

CONFIDENTIAL

REPORT OF THE FACULTY COMMITTEE ON STUDENT GOVERNMENT

PREFACE

The students have proposed, and voted their approval of, major revisions in the College's rules governing the entertainment of male visitors in the student houses. Although their motives were mixed and the issues frequently confused, for most of the students engaged in preparing this legislation the proposal represented less a blow for sexual freedom or an assertion of student power per se than an attempt to confront and solve a number of substantial problems involving conditions in the houses, student government and community morale. While this Committee regards the proposed solution as lacking in perspective, it also recognizes the difficulties presented and respects the energy, time and serious consideration that many of the students devoted to framing it. The issues involved are complex, subtle, and far-reaching, many of them extending beyond this campus and community. The students are in a better position to observe their problems than to define them, and perhaps in no position to be asked to solve by themselves what are problems of the community as a whole.

It has been the conviction of this Committee, therefore, that responsible faculty action in this matter should not rest with a mere vote on the proposed legislation, but should reflect the faculty's own awareness of the situation out of which it arose; in other words, that it should address itself to the context as well as the content of the students' proposal. To this end, the Committee submits the following review and recommendations.

REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

The single most salient fact regarding the present rules for visitors, and the one mentioned most often by the students in support of their proposed revisions, is that those rules have become increasingly ineffective in governing their actual behavior. Infractions are frequent, regular, and widespread: overnight visitors are a fairly common occurrence, and some men have resided in the student houses for days or weeks at a time. Explicit objection to such offenses is apparently made only rarely by housemates or house chairmen. Although the existence of more or less flagrant infractions is acknowledged universally, only one case of this kind was actually brought to the attention of the Judicial Committee last term and, because of complicating factors, it was dismissed without action. In some houses, students specifically voted to ignore among themselves the existing regulations concerning male visitors.

For many students, the very fact that the regulations were not respected constituted the major argument for doing away with them. They felt that to retain an ineffective rule was to engage in hypocrisy, and that the widespread tolerance of its violations implied that the rule was superfluous.

The force of such arguments is weakened, however, by a number of other facts.

One is the deterioration of living and working conditions in certain houses resulting from frequent infractions of the rules. Various counselors as well as the Student Personnel Office and the Health Service have been aware of numerous occasions on which students have been pressured to vacate their rooms, or indeed have been locked out of them, by roommates entertaining visitors. Discretion is not always practiced, and with visitors on the premises at all hours, students have been subjected to

disruptive noise, excessive traffic in the corridors and bathrooms and, more generally, substantial inconvenience and incursions on their privacy.

Secondly, the fact that infractions of the rules are widely tolerated--i.e., not objected to explicitly or referred to house chairmen or the Judicial Committee--does not necessarily imply that the rules are without purpose or value. It may also imply, as we think it does, a demoralization of student government and a more pervasive and subtle demoralization of the College community at large. Students are reluctant to complain to house chairmen or the Judicial Committee, preferring practical inconvenience and silent outrage to social disapproval and uncomfortable scenes. In turn, house chairmen and members of the Judicial Committee find it difficult to exert authority without community support for their actions. Many members of the College community have apparently failed to comprehend the very nature and purpose of that community, the fact that it defines itself as an educational institution and that its survival depends upon and is justified by its functioning as such. There is a related failure among many to appreciate that the various benefits such a community offers to its members cannot be obtained without some limitations of their individual autonomy.

The arguments offered in support of the student legislation are also weakened by their failure to acknowledge the likelihood of certain undesirable consequences. First, there is the fact that whatever vestige of control the existing rules may have exerted to ensure discretion and minimize flagrant intrusions on the privacy of others would be surrendered. With no regulations limiting the hours when visitors might be in the rooms, students would be unable to depend upon the availability of their quarters for study, sleep or other more or less private activities such as reading, listening to music, or just musing. The quality of life in the houses would be substantially compromised, and the distraction from study would have

its effects on academic morale if not performance.

There is little reason to believe that pressure from roommates wishing to reserve shared quarters for the entertainment of visitors would decrease. On the contrary, although the proposed rules include a provision intended to protect students from such pressure, many would inevitably find themselves obliged to bargain or badger for the privilege of remaining in their own rooms and sleeping in their own beds.

Also, it is in the nature of things that, as Bennington's abolition of regulated hours for male guests became publicized, transient men would be attracted to the campus in the hope of finding free overnight accommodations, and the number of regular or semi-permanent male residents in the houses could be expected to increase. (Antioch College, which has recently abolished its own regulations on hours, reports exactly that result.) In view of the fact that our student houses are already overcrowded, it is clear that the increase of visitors or residents in rooms and houses not designed to accommodate them would create additional strain on the facilities as well as on the privacy of other students. Because student rooms at Bennington are not constructed as private apartments, one girl's guest--even if she occupies a single room--automatically becomes the guest of the suite and the house.

Other consequences would not touch the students' day-to-day lives quite so directly, but would nevertheless affect them as members of the College community. It is to be expected, for example, that the absence of regulated hours for male visitors would dissuade otherwise desirable students from

applying to or attending the College and would confine even more narrowly than at present the character of the student body. In addition, although many of the students regard as corrupt in itself any consideration of the financial resources of the College or other forms of support from outside the community, the fact remains that the institution must be solvent to survive--and that as long as we do not compromise our educational objectives and operations, there is nothing improper or venal in our hesitating to risk the wholesale alienation of past or potential supporters.

It may be that to a certain extent the problems we have described reflect a more widespread national or cultural malaise. Our present concern, however, is the extent to which the demoralization is a local product or fostered by conditions more or less specific to this community. For to the extent that the problems are homegrown, we may attempt to alleviate, if not solve them.

In our discussions with student leaders, members of the administration, and others concerned with student government, we tried to determine the most significant local factors responsible for the present difficulties. On the specific matter of male visitors, it was agreed that certain objective conditions--e.g., the location of the College, the design and present overcrowding of the student houses, the lack of inexpensive nearby overnight accommodations--did indeed make it difficult for students to entertain their guests as conveniently and comfortably as they would wish.

With regard to the ineffectiveness of student government in controlling infractions of the rules, it was felt that the Judicial Committee has been hampered not only by lack of community support but also by its own make-up, procedures and implicit policies. Unsure of its power and prestige, the Committee is reluctant to act quickly and decisively--a fact which,

In turn, further undermines its power and prestige. Because it does not consult records of its proceedings, and because there is frequently a total turnover of membership from one year to the next, the benefits of continuity are lost. Punitive action as such has been abhorrent to some members, and the Committee has tended to assume a therapeutic or quasi-pastoral rather than a judicial role. (It should be noted that the authority of the house chairmen has suffered in comparable ways for comparable reasons.)

At the level of the college administration, certain policies were felt to have contributed to the demoralization of the community and the present difficulties in enforcing regulations. It was recognized that the administration has only limited access to the students. Nevertheless, it appears that, by virtue of having assumed a position of inordinate reserve in dealing with student problems as they arose, the administration has jeopardized its potential influence and cannot now readily secure the respect, confidence and cooperation of the students at large.

In another administrative area, certain problems may have been exacerbated by the fact that the Admissions Committee, in evaluating applications, tends to be concerned not only with an applicant's merits as a prospective student, but also with what is seen as her probable ability to fit in or adjust easily to the social or moral climate of the student community. Although the latter concern is understandable, when exercised categorically it may have the effect of perpetuating and concentrating certain qualities of the student body while eliminating the possibility of diversifying and tempering influences.

As a faculty committee, we have been particularly concerned with the responsibility of the faculty itself in matters relating to student government and community morale. As was implied in the resolution adopted by the faculty on October 4th, 1967, we now recognize our failure in recent years to take sufficient interest in such matters and to assume,

individually and as a body, a position of influence and leadership.

The failure arises partly from a legitimate reluctance to act paternalistically toward the students or to risk eroding the powers of student self-government. Also, there is considerable disagreement among the faculty as to what its proper role is with respect to student life and government. The failure also arises, however, from the same individualistic tendencies that we have noted among the students. For some members of the faculty, preoccupation with their own professional pursuits leaves them with little time or inclination to exercise even a role that they accept as proper. Others appear reluctant to assume a position of leadership that might identify them with the suspect role of authority. It would also seem that the very nature of the close relationship between faculty and students that we seek to foster at Bennington creates ambiguity in the minds of both regarding their proper roles toward each other.

Finally, it has been suggested that the College constitution, in its establishment of three separate constituencies, has had a divisive effect on the community at large. That is, it may have encouraged or supported the conception, among students and members of the faculty and administration as well, of three mutually antagonistic parties, each with its separate interests to be furthered and protected from the interests of the other two. To the extent that this implicit conception is prevalent, it may have contributed to the gradual weakening of the sense of the College as a whole or the recognition of it as essentially a community, with fundamental interests and objectives shared by all of its members.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE FACULTY

1. That it continue to demonstrate the active interest in student government affirmed in the faculty resolution adopted on October 4th, both individually (in counseling, community meetings and otherwise) and as a body. This committee itself, which was constituted as an ad hoc group and has operated accordingly, should continue to do so until the institution or other agencies makes it unnecessary. Point four of the faculty resolution would continue to serve to define its provenance and duties.
2. That, on the question of the currently proposed student legislation it affirm its concern for and authority in matters of community government by vetoing the specific proposal and publishing, in a statement to the college community, both its reasons for doing so and its recommendations for alternative action.

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Student Legislative Committee review the problems which the proposed legislation was intended to alleviate and consider whether alternative modifications of the existing regulations would serve some of the same purposes without incurring the same risks.
2. That the make-up of the Judicial Committee be altered to include four students elected by the student body to serve staggered one-year terms, and three faculty advisors elected by the faculty to serve staggered three-year terms. It is also recommended that the Judicial Committee, in conjunction with the Student Legislative and Executive Committees, review its present procedures and policies in the light of the observations made earlier in this report.
3. That the Student Executive Committee provide regular procedures whereby house chairmen and other elected officers who do not carry out the duties of their office effectively will be replaced.

4. That there be established, according to the means provided by the college constitution, a Council on Community Government, made up of four students, three faculty members, and two members of the administration. This council would be designed to bridge whatever divisions may be created by the existence of three separate constituencies, and would be entitled to consider activities and propose legislation affecting any or all of them. It would also be empowered to consult with the President of the College on any matters that may require emergency action outside the normal constitutional channels.

(Note: It has been suggested that this council might eventually absorb the functions of such other standing committees as the Constitutional Council or Judicial Review Committee, and that its members might be drawn from the elected officials of such other committees as the Student Educational Policies Committee, the Faculty Educational Policies Committee, and the Student Legislative, Executive or Judicial Committees.)

5. That the administration act consistently in its dealings with student problems, intervening only in cases of extreme emergency but acting then decisively and unequivocally on the strength of its constitutional powers.

6. That the Admissions Committee undertake a review of its own operations to determine to what extent applicants have been discriminated against because they seemed socially or ~~morally~~ unsophisticated. We further recommend that the Committee establish regular procedures whereby information about the performance of current students will help guide its decisions concerning applicants.

7. That members of the administration and faculty participate more fully with students in the orientation of freshmen in order to clarify the purposes, expectations and standards of the College and also the means available for meeting and supporting them. As necessary, those conducting the orientation should spell out the conditions and qualities of life students should expect

to find maintained in the houses, and indicate the channels open to students for satisfying their grievances should they find otherwise.

8. That the College review the question of coeducation at Bennington.

9. That there be established a Community Activities Committee, consisting of a duly determined number of students and members of the faculty, the administration and the College community at large (i.e., including members of the administrative staff and wives and husbands of the faculty and administration). In conjunction with existing College agencies, this committee would sponsor projects and events designed to extend the intellectual, cultural, social and recreational activities of the College: e.g., faculty colloquia, community fairs, celebrations, shows and performances. (These examples, it might be noted, constitute an implicit comment on the present bleakness of community life in these respects.)

10. That the College look into the feasibility of making architectural improvements in the present houses that would secure greater privacy for students (whether or not they were entertaining visitors), and that it emphasize the factor of privacy when considering the design of future houses.

11. That, to alleviate the overcrowding of the student houses and to provide options for students in their living arrangements, the College consider permitting a limited number of upperclassmen to live off campus in suitable housing.

12. That the College consider reserving space within the houses (possibly in former faculty apartments) where students may entertain guests during certain hours when they cannot conveniently do so in their own rooms or the house living-rooms.

13. That the College find or provide inexpensive but civilized overnight accommodations for visiting men.

14. That the College give financial and other material support to the student-managed coffee house in the Carriage Barn--and to whatever comparable projects the students may undertake to brighten their social lives without dimming the lives of other students or jeopardizing the educational operations and survival of this still estimable and exemplary institution.

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