

The Graduate Student Advocate

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MAYBE THEY WROTE YOU A LETTER

41% of students enrolled at the Graduate School received a notice from the Registrar at the end of August, noting that by GSUC guidelines, their "academic progress" was "unsatisfactory." Failure to comply with standards would bar the student from registration for the spring semester. (See Sept. *Advocate* p. 1).

Also in August, about 200 financial aid students received an additional letter from the Financial Aid Office informing them that their awards would not be processed for the fall semester for the same reason. Students expecting their first checks in September were told that they could not be placed on payroll until they met the criteria for good academic standing. Unlike the text of the larger mailing, this letter did not provide a semester to address the problem.

Financial aid recipients, when blocked, face extremely cumbersome procedures to re-classify their status. Students must first meet with their executive officers to clarify the problem. In cases where no problem existed, an executive officer's signature is still required on a Financial Aid form. Dean of Student Affairs Floyd Moreland must then approve the restoration of satisfactory progress before the form is forwarded to Financial Aid. Every two weeks, *Financial Aid submits names to payroll. Getting on payroll is a separate process requiring several more weeks.*

Many cases involved computer error or out-of-date information. Nevertheless, financial aid payments were delayed by several weeks.

Short-term loans are available for financial aid students. While the normal funding source for these loans has been depleted due to unusually high demand, additional funds are available and the usual \$250 limit has been suspended temporarily. Matthew Schoengood, Director of Financial Aid, attributes the high demand to the double impact of the budget cuts and the recession. Adjuncts and student staff have been cut on a number of campuses.

Schoengood said that students receiving financial aid have always received these letters and that delays in payroll and loan processing are inevitable because many students, faculty, and executive officers were away in August. He also said that many of these cases have been resolved. This year, delays in loan check processing were exacerbated by the CUNY-wide tuition hike, which was not finally determined until the summer. Student loan eligibility is determined in part by tuition costs.

The unsigned letter noting unsatisfactory progress that was sent to 1619 students began: "I am writing to you at this time to alert you to the fact that the executive officer of your program has been notified that as of July 24, 1991

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The Facts & Fictions: USS Spending Allegations

The storm of controversy surrounding how and on what the USS spent its budget remains to be answered, despite that charges of fiscal irresponsibility were levied against the University Student Senate September 23, stemming from an article that appeared in the *Student Leader*. The bare facts as presented in the daily newspapers were that a fiscal budget of \$424,000 had been nearly used up with a third of the year remaining, upon expenditures including hotel bills and car services. Initial statements made by the central administration of CUNY suggested there was no appearance of violations in USS's spending, only allegations of overspending; though an audit conducted by CUNY's Office of Internal Audit, released October 2, found that \$85,653 of the \$419,000 spent may have violated university spending guidelines.

This audit states the majority of expenditures were permissible within university guidelines. University guidelines, according to the audit, refer to the necessary documentation for all expenditures, per-diem limits for reimbursement of transportation, travel and food expenses, and injunctions against money being spent for what the Board has declared to be impermissible uses of student fees, they do not make judgements, "as to the

worth and wisdom of any expenditures." Purchases of over \$500 must follow competitive bidding requirements; while the audit found that 25 such purchases, totalling \$37,946, were not in compliance. The \$9,000 that was deemed impermissible included \$4,500 for illegal loans made to USS officers and \$4,500 for the legal defense of 5 students. Requests for payment of \$23,419 were submitted without complete justifications, descriptions and explanations, and include items such as car rentals, beepers, walkie talkies, out-of-country travel and printing.

The day after the allegations were made public, Marcia Keiz, the Vice-Chancellor for Student Affairs, declared her office was going to apply state guidelines for approved expenditures to the USS. These guidelines refer to allowable travel, transportation and meal expenditures. According to Rita Rodin of the CUNY Office of Public Information, the USS was not bound by state spending guidelines for elected officials, prior to this declaration, but rather by the regulations of the Fiscal handbook for the Control and Accountability of Student Activity Fees. State guidelines make explicit that commuting between residence and workplace is not an allowable travel expense.

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Reynolds Redux: There She Goes Again

At the most recent CUNY Board of Trustee meeting on September 25, Chancellor Reynolds proposed two senior level appointments without conducting affirmative action searches, as revealed by ex-officio Trustee Dr. Robert Picken, the chair of the University Faculty Senate. Dr. Picken protested that the University Report concerning both appointees, Brenda Spatt and Ronald Berkman, states "Affirmative Action report on file" when there were no such affirmative action reports in the actual files for these appointments. Chancellor Reynolds' decision to permanently appoint Dean Berkman explicitly contradicted her statement of intent at a Trustee meeting one year ago that Berkman's appointment was temporary, said Picken.

Dr. Picken directly asked the Chancellor why there had been no affirmative action searches when the University Faculty Senate has repeatedly gone on record stating that senior level administrative appointments should be conducted in the same fashion as faculty appointments that require affirmative action searches. He also added, that as public documents, the University and Chancellor's Reports should accurately state the facts and should not contain misleading implications that affirmative action searches had been made when they had not been.

Chancellor Reynolds responded to Picken that "they are saving a position" by asking Dr. Spatt to add to her existing workload by appointing her to a new position. She had no explanation for why she supported Berkman's appointment to a \$63,900 per year position, other than to state he has assumed a "tremendous load" of work over the past year with the College Preparedness Initiative, a program which has been sponsored by Reynolds herself.

Reynolds then turned over the matter of the potentially misleading phrase, "Affirmative Action report on file," to Vice-Chancellor Bloom. Bloom said that statement can mean

either that there is an Affirmative Action report on file, or instead, that there is "a request and approval of a waiver of the search procedure, which can occur in certain situations." Vice-Chancellor Bloom did not say whether such a waiver had been sought, who may request a waiver, who can approve such a waiver, or what those "certain situations" might be.

Referring to Ronald Berkman's new position, Dr. Picken expressed his long standing disapproval of the large number of such appointments Reynolds has made during her year's tenure as Chancellor. He then read from the minutes of the September 24, 1990 Board of Trustee meeting, where Chancellor Reynolds unambiguously stated that Dean Berkman's temporary position as Acting Assistant for the Dean of Urban Affairs would cease as soon as Dr. Brown, the Dean of Urban Affairs, returned from her temporary position as acting President of Baruch. Dr. Brown has since returned from Baruch and Dr. Picken complained that Berkman's appointment is now being extended rather than dismissed. The Chancellor made no attempt to explain her apparently contradictory behavior, and James Murphy, Chairperson of the board, moved that the public meeting be adjourned and the issue be taken up in executive session.

When the Board emerged from the private session two hours later, Brenda Spatt had been hired as Associate Dean for Executive Search and Evaluation at \$76,226 per year, and Ronald Berkman had been hired as Acting Assistant Dean of Urban Affairs for \$63,902.

The permanent appointment of Ronald Berkman to a lucrative senior level position despite Chancellor Reynolds' previous assurances to the contrary raises serious questions about her accountability and are reminiscent of the controversy surrounding her resignation as Chancellor of the California State University system.

In May of 1990 Ann Reynolds resigned from her position as Chancellor of the CSU system because of controversy that she used her executive control to give herself a pay raise from \$136,248 to \$195,00 and also raised the

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Get a Letter?

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you were not meeting the Graduate School's minimum standards of academic progress, which have been published for many years in the official Bulletin and the Student Handbook." The Doctoral Students Council has already mandated its Steering Committee to draft an open letter to the administration questioning the advisability of issuing these letters. That open letter is printed on page 3 in this issue.

Most students interviewed felt the letter was presumptuous, often inaccurate, and condescending. Rolf Meyersohn, Sociology's Acting Executive Officer, told the *Advocate* he thought the letter was "brutal" and arrogant. The computer search used to generate letters was not supported by a manual screening for error or delays in recording compliance. Meyersohn said that last semester the Sociology department had worked out arrangements with those students who had not made satisfactory progress; those students got letters anyway. Although some executive officers favored the initiative, Meyersohn noted that others felt the letters foster an adversarial relationship between students and administrators.

In November, departments will receive another set of forms. These will be used to determine Spring registration eligibility for students whose cases remain unresolved. Dean Moreland says he will be looking for evidence of progress towards meeting the formal standards.

In a meeting with executive officers, Dean Moreland stated the letters were primarily intended to facilitate greater contact and communication between students and faculty. He noted that a number of letters erroneously went to students who had fulfilled the requirements. Most of these cases had been resolved. He told the *Advocate* that students having problems settling the issue of satisfactory progress can make an appointment with him directly. He expects far fewer letters to be issued next semester because of computer coding improvements and "student progress".

In past years, says Dean Moreland, he was likely to take executive officer signatures as reason enough to approve student standing. This year he is more concerned that meetings actually take place between students, their faculty advisors, and their executive officers. In reviewing some cases, he has asked for more information from the department before approving student status. He says the process is meant to apply enough pressure on students without making them feel threatened; most people receiving warning letters do not present real problems. He is primarily concerned about low GPAs.

Federal law requires that all academic institutions which receive Federal funds establish minimum standards for progress. Dean Moreland stated that Federal officials have not audited the GSUC's compliance for several years.

Still, due to a rumor which circulated last summer, many in the GSUC community think that a State of New York audit of the Graduate Center prompted the August letters. Indeed, according to Moreland, New York State officials notified the Graduate Center that financial aid recipients alone could not be singled out for compliance with academic progress standards. Therefore, a computer search of all student records was initiated. Dean Moreland said that one reason the decision was

made to issue the letters *en masse* was to leave a "paper trail." Any future audits would find that the administration had been diligent in holding students to GSUC guidelines.

The federal government provides guidelines for the implementation of these rules, though the institution concerned retains some autonomy in creating specific expectations. Standards of progress differ from school to school, as do the positions of those who determine "good standing."

In the case of the Graduate School, standards were determined in the mid-'80s by the Executive Council of Presidents. Minimum academic standards at the Graduate School are: a 3.0 GPA; 1st doctoral exam prior to 45 credits of coursework; no more than two outstanding incompletes; meeting all degree requirements within eight years (or in seven if entering with a Masters). Students are expected to comply with the criteria, but executive officers together with the Dean of Student Affairs have final say on whether the student is making satisfactory progress. Financial Aid students have always been closely monitored. This year the recent encoding of all student records enabled the Administration to track academic progress for many more students, generating 3956 searches.

The status of "unsatisfactory progress," in many cases reflects unrecorded grades and individual extenuating circumstances which had already been addressed between students and executive officers.

Changes have been planned, however, in the process of evaluating academic standing. Last year, the Graduate Council, comprised of students, faculty, and administrative appointees, voted to make a change in by-laws. The role that the Office of Student Affairs now plays will be transferred to an academic review panel of faculty, which will minimize Dean Moreland's future involvement in this process. This change is pending approval of President Horowitz and the Board of Trustees. Also, in future semesters, the departments will determine individually whether the executive officers or faculty advisors should evaluate satisfactory academic progress and then send appeals to the new committee for approval.

Perception about the impact and appropriateness of the letters differs drastically between those involved in preparation and those who were the recipients. Faculty advisors have been generally overlooked as contributors to the decision on a student's standing and aid eligibility. Students do not often perceive the initiative as one that is meant to foster greater mentoring from faculty members, but rather as an aggravation which may be slightly ameliorated by an executive officer's intervention against "the computer."

The initiative raises other questions. Are formal standards intended as a guide for faculty assessment of minimum progress? Have these standards become inflexible rules instead? Why have these standards not been adjusted for part-time enrollment, nonacademic responsibilities, differences between programs, and CUNY's inability to support its graduate students financially in the manner of highly-endowed private institutions?

Pamela Donovan is a doctoral student in Sociology awaiting her first financial aid check.

Editorial:

A Call For Action

Many of students at the Graduate School will find that their lives are radically changed, due to the Administration's issuance of the notorious "letter". During November, a further batch of letters will be sent out to check up on those students who received the previous letter, to see if they've cleaned up their situation. As the DSC Steering Committee notes in their open letter, printed herein, no single administrator will take responsibility for the letter. We are part of a community where decisions are, finally, impersonal, and the function of a bureaucracy.

In an interview with The Advocate, Dean Floyd Moreland outlined the process whereby a student is removed from the blacklist of those who are not in compliance with "standards of progress." The student must first meet with his or her Executive Officer and explain why he or she is "not in compliance" (hence "not in good standing"). The Executive Officer may then make arrangements with the student to ensure that he or she hands in papers to complete classwork. The EO then sends a letter (which, students should note, must have the right "language") to Dean Moreland, who then notifies the registrar to allow the student to register in good standing, and thus be eligible for loans, stipends and other financial aid. The Executive Officer also has the power to dismiss the students explanations, and either allow the student to register "not in good standing", or deny registration altogether.

The Advocate has learned that there are considerable differences in the treatment of students who have the same number of incompletes. One Executive Officer merely required a brief conference with the student in question, while another first asked the student not to register, then presented the student with an "agreement" which stipulated that the student must reduce her number of "incompletes" to the (permissible) two before she would be placed in "good standing". This agreement

requires that the student not only hand in the papers, but that the professors concerned also hand in grades.

In the same interview The Advocate asked Dean Moreland if the August letter was valid although it was unsigned. He answered that, "the letter is still in effect, like any dunning letter." When Moreland then referred to the aforementioned Executive Officer's "agreement", as a "contract", it finally became clear that our administration treats us like clients, more specifically, like delinquent credit card clients. We sign "agreements" and "contracts", and are "dunned" when we do not pay up on time. The corporate pretensions of the Graduate School, where department heads are, after all, Executive Officers, and have been fully incorporated into administrative practice.

Students should not be deceived and believe that this letter is the work of one person, for it must finally be enforced by a system. And this system is comprised of our professors, our executive officers, our deans, our provosts, and finally our president. The Advocate has demonstrated that even if the orders came from Washington, it is up to the Graduate School to decide how the orders are enforced. Punishment has already been meted out to students who were denied registration, or are "not in good standing" and so ineligible for financial aid necessary to pay for rent, tuition, money for meals, books, etc.

Still, we can fight back, and since our administration refuses to treat us equitably as individuals we should respond collectively. Students should refuse to sign contracts, to cut inequitable individual deals, and should insist on their right to due process. One equitable standard for all. In conjunction with the Doctoral Students Council and our various student organizations, we should begin to organize now, to form an ad-hoc committee to negotiate, and pursue constitutionally guaranteed actions. We can't afford to wait until November. ☒

BOARD OF TRUSTEES ANNUAL BROOKLYN BOROUGH HEARING

THURSDAY OCTOBER 24

5-8 P.M.

Brooklyn Borough Hall
Court Room
209 Joraleman Street
Brooklyn, NY 11201

Persons wishing to speak should notify the Office of the Secretary of the Board of Trustees, (212) 794-5379 by 4 pm on October 18. Speakers are limited to 3 minutes. Written statements are recommended and may be of any length.