

Libertarian's Corner: An Experience at City College and Its Implications for Liberty

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During my undergraduate years at the City College of New York in the late 1970s, I had some interesting experiences with student clubs, and I began to reexamine the whole matter of student activities and how they are funded.

There seem to be five ills affecting student organizations which appear to be pervasive on the nation's campuses. First, the members of some clubs share few interests to draw them together. They do understand, however, that any group of students may organize and register with the student government and the college administration and thus receive a portion of the mandatory student activity fees collected by the college at the start of each semester. Thus I recall sitting through a two-hour meeting of a campus honor society where the sole topic of discussion was how to dispose of the generous sum we had been allocated. The debate might still be raging had it not been decided to spend it all on a grand party at the home of a student leader.

The second problem with many student organizations is that the leadership has little incentive to adhere to organizational charters. I recall one prayer-and-snack organization with a charter mandating annual elections. Yet several successive presidents simply appointed the other officers and their successors. When I pointed out to an officer that this was improper, I was asked whether I would prefer the secretariat or the treasury! "Private life," I replied. Of course, nobody really cared enough to take recourse. I didn't. After all, the monies were just there.

Third, club officers frequently diverted funds to their own use: pencils, postage, bus fare, meals, maybe a month's rent! Our student newspaper, *The Campus*, was often filled with the latest scandal—and that was still the case last time I flipped through its pages fifteen years later.

The fourth problem is that mandatory student fees distribute the costs of campus activities with an artificial uniformity. Those who care little about student activities subsidize the average user, while those who are very active are subsidized by the average user. The distribution of benefits is even more artificial. Typically, the student government decides on the apportionment of funds in its own inimitable way. As I recall quite well, this leaves much to be desired.

Finally, there is the matter of conscience: Students who are philosophically or personally opposed to the objectives of particular student groups are nevertheless

compelled to chip in and support their mission. As Jefferson wrote

. . . to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves . . . is sinful and tyrannical.

Indeed, in one circuit court just such concerns have led to the holding that all uniformly applicable, mandatory student activity fees that support groups with an ideological bent are unconstitutional at public institutions. One state's highest court has even ruled that to be constitutional, mandatory fees at public institutions must provide an opt-out scheme for dissenters. Additional challenges to mandatory fees are underway in still other jurisdictions.

Now there is quite a simple solution to all these problems. Why not limit student fees to covering such widely used items as the student center, athletics, and the student media? Maybe a piddling sum could be granted to the student government, too, for its advisory role. The remaining student organizations would be funded solely by membership dollars. With the money from student activity fees returned to student pockets, it would be up to the individual whether or not to form, participate in, or pay dues to any club.

Notice how this simple measure addresses all the problems we have sketched. First, clubs whose members share no common bond would quickly dissolve, since their reason for existence—access to mandatory student fees—would be removed.

Second, when the members must pay dues, officers will be held accountable. “Taxation without representation,” unless the officers maintain a consensus, would not be tolerated. If members are sufficiently dissatisfied with their club leaders, or with the way their money is being spent, they may simply withdraw along with their financial backing.

Third, the cost of campus activities to each student would depend on how much he used them. But because the overhead of the student activities bureaucracy can be eliminated—including student government oversight functions and some college administration supervision—the typical student user would come out ahead, paying less in dues than he saved in fees.

Last, the distribution of student funds would be done naturally, not artificially. The most popular clubs would receive the most money. And no clubs would be indebted to the student government or the college administration for their funds. They would answer only to their members. And that is exactly how it should be. Ω