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A broken table: what really happened to this year's USG



BIANCA MONTEIRO | THE TICKER

The 2017-2018 USG senate table has seen eight resignations, communication issues, inefficient spending, arguments over social Greek life and problems with events.

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In a year marked by eight resignations, Baruch College's Undergraduate Student Government is ending the year with a weight on its shoulders. While it managed to still host many of its important student events and continues to handle budget allocations for clubs as well as for itself, this USG ultimately functioned through the strengths of its individuals working independently rather than as an organization.

"The individuals on the table were strong in their positions and worked hard to get the job done," USG President Isabel Arias said in an interview with *The Ticker*. "They just didn't always work well together."

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USG's revolving door: what happened and what went wrong

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Communication was one of the team's biggest problems.

"We just had a lot of communication errors. I just feel like maybe if we had all spoke more in our group chats or kept our doors open more or communicated more to each other just as people maybe that would work out well," said Emma Jorgensen, chair of the Appeals Committee.

While many of the communication issues were resolved following the tall end of the table's high turnover, these issues began to blur the lines between the personal and professional lives of many elected officials.

While the social Greek life recruitment moratorium was a highly contested issue during the latter half the table's tenure, this USG also dealt with other internal issues regarding timely communication in regard to design, marketing and planning for certain USG events, as well as exorbitant spending toward the beginning of the academic year. Despite this, many members were able to implement ideas within their own committees, but few found solidarity on the table. This at times was problematic due to the nature of some committees, such as marketing or graphics, that rely on other table members and vice versa to properly execute events.

Some members also felt that the e-board was to blame for some of the communication issues that existed both earlier in the year and during the discussion framing social Greek life. Representative Sen. Andrew Windsor commented, "This year's e-board tries to run things a little 'top down' so to speak. And while they do let people have room to do and say what they want, they also try to voice their opinions a little loudly on the table and mess with senate business when they shouldn't."

Windsor pointed to a time in which Treasurer Suzanna Egan explained something over another chair, when he believed it should have been left to the chair to speak, or when President Isabel Arias expressed stern opposition to the frat resolution.

Chair of Clubs and Organizations Arvis Chen also commented on the e-board's initial failure to promote a more varied discussion. "We didn't really facilitate an open-ended discussion. When we had majority opinion ideas, it would hardly ever change."

He later went on to elaborate on Arias' position on the table.

"For Isabel, I'll follow her blindly; she's my leader. She's incredibly smart, has a reason for everything," he said. He, however, pointed out that during the social Greek life resolution discussion, her argument for the opposing side within the issue was largely at odds with the rest of the senate.

He went on: "Behind the scenes, she was the person. Whenever someone wanted to leave, she would ask them 'What's wrong? What can I do to make you stay? If I talk to this person, will you be able to stay?' She tried so hard."

When the table was first voted in as a team and was still in its infancy, it retained several members of the prior Undergraduate Student Government: Arias, who became president; Ehtasham Bhatti, who became treasurer but resigned in November; Suleman Aleem, who became vice president of Academic Affairs but resigned in April; Michael Cherry, who remained on as a representative senator but similarly resigned over winter break; and Windsor, who was specially elected onto the table as a representative senator in February.

All of the other original table members were part of club life, resulting in a diverse group of students who previously did not appear on the table in the same majority. This included student clubs

and organizations such as the SEEK society, T.E.A.M. Baruch, Dominican Student Association, Marketers of Baruch and Alpha Kappa Psi.

Some members quit their previous club obligations, but others joined USG while still holding positions in their clubs. This includes Nicole Taniguchi, who was simultaneously chair of the Marketing Committee within USG and held a director position within Alpha Kappa Psi during the year.

While involvement within USG does not prohibit involvement in student clubs or other organizations, time commitment became one of the biggest issues within the organization. It resulted in a lag in completion of work duties as well as several resignations.

Because many elected officials came from club life, Egan in an interview noted a line of thinking that explained some of the overspending that was present earlier in the year.

In the way that clubs usually operate, spending the entire club budget for the year is generally encouraged, as it shows a responsibility for the club's mission and shows that the club is active and operating. Within USG, however, a steep learning curve exists for significantly larger available budget, Egan explained.

Some members failed to grasp exactly what they had to do regarding payments, invoices and contracts, especially in light of the treasurer turnover. Internal spending for programming is largely within the approval of the treasurer. During the turnover, however, events like "Perfect Winter," which attracted attention for its high shipping prices, were not approved first and had to be approved retroactively, otherwise vendors would not get paid.

Egan argued that the thinking toward organization spending, especially among members coming from a club life background, had to shift from "How can I spend all my money?" to "How can I spend my money most effectively with students in mind?"

This concept is present in Chair of Student Services Erica Yang's committee, which is responsible for planning a majority of the "Welcome Week" and "Finals Week" events, with other student-oriented events sprinkled in between, like "Lip-Sync Battle" and "Bearcats on Ice." While she spent a lot of money because of the high number of events her position entails, she dropped "Baruch's Got Talent" — along with several other events — because it required additional funding for renting out Mason Hall. When asked for her reasoning, she believed that the event was a "colossal waste of money."

Controversy also rose with Aleem's "Meme It!" event, whose food vendor cost more per head than usual. Aleem at the time justified it by explaining that the food catered to those who specifically eat halal.

Bhatti and Josue Mendez were the first to resign from USG. Bhatti claims that his involvement with academics, work and family all precluded him from carrying out his responsibilities as treasurer. Not long after, Mendez resigned, citing his own academic work, but also relating his resignation to the toxicity in communication that he encountered within USG.

To deal with the missing e-board position, Egan, who was previously the chair of the Appeals Committee, was appointed by the e-board and confirmed by the senate as the team's new treasurer.

To fill the two open seats, Jorgensen and Alexander Dimceveski were elected by the senate. Jorgensen went on to inherit chair of appeals. Dimceveski hailed from neither USG nor club life, as he was instead a member of the men's swimming team.

During the winter break, an additional three students resigned:



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Many members of this year's senate table were elected as part RISE Baruch, a political party that won almost unanimously.

Zakari Abubakar, Molly Bhulyan and Cherry. Abubakar cited his growing internship time commitment, while Bhulyan and Cherry both scheduled classes during the Tuesday evening senate meetings that they were technically required to attend as senators.

The team's sixth resignation, Representative Sen. Tarak Chowdhury, resulted from the passing of the social Greek life resolution, which was meant as a recommendation to the Baruch administration to end the moratorium on social Greek life from those who sponsored the document within the senate.

While Chowdhury's resignation coincided with a heated debate on his part, as he was sternly against passing the resolution, he insists that the resignation came as a coincidence and was rather a result of increased feelings of discomfort on the table.

During spring break, Aleem became the second-to-last senator to resign. Aleem says that the resignation is "none of anyone's business," expressing that he did not want to list excuses and ultimately declined to officially comment on the matter.

Dimceveski was last to resign as of press time, leaving the table in late April and citing that he was too busy.

Arias commented in an interview, "[I'm] not super happy that there were as many resignations. I wish we could have had those people stay on the table, but unfortunately people's work schedules. A lot of people came into the table not exactly understanding how much of a time commitment is, so that was a bit for us."

Many of the year's resignations come with their own unique circumstances, but ultimately stemming from their own personal obligations or the same chilly atmosphere that pervaded the table until late in the year.

It nonetheless fueled the resignations, though many of the team's replacements were already working on the fringes of the table in the forms of vice chair positions or other involved positions and were able to effectively fulfill their roles once appointed.

What comes as the table's most defining quality this year was its ability to mobilize and continue to carry out events and planning despite the reported erratic flow in communication.

While issues were found with proper marketing of events — like "Bearcats on Ice," which had only been marketed later in the week before it, or "Baruch BASH," which had also been contracted just a few weeks prior to its official day and thus could not have been marketed earlier — many operated and leaned deeply into their own com-

mittees and cliques.

Brandon Paillere, chair of the Arts Committee, was championed by many of the senators as one of the members of the table to have made the most change this year. He revolutionized the Arts Committee by instating the "Annual Baruch College 48-Hour Film Challenge," rolling board displays in the second floor lobby of student art submissions from *Encounters Magazine* and holding student table readings, along with several smaller initiatives.

"I saw there was a need for artists to actually grow. I was frustrated that our college was failing us in that respect. We're not an arts and crafts committee, consumptionary Art Committee, we're real people with art that has real [merit] and we want to do more for students," Paillere said.

Liam Giordano, who was elected on May 2 as a representative senator following Aleem's resignation, put forward the Student Arts Proposal in conjunction with Rebecca Vicente, editor-in-chief of *Encounters Magazine*, and Paillere, in order to help display student art on campus.

Daniel Morote, vice president of the Legislative Affairs Committee and a University Student Senate delegate, and Hamed Dombia, who also acted as the vice chair of the committee, were able to create the DACA panel and spearhead the team's annual Albany trip to attend the New York State Association of Black and Puerto Rican Legislators' Conference.

Windsor was elected just a few weeks prior the deadline imposed by Baruch administration on USG for its social Greek life recommendation. In that short time, however, he was able to reinstate the Constitutional Review Committee, which he co-chaired with Giordano.

The committee pushed for an amendment of the constitution that would now make it possible to impeach senators who miss more than four meetings.

Passed by the senate, it did not receive enough votes on the USG election ballot in order to be approved. The amendment was subsequently approved by President Mitchel B. Wallerstein, ensuring that it will be reflected in the USG constitution.

Windsor also prepared a social Greek life resolution that recommended that the Baruch administration end the moratorium. This resolution was sponsored individually by a majority of the table and then passed by the senate. Windsor, however, explained that the efforts made by him and the rest of the table were still dubious in the hands of the administration.

"We've hit a wall with the administration where they

keep asking for new info that would turn their decision toward a moratorium. What else could we show [them] to support getting [frats] back into student life? The administration says they want to reach out and speak to students, but they don't," he said.

During that time, Chen began working on the Greek life survey, which sought to understand where Baruch students sat on the issue. Despite receiving few outside resources to conduct it, Chen felt that the results he was able to garner showed that students were interested in ending the moratorium. However, he found that the administration placed a short deadline on the team that apparently did not reflect an understanding or concern for students' opinions.

"USG knew regardless of how much data was collected or who we talked to, the administration had total control on the moratorium. But they believed the administration had to hear the voices of the student body before any decision was made, so we decided to mobilize and start the conversation of bringing it back. We've set the groundwork with surveys, a resolution and a couple of articles, and we will prepare the future generations to open a more transparent debate," Chen said.

On May 8, Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs and Provost David P. Christy sent an email announcing the extension of the social Greek life moratorium, despite USG's official recommendation.

Damali Smith, director of the Office of Student Life, did not respond to a request for comment.

USG has largely, in its final days, turned a new leaf. In a year plagued by a closed-door atmosphere and a struggle to encourage other table members to communicate and collaborate with one another, USG's success was found only among the elected officials who decided to work hard in spite of perceived communication issues. The hypersensitivity among intrapersonal conflicts culminated during the peak of the social Greek life debate and, not too long after, released a lot of the tension that had been bubbling among members of the senate.

In its last days, the atmosphere still retains a residual edge of the garnered social issues. However, the absence of contested issues and, more importantly, an overturn that resulted in more passionate students getting involved, has brought USG's year to a much milder end. Overall, USG has managed to operate effectively as individuals became focused on their own jobs, though this translated to lapses in group tasks like planning, marketing and design of events.