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Broken Promises?

Kate Kompas
Iowa State University

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broken promises?

GSB talks the talk but does it walk the walk?

It's no surprise that Iowa State University students, by and large, don't participate in student government. After all, these are the same people who won't vote in national elections, let alone local, the same people who don't drink responsibly, who don't practice safe sex, who don't read the local news beyond their horoscope and have a list of late fees at Hollywood Video. In the big scheme of things, when you consider full class loads and assignments and projects, not to mention working to pay for school, disregarding the activities of the ISU Government of Student Body is hardly a sin. It's practically a necessity.

If you're not in GSB, or if you're not running for or planning to run for GSB, the definitive question is (Janet Jackson-style), "What has GSB done for me lately?" It's GSB's campaign season, and if you're the typical ISU student you probably know this, although you're not going to do anything about it. Candidates are everywhere: on the pages of the *Iowa State Daily*, on table tents at food service, hanging out near the Memorial Union trying to hand you a cookie. Like any politician, they say a lot of things to try to get your vote. They are probably even serious about some of those things.

In some cases, there's not a lot they can do. All current and past GSB presidents interviewed for this article started out with good intentions. Unfortunately, it's like the kid you voted for in high school for class president who promised he'd bring in fast food to replace school lunch and hire rock bands to play during study hall. Of course, the next year it was still sloppy joes and quiet study halls because Mr. Populist found out he has no real power. Every GSB president promises to fight for lower tuition, but it's the Board of Regents that makes those decisions. That's why tuition is rising 18 percent next year.

Other campaign proposals in the past few years include holding GSB town-hall style meetings (did happen), creating a campus multicultural center (didn't happen) and improving campus lighting (still working on it).

GSB may mean a lot to you if you're a dormie, or part of a campus organization or publication (such as *Ethos* or the *Iowa State Daily*) that receives money from its finance committee, or active in Veishea or the Inter-Residence Hall Association or some other high-profile group. But what does it mean to you if you're the average Joe student? How does GSB impact your life?

Everyone knows GSB funds tons of campus groups and chips in on the things students would miss, like ISU Lectures

Program's presentations. But where's the initiative? Does GSB ever accomplish anything that's not routine business? In March, they talk the talk. In September, do they walk the walk?

The Image Problem

Most GSB candidates in recent years have included in their platform some sort of reference to GSB's image problem. They don't call it that, but there's usually some sort of language about how GSB needs to take more steps to reach out to the student body, find out what students want, etc. GSB has done stuff in recent years like hold a meet-and-greet on central campus (a good idea and a chance to load up the purse with cookies) to get to know what students want.

GSB's reputation, though, hasn't been of an organization that works to serve students. You may think this reputation is deserved if you've been lucky enough to sit through one of their marathon meetings. (It's frustrating, but have you ever been to a city council meeting, or a school board meeting? This is life, people. This is government. It's slow and uninspiring.) *Daily Opinion* Editor Tim Paluch editorialized in a December column that, "If not for GSB, who would spend two hours in a heated debate over tasers that resulted in a paper-thin 30-to-2 vote? And if we lost our dedicated GSB, who would argue for hours over that poignant issue all students ponder regarding the GSB constitution — comma or semicolon?"

It's not a stretch to say that most students share Paluch's sentiment — if they have an opinion about GSB at all. Turnout for elections in past years has been dismal. Last year's turnout was a near record, and still only a quarter of the school voted. Even more embarrassing are the special elections. GSB held a second referendum on its off-campus government constitution in late January in hopes of garnering more turnout. The number rose from 19 total votes to 35.

For election commissioner Steve Skutnik, the magic number is 25. He'd like to equal the percentage from last year, but he acknowledges that will be tough. Last year's elections had several slates running, not to mention two polarizing issues on the ballot: fare-free CyRide and the elimination of specialty seats (the former passed, the latter didn't). Plus, it was the first year students could vote online.

Skutnik, who's been involved with GSB for the past few years, says some students feel disconnected to the organization. "GSB needs to prove itself through results," he says.

Story by Kate Kompas



“This year, I truly believe that President Bush, the pope and the Easter Bunny would have had to walk in that room and tell the regents not to raise tuition for them not to do it.”

Andy Tofilon, GSB President,

As election commissioner, Skutnik’s responsibilities include trying to increase student participation, which means both getting out the vote and trying to make sure there are plenty of qualified slates running. Just for the record, he says there are no limits in the GSB code on what candidates can or can’t promise.

Skutnik says he’s become more realistic about what GSB can accomplish. “Funds are limited,” he says. “You’re not going to be able to do a lot of things.”

Some promises, Skutnik acknowledged, seem to disappear shortly after the election’s over. “Look at the bus shelter,” he says.

Promises, promises

A bill giving money to build a bus shelter at the commuter lot passed during former GSB President Matt Craft’s administration. Craft, now a second-year law student at the University of Iowa, served during the 1999-2000 school year. Craft is proud of the bus shelter. To him, it was an example of GSB doing something that students will appreciate — when it’s done, of course.

“It’s something you can point to and see,” he says.

GSB President Andy Tofilon, along with Vice President Charlie Weaver and the senate, has at least tried to fulfill every one of their campaign promises, including improving campus lighting and trying to make textbooks more affordable. He’s had a successful term in office, although you might not think that when you consider the mammoth tuition hike next year. Tofilon works hard and is a good networker. It also helps that he got one of the highest turnouts in GSB history last year. It gives him credibility that past presidents haven’t had.

“When we ran, we wanted to make sure that we made promises and goals that we could actually finish,” Tofilon says. Among those goals: more than \$40,000 in improvements to campus lighting, putting tax-free forms for textbooks on the GSB Web site and splitting the fees on tuition. Tofilon had prepared himself for what he knew was going to be a difficult-if-not-impossible tuition battle. He had a preview of what it’s like to go head to head with the Board of Regents when he worked last year as GSB’s governmental liaison. “This year, I truly believe that President Bush, the pope and

the Easter Bunny would have had to walk in that room and tell the regents not to raise tuition for them not to do it,” he says. “The Board of Regents does not care about student opinion.”

Tofilon started this semester by writing down 43 things that he wanted to accomplish, among them, having more student seating at ISU basketball games and ensuring that the Thursday and Friday of Dead Week stay class free. Check again this time next year to see how far he got on the list.

He knows a lot of ISU students don’t know how GSB works or could care less. “I think people look past our accomplishments and just to our shortfalls,” he says. “For every four good stories we have in the paper, we have a bad one, and people remember the bad ones.”

It might be GSB’s bad luck that even their victories are eventually considered their defeats. The nearly \$500,000 commuter-lot bus shelter is one example. It was praised when it passed, but lately has garnered criticism because it’s so extravagant, and the university is in a budget crunch.

Craft learned a lot about the complexities of being a student leader during his first few months on the job. The campaign promises he and Vice President Garrett Toay accomplished, include recreating the Minority Student Affairs/GSB cabinet position, holding town-hall meetings, updating the GSB Web page (www.gsb.iastate.edu) and hosting a call-in show on KURE 88.5 FM.

He also learned how frustrating it can be to have a dialogue with a student body that’s not interested in talking. He and his v.p. got their KURE call-in show, but because of their awful time slot (Monday, 6-8 a.m.), interested callers were few and far between. No one showed up to one of their town-hall meetings except an *Iowa State Daily* reporter. “A lot of it is just the way it’s set up. There’s no introduction to GSB class,” Craft says. “No freshman walks on campus and knows how GSB works.”

Craft discovered the hard way why some GSB campaign promises can’t be kept. He and Toay wanted a multicultural center. “During my first meeting with Dr. Jischke, he asks, ‘Matt, what do you think you want to do?’ and I say, ‘Well, I’d really like a multicultural center.’ And he looked at me and asked, ‘Matt, what is a mul-

ticultural center?’ And I couldn’t answer.”

Craft thought the big issue would be where should the multicultural center go. He didn’t think about the money, who it should be for, etc. It’s like the perennial GSB promise to improve campus lighting. One might think, what’s the big deal? Just screw in some new light bulbs. Craft now recognizes, “You have to have plans, get approval of DPS and the university, and maybe the Board of Regents depending on how extensive the changes are, and you spend all that time doing that, and at the end of the day the Board of Regents is still going to want a check.

“These are major, major projects. It’s going to take longer than one president to get them done,” he continues.

It seems that for GSB presidents, it’s better to think small. Bryan Burkhardt, GSB president for the 1998-99 school year, was happy that he and Jamal White, his vice president, were able to get more security phones for campus, although “the senate did not support us.” He also enjoyed participating in the George Washington Carver celebration, which he thinks helped give some students more exposure to GSB. They also encouraged students to come to their meetings by occasionally moving the location to a bigger area.

Those were some of the things that the Burkhardt/White administration did get done. Here are some of the other campaign promises that were discussed but never followed through: implementing professor evaluations in the middle of the semester, fighting tuition increases and, like Craft, advocating a multicultural center.

Burkhardt’s is one of the few presidencies that was marred by controversy, even though it was a relatively small one. Some senators alleged that they mishandled money tagged for George Washington Carver special projects. The charges were quickly dropped. There were critics during Burkhardt’s term who said that GSB was not sensitive to minority opinions. There also was much speculation about whether Burkhardt and White would run for office again, though they didn’t. “That turned into a distraction,” says Burkhardt, who now teaches at Des Moines Area Community College and lives in Des Moines. “But I have no regrets. It turned out to be a great experience.”

The Tuition Monster

Ben Golding also doesn't have any regrets about his term, although he says he wishes he had focused less on the tuition battle and more on issues that students can control. Golding, who was president during the 2000-2001 school year, now lives in Los Angeles and works for a project management company. He calls the tuition fight "one of the most frustrating experiences possible."

"It wasn't worth it. Tuition is never worth it," he says. "There are so many other projects. GSB has never won a tuition fight, never made an impact, but we had to do it. It's one of those things: You can't not fight it, but you can't win it either. We definitely thought we could make an impact, but shame on us for spending time doing other things."

Burkhardt says when talking to the regents, it's best to use tactics such as using "real students" stories. He notes that the regents "are at the mercy of the Legislature" when trying to figure out the regent universities' budgets. However, he says the regents don't take into account how many students may be forced to leave ISU in massive debt or leave ISU period. "I wish they'd have a two-year plan, instead of springing tuition increases on students like they're an emergency," he says, adding that he'd like to know exactly how much money it will take for ISU "to reach its plateau of excellence."

"I feel bad for the students who started here three years ago and are paying hundreds of dol-

lars more than they thought they would have to, even in-state students," he says.

Craft was the last GSB president under whom there was a fairly benign tuition increase, 4.3 percent. He says he stressed to his predecessors, Golding and Tofilon, to prepare extensively to make their case to the Board of Regents. "You have to be a 21-year-old who isn't afraid to call up someone with a Ph.D. and tell them why they're wrong," he says.

Golding's battle with the tuition crunch was the first in two straight years of budget cuts from the statehouse. He spent a lot of time on tuition, which may be why some of his campaign promises, such as posting teacher evaluations online, never happened. (Although it has made a comeback this semester.)

"I loved it," Golding says. "The senate, they challenged us on our decisions, and gosh darn it, sometimes you had to stand in front of a roomful of people who didn't like you. Every day I face that, and it makes my life easier now."

How Much Power Do They Have?

Not many students spend a lot of time emailing their ISU presidents to pick their brains. Few students trek down to the state capitol to give their legislators the business. Not many students travel to Board of Regents meetings to explain exactly why tuition increases are not a good idea. GSB executives and senators do all these things. So when people ask how much power GSB actually does have, they

disregard all of this. As Craft pointed out, GSB works best when it acts as an interest group for the student body.

"President Jischke heavily relied on what we had to say when he was seeking student input," Burkhardt says. "He had difficulties relating to students, so he'd use us to kind of feel out what he should do. And that's a big responsibility, when you're representing 25,000 students."

Rob Wiese, who was GSB president during the 1997-98 school year, said GSB presidents have a lot more influence than one might expect. For instance, Veishea, which was officially dry for the first time during Wiese's presidency. Many students said then-President Jischke was to blame for the alcohol-free pledge. It was actually a decision made by Wiese and other student leaders.

"It's a lot like government in that you don't really care about it, and a lot of students don't participate, which is bad, but things still run pretty smoothly, and their interests are pretty well represented," Wiese says.

There you have it. It's up to you to decide whether GSB is relevant to your life or just a paper tiger. But considering the influence they have with the men in Beardshear, it might be a good idea for those of you who have routinely avoided the elections to follow the campaigns. Even better, check again next year to see if the promises are kept.

Kate Kompas is a senior in journalism. She is Ethos' copy chief.

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