

## **Student-Administration Relations: Lessons from a Small Liberal Arts and Sciences University**

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Small universities have a special appeal. Closer relationships in the classroom and the emphasis on undergraduate education, for example, are traits that often attract students and faculty to less traditional, smaller campuses. These schools tend to prioritize classroom learning over research output, and they appear to have a strongly defined campus culture that is more cohesive and less cliquish.

Quest University Canada, a Liberal Arts and Sciences university in Squamish, British Columbia, fits this mold. Our students, faculty, and administrators are closely acquainted and often work side-by-side on projects and committees. But this, in turn, gives rise to a specific set of challenges. We tend to have high expectations about the products of our collaborations. In our experience, from two different sides, we have learned some valuable lessons about student-administration relations.

As a professor and Interim Chief Academic Officer, James had to balance students' desire for a more just and inclusive campus with faculty academic freedom—as well as translate student-led momentum for campus change into the slower-moving procedures of university governance. As a student and the president of

the Students Representative Council (SRC), Marcela had to adjust to the administration's timelines and learn how to work with inconsistent, “hyperdemocratic,” and, at times, contradictory input from her constituents.

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Over the past several years, Quest has experienced what seems to be a trend in North American universities: students are becoming increasingly confident in identifying injustice on and off campus, and in vocalizing their critiques about them. For example, in the spring of 2017, nearly one hundred and fifty Quest students and alumni (a significant portion on a campus of about seven hundred) signed a public letter urging the Academic Council, Chief Academic Officer (CAO, who was James, at the time), and administration as a whole, for greater diversity in faculty, better support for international students, and more inclusion of indigenous epistemologies. To justify their appeal, the letter highlighted issues of oppression, the importance of diversity in education, and made some suggestions for improvement.

The Academic Council, CAO, and administration were receptive to the document which, along with other factors, contributed to tangible results, including Quest's first search for a scholar in indigenous studies, and a commitment to diversity and inclusivity training for Quest faculty and staff. In this instance, the university as a whole benefited because vocal students identified an issue and communicated their needs to the administration.

However, as on other North American university campuses, student activism and faculty and administration responses have sometimes led to an atmosphere of heightened tension at Quest. Compared to the U.S., academic speech in Canada has not been quite so heavily politicized. Still, the Canadian political right often claims that universities are hostile to conservative opinions, and multiple incidents relating to academic freedom at Canadian universities have received significant media attention.

For example, in the fall of 2017, Lindsay Shepherd, a graduate teaching assistant at Wilfrid Laurier University, was reprimanded in a meeting with her faculty supervisor, program head, and an administrator, after students raised concerns about her use of a clip of Jordan Peterson, a University of Toronto<sup>1</sup> psychology professor, criticizing gender-neutral pronouns on a current affairs program. After Shepherd's recording of the meeting went public, the resulting media uproar led to public apologies from her supervisor and WLU's president, campus protests, and, ultimately, a defamation suit by Peterson.<sup>2</sup> So, while academic speech in Canada does not seem as polarized as it is in the U.S., this case demonstrates that the stakes are high when it comes to issues of justice, academic freedom, and freedom of speech.

Partially in response to this incident, the recently elected Progressive Conservative Premier of Ontario, Doug Ford, campaigned on a

promise to protect campus free speech, linking it to threats to postsecondary funding.<sup>3</sup> A position paper from Ford's campaign argued that "freedom of speech has come under attack on Ontario's university campuses," and specifically points to the Shepherd case as an example.<sup>4</sup> While Quest has not dealt with issues of this nature directly, this broader environment certainly creates a sense of heightened tension among students, faculty, and administrators. At times, it feels as if there is a widespread, but unspoken, fear that free speech could become an issue on our campus as well.

In tense environments, student representative bodies play an important role. At Quest, the SRC is this body. The SRC is a group of twelve students elected to represent student interests, support student initiatives, and administer the money collected from student association fees. The SRC has established relations with Quest staff and faculty, and holds permanent seats in a variety of university committees.

Most of the time, this system works quite well. Administrators and professors see SRC representatives in a position of legitimacy to speak for the greater student body, and students rely on their representatives as guides while navigating university policies. Of course, the SRC has its own projects as well. The public letter from 2017, for example, was an SRC initiative. However, not every initiative goes as well. While historically the outcome of the relation between the SRC and Quest administration has been either positive or neutral, negative resolu-

<sup>1</sup> Aaron Hutchins, "What Really Happened at Wilfrid Laurier University: Inside Lindsay Shepherd's Heroic, Insulting, Brave, Destructive, Possibly Naïve Fight for Free Speech," *Maclean's*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.macleans.ca/lindsay-shepherd-wilfrid-laurier/>.

<sup>2</sup> Simona Chiose, "Jordan Peterson Sues Wilfrid Laurier University for Defamation," *The Globe and Mail*, June 21, 2018, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-jordan-peterson-sues-wilfrid-laurier-university-for-defamation/>.

<sup>3</sup> Creoso Sá, "Who Knows What Doug Ford's Government Has in Store for Higher-Ed in Ontario?" *University Affairs*, July 4, 2018, <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/policy-and-practice/who-knows-what-doug-fords-government-has-in-store-for-higher-ed-in-ontario/>.

<sup>4</sup> "On Education, Doug Ford Will Respect Parents and Get Back to the Basics," *OntarioPC*, May 8, 2018, [https://www.ontariopc.ca/on\\_education\\_doug\\_ford\\_will\\_respect\\_parents\\_and\\_get\\_back\\_to\\_basics](https://www.ontariopc.ca/on_education_doug_ford_will_respect_parents_and_get_back_to_basics).

tions bring about major frustrations on both sides, and the campus tension discussed above makes the perceived stakes of this relation significantly higher. In a tense, if not politically charged, university environment, frustration and disagreement can easily escalate into bigger problems.

Unsurprisingly, some of the most challenging situations we have dealt with at Quest concern academic freedom and students' political and academic interests: specifically, issues that arise when the university does not meet students' desire for inclusive and equitable academic spaces. For example, imagine that a group of students takes issues with a course syllabus that is overwhelmingly dominated by white, male authors. Their argument is that this follows a greater pattern of discrimination in academia—one that we, as a university, should work to actively dismantle.

In such a case, the SRC would raise the issue with the administration, situating the students' arguments in relation to Quest's stated commitment to diversity and equity. Indeed, in making this kind of argument, students would be doing precisely what they've been trained to do at Quest. Namely, to remain critically engaged with all aspects of their education and to question assumed norms. Faced with such a complaint, the professor might fairly respond that their syllabus facilitates intended learning outcomes and, ultimately, that the principle of academic freedom gives them the right to choose appropriate material, so long as it covers the content and meets the stated objectives of the course.

Quest, like most other universities, has strong policies protecting academic freedom and, in such a situation, administrators might rightly be hesitant to act. An example such as this would result in frustration all around: students feel unheard, the SRC feels as if it is not taken seriously, faculty members feel targeted,

and administrators feel constrained. We certainly do not have all of the answers for how to address tensions between academic freedom and inclusivity, but we can offer some lessons learned through our experiences as an administrator and as a student leader at a small university.

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Some of these lessons are quite obvious: students quickly learn that harsh public accusations, about no particular issue, hardly ever open a path to resolutions. Simultaneously, on the administrative side, we know that responses that boil down to “we can't do anything because of academic freedom” are unlikely to be satisfactory. Other lessons were less obvious to us.

For example, Quest has a Human Rights Policy, one that governs, among other things, discrimination against members of the Quest community. Yet no matter how well designed this policy is, it does not address microaggressions, structural inequities, and other such phenomena. While these issues might—and probably do—have a significant impact on someone's sense of inclusion as a respected member of the university, the Human Rights Policy is largely inapplicable where there is not a specific instance of discrimination. Without a clear discriminatory episode, there is little ground upon which to build a case.

Additionally, there is the stigma attached to claiming a Human Rights Policy violation. Community members who have experienced discrimination might feel reluctant to claim that

their human rights were violated. Even when discrimination was evident, and they could therefore build a strong case, a “human rights violation” is perceived as a very serious accusation—one that many would rather not make, in order to avoid raising the stakes surrounding a conflict. These challenges, which were identified in part through conversations between administrators and members of the SRC, have made us more aware of a need both for a broader set of standards that articulate shared community values and expectations about respectful behavior, and for a more holistic approach in which formal policy is only one element of a broader effort to ensure that Quest is a just community for all of its members.

On the latter front, one effort that has been particularly successful is Quest’s annual Power, Race, and Privilege Symposium (PRPS), which is supported and endorsed by the university, but primarily organized by students and the SRC. The symposium, which began in 2016, brings together scholars, students, activists, and artists both from within and outside the Quest community to discuss issues of racial oppression and social justice.<sup>5</sup> In its third edition, in February of 2018, PRPS welcomed attendees and speakers from Squamish, Canada and abroad to discuss Art and Activism; Intersectional Experiences of Disability, Ableism, and Health; and Geographies of Race in Canada.

The panel themes change every year, but the overall feeling at the university is that PRPS is a necessary event, successful at fostering honest conversations in our community. The event is another example of students, professors, and administrators collaborating in a productive way. Furthermore, by tackling issues of

power, race, and privilege, the symposium sparks conversation about many of the grey areas of discrimination that the university’s Human Rights Policy cannot cover.

On the more practical side, one of the largest challenges that administrators and student representatives face in working together is a dramatic difference in time scales. Most students at Quest expect to be at the university between three and six years, while administrators might expect to remain at the university for much longer. SRC representatives, in particular, serve one-year terms, and must stand for reelection (which most choose not to) if they wish to remain longer. A project timeframe that seems reasonable or even speedy to an administrator might conclude at a point when a student will no longer be in office, or even enrolled at the university. Even at small, relatively new institution such as Quest, which prides itself on its agility, administrative and student timelines can diverge sharply.

There are practical steps that can be taken to mitigate this issue. On the student side, it is important to prioritize requests, and differentiate those in which there is a real need for urgent remedy, from those that can be addressed over a larger time frame. On the administrative side, it is necessary to be clear with students about realistic timelines and obstacles, and, in cases in which it is not possible to achieve a desired result quickly, to identify concrete intermediate steps to be taken.

For longer projects, student leadership turnover can be both a substantial obstacle to continuity and a source of administrative frustration. To address these, both the SRC and the administration have had to adapt. SRC representatives have had to pay more attention to preparing transition packages for their successors and facilitating communication across successive governments in general. Administrators have likewise had to prepare for bringing new

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<sup>5</sup> Mike Chouinard, “Power, Race, and Privilege: Symposium Held at Quest University Tackles Tough Questions,” *The Squamish Chief*, March 15, 2016, <https://www.squamishchief.com/news/local-news/power-race-and-privilege-1.2198617>.

representatives up to speed, for introducing students to behavioral norms for some more formal settings (e.g., university committees), and to be prepared to adjust to changing priorities as student governments shift.

The limited time frame in which most students can participate in a university committee or project makes finding appropriate student representation especially important. At Quest, many committees include student representation. The idea behind this is that every interest group should have a say in the projects that shape our community. This is the case in the Diversity and Equity committee, the Curriculum Committee, and EcoQuest, our sustainability program. Student participation is, most of the time, celebrated and productive. In some cases, such as EcoQuest, it is the students who run most of the projects.

But other times, this participation in decision-making does not go as well. Problems can arise from the timeframe issue, questions of confidentiality and liability, or just overall unpreparedness. Students are often significantly less experienced than other committee members when it comes to interpreting policy, making hiring decisions, or working with a third party. Students want things to move fast and in a clear direction, but often do not see the intricacies of every step along the way.

Over the years, student participation in decision-making at Quest has happened in one of two ways. Students are either elected representatives, such as members of the SRC, who have an established seat at the table given their position; or, they are interested students who have volunteered to represent their peers on a specific project. In the latter case, there may also be a selection process run by the committee itself, if there are more interested students than seats.

Student-chosen and committee-chosen student representatives tend to differ quite significantly, and in both cases, there are benefits and

shortcomings. Both students and administrators have an interest in selecting student representatives who can work effectively with other committee members to address student concerns. However, they may have different criteria in mind when electing or choosing representatives.

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Elections may favor more outspoken, extroverted students who are already popular with their peers. Administrators, in contrast, may select students based on notions of qualifications for particular projects. But elections, at Quest at least, have made us aware of a “hyperdemocracy” problem. That is, the notion that a general vote is the best solution to avoid friction and create a sense of common ownership. For, as political theorists know, majority rule can hardly create this sense. In our experience, falling into the fallacy of hyperdemocracy often just leads to longer processes and more frustration, without necessarily bringing better results.

Still, for more high-stakes projects, administrative selections can raise lots of questions. We have not yet found the right formula for selecting student representatives, but it seems that working on a case-by-case basis is the best alternative. In some cases, such as the Diversity & Equity Committee, there is a blend of both. The SRC minister for Human Rights holds a permanent seat, but another student, outside the SRC, is also selected from a pool of volunteers. This model has worked quite well for Diversity & Equity Committee, since the two students serve clearly distinct functions: on the one hand, the SRC minister looks at the institutional relations according to their own Human Rights mandate; and, on the other, the student

representative speaks from their own experience without responding to another body.

Thus, we are starting to understand the functions of a student representative in a committee. These different roles play, both positively and negatively, an important aspect in the collaboration. Individual students interpret their roles differently, and participate in decision-making in inconsistent, and, at times, contradictory ways. Some students, who are used to using social media to quickly connect to a broad group of their peers, may see themselves primarily as channeling the opinions of a broad student body, while others are more confident in bringing in their individual perspectives, despite the hyperdemocracy concern.

In contrast, faculty and administrators often value student representatives precisely for their particular expertise and opinions. These mismatched expectations can cause frustration in sorting out the role of student members in committees and working groups. At its best, students' ability to solicit feedback from their peers, nearly in real time, can lead to broader consultation about important initiatives; at its worst, it can be a crutch for students who have not developed the confidence to interact with faculty and administrators on their own terms, or can lead to misunderstandings when internal committee discussions are shared with a larger audience that lacks the context to understand them.

To address this issue, we have found that it can be helpful not only to introduce students to the sometimes arcane world of terms of reference, agendas, and minutes that make up the formal aspects of committee work, but also to discuss expectations about the nature of participation and representation. Student members may need guidance on when it is appropriate to bring a question to their peers, while faculty and administrator members may need to adjust to the fact that students increasingly see broad

engagement via social media as legitimating a deliberative process.

The challenge of bringing students, faculty, and administrators together to work collaboratively is multifold. Different timescales, unclear agendas, and mismatched expectations of participation can frustrate, heighten tension, and slow down progress. But from what we have learned at Quest from projects such as PRPS and groups such as the Diversity & Equity Committee, the challenge is worth it.

When, despite the inevitable conflicts, the collaboration goes well, student-administration relations can give rise to great projects and address complex issues. When included in important decision-making processes, students feel empowered and respected, and they are less inclined to protest angrily about particular parts of complex problems. Administrators and professors, in turn, appreciate working collaboratively with students and value the fresh perspectives they bring to the table. In our view, there is no way around the need for collaborative community building.

Liberal art colleges and universities tend to be small and close-knit, and often feel relatively isolated. However, in a political climate where an unwise meeting or a poorly conceived policy can go viral, our size and cultures provide less shelter than ever, and can even be a double-edged sword. Divisive incidents are especially damaging on campuses where nearly all relationships are, to some extent, personal. All universities, however small, need to be able to navigate this new environment.

Developing productive, cooperative student-administration relationships, that leave both sides feeling empowered, is one step towards adjusting to this new terrain.

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