

APPENDIX 3
2008 Summer Stipend Report
Research Project by Megan Howatt
“A Need for Solidarity: The State of Student Activist Organizations on University Campuses in Canada”

Background for the Research

As a volunteer and board member with first OPIRG-Ottawa and later QPIRG-McGill, I have witnessed several examples of antagonism towards a PIRG by university administration, student government, or other conservative student groups. I find it frustrating and unfortunate how these attacks can send the organization into crisis mode and detract from the positive work that PIRGs are there to do.

There are numerous specific examples of this antagonism. At McGill, the university administration has violated their Memorandum of Agreement by putting fee opt-outs online without consulting QPIRG. Meanwhile, NSPIRG operated for a significant period of time without any funding because the Dalhousie student government chose to withhold their fee levy. Finally, OPIRG-Toronto has uncovered, through an access to information request, intentional attempts by the university administration to harm and subvert the PIRG.

Research Objectives

My research proposed to investigate the state of PIRGs across the country, and inquire about the obstacles and issues that they are currently experiencing or have experienced in the recent past. In order to do so, I sought to interview one board member and one staff person from each (operational) PIRG in the country. These interviews would form the basis of a final report that would then be distributed to all PIRGs and any other interested organization.

The goal of this project was to create a comprehensive research report that allowed other PIRGs to learn from the problems and obstacles encountered by peer groups on other university campuses. When a group encounters a specific issue challenge (i.e. forced referendum, eviction, etc.) they will be able to use the report to see if there are other organizations that have encountered similar problems in the past and then consult these groups to see how they have dealt with it. The report will become a tool to assist in knowledge and resource sharing among PIRGs across the country.

Accomplishments

During the summer I made contact with every (operational) PIRG in Canada. I was then able to conduct approximately thirty interviews.

These interviews have been fascinating. It has been very interesting to see both the similarity and diversity of issues and concerns of each PIRG. It has also been informative

to see how many PIRGs conceptualize themselves quite differently. Almost every PIRG believed that they were the first or only PIRG to do one particular thing. This was not always true, however, and I found this was indicative of perhaps the failure of PIRGs to communicate both the success and obstacles to each other.

This has brought me to the preliminary conclusion that increased communication could be beneficial for the PIRGs, but also at the same time the realization that what might work at one PIRG, might not work at another one.

I have also been able to write sections of the report, but the finalization of the report has been held back because of some unforeseen obstacles (see below).

Obstacles

My inexperience with this sort of research methodology was both a strength and an incredible weakness. It is a strength because the project was not bound by any sort of academic expectations or frameworks, therefore giving a lot more freedom to the qualitative aspect of the research. (I had spoken with other people who had attempted a similar type of research for graduate work and found the constraints of academic methodology on this type of research to be insurmountable).

At the same time, however, my inexperience with this type of research meant that I seriously underestimated the amount of time the research phase of the project would take. It was very difficult to make initially contact with most interviewees and I spent the majority of my summer playing phone tag. Even at summer's end there were still several very important PIRGs who I was having a difficult time reaching.

My difficulties making contact with interviewees set the entire project back. I also had computer hard drive problems, which took up any time I set aside for writing because I had to relocate the electronic copies of my research. I eventually had to temporarily set the project aside to focus on my schoolwork.

Finally, I feel that so much has happened in the last eight months for PIRGs across the country that it would be unhelpful to finalize the report using only the information collected during the summer. This means that second smaller phase of research should be conducted before completing the report.

Further Thoughts

Given these accomplishments and obstacles, I hope to complete a small phase of research to update the research that I have already collected. This will include contacting a staff member from each PIRG to hear about new issues that have arisen over the school year.

Using this new information I hope to finish writing the report by the end of May.