General Assembly Meeting: November 10, 2013

Keywords: NESCAC Student Government Conference update, first-year academic policies, Roth’s questions on the residential college model, elections reform

Agenda:
Opening of the Meeting: Meeting called to order at 7:00pm

1. Fight song and role call
2. Open Forum
3. Minutes: APPROVED.
4. Committee Reports
   a. Andrew Trexler: I just want to reiterate that if anyone is considering running for the CoCo chair position, please come talk to me so I know who I might be training.
   b. Nicole Brenner: I think a mobile app would make my life way easier.
   c. Andrew Trexler: The mobile website also prevents you from seeing important information.
   d. Nicole Updegrove: What was the cost for the Fan Van buses?
   e. Justin Gitlin: It was free for students, but cost the university $600.
   f. Nicole Updegrove: We might consider offering van services more often, to other venues like Miller’s Pond, Lyman Orchards, etc.
   g. Sadasia McCutchen: 115 people signed up but only 43 showed up for the bus to Trinity. We lost a lot of money.
   h. Jacob Munisky: We should have students make a down payment to ensure they show up.
   i. Justin Gitlin: I disagree. We shouldn’t charge people. This is a service to fans; something they shouldn’t have to pay for.
5. NESCAC Student Government Conference Update
   a. Lily Herman: First off, thank you to everyone who was involved, Mary for hosting a rocking party and Ben for taking minutes. We had four different schools attend- Bates, Middlebury, Tufts, and Conn College. We discussed nine different topics, from budgeting, finaid, residential life policy, academic policy, it was very productive. The point was to foster discussion, someone said they were not aware that other schools did student government differently. Bates has stepped up to host a conference in February. Right now we’re actually live-tweeting GA; this has been very successful at other
b. Rebecca Hutman: I was in the career center breakout session; it takes a lot of different forms on different campuses. A lot of school had very cool incentive programs to make students to get involved earlier with the career center. The other session concerned advising and helping other students. Very informative.

c. Lily Herman: If you want to see specific notes on specific topics, please let me know. Check them out—it’s cool to see what other schools are doing.

d. Nicole Brenner: Thank you for all your hard work Lily!

6. First-Year Academic Policies

a. Grant Tanenbaum: For a while, AAC has discussed changing first year academic policies. Many peer institutions have policies specifically for first semester. In the course, we realized Wes’ withdrawal period is far shorter than other schools. You will get a W if you withdraw from a course beyond drop/add period. Before going to administrators with these ideas, we want to see what GA thinks.

b. Rebecca Hutman: First, we’re going to talk about the policies of other schools. Some schools have an extended withdrawal period, some schools have a two-week drop/add period, and then a 2-month period during which you can withdraw without

c. Ben Marvin-Vanderryn: There might some push-back to having freshmen-specific policy. However, freshmen come into college with no prior knowledge and have no way to gauge how difficult courses will be.

d. Rebecca Hutman: The root of our exploration is that many freshmen come into college not knowing how rigorous their coursework will be and only realize it occurs after the drop/add period. Let’s open it up to general discussion now.

e. Ben Marvin-Vanderryn: After looking freshmen-specific policy, the next question is whether we should expand the withdrawal period for the entire school.

f. Rebecca Hutman: We’re going to discuss three possibilities--first, an extension of drop/add.

g. Nicki Softness: I’m wondering if we have stats on withdrawal. Do people actually withdraw and end up not getting the grade they want?

h. Key Session: Teachers are really encouraging initially, but after a while, the class gets very difficult and students have no choice but to withdraw from the class. There’s also a negative effect on drop/add in that when one enters a class late, there is a lot of information lost and there’s really no way to catch up. Let’s extend the drop period—but not the add period.

i. Matan Green-Koplin: I agree. It would be futile for both the students and teachers for students to enter the class that late. I’m not sure if this policy should be extended to all students.

j. Justin Gitlin: This might be dangerous and lead to more grade inflation. The mean grade given here is an A-, and that’s scary. Grades don’t mean anything here–we shouldn’t
be as concerned as we are with GPA. Considering I was never a freshman here, I don’t have that same perspective.

k. Ben Marvin-Vanderryn: Bowdoin does this for all first year students, including transfer.

l. Nicole Updegrove: An experience I have had is being on the Academic Review committee, if you’ve failed too many classes or your GPA is too low, you are asked to take a semester off to get everything together. Many people say they fell behind freshman year without realizing it, and ended up having to make those credits up during later semesters. Perhaps if a student is above a certain number of credits, then they could drop a class without repercussions. Otherwise, I don’t know if that’s a sustainable model, given that people might drop and cause problems for their academic futures, as well as other people’s ability to take seats in the class.

m. Martin Malabanan: I don’t want to extend the drop and not the add, this brings up Nicole’s problem. If you drop too many, you won’t be able to add the class you need. Professors gave you that seat in that class and another student can’t add, then there are holes in the class and many students who want to be there will not be able to.

n. Victor Zhao: I think I really like this idea about extending the drop/add period.
Considering the liberal arts nature of Wesleyan, it would make sense to allow students to experience a wider range of classes before having to declare their major. Let each department decide how long the drop/add period should be.

o. Lily Herman: I want to add that we should add transfer students in the mix rather than just focusing on freshmen. It would be huge to make policy the same for all first year students.

p. Grant Tanenbaum: Just to the point of more withdrawals, at least students would be withdrawing whether or not they will get the W. Empty seats is a good point, but there will be empty seats either way. In AAC we felt that we could not find consensus within our own group, so these are good thoughts.

q. Rebecca Hutman: Also for students who take more than four credits their first semester, they should able to pare down to three credits and then take five credits when their academic ability increasing.

r. Justin Gitlin: I just think that this could be very dangerous, students should not be able to drop without repercussions. If a student takes 7 classes and then drops the ones s/he does most poorly in, this feeds into the whole grade inflation ordeal.

s. Ben Marvin-Vanderryn: I like that we’re getting all this feedback. If we’re trying to give people additional weeks of normal classes, then we should leave the add period where it is. Two weeks is long enough to give students an idea of what the class is like.

t. Nicole Updegrove: I want to echo the point about not extending drop/add. The class will move more slowly as a result of too much fluidity in course registration. The idea of having all pass/fail for first semester of freshman year might be a better option for stressed out freshmen. We should also explore the idea of covered grades, meaning first
semester transcript shows up all pass/fail, but you could have them uncovered and have a grade show up if you were to apply to med school, etc.

u. Andrew Trexler: Just want to contest the idea that withdrawals would not go up significantly. If I got an F on my mid-term and I was ahead on credits, I would absolutely consider withdrawing because I had to ability to and because it doesn’t reflect my performance in that class.

v. Richard Fessler: Because this is designed to fix overwhelmed freshmen. A better way to fix this is better advising. This would keep freshmen from being overwhelmed. Advisors shouldn’t just sign off on classes for students.

w. Nicole Brenner: To back off of that, I don’t think that the case of students taking 7 classes would happen very often, for there is a 4 course limit. I don’t see advisors being willing to increase that to 8 credits.

x. Grant Tanenbaum: There are often misconceptions about courses during drop/add - as you can see from comparison chart, it’s not uncommon to have a long period where you can drop without getting a W. Administration keeps insisting that a W is not a punishment, but it seems to be a bad thing to have on a transcript. I don’t see a problem about being able to withdraw from a course if you had a misconception about a course.

y. Isabelle Linzer: Let’s extend the drop/add period but not the withdrawal period. This way students will know what the class is like and be less likely to withdraw.

z. Ben: I just wanted to speak to the point Nicole made, there are many options we can explore. There are better pass/fail options at other NESCAC schools, and the covered grade policy is from Johns Hopkins. Under this policy, you get an S or a U, meaning satisfactory or unsatisfactory, and graduate/med schools can see grades if necessary. There is less pressure to get an A during your freshman year and more freedom to try classes you might not otherwise. Another option include not factoring freshman year grades into GPA.

aa. Sadasia McCutchen: I think that all of these ideas are great. I think that the biggest issue is that advising shouldn’t be for all four years. There might be different circumstances for students and their plans might change.

bb. Colin O’Keeffe: Going off of Grant’s point about how the W looks on a transcript. There is the possibility of placing a WP-- withdrawal passing-- to blur the distinction and ease the tension from withdrawing.

c. Richard Fessler: I just had an anecdote about extending drop/add: I am currently taking a class that said it required four 3-7 page papers, but it was bumped up to two much, much longer papers. I’m doing a lot more work for this class than I expected. I stayed in it, but I can see myself in a situation in which I would not be able to do it.

dd. Nicole Brenner: I’m looking into students who might have stronger or better grades freshman year-- FYS and intro courses have a lot less workload than higher level classes. A better solution to these issues would indeed be better advising and holding
professors accountable to their syllabi.

ee. Patrick Keogh: I would be down to extend the drop part of drop/add but not the add part. No professor would take you that late into the game. I think it should be for everyone because I think people would be mad. About advisors, I have had 3 advisors in 2.5 years here, and my professors have not asked specific questions about the classes I’m taking. Most just press approve and then everything’s done. About pass/fail, I know at Vassar, once per semester you can pick a class, you set a grade limit, and if you get below that grade, it goes as pass/fail. If you get above that limit, it goes down as a grade.

ff. Nicole Updegrove: First, Ben and Rebecca should talk to top grad schools to find out what they think about Ws. Second, all freshmen should be required to have four courses in the first semester unless they have AP credits so that they don’t fall behind. Third, we should find out how many students wanted to be in classes that people ended up dropping. Finally, we should extend the grading mode change option for freshmen and for any classes. If we make this only a pass/fail extension, there’s no pressure taken off concerning grades.

gg. Key Session: My advisor was more involved and told me that the class I am now struggling in was a hard class - mentor said nbd, teacher said hang on, everybody told me different things...it’s good to stick with it, but I am seriously struggling. What is more important, a W or my mental/emotional health? It affects all of my other classes.

hh. Rebecca Hutman: Improving advising will do wonders for upperclassmen, but not sufficient for freshman. You don’t know what levels of difficulty really mean. This is needed at least for freshmen because they need time for self-discovery, and no advice can help sufficiently.

ii. Ben Marvin-Vanderryn: Thank you everyone for contributing. Just looking at what everyone is saying. I think we should extend the drop period to four weeks--don’t know if it should be freshmen specific. Students at Bates for instance, only gets two pass/fail classes for their entire college career. Wesleyan is lacking, and our policies do not match up to other schools. I am looking to pursue a change somewhere.

jj. Nicki Softness: In other schools, there exists a normal GPA and a major GPA. Most employers don’t care about grades in classes other than major-specific ones. Freshman year is the time to explore academic interests and shouldn’t reflect poorly on one’s transcript.

kk. Andrew Trexler: At least in social and behavioral science classes, there is an actual impact in the class whether or not you are trying for a grade or pass/fail, discussions suffer. It’s useful to know that grade inflation in the US has risen from around 2.3 in 1940 to around 3.3 in the late ’90s.

ll. Lily Herman: I think another issue is that a lot of freshmen don’t understand what a hard college class is. FYM classes could be easy or hard and don’t convey the difficulty of
some college courses. It’s not the fault of students that they aren’t prepared for college classes.

mm. Nicole Updegrove: Something I wanted to add: if you are in a dance class and you twist your ankle, you can get a note from the health center and drop the class without a W. This should be considered for all classes and all types of health, including mental/psychological health. We shouldn’t have to decide between our mental health and grades.

nn. Richard Fessler: I thought it was great that liberal arts college have more expansive policies. This way, students can take more classes that interest them and fulfill the liberal arts mission. If we can have a system that encourages students to branch out more, it would be far more beneficial.

oo. Justin Gitlin: I wanted to counter Nicki’s point - it is a liberal arts education, a DaVincian school of thought and if we move more toward pre-vocational thinking, then we are moving away from the liberal-arts mission.

pp. Nicki Softness: I didn’t mean it more in a pre-professional way, but more of a “shouldn’t we give students the ability to put their best selves forward” sort of way?

qq. Rebecca Hutman: Thank you so much for all of this. You are all great!

7. Roth’s Questions on Creating a Residential College Experience

a. Cynthia Tong ’14 is joining us.

b. Jason Shatz: I have received several responses to this question. We need a larger space for UOC. We could also get new senior housing. At the student conference, people noted that our peers have spaces where classes, or the whole student body, can gather. Wes doesn’t. We could renovate Fayerweather to allow for more social events. We could also put something on the old Mocon space. But the construction of new spaces might provoke student discontent - in terms of facilities, many students prefer the status quo.

c. Mansoor Alam: First, I would like to put out my support for the fact that one of the greatest spaces on campus, students do not have access to the Butts Tunnels. College row is absolutely beautiful. The guy who wrote the gatekeepers said that a lot of the buildings are very cool but don’t fit in with each other. I feel like PAC doesn’t have that cool look or identity - it kind of intrudes and from an aesthetic standpoint, I would like to see that change.

d. Nicole Brenner: On the Butts Tunnels, we could use that space for music practice space. It’s better than Usdan because it allows musicians to go something closer to them.

e. Cynthia Tong: I submitted a proposal for the 2020 proposal thing about creating a new student-run art space. I heard there was a building on Hamlin street owned by Wesleyan but just needs to be renovated. It could bring more of campus down there. I envision a space with an entrance space, a place to practice dance and music, and it’s
hard to get space for student run theater and dance productions. I envision music
practice rooms with all of the equipment. An open gallery space for visual artists to
display their work. It would be great for people to have access to show their work. Art
rooms to develop works, and space for interdisciplinary work. Create a 2-year long
internship for students to run the space. It would be run by ourselves and not owned by
higher-ups. It’s not realistic financially, but I thought we should go big or go home.
f. Ben Marvin-Vanderryn: Out of the conference, I went to a school spirit breakout
session. Conn College had some great suggestions. Different classes organize different
events that gradually open up to the whole school. We’ve asked how we can create
more cohesive unity at Wes. I would like to see a space that could host an entire class
for events.
g. Nicole Brenner: The student art space is a really good idea, especially with frustration
with the movement of the art library. I think that more student space is important,
especially student art space. Ben, I know that a lot of schools do end more successful
spirit events, so a space to bring people together would also be good.
h. Richard Fessler: I would change Usdan. Having two dining spaces is futile. Having one
large dining hall would be able to host an entire class.
i. Jacob Munisky: Considering this school really cares about the arts, there are very few
spaces to perform. We also need a place for students groups to hang out-- not
necessarily a large place. 190 High is supposed to be that place, but isn’t at all.
j. Patrick Keogh: Housing for people whose groups fall apart should be available.
k. Justin Gitlin: SciLi and Exley are hideous.
l. Nicole Updegrove: If you have strong opinions, send us a paragraph and we will try to
send them on.
m. Victor Zhao: More of the FAC could be utilized as a space for groups meeting. Such as
the Bacon Field House.

n. Amarachi: In terms of getting the new space, it is definitely because Spring Fling is
normally relegated to the the hockey rink.

8. Election Reform

a. Mika Reyes: Why do we use petitions? I don’t see the point.
b. Jacob Munisky: It’s just a way to make sure you can do that. If people won’t sign that
petition, you really shouldn’t be on the WSA.
c. Jason Shatz: There should be a balance. We need enough time for freshmen to get to
know one another. However, with Facebook and other social media, it accelerates the
process. We might expect them that they would read up on the WSA. But they don’t--
most simply run on their prior high school student government experience.
d. Key Session: I’m only elected for a half-year term, which means that I have a slightly
shorter term. Plus, freshman year, it’s more of a popularity contest, and to cut down on
this, we should have a shorter term.
e. Nicki Softness: Yes. Make the time for elections way shorter. Having GA assembled and ready to go is really needed. Freshmen don’t need that long to decide if they want to run.

f. Andrew Trexler: If we push back petitions, they would be due the first week of classes.

g. Rebecca Hutman: Pushing it back has no bearing on popularity.

h. Nicole Brenner: If people are worried about the amount of time in getting signatures. Maybe people would be able to sign an online petition in lieu of a physical petition. This would save a lot of time.

i. Lily Herman: My freshman year had elections during the second week. Knowing names and being WesAdmits famous really affected who won. We need to move up elections because it affects not only people running but those already on the WSA.

j. Andrew Trexler: By keeping it the way it is, I really don’t want freshmen to worry about getting signatures while they’re setting up their classes. Chairs can schedule meetings and get work started even without committee members.

k. Madison Moore: If we’re going to move it up, set up before the first week. Too short of a time for freshman - it’s already a hectic time filled with a lot of information. Give them information ahead of time, don’t move it up.

l. Ben Marvin-Vanderryn: I agree with Trexler. None of this shouldn’t be going on during the first week. Elections shouldn’t last an entire work. Let’s do petitions for the first two days and then elections for the last three days of that week.

m. Justin Gitlin:

n. Patrick Keogh: I saw my email and I decided to run.

o. Izzy Linzer: I saw a great opportunity that wasn’t there for me in my first week.

p. Scott Elias: It’s easy from the perspective of an upperclassmen to think that we should be doing more. But it’s so much harder for first-year students, and I think we want people to figure out if the WSA is the experience for them or not before they run. And I think it’s also important for committee chairs to get their work done before the committee is set up. Also I don’t think we should shorten the voting period because we already have such low voter turnout with the week we give people now.

q. Nicole Updegrove: I wanted to shift gears to talk about costs. We ask that candidates don’t spend more than $25 on campaigning excluding printing. Should we include printing within that spending limit?

r. Colin O’Keeffe: We should elect people not based on how much money they spend. In addition to the statement, candidates should have to respond to a prompt as well.

s. Lizzie Shackney: The petition process was the time when I spoke to people outside of my friend group and got to learn about more issues.

t. Andrew Trexler: We should extend the $25 limit to all elections and include the printing as well. Let’s also extend the free printing to 50 sheets as well. Also, the appointments process has really convoluted language. I’d like to change it to prior to second quarter
classes only.

u. Nicole Brenner: In response to the cost limit, I think that it should be extended to both general and presidential election. I think ___ election should be kept separate, because if someone wants to print a big poster that might be more than $25 would be alright. If you can print 500 small copies, I would imagine you would want bigger things to get elected.

v. Mansoor Alam: I would bring the limit down to $0 and let them print unlimitedly in the WSA office.

w. Ben Marvin-Vanderynn: Let’s limit the amount of posters one can print to just the ones in the WSA office. The election this year wasn’t so much a popularity contest than just a name recognition contest.

x. Andrew Trexler: One can print a banner for less than $25. I want to add printing to the spending limit because last year, there was a lot of printing done. I want to maintain the $25 limit because to make things more equitable. Let’s also set up a fund to help students on financial aid run for office.

y. Nicki Softness: To put this into perspective, I can’t recall anyone buying anything beside markers and tape. People are not spending 100s of dollars. There are places to get free supplies as well.

z. Nicole Brenner: It’s very tricky to have a spending limit of $0. One should be able to put their name on a paper.

aa. Nicole Updegrove: I’d like to introduce another question: the custodian staff has to work a lot more given the large distribution of posters. Should we restrict where posters should be placed in order to limit the amount of work custodians have to do? Examples: on the ground, on glass.

bb. Richard Fessler: Spending limit - hard to enforce? Some people have things already or have more access. In ResLife, there is a room filled with art supplies. It’s a place for general use. Could we have a room with supplies that can be used by everyone?

c. Andrew Trexler: I agree with Richard that having the limit of $0 causes problems. There is an advantage that WSA members have over other candidates because of their access to the WSA office.

d. Nicki Softness: My freshmen year, the people who got elected were the people who put in the most work. I’m wary of limiting printing. In regards to where one puts posters, I agree that posters should not be placed on the ground, however, posters should be able to be placed on doors.

e. Nicole Updegrove: One more question. Typically, the elections committee will announce when elections are occurring a few weeks before it begins, but sometimes incumbents start campaigning in advance. Should one be allowed to declare they’re running before that date? Are there other guidelines that we should create guidelines for the presidential elections? For instance, at other schools, candidates need to attend a
certain number of meetings before they can run.

ff. Andrew Trexler: There has never been an investigation into the funds spent by students. As for where people place posters, there is an important aspect to elections we need to maintain. We shouldn’t create a requirement for presidential elections-- let’s have the voters decide.

gg. Madison Moore: A different point - how you get votes in an election. In high school, people would go around with phones asking people to vote right there. That’s kind of cheating, in my opinion. If you have access to and go around with a smart tablet and ask people to vote for you, this is not fair.

hh. Ben Marvin-Vanderryn: Let’s extend the no campaigning rule to include people walking around with computers to get people to vote.

ii. Nicole Brenner: Does anyone have thoughts on other people making posters for candidates?

jj. Patrick Keogh: Regarding the prior point made by my esteemed colleagues, and while I get there’s no WSA police, it’s hard to hold people accountable for “WSA crimes”.

kk. Ben Marvin-Vanderryn: It would be easy to tell if someone is going around with something telling people to vote for them, so there’s really no need to create a special police force. Let’s allow other people to make posters.

ll. Andrew Trexler: Expensive posters made by others for candidates should be taken down but the candidates themselves should not be punished. Wandering around with a phone or computer to campaign shouldn’t be restricted. People should be expected to do the right things considering the $25 limit.

mm. Justin Gitlin: I’m good with the “Super PACs”. If one can mobilize campaign efforts, more power to ya.

nn. Andrew Trexler: I’m concerned about the money being spent, not the efforts.

oo. Rebecca Hutman: We should look to more forms of campaigning, like town halls, which help more people learn about what candidates actually stand for.

pp. Andrew Trexler: People who have actual platforms wildly outperform those who make up raps for their statement.

9. New Business and Announcements

Meeting Adjourned: 09:15pm

Respectfully Submitted,
Fred Ayres ‘17 and Lizzie Shackney ‘17