Point-Counterpoint: Grad Ball Low-Income Subsidy

At our most recent general meeting on February 25, 2008, Student Senate passed a resolution authorizing a subsidy for Graduation Ball tickets purchased by students about to enter low-income jobs (see text of resolution and meeting minutes containing debate summary at http://www.columbia.edu/cu/law/senate/meetings/022508/). Some members of the student body have expressed discontent with the new policy, but from two very different perspectives.

Not Enough
by Adam Pulver ’08

Students who choose to devote themselves to careers in the public interest face many obstacles. Public interest jobs are harder to get, and pay on average less than one-third of those in biglaw. But more disrespectful than the salary differential is the attitude of our peers who harbor ill-will and resentment to programs aimed at reducing the enormously disparate burden that faces students working in the not-for-profit and public sectors.

As a 3L student committed to pursuing public interest work after and promoting public interest work at Columbia, I was excited to see the Senate take the real salary differential of graduating students into account in this year’s Graduation Ball ticketing. I enjoyed being part of the Columbia Law School community, and would love to be able to share a final classy evening soiree with my friends and colleagues. But $100 represents approximately 1/10 of my pre-tax weekly salary. When you add in the numerous other costs that graduation and the summer will bring (e.g., BarBri, rent, food), with no advance or firm meals coming down the road, what could easily turn out to be a $200 night in a week and month of other parties and celebrations would be fiscally irresponsible.

The amount of money the Senate is committing to this “public interest subsidy” is minimal—probably comparable to the cost of surplus pizza over a month period. If anything, in setting eligibility based solely on a salary of $50,000 or less, this policy will affect very few of the graduating 3Ls who actually are pursuing public interest work. Each year, only 2.5% of Columbia graduates enter legal services or non-profit careers, and another 1.5% enter government.1 Even if all of these students made under $50,000, and applied for the “public interest subsidy,” the maximum possible $2,000 allocation to the “public interest subsidy” would exceed the full cost of the tickets for the 14 eligible students.

Public interest work encompasses a variety of different kinds of work. As such, no program at Columbia Law School has ever before limited eligibility to participate in a program based solely on income. Government careers typically have a starting salary of between $50,000 and $60,000. The Department of Justice’s base salary ranges from $46,974 to $61,068.3 The New York City Department of Law Office Program has a starting salary of $57,358.4 Moreover, many traditional public interest jobs pay more than $50,000 as a starting salary. The ACLU, for example, pays a salary in the “high 50s” to starting attorneys. Other fellowships that attract Columbia graduates have similarly “high” salaries.

The point of Grad Ball is to celebrate what has brought students together over the past 3 years, and will continue to do so. Any policy with a minimal budget impact that helps this become a reality should be embraced, not used as a wedge to divide our class more than the absurd market has already done. The animosity expressed to this minimal subsidy only seeks to drive students interested in public interest even farther from the CSL community, and that would be a grave injustice.

Too Much
by Senator Jason Lear ’09

Sixteen other student senators and I recently either voted against or abstained on a resolution to pay for Graduation Ball tickets for law students who are clerking or working in public interest.

Though the resolution passed, a great many of us thought it was a bad idea. Of course, behind the idea of the resolution was only great intentions. Public interest lawyers ensure the legal system can function, defend our civil liberties, stand up for individual rights and protect the many people who can’t afford to spend thousands of dollars on lawyers. The many of us headed toward megafirms ought to keep in mind that we are billing in a few hours what public interest advocates are paid in a week.

However, there are strong reasons not to drain the meager student activity fund in this case. To drain a thousand or more dollars into a meaningless subsidy for a tiny group of public interest attendees means over six speaker-oriented lunch events won’t happen, or events that do happen will be funded at perhaps significantly less than they otherwise could be. That money could be used to send people to represent us at national conferences, to pay for coffee at the school at night for all students or a lot of other things that benefit the entire community.

Second, this subsidy, while costly to us all, doesn’t do much to make Grad Ball cheaper. By taking the money denied to student groups and giving it over to 20 or 30 people, each will save a whopping $50-$75 a ticket. On a night when the expenses for formal wear, beauty treatments, transportation, after-parties, etc. often soar to anywhere from $500 to $1,000 per couple, this spending—which could otherwise potentially benefit everyone—results in a 5-10% discount to a pricey dance for a small group. For the majority of public interest students (who won’t be in attendance), I’m sure some would support using all of this money for a $50-off coupon to the dance. But I bet a lot of them would prefer the money go into making PILF stronger, funding for public interest summer jobs or toward other things that make a real difference. Like the recent Bush economic stimulus package, this is an ill-advised feel-good measure we can’t afford.

Finally, a public interest-oriented job does not clearly indicate financial need. Financial aid is a private and individualized process because, especially at a place like Columbia, people come from vastly different circumstances. The students here range from those born in poverty to royalty. A lot of people heading for corporate jobs are doing it for a few years to pay off massive undergraduate, grad school and law school debt. Many people who are clerking next year can expect the opportunity to receive a massive bonus upon entering the private sector. And plenty of public interest lawyers are lucky enough not to have to worry about $100,000 or more of personal educational debt. It’s the job of the Senate to cater to everyone and not to disburse student funds as income supplements.

Feel strongly about something? The CLS Black Letter welcomes your views. To submit a piece, please email us at senate@law.columbia.edu.

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1 http://www.mlitewwwchicagostate.org

2 Editor’s note: If only 14 students were eligible for the subsidy, the allocation would be set at $700.


4 http://www.aclu.org/jobs/careers/31321res20070816.html


6 http://www.nalplawschoolsonline.org

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Please be kind and double-side your printouts!
Your 2007-2008 Student Senate

Please contact us with questions or concerns! We are working hard to represent you.

E-mail us at senate@law.columbia.edu, and visit us at http://www.columbia.edu/cu/law/senate/.

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Senate Business

The full Student Senate typically meets every other Monday at 9:10 PM in JGH 105. Meetings are generally open to the entire student body. Our next meeting will take place this Monday, March 10, 2008.

Agenda for March 10, 2008, Senate Meeting

I. Roll Call
II. Student Services Visit
III. Officer Reports
   a. President
   b. VP
   c. Treasurer
   d. Secretary
   e. Parliamentarian
IV. Committee Reports
   a. Graduation
   b. Housing
   c. IT
   d. University Senate
   e. Faculty Committees
V. Recognition request
VI. Ad Hoc Request: SHN Caravan
VII. Student involvement in faculty hiring discussion
VIII. Announcements
IX. Adjourn
Get to Know Your CLS

Spotlight on Juliana Utley

Juliana Utley, the newest addition to the Student Services team, is Scheduling Coordinator.

Q. How long have you been at CLS? Do you live in the neighborhood?
A. I started at CLS in January but have lived and worked in Morningside Heights for almost three years.

Q. What brought you to Columbia?
A. I finished an Ed.M. in Music Education/Administration at Teachers College last December and had been working as an Administrator for TC’s Continuing Education Department. I missed working directly with students, but wanted to stay at Columbia. Transitioning to Student Services seemed like a natural way for me to continue working with wonderful people and doing something I love.

Q. About what do students generally come to speak with you?
A. Most students actually email me. Among other things, I am the person who answers the room reservation email requests. I hope the longer I am here the more people will feel free to stop by Student Services, say hi, get some help planning an event, or just to meet the face that goes with the email.

Q. What has been your favorite job, aside from your current one?
A. I loved teaching Middle School band in Oregon.

Q. What is your favorite restaurant in the area?
A. I go to Mama Mexico just for the guacamole.

Q. Name something most people don’t know about you?
A. I have played the bassoon since I was 12, but decided to learn to play French Horn three years ago when I married into a family of brass players.

Q. What is one thing every CLS student should do before they graduate?
A. Find a favorite park and run, walk, or just sit there regularly.
This Week at CLS
March 10 – March 17, 2008

Monday
- Student Services: Clerkship Tips from the Honorable Judges Kenneth Karas (SDNY) & Debra Livingston (2nd Circuit) and their clerks. 12:15 - 1:10 PM; JG 106. Lunch.
- ACS: Author Talk, “The Guantánamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in America’s Illegal Prison.” 4:00 - 6:00 PM; JG 107.
- Student Senate: General Meeting. 9:10 PM; JG 105.

Tuesday
- CLWA: Preparing for Oral Arguments. 12:10 - 1:00 PM; JG 106.
- Koleinu: “Reflections on Immigrants and Immigration in Jewish Law.” 12:10 - 1:00 PM; JG 807.
- Amnesty International: James Dawes, “That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity.” 12:20 - 1:00 PM; JG 104.
- FedSoc: Judge Richard Posner. 12:20 - 1:00 PM; JG 102
- Telecommunications Law Speaker: Walt Mossberg. 1:10 PM; JG 101.
- Financial Aid/CPIL: “The Nuts and Bolts of LRAP.” 5:00 - 6:15 PM; JG 104.
- KCLMA: “Breaking Up is Hard to Do: Issues of Museum Deaccessioning.” 6:00 PM; JG 103.
- MESO: Film Festival - focus on culture and communication: Babel. 6.30 PM; location tba.

Wednesday
- FedSoc/CardClub: Hurricane Katrina Relief Poker Tournament. 7:00 - 9:00 PM, Lenfest Café.
- Devinimus: “In Vino Veritas - Travel Italy in Wines.” 8:00 - 10:00 PM, JG 104. RSVP to devininus@gmail.com by Tuesday at 10 AM.

Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday
- Have a great spring break, everyone!

Event information is taken from the Advisor, a Student Services e-publication. To have your event listed, follow the link below and submit the on-line form. These must be submitted by 10am on Thursday, the week BEFORE your event. http://www.law.columbia.edu/current_student/studentorgs_abc/studentorgevent/eventform.