



Graduate Student Organization

Summer 2010

Official Statement of the Graduate Student Organization (GSO) Executive Council regarding the GSO-sponsored survey for SBU graduate students on the Public Higher Education Empowerment & Innovation Act (PHEEIA)

In April of 2010, the GSO Senate passed a resolution to endorse the Public Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act (PHEEIA), with some notable concerns and caveats. The purpose of the current statement is address the subsequent survey, which was designed by the Stony Brook Center for Survey Research to assess the general SBU grad student public opinion regarding the proposed legislation (PHEEIA). The Survey Center's full report, along with data, can be found here <http://sbgso.org/node/7919>.

The original Senate resolution (found here <http://sbgso.org/node/7917>), while broadly expressing enthusiasm for PHEEIA, also expressed strong reservations. The tone of the resolution expressed the sentiment that Stony Brook graduate students did not necessarily prefer PHEEIA, but rather that PHEEIA was preferable only relative to the status quo that includes immense and irresponsible budget cuts handed down from New York State. To paraphrase some points in the resolution, graduate students would prefer that SUNY be fully funded by the state, but if it will not, then PHEEIA is a viable alternative solution to solve the budget crisis. Echoing this sentiment, one PhD student respondent said, "I worry that PHEEIA may be the best of horrible options for Stony Brook right now."

The GSO was very interested to investigate how most Stony Brook graduate students felt about PHEEIA. Thus, we solicited the Center for Survey Research to conduct the survey. Although the GSO Executive Council worked on formulating our own original survey questions, they were largely discarded and the final survey was nearly identical to the one for Stony Brook faculty (conducted earlier in the spring).

The results of the survey are somewhat discouraging, when considering the low response rate from SBU grad students. Only about 10% of graduate students responded to the survey, and it is clear by the free-responses that many of the respondents felt that they were not given an adequate amount of information to make informed opinions on PHEEIA. Students also expressed frustration and apathy with regard to New York State and Stony Brook University politics. "I really don't get involved in state or local politics, including the SUNY system," said a PhD student respondent. "I really don't have much of an opinion on the topic because I don't know enough about it, or either sides of the argument for or against PHEEIA. The information provided in this survey is not enough for me to pass judgment or formulate an opinion on the matter," said a Masters student. "I was not too familiar with PHEEIA, I answered the questions based upon the information you provided;

assuming the information was correct and not biased,” said another Masters student.

In addition, graduate student respondents expressed a disparaging tone toward both New York State and SUNY/Stony Brook University. “I don't trust the NYS legislature any more than I trust the SUNY Board of Trustees,” said a student. While having the increased resources/revenue stream through PHEEIA may seem like an attractive solution to some, this was detracted by perceptions that it would be misused or wasted by local administration. “I wish that the Universities would look more at where the money is going than where it is coming from. Everywhere I go on campus I see waste. Before money is put into new buildings it should go towards making the current ones more energy efficient,” said a Masters student. “While some people (such as GSO in their recent resolution) suggest that PHEEIA will increase funds available for programs, services, new faculty, etc. that are important to graduate students, there are no guidelines for how funds raised through tuition hikes will be allocated. We have no assurance that the money raised will be used to directly benefit students,” said a PhD student.

There was also a tone expressing caution rather than opposition. While some students thought that PHEEIA has potential to be positive for Stony Brook, they also expressed the need to think carefully about the legislation itself before passing judgment either way (to address unforeseen consequences). “I am for certain articles and against certain implications, mostly due to the lack of clarity of the promises and lack of any given measurement or objective guarantee,” said one PhD student. “As long as the funds go toward increased faculty lines and Ph.D. stipends, then I am in favor. If the funds merely go towards privatization and treating the university as a business, then I strongly oppose,” said another PhD student.

It should be noted that on the whole, those who responded to the survey tended to moderately oppose PHEEIA. The breakdown, by degree path, and other demographics can be found in the survey report <http://sbgso.org/node/7919>. Concerns about environmental and union labor protections seem to be pressing amongst grad students, apart from the general philosophical concern about public higher education being funded by the state. “In addition to the reservations I have regarding protection for unionized employees and the environmental regulations (or lack thereof), I am also wary of undermining the public character of the SUNY ed system by turning these into private institutions,” said a PhD student.

The GSO Executive Council would like to call attention to a few notable caveats in the survey.

- 1) Despite the global opposition to PHEEIA, there were mixed findings with regards to individual provisions. For example, respondents opposed tuition increases, but were evenly divided about the idea of transferring tuition-setting power to SUNY from the legislature. Respondents opposed differential tuition across universities/colleges, but they supported relaxing state control to allow for more public-private partnerships.
- 2) Respondents tended to hold mixed beliefs about the implications of PHEEIA passing/not passing. Respondents opposed tuition increases overall, but also believed tuition would increase even if PHEEIA does *not* pass. Respondents

also believed that course offerings and stipend levels would remain stable for SBU grad students, despite the budget cuts (even if PHEEIA is *not* passed). This is in contradiction to the fact that plenty of courses have already been cut due to budgetary constraints, and the SBU administration has said that hundreds more will be cut in the near future.

- 3) PhD students were more likely than MA students to support PHEEIA overall, and they were more likely to support specific provisions (e.g. tuition increases).

In conclusion, despite the seemingly confused and somewhat conflicting results of the survey, they do not negate the will of the Senate, which voted strongly (by a substantial margin) in favor of a resolution to endorse PHEEIA (with some notable caveats). However, the results of the survey demonstrate the need for more discussion, more elaboration, and more investigation about the proposals contained in PHEEIA. It is now the goal of GSO to assist the process of educating graduate students on what PHEEIA actually contains, as well as the overall Stony Brook budget situation in general. Through this increased effort to foster education and debate, it is our hope that graduate students will be more informed and participate more readily.

What is needed right now is substantive discussion about the current state of the Stony Brook University budget, the PHEEIA legislation itself, what the implications of PHEEIA will be (if passed), and what the implications will be if PHEEIA is *not* passed. Respondents on the survey were emphatically calling for more information. The GSO Executive Council recommends town-hall style meetings, with freedom for dissent and debate, so that all sides may be heard, and so that all members of the SBU community may be educated and informed. Only then will they be able to make quality judgments about PHEEIA and where to progress from here.

The GSO Executive Council also recommends that the SBU administration discuss, in more concrete terms, what they plan to do with the increased revenue stream and the increased autonomy if PHEEIA passes. We believe this will help quell students' fears and concerns about the potential risks of PHEEIA outweighing the potential gains. While some are completely trustful of the intentions of the administration, many others are not. The SBU graduate student community as a whole would benefit from more elaboration and detailed descriptions of plans (similar to the proposal to hire 400 new faculty members). These proposals should contain specifics on what grad students stand to gain with the increased revenue through PHEEIA (e.g. more course offerings, higher stipends for PhD students, affordable housing, etc.)