

Finance committee can't interpret law

An ongoing debate — centering on the question of whether the University's chapter of OSPiRG should receive student funds — will come to a head tonight, as the ASUO Programs Finance Committee hears the group's budget request.

The debate, which has taken an ugly turn in recent weeks, is based upon two separate considerations: The first is whether it is legal for OSPiRG to receive a share of incidental fees, which are charged of every student along with their tuition, even from students who disagree with the group's various positions — which include environmental, hunger and consumer safety issues. The second consideration is whether students are getting enough bang for the 137,775 bucks they shell out each term.

The first question, the question of legality, is by far the stickiest. A group calling itself Students for Legal Government has been organized to oppose OSPiRG, charging that OSPiRG's activities are political in nature, and therefore, should not receive mandatorily assessed student funds. It is illegal, the group argues, to force students to pay to support an organization which engages in activities they do not agree with.

Students for Legal Government points to a variety of court cases, as well as a 1985 Attorney General's opinion, to support this argument, which may or may not have merit. This newspaper is not qualified to make that legal judgment.

Unfortunately, neither are the individual(s) behind Students for Legal Government. And, for that matter, neither is the Programs Finance Committee, which is being asked to do just that — make a legal judgment.

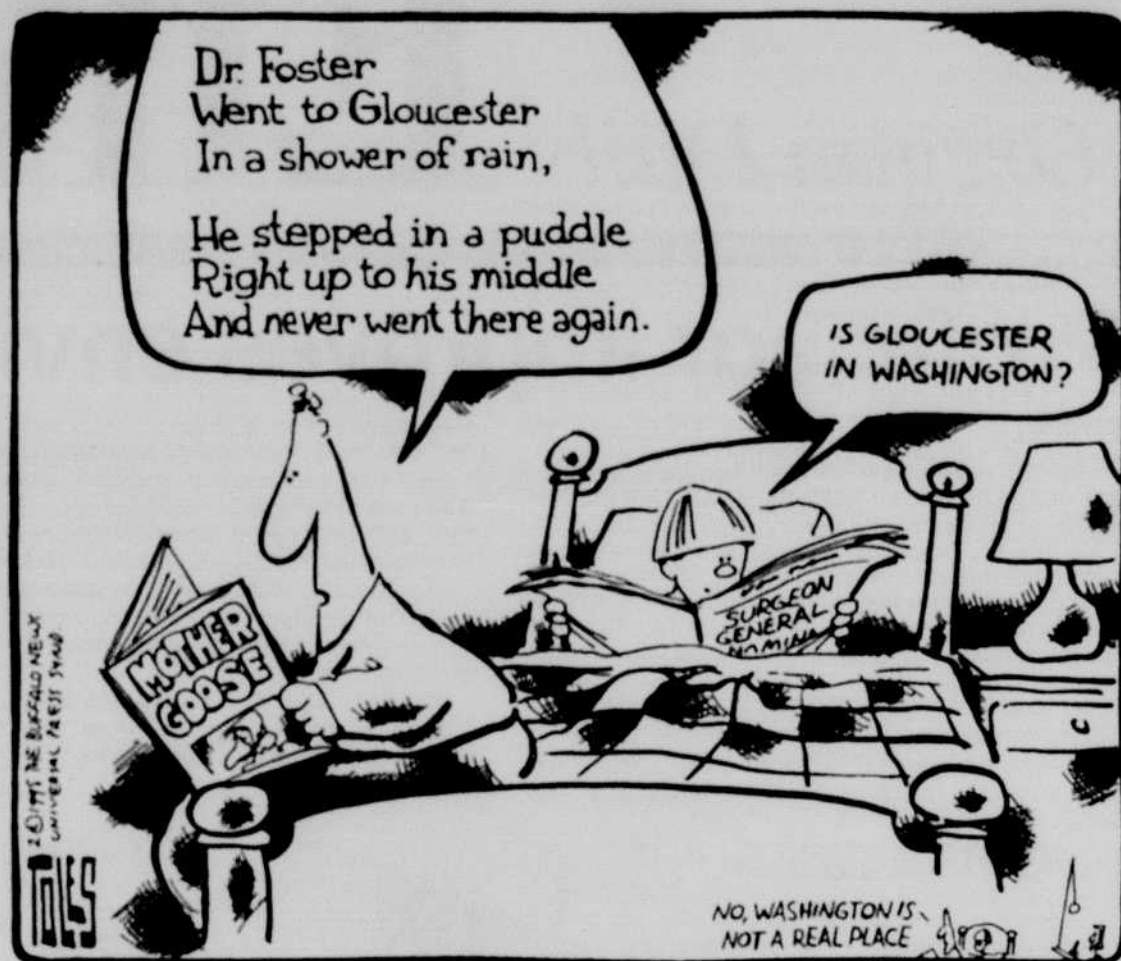
OSPiRG receives a huge chunk of student fees. At \$137,775, OSPiRG has the third largest budget of all student groups, and its budget is not likely to decrease much in the future.

With that much money at stake, the committee has an obligation to find a definitive answer — from a qualified, disinterested source — to this far-from-clear legal question.

Seeking such an answer carries with it some risks. It makes the finance committee appear incapable of making decisions, which is an invitation for the administration to come in and remove students from the fee allocation process altogether. At many other universities, such responsibilities already lie entirely in administration hands.

But the committee members still must take that risk. They cannot rely on laymen to interpret the law for them, nor should they interpret it for themselves.

They are qualified, however, to consider whether the money being spent on OSPiRG is going to good use, to the benefit of students. That second question, which should be examined in detail, should be the committee's only concern — at least until the legal question receives some satisfactory resolution.



COMMENTARY

Activism must remain strong

Kalpana Krishnamurthy

Think about why you come to school. You want to get an education. You want to get a glimpse of how other people think about our world and our cultures. Essentially, you want to learn. I came to the University of Oregon to do all of these things. But the more I learned about the way that students' concerns are ignored, the more I learned that if I wanted to change issues I had to get involved.

So I looked around at my choices. I could either ignore the mess and hope it went away or do something about it. Fortunately, the U of O has a 25-year tradition of student activism. Twenty-five years of students fighting for civil rights, cultural diversity, ethnic identity, and a clean environment. Twenty-five years of students saying that people shouldn't sleep on the streets, that we shouldn't clear-cut our forests, and that we shouldn't be racist or sexist or homophobic. Twenty-five years of students fighting to make our voices heard.

I chose OSPiRG because I wanted to be heard and wanted to have a voice in the process. If students want to take on a special interest, they need to get organized. So in 1972, U of O students organized a statewide petition drive that would create the first Public Interest Research Group in the nation. Grattan Kerans, then the editor of the *Emerald*, even ran the petition on the front page of the paper. The drive worked and OSPiRG became a reality at the U of O; since then the PIRG's have spread to 35 states across the nation.

It was, and still is, somewhat irrelevant what "public interest" issues OSPiRG students are active on. There's no OSPiRG definition of the term "public interest." Because students, and only students, pick OSPiRG's agenda, any group of involved

students can work to set the agenda. And there's really no reason why OSPiRG couldn't work on promoting nuclear energy or on managed forest plans. Those stances, however, don't seem to be popular with students. As the Environmental Studies major becomes a reality, I don't think it comes as a surprise to anyone that students are making a conscious decision to work on issues like ancient forests and recycling.

Not only do students control what OSPiRG works on but we also control how OSPiRG is funded and how that money is spent. Here at U of O, students vote every other year to fund PIRG through the incidental fee — the same fee that funds the Survival Center, the Black Student Union, and nearly every other recognized student group at the U of O. Just last year, students voted to fully fund OSPiRG and pool the money statewide to hire the maximum number of staffers. No lawyers in ugly white suits, no fatcat lobbyists. Just a group of recent college graduates working with students to organize and educate around student selected issues.

Students have always felt staff were the best resources possible for the issues they work on. Why shouldn't we have a full-time staff at our disposal? Polluters and special interests have staffs working for — staff who facilitate pollution and the eroding of democratic rights. For example, the American Plastics Council, an out-of-state lobbying

group, spent \$400,000 last year to gut the landmark state recycling law that U of O students fought to pass.

When all's said and done, the staff are an integral part of why U of O students passed the nation's toughest recycling law, why U of O students continue to register huge numbers of new voters, why between 150 and 200 U of O students educate hundreds of Eugene school children about the environment. And all of this is funded through the incidental fee.

The incidental fee is just that, incidental. And students have voted for OSPiRG and increases in the incidental fee because they support a diverse set of student programs. OSPiRG's cut of the fee works out to about \$2.75 per student. If we want to talk about expenses and access to higher education, let's talk about tuition and financial aid cuts instead. We need student programs because we have a right to protect our planet, to explore out cultural identities, and to have a voice in the process. We, as students, have a right to organize and fully fund all the programs that exist through the incidental fee. Ultimately, we must keep student activism strong at the U of O. Just as it's been for the last 25 years.

Kalpana Krishnamurthy is the State Board Chairwoman for OSPiRG.

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Letters to the editor must be limited to no more than 250 words, legible, signed and the identification of the writer must be verified when the letter is submitted.

Commentaries should be between 600 and 800 words, legible, signed and the identification of the writer must be verified when the commentary is submitted.

The *Emerald* reserves the right to edit any letter for length or style.

Oregon Daily Emerald

P.O. BOX 3159 EUGENE OREGON 97403

The *Oregon Daily Emerald* is published daily Monday through Friday during the school year and Tuesday and Thursday during the summer by the Oregon Daily Emerald Publishing Co., Inc., at the University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

The *Emerald* operates independently of the University with offices at Suite 300 of the Erb Memorial Union and is a member of the Associated Press.

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