Most of my reflections lead to shortcoming. I did not do things as much as I could. I did not know how to get the job done. But you should just jump right into it, and ask for help from those who know. People should plan on being closer outside of council meetings. Don't have 40 40s events.

Matan: Summer time is a good time to start working on initiatives. Don't wait till fall, because you will be busy once the semester begins. Guide Book should help you a bit. Outgoing members still need to submit their entries. Talk to Dominic – he has the knowledge and the institutional memory to tell you where to go and how to get things done the right way. Plan ahead. Work with others- from council and from other councils. The best way to get others to help you is by helping them! Learn from the past. Each year the council does a lot. Don't try to invent the wheel, but rely on past experience.

Abbey: use the other (and past) council members as a support system. Don't try to work on your own. Use the resources of the city. We all live diverse lives, we are everywhere. Try to go outside of the campus. You will feel that you could have done more. But keep in mind that you are doing a good job.

Akiva: I will send my comments via e-mail.

Claudia: good luck to all new members. It is a good experience if you don't get frustrated, and don't fall behind the barriers.

Jean-Michel: integrate with the other student councils. There are great opportunities out there.

Akiva: we have good relations with the other incoming Senior Class Presidents. Show them that we can be cool.

Erica: I did not know what I was getting into. And I am very happy to have had this experience. I should have been more persistent in getting to administrators.

Shuky: advice - do small things; they really count. A lot of small things will make a difference. Don't forget about your beliefs just because someone tells you something is not possible. Don't be discouraged by the short period of our time. We might not enjoy the fruits of our labor.

Chris Riano: I believe I got an e-mail "we have open positions" and I did not get the position, but I still wanted to be involved. You have to have this attitude. Accept what your position is, but work to make it what you want it to be. We are the only ones who know what goes on in life. Don't shy away from your life experience.

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Stephen: I would like to encourage all people who do not have an official position to stay around, and to get involved. We even create positions. We accomplished a lot, and we have large shoes to fill. Lean from the previous council how to get things done.

Ariel: outgoing council - we have a few more events, and a funding allocation. New members, you can get involved now too. We opened up council to non-voting members. Thank you for coming tonight.

Omri: there will be another faces-of-gs event.

Akiva: I also need help for an event.

Meeting adjourned at 21:00
Minutes taken by Matan Ariel

ⁱ Here is the full text of the farewell address:

Presidential Farewell Address – GSSC 2004-2004

Today, I would like to start a tradition of farewell addresses, whereby outgoing council members do not simply dissolve into the background, but rather leave to future generations a reflection of their thoughts on the way the year was carried out, and their vision for improvement for the future. The following, therefore, will not be a puff piece. I think that Council was blessed with a number of successes over this past year, and each person and activity deserves its due—and I certainly will give it here also. But what I believe we can learn from even more are the shortcomings we each have due to the simple fact that we, whether we like it or not, are humans, and even worse than that—we're students, with jobs and commitments who in most cases overload ourselves and are simply unable to give everything we might have wished to give were we to have more

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time and energy. In recognizing that, I would like to point out my own shortcomings as president of the GSSC and as an observer of the student community at Columbia in general in the hope that my successors will be able to plan their limited time and energy accordingly.

This past year has put the GSSC to a test not faced by many other councils to my knowledge: how to operate during times of controversy on campus when the president of the Council himself is elemental and inextricably linked to that controversy. As the president in question, I have to say that it was not an easy year. That the controversy only really heated up at the end of the Fall Semester created a dynamic whereby the Fall Semester, as opposed to previous years, was much more packed and well run than the Spring semester. A number of other factors fed into this: our social chair, Liz Hollister, who did an absolutely amazing job in the first semester and on the formal, had to step down from her post at the beginning of the Spring semester. Our VP Internal, Stephen Davis, also stepped down from his post, greatly reducing his responsibilities and leaving a lot to be wanted from the administrative side of running Council—especially in light of the great job he did in the first semester coordinating activities and ordering Council meetings. I, as president, did not act quick enough to fill these positions, hoping that Council members would be able to distribute the responsibilities amongst themselves. Once it became clear that such distribution would not happen, the delay led to the perpetuation of the problems caused by their absence, and Council—in my opinion—was unable to rise to the level set in the previous semester. I take full responsibility for the

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resulting dip in Council activity which, although might have matched previous years, was not up to the potential shown to exist by the first semester.

That is not to say that individual members did not do amazing jobs. By the beginning of the second semester, Erica Jackson, who I brought on to take up the New Media Chair position I had created at the beginning of the year, was able to bring on-line an amazing new website—thereby proving the need for a VP Communications and creating a platform for future expansion of non-time-bound communication services; Kasia Brathewaite continued to reach out to the parents-who-are-students community with creative functions as our newly created Parents Liaison, another position I am glad to see has been adopted in the new constitution this Council is leaving to future officers; Matan Ariel has done an amazing job for the entire Columbia community by leading the charge in the student affairs committee of the Senate for fuller integration of students into community decisions; Akiva Zablocki has persisted in showing how active and resourceful class presidents can be, and Josh Niehaus's ethnic meal series brought the different flavors of the GS community to the GS community's sometimes forgotten members; Katia Gaika and Shuky Ehrenberg have proven to me that Liaisons could serve a positive purpose for Council, and make me hope that the new Delegate-at-Large positions will include the taking up of some of their responsibilities; Chris Riano has shown proven that the policy I set at the beginning of the year regarding the inclusion of non-officers in responsibility bearing positions could work with the right people involved, and allow those who might not have entered Council previously to gain experience. The list goes on—from the dedicated and always helpful Josephine Johnson-



Andres, to the periodic Teas put on by Alissa Gafford; from the policy initiatives undertaken by Pavan Surapaneni to the drive towards transparency undertaken by Marianna Astakhova to the upgrading of end of the year senior events by Claudia Barrera. The work undertaken by Abbey Dubin, Omri Chaimovitz, Isak De Portalis, and Jessica Negron-Zoppoli was no less appreciated.

But, as I said at the opening of my remarks, in my opinion, Council had and has much more to strive for. To develop to better address the potential of council I will separate the issues into the two I think are central to our mission, and will address each separately before giving a short critique of my own behavior as Council president.

First I'd like to take on the issue of "community." We have yet to have a distinct vision of what the GS community, at its ideal, could be. I hoped that such a vision would be massaged out by monthly town-hall meetings. But it was not, and much of that due to the incorrect focuses of our town-hall meetings. They simply did not ask the right questions. The question of what our ideal community would look like is the key to tailoring the services Council could provide in the next year. What experiences should a GS student undergo before graduation? What is the GS experience? These questions and many more should be at the top of Council's agenda in the coming year, and should be addressed as early and as deeply as possible by as many people from as many different backgrounds as possible.

If you were to ask me, the main problem with the GS experience as it now stands is that there is no bubble. The normal college experience includes within it an all encompassing bubble, immersing the student in a world completely separate from the

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outside world, where intellectual and cultural stimulation is not confined to the classroom, but rather a way of being. GS, on the other hand, seems to me to be more of an Ad Hoc collection of classes and events, with little sense of commitment or regularity. That is why I tried to institute Weekly emails, subject lining them with the same subject, and why I was so happy that the Mona Hang-Outs were carried out in the first semester. Such a sense of regularity gives the student the stability she might need to integrate into the community in the best way possible. But this was not enough—with my own limited knowledge of the social life at Columbia, and my numerous commitments, I was unable to actively seek out what was going-on on campus and share that with the rest of the student body—underscoring the need for both a VP student life to go out and make connections with the many different service providers at the University and the VP communications to compose and distribute emails, and also integrate way of creating a personal interface with the GS site.

The sad fact is that I, as a graduate, will be leaving GS without having experienced much of the Columbia experience. My eyes were only recently opened to the numerous plays and concerts put on by various student groups at the school by friends I have made in Columbia College—not by the outreach of Council, or the work of my office. And while some say that students should be free to integrate themselves as they deem fit, and would find these aspects of the community with or without our help, I disagree. Not living in dorms is a serious impediment to the communication of the opportunities GS provides, and Council should help students overcome that obstacle by becoming their connection to the greater community—whether that be by simply sending



them info or connecting them personally to students in the other schools through innovative programming. A minor way I have tried to do this is by integrating non-Council events into emails, and yet that was done passively, and I regret not doing more outreach myself. Thus, outreach and communication, I believe are two central tenants that should be focused on when thinking about strategies of improving the way council builds campus community, and I hope the officers coming in take these two roles seriously.

The second issue I would like to address is “governance.” Specifically, what concerns me is whether GS students—and undergraduates in general—are able to influence the running of the University and thereby ensure that University-wide decisions affecting students have student input. There will be those who say that ‘this issue is too political’, and that ‘since there may be many different perspectives on the issue it would be better for Council simply not to get involved.’ After a year of trying to separate the personal politics I have been embroiled in from the job I was to do as president, I strongly reject these notions.

The GSSC is no mere club providing social opportunity to its members; it is a democratic body with checks and balances that are built to provide its members all the freedom they need to voice their own opinions and push for those issues they feel are most important. If a president or any other officer is overstepping their bounds in the eyes of Council, tools such as impeachment and censure exist—and council should not be afraid to use them, just like Council members should not be afraid to use their positions to advocate for the causes they feel affect the way they execute their positions. To use the

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example called to mind by the current controversy, as student body president my role is to represent the interest of the students of the School of General Studies in the fashion I believe to be true, whether there is opposition to that interest by other segments of the population or not. If the rest of council disagrees with me, that should be debated and discussed. If enough of council disagrees with me, Council can set policy that binds me or any other officer, and if I or any other officer would overstep those bounds, removal from office is always a possibility. The point of this is not to call on members to take views that some may call extreme, but to tell that that if there are times where controversy is sweeping the University, they must not be shy: jump in. It is Council's duty to become a forum for political discussion and debate, and to then take serious action to pressure other segments of the population to take the interests of the students of the School of General Studies into account. Activities may be outsourced through co-sponsorship; political action is a responsibility we should not shake.

In order to get to the point where Council can in fact improve the way students of the School of General Studies are treated by the bureaucracy of Columbia, Council needs to find a way to better integrate itself into the policy making framework of the University. To do so necessitates serious ties with administrators on one hand, but also the courage to go head-to-head with the administration on the other hand. If not, administrators will avail of the time-honored strategy of waiting out the complaints, with full knowledge that students quickly tend to be discouraged—and even if they do not, they graduate. We can't let them wait us out. Council should ensure that the students it represents, paying tens of thousands of dollars a year, do not have to passively accept the good graces of

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administration, and have recourse if other power-bearing members of the University community do them wrong and impinge in their ability to fully participate in University life. If council will not take up that responsibility, no one will, and Columbia as a whole will be worse off for letting problems fester.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about my shortcomings as president. First, I did not spend enough time getting to know each and every member of Council. I simply did not reach out enough. This is true also in regards to administrators in the School. This was not for lack of wanting—coffee with every member of council was a goal of mine at the beginning of the year, and I failed in that regard. I hope that, for the future, presidents will communicate to council set times they will be available, and encourage officers to reach out to them as well. A council with good relations is a good council—and, despite the fact that we held our first weekend retreat and mid-year mini-retreat in years, our relations were not as tight as they should have been. This is especially true of the executive board, and I hope more investment will be made into making the e-board a more harmonious and productive unit in the future.

Second, I did not structure council meetings well. In trying to drive towards specialization, I feel Council lost much of the energy and cross-pollination that existed in earlier years. The renewed format of round-robin at the beginning of the meeting, bringing in all members and emphasizing the need for their participation, I think is critical to keeping the channels of communication open.

Third, I came on as president without a clue as to the real responsibilities of the president. Sure, I read the constitution, but the actual day-to-day running of the GSSC



was unknown, and much of my year I spent trying to learn the ropes. I hope that the entry I plan on contribution to the Guide Book initiated by Matan, and these reflections, will be able to help the next president, Stephen Davis, land on his feet and get Council running as soon as possible. In order to run a good year, it seems to me, work needs to begin in the summer, and be finalized before the middle of the Fall semester. Thus, it is crucial that the hand-off between the incoming officers and the outgoing come as early as possible, so that each and every officer of the GSSC be comfortable in their responsibilities once the Fall semester starts. That means that elections should be even earlier next year, and allow time for candidates to shadow those they will replace to help them learn as much about the position as possible.

To conclude, despite my shortcomings as president and the obstacles we faced as a team, I think council had a productive and even revolutionary academic year. New positions and new responsibilities have opened up new horizons for future councils. The two new vice presidential positions of Student Life and Communications will ensure that the very important responsibilities of community building through outreach and bridge-building will be taken as seriously as the officers in those positions take them. I hope that the next year will bring much more public involvement of Council, that together Council will become more than a sum of its parts, and that next years officers will be able to decide together on what the ideal GS experience should be and what can be done to make that ideal a reality.