

Final Report by the Undergraduate Council of Students' Special Committee on University Governance

January 22nd, 2025

1. An Introduction to the Special Committee on University Governance

In November, the Undergraduate Council of Students formed the Special Committee on University Governance to identify why so many students and faculty feel ignored by senior administrators despite Brown's tradition of shared governance. Over the ensuing two months, the committee interviewed nearly two dozen members of the Brown community, ultimately finding broad culpability in the absence of formal decision-making bodies that meaningfully include students and faculty.

Strong discontent with Brown's administrative structure is commonplace. During the final two weeks of October, 1,368 undergraduate students voted in favor of a referendum that demanded student representation on the Corporation and "democratic reform across our institution." This recommendation was made on the basis – affirmed in the referendum – that the "undergraduate student body lacks confidence" in the Corporation.

The referendum passed with 73% of students in support. Students clearly expressed that their voices were unheard and their needs were unaddressed by the University. And it wasn't the first time – nearly a decade ago, a 2014 *Brown Daily Herald* [poll](#) found that 82% of Brown undergraduates supported student representation on the Corporation.

Many faculty have vocally objected to University decisions that they feel are incongruent with Brown's historic shared governance practices. In recent years, faculty have sparred with administrators over decisions to [reduce](#) support staff, [avoid](#) faculty pay [increases](#), and [threaten](#) faculty with discipline for participating in protests.

Brown has also seen an increase in the number of on-campus unions. Union leaders have [reported](#) that they decided to form their unions because they felt they had insufficient power to advocate for themselves and their working conditions. In August, a leader of the Labor Organization of Community Coordinators [reported](#) that University leaders were not bargaining with the intention of reaching an agreement. The union filed an unfair labor practice complaint in response.

Beginning in November, committee members interviewed 24 members of the Brown community to understand how the University's constituents experience its governance structure. All undergraduates were welcome to join the committee; the word was primarily spread at an early November UCS town hall that focused on democratic reform at Brown.

The committee met five times and finalized this report on January 22nd, 2025. The committee was chaired by Isaac Slevin, who is also the UCS Appointments Director. The committee members were Rafi Ash (UCS Treasurer), Melody Chen, Jack de Haan, Alicia Joo, Andrew Kim, San Kwon, Naomi LeDell, Nick Lee, Jesse Mathis (UCS Chair of Equity and Inclusion), Tommy Medlin (UCS Chair of Student Activities), Mira Mehta, Daniel Newgarden, Ariel Shifrin (UCS Polling Co-Director), and Soph Thomas.

2. Process and methodology

The committee conducted a series of interviews with individuals who have taken part in key decision-making processes. To identify interviewees, the committee conducted key informant interviews, a method in which interviewees are selected based on their proximity to and knowledge of a topic. The committee identified 48 faculty, staff, students, and senior administrators who were identified as having relevant roles in University governance. Many had expressed discontent with key University decisions and many carried out those same decisions.

The students are unionized workers, non-unionized workers, and club leaders who have frequently interfaced with senior administrators. The faculty have experience on the Faculty Executive Committee, University committees such as the University Resources Committee, and other relevant decision-making entities. The administrators work in offices that have a particularly large impact on the student experience, such as the Student Activities Office, the Office of College Admission, and the Office of Institutional Equity and Diversity.

From that list of 48 community members, committee members interviewed only 22. (Two interviewees brought an additional person not originally on our outreach list to participate in their interview, bringing the total number of interviewees to 24). The 26 targets the committee did not interview were roughly equal parts students and administrators, with just one member of the faculty. The reasons for their lack of participation are varied. Of those who responded to outreach emails, most cited the proximity to finals period and the end of the semester.

The committee standardized and drafted the interview questions over the course of its first three meetings. Each interviewee was asked to identify the roles and positions they've held at Brown and to describe a change to a policy, procedure, or practice they have advocated for. Then,

interviewees were asked a set of questions corresponding to one of the following four categories: administrators and staff; faculty; students (workers); students (club participants and leaders).

Each set of questions corresponded to the interviewee's role in governance at Brown. Faculty were asked about the relative decision-making power they feel that they have compared to other actors at the University. Senior administrators were asked whether they include faculty in their decision-making processes. Members of student organizations were asked if they knew how to change policies that govern their student group. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing interviewees to discuss topics of their choosing and allowing for interviewers to ask follow-up questions at their discretion. Additionally, interviewees were granted anonymity to allow them to speak freely.

After the start of the New Year, committee members met to begin analyzing the data they had collected. Interviewee responses were sorted by question, then committee members hand-coded the responses to a given question to identify common themes. To improve the quality of data analysis, answers to each question were analyzed by two different committee members to ensure that theme identification was shared amongst the group. Six committee members took part in this analysis. Afterwards, members of the committee re-convened to discuss themes and determine key takeaways.

3. Findings

Our most significant finding is that there has been a broad-based disempowerment of faculty and students at Brown University. Though students, faculty, and administrators responded to different questions, nearly all identified that power was consolidated in the hands of a select few individuals. These responses took many forms. Some students who had experience as campus activists explained how, in their view, they were locked out of rooms where decisions were being made about the University's academic priorities, endowment, and strategic orientation. Meanwhile, several low- and mid-level administrators noted that they were responsible for enforcing policies over which they had no direct say, with only some advisory input to the superiors responsible for the creation of such policies.

Still, the committee found that nearly every interviewee reported that they were aware of the proper channels through which they should raise concerns about a policy, procedure, or practice. Additionally, interviewees near-universally reported that when they proposed a change to the relevant superior, their proposal was fairly received. For many, the difficulties began afterward. In the following sections, we identify how students, faculty, and administrators experience University governance in different ways.

3a. Students

A committee member summed up student sentiment about administrative leadership in a January meeting: “There is an appetite for student input without a robust framework for it.” The committee discovered two key themes in student responses.

First, students expressed frustration with the lack of quality, formal venues for changing rules that govern students and their education. *Informal* methods of input are extremely common, and administrators interviewed by committee members regularly communicated their desire for student feedback on their decisions. These administrators largely expressed that this input comes through nonbinding processes. In the case of the Student Activities Office, this means regular conversations with student leaders as part of employees’ day-to-day work. One individual who works in the Office of Student Conduct & Community Standards reported that individuals who go through their proceedings can schedule a feedback meeting online with a dean in the office.

As a result of administrators employing informal methods of acquiring student input, many students expressed that they felt unheard. In reality, they were being heard, but they saw nothing changing in response to their concerns. It was not a question of knowing which administrator a student should talk to, but rather a question of how a student could get from expressing a problem to enacting a solution.

Even many formal avenues proved inadequate for students. This was most clear with student participation on University committees. One student who has served on a prominent university committee reported that students are easily overruled on questions that have profound impacts on students’ day-to-day lives on campus. When a student serving on the Student Conduct Board expressed that the SCB should have more oversight over a variety of student conduct cases, their appeal was rejected. Only the highest-level conduct cases make it to the SCB.

Two students discussed how they feel that committees can be wielded to achieve predetermined results. One specifically pointed to the Advisory Committee on University Resource Management, which the student claimed “performs advising.” They observed that ACURM’s advice wasn’t heeded until it produced a result favorable to the status quo, noting that ACURM’s predecessor committee recommended in favor of divestment in 2020. (Faculty on the University Resources Committee expressed a similar sentiment in 2008, [suspecting](#) “budget decisions are reached by administrators on the committee in advance of the general meetings.”)

The second important concern expressed by students was the disconnect between rule writers and rule enforcers. This gap has made it very difficult for students to identify which University office or administrator they should contact about a concern they had, even if it is simple to identify who is enforcing the rule in question.

For example, leaders of student clubs naturally felt that SAO was the office that most commonly limited their groups' programming. When pressed, the vast majority of these students expressed that the problem was not SAO itself, but that the final say over contentious events was possessed by individuals in the upper echelons of University leadership. Similarly, a student employee at the Brown Center for Students of Color explained that BCSC employees were not at fault for restrictions on political events and statements; these employees were just following the rules. Rather, the individual explained that more leadership was responsible for policing students.

Interviews with administrators demonstrated that enforcement bodies at the University, such as SAO and the Office of Student Conduct & Community Standards, are often only responsible for policy enforcement rather than policy-making. While SAO requires that student groups abide by the University Green Space Usage Policy, it does not have the power to change the policy. While the Office of Student Conduct & Community Standards handles alleged violations of policies owned by a wide variety of University offices – from the Office of Residential Life to the Office of Information Technology – it is only in control of the Student Code of Conduct.

These two trends in University governance – the lack of formal student power and the disconnect between rule writers and rule enforcers – proved frustrating for nearly all students interviewed by the committee. Brown is a large institution with many and varied support structures, but these structures obscure who's in charge of University policies as they are enacted and enforced. When a limited number of senior administrators write policies that apply to thousands of undergraduate students, there will necessarily be incongruencies and confusion.

To alleviate these issues, students are in dire need of high-quality, formal venues in which there is shared governance over policies that affect them. As students increasingly feel that their voices are being ignored, they often feel forced to work against administrators instead of with them to develop policies that would benefit the student body and Brown community more broadly.

After all, these last several years have been marked by clear student efforts to be treated as constituents of the University. Seeing a lack of response to concerns expressed in non-binding discussions, students have engaged in protests against the University, organized unions, and expressed their lack of faith in University governance. With formal decision-making mechanisms in place that are required to act upon student sentiment, we could easily see much more cooperation between students and administrators.

3b. Faculty

Interviews with faculty members resulted in discussions about the relative power of the Faculty Executive Committee. Many faculty reported that the FEC was a valuable venue for sharing concerns with faculty leaders and administrators. However, of the faculty who were asked

whether “the Faculty Executive Committee and votes of the Faculty have sufficient decision-making power,” each one answered “no.” Two faculty members expressed frustration that faculty meetings have become increasingly driven by administrators.

When expanding upon their responses, faculty specified that FEC meetings and processes are substantially more advisory to the University than actionable. Four faculty identified decisions affecting them personally that were made by senior administrators on a seemingly unilateral basis. These decisions included changes in contracts, sanctions of professors, and decisions on faculty raises.

Three faculty members explained that their voices were purely advisory instead of meaningfully included in the decision-making processes on these topics. This made it difficult to sense if their advocacy was changing anything and if their priorities were being valued. One faculty member reported a growth in the space taken up by administrators in faculty meetings.

Another related theme was faculty frustration over their lack of involvement in financial decision-making at the University. Several faculty members identified pushback from administrators on questions of faculty salary, which they reported as incongruous with the record growth of the University’s endowment. (On a related note, one student with experience on the College Curriculum Committee expressed frustration that the CCC could identify academic needs but could not allocate funds to alleviate them.)

A clear solution seems to be formal, structured involvement for faculty in University decision-making processes where they cannot be easily overruled by administrators. Still, faculty interested in more prominent decisions must contend with the fact that only a sliver of faculty seek to regularly engage in questions of faculty governance. One faculty member noted that if you ask faculty members if they want more power they’d say yes, but that sentiment does not match with the low number of attendees at faculty meetings.

4. Conclusion

The Special Committee on University Governance embarked on its mission of understanding the widespread dissatisfaction with decision-making structures at Brown University. The committee found that this dissatisfaction is grounded in students’ and faculty’s inability to have agency over the basic procedures that govern everything from student conduct to faculty pay. Community discontent is not due to a lack of places where individuals can provide their thoughts on community policies, procedures, and practices. Rather, students and faculty report that they have ample places to provide informal, non-binding feedback. It’s genuine decision-making power that they feel is kept out of their reach by senior administrators.

To alleviate these issues, the University needs new processes that grant students and faculty high-quality, formal avenues in which they are empowered to make decisions alongside administrators. Adding student seats to the Corporation is one of these changes, empowering existing University committees to make binding decisions may be another. Right now, abundant space for student and faculty advice but scarce space for student and faculty power is leaving Brown's constituents disempowered and discontent.