

Lowell Speech – “Why should we care about the UC?!?”

“Why should we care about the UC?” “What has the UC done for us?” These questions came to the forefront in last November’s Presidential race. Students elected a joke ticket in Sam and Gus, who ran on the platform of Tomato Ravioli Soup and thicker toilet paper. This was a campus-wide referendum about the Undergraduate Council. As someone who has spends 10 hours a week on Undergraduate Council work, (sorry Grace), this was naturally very disheartening.

A lot of students made good points and arguments to justify this perception, claiming that UC representatives only surface during election season. Whenever they have approached the UC to remedy a problem, it has done very little. They say: “The UC is working on the Smith Campus Center, but that will only be ready by 2018, why should I care about that?” This makes sense because most of you will not be around then, unless you fail your courses of course, which is unlikely given Harvard’s grade inflation!

As someone who spends hours in meetings and helps write proposals for projects like the Smith Campus Center and the Honor Code, this sentiment troubles me. I empathize with students - I know it’s hard to care about something that does not affect you. But it is important to take a step back, and consider some UC-led initiatives that we tend to take for granted.

- Have you ever wondered why we can swipe into different Houses unlike Yale’s system where you are forced to piggyback into your friend’s House?
- Have you ever wondered why we take exams before Winter Break unlike Princeton’s system?
- Have you ever taken a UC shuttle to the airport before Thanksgiving Break or had coffee in Lamont Cafe? It was an Undergraduate Council that fought for you years ago to make all of this a reality. We reap the benefits of these developments today, but imagine if past councils shared this mentality of “Why should we work on this project when it will never affect us?” What motivates me to continue working hard on projects that will never impact my college experience?

In all of the humor of Sam and Gus' brilliant campaign, they did make one very interesting analogy during the Presidential Debate. I don't know how many of you saw that, but they took out thin toilet paper (on stage, in the middle of the IOP!) and poured some water on it, which obviously percolated straight through. Then, they took out thicker toilet paper, and again poured some water on it. This time the toilet paper withstood the onslaught. This was symbolic of their mission. They wanted a university administration who would not let the council's requests merely percolate through, an administration that would take the council more seriously. An administration that would at least consider our request for 250K, a day after it received a "small donation" of about a 150million from Kenneth Griffin.

As Chair of the Education Committee and a member of the Executive Board, I now realize that we have to combine our long term initiatives with some recognizable, short term projects. Our committee is currently pioneering the Affordable Course Materials Project, which mandates that faculty state the total cost of their courses on the syllabi. Doing away with hidden costs will increase transparency and raise accountability among professors. Faculty will be forced to take note of how much money their courses cost students, especially those on financial aid, who have to fund their course materials through their work-study. I concurrently worked on a small-scale Air Mattresses initiative, where we partnered with HSA so that students could rent air mattresses for their guests at merely \$2 per night. Projects such as these will impact each and every one of you in this dining hall!

So then why am I telling you all of this? What is the UC asking of you? I'm not saying take us too seriously, just care. Ask us what you want, engage with your representatives, participate, fill out a HUDS survey, fill out our weekly Ghost Protocol surveys, vote responsibly. I encourage you to criticize us, blame us when we are at fault. We are, at the end of the day, a conduit for you. We advocate for YOU. The louder YOU are on your end, the louder we can be... I will end with a slightly modified version of JFK's famous words: **"Ask not what you can do for the council, ask what the council can do for you?"** (ASK AND WE WILL DELIVER!)