Amsterdam University College
Student Council

Policy Plan

2019-2020

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student
council

AUC Student Council 2019-2020

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Date Published

2 September 2019

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Preface

Dear reader,

Before you lies the policy plan of the Amsterdam University College Student Council (AUC SC) for the period 2019-2020. We cordially invite you to take cognizance of our ambitions as well as our priorities for the upcoming academic year. Please note, the sections are not presented in any particular order of priority, as we equally value the importance of all topics covered in this policy plan. Upon reading this document carefully, you will get a view on the mountains that we purpose to move, the walls we aim to tear down, and the bridges we aspire to build.

Fostering the participatory leadership paradigm ranks among our top priorities. As a more effective, democratic model for leadership, it harnesses diversity, creates shared responsibility, and sustains a critically engaged community. The participatory leadership paradigm allows the students at this college to participate actively in the decision- and policy-making processes through their representative body, i.e., the Student Council. We aim to facilitate the initiatives of our fellow students, raise their concerns at the top-level, and translate their ideas into feasible policy proposals, under the auspices of student participation. This policy plan was written in the spirit of active student participation and is wholly aimed towards releasing the full potential of the student experience at AUC.

We want to thank the student body of AUC for the trust they have vested in us by electing us to the Student Council of 2019-2020. We will represent their general interests to the best of our abilities and serve at their pleasure with an unyielding devotion. This policy plan will be our starting point.

Was signed,

Bart Knibbe, Bluma Brecher, Valérie Heinz, Jaël Kortekaas, and Annemijn Ooms
AUC Student Council of 2019-2020

Academics

Course Registration

In previous years, a deficient course registration system has caused major difficulties for students, tutors, and lecturers. In January 2019, students and lecturers were moved to sign a petition out of discontent with the structural issues relating to course registration that were hindering their academic work and progress. In early February 2019, the Management Team of AUC, under pressure from and in close consultation with the participatory governance bodies (the Student Council, Works Council and Board of Studies), committed to the development of a new course registration user interface. This new user interface, which is being developed by the FNWI (UvA Faculty of Science) Datanose Team, must be much less prone to human error, more user-friendly, reliable, transparent, and fair to students. Furthermore, the new course registration system must be employed during the upcoming enrolment round in November 2019. To further those ends, we will … :

1. … strongly urge the Management Team and work diligently with all stakeholders involved to realize the implementation of the new course registration system before the November 2019 course enrolment round;
2. … ensure that students are timely and amply informed about the new course registration procedures by AUC's Registrar's office, so that the new system and the underlying processes will be transparent and intelligible;
3. … monitor whether the new system is in practice indeed fairer to students and more transparent to users, i.e., an improvement to the previous course enrolment system;
4. … advocate the prospective expansion of the user interface into an encompassing platform that centralizes many if not all crucial student services, so that students can not only register for courses via the new course registration domain, but can also use the interface to build their curriculum, access the digital service desk, send requests to the Board of Examiners, review their study results, etc.;
5. … make sure that all prerequisites listed under courses are fair and attainable, as the new course registration procedure will give more importance to prerequisites (the prerequisites will now be checked automatically by the registration system);
6. … request the Heads of Studies to arrange that courses from one track do not overlap in the timetable, as far as this is possible, so that the student's ability to follow courses from the same track in the same semester is not hampered.

Academic Core

The Liberal Arts and Sciences program that AUC offers relies heavily on the Academic Core courses to teach students valuable academic and interdisciplinary skills. However, many students have indicated that the courses themselves, as well as the ways they are integrated into the curriculum, are not living up to their expectations. Therefore, during our term, the Student Council will … :

1. … open up a discussion with all relevant stakeholders in order to further develop the four Academic Core courses that are mandatory for all students, i.e., Academic Writing Skills, Advanced Research Writing, Logic, and The Global Identity Experience. These courses must become more relevant and useful for students from all tracks, by making them more anchored in real-world contexts;
2. … advocate investments in the development of CP/I processes and procedures, in order to release the full potential of the CP/I dimension of our curriculum;
3. … request cross-listing of Academic Core courses that are not mandatory for all students so that an Academic Core course can count towards the major requirements of students. This will make it more attractive for students to take an extra Academic Core course;
4. … endeavor to establish an equal focus on academic skills, such as writing and presenting, across all majors, as far as this is workable.

Teaching

In 2016-2017 and 2017-2018, 32% of all contact hours were taught by external teachers on UvA JobService contracts or deployed from other institutions [AUC Annual Report 2017-2018]. The deployment of external lecturers puts heavy pressure on AUC's financial resources, as external lecturers are more expensive to appoint than lecturers from partner faculties at UvA and VU. Moreover, external lecturers are often unfamiliar with AUC's academic set-up and underlying philosophy, which can negatively affect the quality of the student experience. Therefore, … :

1. … the Student Council considers the deployment of partner faculty at AUC a high priority, for financial and educational reasons;
2. … all lecturers that teach at AUC should be familiar with the pillars that underlie it, including but not limited to diversity in thoughts and backgrounds, an interdisciplinary approach to complex world-problems, and intensive, small-scale education.

Sustainability

On its website, AUC officially recognizes that it has the responsibility as an academic institution to fight climate change, e.g., by making AUC a sustainable college and educating students about the human impact on the environment. As members of the Student Council, we fully support AUC in their mission to do their part in the global fight against climate change. Together with the AUC Management team, engaged students, and all other stakeholders, we aim to … :

1. … encourage the implementation of a sustainable travel policy at AUC, enabling teachers and students to choose environmentally friendly means of transportation;
2. … work together with the Green Offices and other sustainability-related bodies of the UvA and VU to identify possibilities to make AUC as an institution more sustainable;
3. … further refine students' opportunities to recycle their goods at the AB by engaging in a stationary recycling program;
4. … continue to work towards an environmentally friendly canteen, by exploring further options to reduce food wastage, use of plastic, and meat consumption, in close collaboration with Cormet;
5. … confront a greater variety of students with the issue of climate change, by proposing the integration of academic interaction with and discussions about climate change in the Global Identity Experience and relevant Big Questions courses;
6. … collaborate with AUCSA committees such as Pangea, the sustainability committee, and the sustainability commission, in an effort to animate students' interest and involvement.

Graduate Futures

A survey about AUC's curriculum as a whole that was conducted among students who graduated in the period February 2018-August 2018 shows that students are least satisfied with the way our institution guides them towards the next step in their professional career. Out of 5, students rated "Future Career" at 2,5 [AUC Annual Report 2017-2018]. We believe that AUC as an institution can do more to enable graduating students in exploring the countless possibilities that "Life after AUC" offers and should employ Quality Agreement Funding to this end. The Student Council will contribute to the achievement of this goal by … :

1. … advocating the investment of time and financial resources into the Alumni Association (AUCAA), as a strong and active alumni network is a valuable tool for graduating students to explore opportunities for their life after AUC;
2. … investigating if career coaches from the UvA Student Careers Center (SCC) can hold regular office hours at AUC, following a pilot with the UvA SCC that was conducted at AUC in early 2019;
3. … ensuring that graduating students are timely and amply informed about the wide range of opportunities that "Life after AUC" offers, e.g., Master programs, work programs, internships, formations, etc., via Canvas, emails, tutor meetings, and other relevant media;
4. … looking into possibilities to make the transition from a LAS to a Master program less laborious, given that a LAS degree is not a sufficient diploma to get accepted into a variety of Master programs;
5. … monitoring the prospective appointment process of a Master's Coordinator at AUC (QAF approved in April 2019);
6. … requesting an alternative to the Master's Database developed by University College Maastricht, which was commissioned under QAF but the purchase of which fell through due to concerns about quality and maintenance costs;
7. … further developing the AUC Master & Career Week by collaborating with the AUC Graduate Assistant in the process of approaching external organizations and partners.

Student Well-Being

The well-being of AUC students is integral to their learning experience. Attaining a degree from Amsterdam University College demands a great deal of commitment, discipline and work, and can be both mentally and physically challenging. If students are unable to move about their academic career comfortably, this will greatly impact their achievements and experience throughout their time at AUC. We thus strive to create an environment at AUC that is accommodating for all of its students and recognizes the importance of tailoring education to a student's individual needs. Furthermore, we are aware that the academic environment at AUC can put a considerable amount of pressure on students, which can impact their mental well-being. This year, we want to initiate a conversation regarding the mental health of our students, and actively implement measures to make life at AUC more viable.

Mental Well-Being

The ability of students to perform adequately at AUC can be significantly compromised when facing mental health problems. Because students live in the dorms for the full duration of their studies, we have an important responsibility in creating a safe environment and encouraging students that may be struggling to ask for help. Furthermore, the nature of our honors program at AUC can put a lot of pressure on students, and it is easy at times to feel stressed, isolated or disillusioned. We thus aim to not only provide resources for students who seek mental health council, but also to develop a platform at AUC to discuss issues particular to the degree program we follow. In order to improve mental well-being at AUC, we will … :

1. … strongly encourage providing a brief break during all lectures in proportion to the length of the class. Student concentration has been proven to significantly improve when students are able to take a short rest during long class-hours;
2. … start a discussion group surrounding the issue of "academic excellence", convening professors and students. AUC is a highly academic environment and can encompass a great amount of competition, pressure and expectation. We aim to initiate a broader conversation on mental well-being at AUC, and de-stigmatize topics regarding mental health. Being involved in an ongoing discussion group

will also allow us to gather a better understanding of how to improve the experience of AUC students;

3. … strongly encourage all lecturers to provide content warnings during class, for any content that may be harmful to a student in any way. This could include, but is not limited to, content containing violence, mental illness, sexual harassment and discrimination;

4. … work closely with the Student Life Officer and Peer Support at AUC to improve mental health facilities on campus;

5. … make information about professional counselling more accessible. Additionally, we strive to bring regular office hours by a professional psychologist to AUC, by working closely with UvA and VU well-being teams.

Tutor System

The tutor-tutee relationship is the cornerstone of the AUC student experience. Unfortunately, students have expressed that the tutor system at AUC is lacking in certain areas. The quality of our tutoring system is thus one of our major priorities for this upcoming year. Tutors at AUC are faced with a wide variety of student issues, for which they may not always be entirely equipped. We must ensure that all tutors are able to act adequately in a host of situations and that students can hold their tutors accountable if this is not the case. In order to improve the functionality of the AUC tutor-system, we thus intend to … :

1. … give students the opportunity to evaluate their experiences with the tutor system every year, in order to assess whether all students are receiving adequate support throughout their academic career at AUC;

2. … define the role of a tutor more clearly for students, in close consultation with the Senior Tutor. The tutor handbook must be made fully available to students, which will ensure that students know what (and what not) to expect from their tutors;

3. … provide informative lectures for all tutors regarding student well-being, mental health and diversity issues; these workshops must include professional insights as well as student experiences. This will equip tutors with the tools necessary to act appropriately when students approach them with both academic and personal issues.

Extenuating Circumstances

Given the nature and philosophy of the Liberal Arts and Science degree at AUC, students are expected to put their full commitment into the academic and social program. This includes a willingness to participate in and be present during as many lectures and assessments as possible. However, for some AUC students, our strict absence and resit policy can bear heavily on their mental and/or physical health. It is of tremendous importance to us that a degree at AUC is attainable for all students willing to put in the work our honors degree requires and that AUC as an institution can accommodate even those facing long-term health- or personal problems. AUC is, and should be, a degree that accounts for all its students, and we thus strive to improve our absence and resit policy by ... :

1. ... more explicitly defining what is meant by the terms "extenuating circumstances" and "force majeure", so that students can make a better estimation of whether they can rightfully miss an exam or more than five classes due to personal circumstances. We aim to communicate clearly to both students and lecturers under what circumstances AUC students can expect an exemption, and to allow these to include a wide variety of issues. By doing so, we hope to alleviate some of our students' concerns regarding the absence and resit policy;

2. ... provide for a special procedure that will liberalize the absence and resit policy in cases of recurrent illness or other problems that compromise a student's well-being. This procedure will specifically be aimed at cases in which students face continual physical or mental health issues, but are still able to perform sufficiently to stay at AUC. After having gone through this procedure, lecturers will be aware of the student's situation. Students would thus not have to go through the uncertain process of requesting an exemption over and over again. The procedure will grant students the possibility to prospectively go over the maximum amount of five absences, as well as allow resitting/re-scheduling of exams or assignments in case of dire physical or mental health issues.

Visibility and Approachability

In the past, the AUC Student Council has had quite some issues with regard to visibility and approachability. Over the past years, a lot of students have expressed that they were unaware of what the Student Council was doing or where they could express comments, ideas and/or complaints with regard to Student Council matters. The previous Student Council has already gone to great lengths to improve on this, for example, by introducing the toilet newspaper, and we aim to continue their efforts. Therefore, our action points with regard to visibility and approachability will be to … :

1. … utilize the Student Council Green Board in the academic building in order to centralize important information with regard to Student Council matters in a non-digital environment;
2. … make students aware that the minutes of the Student Council meetings are published on Canvas every month and address every recent publishing of the minutes on our social media channels;
3. … take on an active role in communicating important information with regard to academic matters to students in a concise and understandable way through social media channels and the Green Board in the academic building;
4. … make use of online and offline methods to regularly poll student opinions on pertinent issues. The short answer questions and agree/disagree polls that were used frequently by the previous Student Council will be supplemented by more detailed questionnaires. In addition, we will aim to communicate clearly to the student population how their voting and questionnaire answers have influenced the Student Council's decision-making process with regard to the matters in question;
5. …. look for ways to make office hours more effective and interactive;
6. … seek active participation in the organization of the AUC Introweek so that the new Student Council members can introduce themselves to the incoming students;
7. … publish formal letters and documents that the Student Council sends to or receives from the AUC Management Team on Canvas (when secrecy does not have to be observed) with the aim of realizing the promises made in this policy plan;

8. … continue the publication of the monthly newsletters. In addition to displaying these in the academic building, we will make them available on the Student Council social media channels;

9. … start a Student Council Instagram account to give more insight into what the Student Council does on a day-to-day basis in a fun and informal manner;

10. … hold monthly open meetings outside of the office where students can propose agenda points on the spot and engage in a discussion with their student representatives and peers;

11. … organize and host events relevant to student life, possibly in collaboration with the AUCSA and/or the AUC Well-Being Team.

Inclusion and Representation

Diversity features prominently in AUC'S motto of "excellence and diversity in a global city". Given this institutional commitment to diversity, we believe AUC must continually strive to create an environment that is as inclusive and accepting as possible. Within this next year, we aim to make the classroom a safer space for all AUC students, by improving teacher and student awareness regarding the correct use of language and pronouns. Moreover, as a council, we see the diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and opinions at AUC as the nucleus of our community, and thus strive to provide a platform for all students and staff to exchange perspectives respectfully yet critically. In order to foster a community in which every student feels both comfortable and adequately represented, we will … :

1. … scrutinize documents such as the Academic Standards and Procedures document, the CP/I guidelines, etc., to ensure the appropriate use of inclusive language;

2. … provide information on how to report diversity issues in the classroom. This will ensure that recurring complaints about lecturers and students are taken into consideration and that recurrent abuse can be met with consequences;

3. … encourage teachers to create an environment in which students are introduced to both mainstream as well as generally lesser-known ideas and to animate students to think critically about all theories and views;

4. ... strongly encourage the management team to provide informational sessions on diversity in the classroom and the appropriate use of language and pronouns for faculty members and external lecturers;
5. ... encourage AUC to actively reach out to groups that are currently underrepresented in the AUC community in their promotional efforts.

Elections

During the elections for the Student Council of 2019-2020, which took place on April 2019, a new election system was implemented at AUC, following the election regulations of the Vrije Universiteit (VU). Some students voiced their concerns about the new system and how it was presented to the student body. While it is not up to the discretion of the Student Council - past, present or future - to alter the election system, we aim to render the election process more transparent by ... :

1. ... publishing the criteria on the basis of which the electoral list is established;
2. ... continuing to provide a detailed explanation of how the election process functions;
3. ... ensuring that the committee responsible for creating the electoral list does not solely consist of Student Council members, but also contains members of the AUC community that function independently from the current Student Council (e.g., a member of the Board of Studies).

External Relations

Maintaining relations with external parties is valuable for the AUC Student Council and the student body, as there is much to share with and to learn from other organizations. Expanding and utilizing our existing network of partners can prove beneficial to many of the Student Council's endeavors this year, for example in relation to Sustainability, Student Well-Being, and Graduate Futures.

Besides these points and regular contact with the UvA and VU, by reaching out to our partners across various organizations, we will … :

1. … maintain regular contact with DUWO, the Tenants Association, and the Well-Being Team regarding life and safety of the students in the dorms;
2. … actively participate in and support the UCSRN network of all University Colleges in the Netherlands;
3. … advance direct contact with the academic representative bodies of different University Colleges in the Netherlands on current topics and issues, in order to support and learn from each other's experiences and achievements;
4. … keep the work of local and national Student Unions, such as ASVA and the LSVb, on our radar.

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We invite the endorsement of students, faculty members, and the Management Team of AUC in the implementation of the proposals that are specified in this policy plan.

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