

Democracy in Action

by *Dorothy H. Schwartz*

The words leap to the astonished eye. They sound strange to the ear: "Student government . . . synonymous with 'Spy System'"; "94 per cent membership in the Union"; "Seniors march to chapel in caps and gowns."

One is struck by the unfamiliar words which remain untouched in the files; words which, once read, reveal our heritage. It has been at least ten years since the tale of the early years of Student Council has been resurrected.

In the past of which we know so little, there existed an Honor System. Every student hears at least once each semester, and particularly at final examinations, a crude survey of what the Honor System was; and again, what it was not. Its history would be interesting only as a story or nostalgic memory of a Hunter alumna, were it not for its significant repercussions. The Honor System failed; it produced, in its decline, student self-government.

"The movement for self-government was begun as a result of the need felt for student responsibility along certain lines. It was after an unusual display of dishonest work during an examination. Several girls met to discuss the situation casually and from this discussion rose the idea that what we needed was self-government." Thus, in retrospect, wrote one of the founders of Student Council, Miss Johanna de Wolff, in the *Hunter Bulletin* of April 7, 1915.

"Full of enthusiasm, we set to work to make converts 'at once!' That was our first big mistake. We made no real investigation into the workings and aims of other established self-governing student bodies. The idea foremost in our minds was that dishonesty must be stopped and that the students were to take this matter into their own hands. Not taking into consideration that the rest of the students had not even thought of such an idea and were absolutely ignorant of the fact that a small handful were interested in it, we distributed a printed copy of a set of rules made by ourselves, by which the rest were to be governed.

". . . The result of this need not be explained

to you. We were ourselves responsible, I feel, that student government became synonymous with 'Spy System'.

"Having raised this storm about us, we began to realize that to win out, our government must offer more than this. Then we went backwards, investigated other forms, asked help and information of those who knew; . . . discovered more constructive and less destructive powers and possibilities in those other programs and with these new suggestions won to our side a few of the leading minds among the student body. With these keener-sighted, more stable minds to aid and restrain, we were able to present the truer ideal to the rest. That was the beginning of what the others have carried on so well . . ."

When, soon after 1910, the ferment of student opinion was resolved into a Convention, a student government was formed and the same year began activities by sponsoring "Wisty" and the Christmas Play. The student government was known as the Union, to which everyone belonged. Student Council was the representative governing body for the Union. The purpose of the Union was to "promote the . . . welfare of the college and to establish the nucleus of student opinion through representation on a student council," and the Council was to have "cognizance over all matters concerning the students in their college life . . ." The extension of its program was rapid and marked until 1928.

By 1914, Student Council had charge of all activities and was "the body to which all suggestions and complaints are taken by everyone in the college." Student Exchange was established and, in addition to its other duties, arranged for employment of students during their spare hours. *Bulletin* was also brought out that year. A bazaar in 1915 raised \$5,000 for the Red Cross Fund. In 1917 we had our first Sing and Varsity.

War work, in 1918, was centralized in a student committee operating through a central committee of students, faculty, and alumnae, and continued war relief activities through 1919; its place

was taken in 1920 by a community service under the leadership of a chairman of community service, elected by Council.

Echo and *Bulletin* joined the Budget System of the Union in 1921. That year it was decided in Council that only Union members could vote in elections or belong to clubs or sororities. This rule was so strictly enforced that Union membership rose to 85 per cent in 1922 and 94 per cent in 1923.

The year 1923, high-water mark for Union membership, brought also the famous "Penny Day." On Wednesdays, students were asked to contribute their pennies for philanthropic purposes. The Louvain Library Fund thus received \$2000, and the seal of Hunter College was placed on the foundation stones of the Library of Louvain University in gratitude.

The years following brought an increasing amount of attention to Hunter College needs. A Student Curriculum Committee was set up in 1925 to criticize existing conditions, to formulate student opinion on their needs, and to present these opinions in an effective manner before the Faculty. In 1926 Council set up an Inter-Club Council to provide for greater centralization and stronger supervision of group activities. In 1927 the students assisted in establishing the Helen Gray Cone Fellowship.

About this time, the name "Union" was replaced by "Student Self-Government Association," as it is now known.

Dues to the S.S.G.A. were increased in 1928 from \$2 to \$3, but in 1930 "Council found it expedient to embark on a program of economy because of the cut in dues from \$3 to \$2. Nevertheless, money has been given to several worthy causes."

Until 1932, no official reports of Student Council Presidents and Treasurers were requested, so that information concerning previous years had to be culled from various sources. Since then, however, we have the records in detail.

There are several committees which form a permanent part of S.S.G.A.: Art, Cafeteria, Central Sing, Education Advancement, Finance, Freshman Advisory, Honor Education, Hostess, Inter-Club, Service, Student Aid, Staff-Student Relations, Traditions. These, and the Boards of Contract Review and Elections, act independently; most of them make reports of progress at irregular intervals.

The temporary committees are those set up to care for specific timely needs, such as, at present, the Forum Committee, the Radio Committee, and the Committee on National Defense.

S.S.G.A. raises its money through Budgie cards, Varsity, Sing, and Carnival. Its largest expenses consist of the salary of a permanent secretary to

Student Council, printing and mimeographing, teas, "H" pin awards, and the traditional contributions to the Bureau of Occupations and donations to the College on its birthday.

The budgets of the Twenties called for expenditures of thousands of dollars yearly—sometimes close to \$20,000. Those bright days meant semi-annual contributions of \$3 from each student. In those years *Echo*, *Bulletin*, and *Wistaron* were included in the Budgie card. The Student Self-Government Association, in those years, supported the dramatic and debating efforts of the students, the Athletic Association, and the Classes. In those years, the Lenox Hill Settlement (which the Hunter College Alumnae are still pledged to support) received large yearly sums from the student body through S.S.G.A. In those years, generous grants were made to equally worthy causes.

Its first major battle won in 1912, Student Council began work, after a false start comparable to our pre-constitution Confederation. Once established, it undertook as much as it could handle. It branched out into large money-raising schemes and contributed generously far and near. It administered all the student activities of the college. It was a real and substantial "buffer" between the student body and the Administration.

S.S.G.A. differs today in a number of ways from the Union of yesteryear. It would be foolish even to imply that the old vigorous support and intense pride in student government has not given way in the past ten years to something like quiet acceptance and indifference.

To the impartial observer of S.S.G.A. in general and Student Council in particular, there are two main parts to the problem of self-government. The first is the attitude of the students, and the second is the attitude of Council itself.

Let us look at the students.

After the old Hunter College building burned down, the students were shifted into four widely-separated buildings. The task of unifying the scattered students was tremendous and never wholly realized. This led to a decrease in those activities in which all students would otherwise naturally be engaged together. The habits of working and playing together as a unit were lost to those who were shifted and hence could not be passed down as tradition to their successors.

Then again, we are handicapped by our size. In a college which contains several hundred or a thousand students, it is a fairly simple administrative task to lead them into collective enjoyment of college affairs. This is hardly possible with 7000 individuals, and the students understand it almost instinctively. Because of this, and because of an innate inertia we are almost too willing to indulge,

the thought to "Let someone else do it" is not wholly unnatural.

Sad to relate, it crops up even in social matters, to say nothing of the extra-curricular. We have lost the elementary habits which are the basis upon which more mature practices should be built. We are reduced to writing an Honor Code (pages 35-37, Bulletin of Information) which can easily be compared, point by point, to the recently publicized code of morals drawn up by grade-school pupils. We are, indeed, so accustomed to this situation that we cannot observe the absurdity of our position; we are inured and calloused to the pleas of any and all pleaders.

Of these three conditions, we can easily remedy the third; the other two require whole-hearted interest in college (our local community) affairs. We must ourselves resist the call to "do-nothingness"; combining natural interests with an equally natural social instinct, we can achieve the stimulation and happiness which come from cooperative enjoyment of College activities. We need to recognize that this is a simple and pleasant obligation, one which we have to meet.

Concerning student self-government itself, the Progressive Education Association, in the pamphlet *Democratic Education* published by the American Council on Public Affairs, writes: "Schools as community agencies have a special responsibility for giving students an opportunity to live democratically. This means far more than electing class officers and having student government, for very often such forms are superficial and may even impede the growth of democracy. When a group plans an activity which has value for its members or for a group still larger than itself, when it discusses honestly, plans vigorously and works zealously to carry out an enterprise, it is participating as citizens of a small community actually using a democratic process."

Though the impartial observer may find the task of analyzing S.S.G.A. and Student Council rather complicated, four reasons for other present difficulties emerge after consideration. First, lack of unity in the management of the typical College activities exists, with several significant phases.

Eighteen years ago, 94 per cent of the student body belonged to the Union; today, 4 per cent of the student body belongs to S.S.G.A. The depression which caused Council to "embark on a program of economy" also caused the drop in Budgie dues to twenty-five cents. S.S.G.A. has, for several years, been operating on a narrow margin of cash. It worries about its necessary expenses. It attempts to urge the Board of Higher Education to make Budgie a compulsory feature of our attendance.

With the drop in Budgie dues, the activities

which S.S.G.A. had supported were left to manage themselves as best they could. *Bulletin* tries not to run into debt and its issues fluctuate between four and six pages, depending upon the week's advertising payments. *Echo* barely meets its expenses and cannot enlarge its issues. The Athletic Association has to beg for student support. Our dramatic efforts are hampered by the threat of bankruptcy. The Ottinger Debating Society does not have even the proverbial shoestring. Our classes border on debt.

Financial support is undoubtedly the most persistent topic of discussion in all these activities. If Council would again vote to have S.S.G.A. undertake to support them by including them in our Budgie cards, duplication of effort will be avoided and the time, thought, and energy now given to this question by the individual organizations can be diverted to other channels. It should be a strictly-enforced requirement that anyone engaged in any extra-curricular activity should buy a Budgie card. This will insure a fairly regular income for S.S.G.A. It will support the College activities; the students will have the opportunity to learn more of the College and their fellow-students. The results will be highly beneficial to everyone concerned.

In addition, there is little excuse for the indifference of Council toward its own money-raising features. Sing and Varsity are not all they should be. If there were definite and enforced arrangements for Council and student criticism of these productions and for defined responsibility of specified individuals in charge, the recurring complaints would be effectively answered. An investigation into the methods of handling these projects and suggested improvements will insure better productions, better attendance, more publicity, and more money. A second main fault which may be observed is the remarkable lack of action, compared with expended verbiage, to obtain the cooperation of independent school organizations on Council projects. Inter-Club Council was set up to provide for greater centralization and stronger supervision of group activities. Its ineffectiveness is appalling; there is no centralization whatsoever, and no group activity has ever been supervised.

Inter-Club Council can be a vital force, if correctly managed. It could be the clearing house for information concerning current activities. It could be the focal point for publicizing them. It could consult with all organizations interested in a particular activity and integrate their plans, to each one's satisfaction. Its possibilities are innumerable, since each organization would be represented.

In the third place, there has been no planned program of activities on the part of recent S.S.G.A. officers, if their actions are indicative of anything.

(Without reports previous to 1932, it is, of course, impossible to compare past and present performances). "In the heat of the campaign," no doubt many grand promises are made. Few ever materialize. Reading the reports of the Presidents since 1932, one finds many suggestions to future Presidents—but little inclination on the part of incumbents to act upon those of their predecessors.

Signs are increasing that the present student administration is attempting to better this state of affairs. The Relief Drive, with its three divisions of aid, is the first of the series. The rejuvenated Forum Committee is planning extensive panel discussions. The Committee on National Defense has already begun its solicitations on behalf of the armed forces of the United States. It is still too early to know if this program will be entirely successful without a determined effort to clear up in some measure points one and two.

The final difficulty is one about which individuals are likely to hedge. This concerns those members of Council who subordinate their obligations to their constituents to another "obligation," and base their judgments upon the latter.

The objective, regular attendant of Student Council sessions (which are open to everyone) can observe how arguments for "desirable" measures can be prepared in immediate caucus and given on

the floor by "reliable" members; how parliamentary techniques can be employed to forestall the passage of "undesirable" measures.

Council has undertaken to do for us what 7000 persons cannot do individually. It is our voice to the Administration. It speaks for us in Faculty Committees. It represents us to the world. We cannot permit College "machine" politics to take the place of individual inquiry and honest, disinterested government. Those who participate in invidious machinations do not belong in our S.S.G.A. They countermand and cancel the truly democratic procedures we seek to maintain when we elect fellow-students to govern us to the best of their individual abilities in collective council.

We are citizens of a College, and as such bear the duties and privileges automatically bestowed upon us. The practicing citizens of a larger civic community know that their obligations do not begin and end on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November.

Our predecessors have gone to considerable pains to give us a worthy heritage. "The price of liberty is eternal vigilance." The conscious, steady flame of attention to our College democracy, which is only as perfect as those who direct it, must never go out. That flame within us must burn constantly and smoothly. Thus, democracy in action.

No Future This

Make of me a tree
Slender and bright as a tall white Birch,
Bent and gnarled like apple-wisdom,
Let me live my time
To revel in an orchard's living
Among the voices of earthy men.
I've no heart-wish
To live so long, to grow so tall
As the great Redwood uninfected.
No great desire for this
To end my days
In vain,
Self-strangulation.

by Josephine B. Weil