

Minutes

GSO Business Meeting

April 1, 2015

Eggers 010

5:30 pm

- I. Call to Order
- II. Roll Call
 - a. The sign in sheet was accepted as roll call.
- III. Confirmation of Minutes
 - a. The minutes from the March 3 meeting were approved without change.
- IV. Executive Reports
 - a. President's Report
 - i. Officer Elections
 1. Elections will be held during the Senate meeting scheduled for April 22nd. Officers will be elected to fill four GSO board positions, 5 senate seats, and 3 senator at large seats. Those interested should get in touch with members of the board.
 - ii. Academic Strategic Plan
 1. A shorter version of the Academic Strategic Plan, which is part of the Fast Forward initiative, will be released on Thursday April 2nd. There will be an open period for comments online from April 2nd to April 10th. The Senate was urged to read the document and provide their feedback. The final report will be released during the summer as it is still being written.
 - iii. Health Insurance Requirement Changes
 1. The University is rolling out a new health insurance requirement over the next two years. In the fall of 2015, all incoming full-time students, full-time international students, and fellows will be required to have health insurance. During the fall of 2016, all matriculated students will be required to have health insurance.
 2. The University will provide a health insurance plan through Aetna Student Health starting at \$1,890 a year. Students who are already insured can opt to not participate in this plan. All of those students who do not have insurance or who have an insurance that is not ACA-compliant will be automatically enrolled in this plan.
 3. Additionally, all TA/RA/GAs who use employee health plans will be moved to student plans by fall 2016.
 4. Through prior research, Patrick found that the plan that will be offered by the University will provide benefits similar to "gold" level plans at a much lower price, even after taking into account

tax credits that a student might be eligible for. The University recognizes that there will be an increase in costs for students and mentioned that they are willing to explore ways to alleviate that cost differential. However, at the moment there is nothing concrete.

5. Patrick quickly mentioned some of the issues and concerns that had already been brought to him. Some students that have had Aetna plans in the past mentioned that this company did not provide a good service for them. Students have no way of knowing what the actual benefits of these plans will be since the terms are still being negotiated. While the default cost is \$1,890 per person, a person with a spouse and children could end up paying up to \$5,000. For the vast majority of TA/RA/GAs this new plan would mean they would have to pay almost \$2,000 up front at the end of summer, which is not very realistic for most of them. Finally, students want to know how this plan compares to the one they currently have.
6. Next, Patrick mentioned that the purpose of discussions during this meeting should be to decide what the GSO's position should be on this issue. He also mentioned that while we need to act swiftly, we have time to make changes since these requirements will not come into effect until 2016.
7. A person in attendance asked Patrick how the University has been handling this issue and how sure he was that these changes would actually come into effect. He responded that he was told that the University will require every student to have health insurance right before spring break. After spring break he was told that TA/RA/GAs would be moved from employee plan to student plans. He brought the issue to student affairs but noted there has not been a lot of movement there. This morning he personally spoke with University officials who are close to this matter and they mentioned they would be open to having discussions about the University's plans. Patrick noted that these officials seemed nervous about the possible reactions some students may have towards these changes. Because of this, Patrick was very confident that through quick action we will be able to obtain the changes we want.
8. Another attendee asked Patrick whether he knew the reasons behind the school moving towards these changes. Patrick said he did not know, but speculated that it could be due to the IRS not being happy about TA/RA/GAs being designated as employees when the IRS considers them to be students. Patrick speculated that moving fellows out of employee contracts might have triggered this response from the IRS. However, a person in attendance mentioned that fellows are still required to sign contracts forbidding them from seeking employment elsewhere.

9. A student asked if a subsidy will be coming from Aetna. Patrick said he did not know anything about that.
10. Another student asked whether students who have Medicaid would be required to purchase an insurance plan provided by the University. Patrick mentioned that any insurance plan, as long as it is ACA-compliant, would be enough to satisfy the insurance requirement.
11. A person in attendance asked how the undergraduate students feel about this new requirement. Patrick mentioned that since the vast majority of undergraduate students are still covered under their parent's plan, this issue is not of too much concern to them. Only 2,000 undergraduate students would be affected by these changes due to lack of insurance or being underinsured.
12. Another issue that was brought up is that international students need to have an insurance plan that covers very specific costs. This new initiative would require them to have insurance plans through U.S. based companies. Otherwise, those students would be required to enroll under the University plan. A student asked whether or not this new University plan would cover all the costs that international students need and Patrick mentioned that officials are working on a plan that will cover those requirements.
13. It was mentioned that it is important to remember that there is a significant portion of the graduate student population who are only students and who will not be affected by these new requirements. In fact, for those students this new University insurance plan would be another price competitive option.
14. An attendee mentioned that he had read online an Aetna coverage plan in which it said that Aetna does not cover service animal costs or transgender needs. The current employee plan does cover does charges.
15. The University insurance plan will not include a dental or a vision plan. The University will direct people interested in dental insurance to other companies. There is no plan for vision coverage.
16. An attendee who has had Aetna student coverage in the past explained that his experience with Aetna had been horrific. Aetna pushed students to visit campus physicians and campus pharmacies over other physicians and pharmacies by imposing high out-of-pocket costs for off-campus doctors and pharmacies. Patrick mentioned that he had been told that the University will not approve a plan that pushed students towards campus physicians over other doctors.

This person also made sure to explain to the rest of the Senate why this issue was important to him. As a person with disabilities he needed a good insurance plan in order to live a normal life. Any reduction in benefits would decrease his standard of living.

17. Someone asked whether pregnancy related expenses would be covered under this new plan and Patrick said that he did not know and did not have any details on that.
18. A student asked to know what the current University plans are and what is it trying to achieve by implementing this requirement. Patrick mentioned that the only things he knew that had already been decided were the price tag of \$1,890 and that the benefits will ultimately be comparable to a “gold level” plan offered in the insurance exchanges. He also mentioned that it is important to compare those benefits to the ones provided by other Universities in their insurance plans.
19. A student mentioned the University recommends international students to purchase an HTH plan at about \$1,200. Patrick noted that HTH plans are not ACA-compliant and under these new changes the University will push international students towards the new University plan.
20. Another student asked if University officials had signed anything yet and if there was a contract in place. Patrick remarked that details are still being negotiated and the University intends to sign a contract within the next two weeks.
21. Patrick mentioned that there was a brief discussion to have departments individually give money to students in order to alleviate the difference in prices between the current and proposed plans. However, doing that would be illegal.
22. Attendees grew more concerned as the meeting went on. Several students asked how is it possible for the University to be close to signing a contract that would impact all students to some degree and not provide any information on what the possible benefits/drawbacks would be. Patrick mentioned that has asked this several times and has always been told that they are working on it.
23. It was also mentioned that the fact that the Plan Design and Premium Cost table provided to us mentions coinsurance and copay costs is suspicious. One student mentioned that it seemed to her that Aetna is only concerned with getting more money out of the students.
24. An international student voiced his concerns regarding the price hike. He spoke on the \$700 price differential between plans. He mentioned that other Universities are increasing their premiums by much smaller amounts and some are either decreasing them.
25. Patrick summarized all of the things that had been brought up so far. The main issues that concern students are the price differential, the benefits provided, and copays.
26. The Senate started to debate how the GSO should proceed and how we should confront this issue.

27. It was mentioned that these changes would happen within months for international students and something needs to be done very quickly.
28. The idea of hiring an insurance attorney was brought up. It was also mentioned that this would be difficult to do within a week. The board agreed to reach out to student legal services first and see if they could help us find a lawyer. Patrick agreed that this would be an appropriate course of action.
29. A student wanted to ask how the insurance premiums will be charged and whether the cost could be split between two semesters. Patrick mentioned that is something the University has discussed. The Aetna plan would be for 12 months. It was argued that there should also be a plan that covers only the summer months for students that only take summer classes.
30. A student commented that if the prices for these new plans are already set, there is not much the GSO can realistically expect to accomplish. Patrick said that a discussion towards changing this or even requesting for alternatives for international students might delay this plan for another year.
31. At this point, the majority of the students that have spoken have agreed to push the University to stop the move of TA/RA/GAs away from employment plans.
32. An attendee mentioned that there is one good thing about the proposed insurance plan. TA/RA/GAs who have to take a medical leave of absence will not lose their insurance like they would with the current employee plan. This happens due to IRS regulations and students losing their employment status.
33. A student brought attention to something that has been happening at the iSchool. He informed the Senate that students who work with professors have been renamed Faculty Assistants, as opposed to Teaching Assistants. There is concern that this might have been done to get around some rules and exploit students.
34. Several students expressed their discontent with the University for not contacting students prior to making these decisions. They felt that there has been a lack of transparency and communication, seemingly to purposely keep students out of this discussion. Patrick mentioned that this has been in the works for two years and that during that time the University made to effort no contact students and ask for input.
35. Most attendees agreed that the GSO's strategy moving forward should focus primarily on making this process more transparent and on finding ways to protect the interests of international students. They also agreed that there is a pattern in this University of keeping students out of important conversations.
36. There was also concern about the precedent that this sets other issues in the University.

37. The suggestions that were coming from this discussion were the following:
 - a. Hire an insurance attorney.
 - b. Create an ad hoc committee that will protect student interests in this matter by working with the University on a solution to this issue.
 - c. Write a censure letter to the University highlighting the lack of transparency in this process. This censure letter will also call for the University to make public any insurance contract they plan to sign and push for more transparency.
 - d. Look into the possibility of creating a graduate student union. To some students this seemed the most appropriate strategy as it would provide a long term solution to similar issues.
 - e. Keep TA/RA/GAs under employee insurance plans.
 - f. Address the issue of FAs previously discussed.
38. The debate moved towards a discussion of whether or not it would be appropriate to form a graduate student union to protect the interests of those students that are also being employed by the University.
39. It was argued several times that unionizing would be the best long term strategy. The unionization issue was explored at length. The Senate was also made aware that there have been and still are groups that have been working towards unionization. One attendee who has been involved in those efforts mentioned that if the GSO decided to move in that direction it would not be doing so without support from those groups.
40. An attendee cautioned the Senate to think about the implications that unionizing might have for students that are not employed by the University since they are the majority of the graduate student body.
41. Some students believed that the discussion was losing its focus. They argued that while the idea of unionizing might be worth exploring, there were other issues at hand that needed immediate attention, such as international students facing these changes in a few months.
42. Patrick proposed we discuss the issue of unionization on a special meeting which would be held one week from today on April 8th. After today's meeting Patrick would reach out to the graduate student body let them know of the Senate's discussions on unionization and ask them for their input and feedback.
43. Voting on contacting graduate students regarding unionization and to hold a meeting next week where that issue will be discussed.
 - a. 22 in favor, 0 opposed, 3 abstentions. Motion passes.
44. The Senate will now discuss the censure letter that is to be written to the University by the GSO.

45. Motion on the floor: write a censure letter condemning the University for lack of transparency, lack of student involvement, and ask to see the new health insurance contract and a comprehensive list of benefits and costs. The letter will also mention that TA/RA/GAs should continue to be under employee plans and discuss the price increases in premiums students will experience.
 - a. Voting on the motion
 - i. 21 in favor, 0 opposed, 1 abstention. Motion passes.
46. Now the issue being discussed is the creation of an ad hoc committee which will work with the GSO and University administrators. They will perform research, meet with University officials, and come up with recommendations for the GSO. This committee would exist through the summer months.
47. There was concern that this committee would operate for a long period of time and we have issues that need to be resolved soon.
48. There was confusion as to how exactly this committee would operate, the amount of oversight that there would be, the issues they would cover, and whether or not they would partner with other working groups and committees.
49. Patrick proposed that he would like to take a few days to craft a proposal that would specify the duties, purpose, and scope of this new committee. This formal definition would be presented to the Senate at the special meeting on April 8th. Patrick and Sam urged those members of the Senate who would like be part of this new committee to speak to them after today's meeting or to send them an email expressing their interest.
50. Patrick moved to allocate \$5,000 to pay for the costs of hiring an insurance attorney in pursuit of the goals previously outlined.
 - a. The Senate unanimously agreed. Motion passes.
51. Finally, Patrick asked whether or not the Senate would be interested in having University officials at the next meeting to discuss some of the concerns students have.
52. Some were interested in the idea while others completely disagreed with this proposal.
 - a. Move to question, seconded.
 - i. 17 in favor, 0 opposed, 0 abstentions.
 - b. Vote to invite University officials to next Senate meeting.
 - i. 8 in favor, 9 opposed, 0 abstentions. Motion fails.
53. The idea of inviting undergraduate students and members of the Student Association to the next Senate meeting was put forward by Patrick and all attendees seemed to agree.

- b. Comptroller's report:
 - i. Recommendations of the Finance Committee
 1. Fund SUPRA for \$750.

- a. This group had asked for \$750 to be spent on an end-of-year thank you banquet for their volunteers. 50 people participate in this volunteering program.
 - b. Motion to vote:
 - i. 14 in favor, 1 opposed, and 2 abstentions. Motion passes.
 - 2. Recommend to fund the Travel Grant Committee for \$4,000.
 - a. The committee has on average spent \$8,000 per deadline. Since there is one more deadline, they would like to ask for \$4,000 more to be added to their budget so that they can keep funding travel at the same rate.
 - b. There were concerns as to why there were more applications being approved. Is it that people just got better at applying and writing down what the committee wants to see? The committee representative answered that while there is that danger, applications are always carefully examined.
 - c. Another student asked how the committee reached that number. That was simply done by looking at how much has been spent in the past.
 - d. Vote on calling the question and ending debate
 - i. 17 in favor, 1 opposed.
 - e. Vote on the motion.
 - i. 18 in favor, 2 opposed. Motion passes.
- c. Internal Vice President's Report:
 - i. Legislative Action days - NAGPS
 - 1. Sam communicated to the Senate that through this event, he was able to visit and speak with two representatives, one from Syracuse and another from Albany. The issues discussed were the following:
 - a. F1 visa regulation – push for people to be able to renew these visas inside the U.S.
 - b. Increase funding for graduate research.
 - c. Have open access to more federal resources.
 - d. Graduate student debt.
 - 2. Sam mentioned that he believed these conversations were very productive.
- d. External Vice President's Report:
 - i. On Friday, April 3rd at the Inn Complete there will be a wine tasting event with wine from local vineyards. The event will be from 8:00 pm to 10:30 pm.
 - ii. On Friday, April 10th at the Inn Complete there will be a Casino Night event. There will be games of roulette, blackjack, and poker. There will also be a wine tasting and several prizes.
 - iii. On April 26th, the Spring Picnic will take place.

V. New Business

- a. Resolution 15.16 – Calling Upon Syracuse University to Divest from Fossil Fuel Companies
 - i. Stop any new investments in fossil fuel companies
 - ii. Ensure that within five years none of its directly held or commingled assets include holdings in fossil fuel companies.
 - iii. The University will find ways to invest in more socially responsible companies that are currently working towards sustainability and renewable energy.
 - iv. The University will release bi-annual reports detailing the progress it is making in divesting from such industries.
 - v. An attendee asked what would be the real benefit from such actions, since companies are highly unlikely to be hurt by these actions. In response, it was mentioned that this is more of a political statement.
 - vi. Vote to call the question
 1. 16 in favor, 0 opposed, 2 abstentions.
 - vii. Vote on the resolution
 1. 13 in favor, 0 opposed, 3 abstentions. Motion passes.
- b. Resolution 15.17 – Resolution to Place a Limit on Prior Research Grant Payments
 - i. Individuals awarded Research Grants during the GSO Research Grant pilot program will have to submit any reimbursement forms before April 15th, 2015.
 - ii. After that date, all unclaimed funds will be returned to the GSO general funds.
 - iii. Vote on the resolution
 1. 15 in favor, 0 opposed, 1 abstention. Motion passes.

VI. Remarks for the Record

VII. Announcements

- a. Next meeting will be held on Wednesday, April 8th. This will be a special meeting to discuss unionization and the ad hoc committee that will work on insurance requirements and plans.
- b. Next regular meeting will be held on Wednesday, April 22nd. Elections will be held during this meeting.

VIII. Adjournment