Commentary: Student leader wants tables turned on OSCCR

By George Gottschalk

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Over the past year a number of events have taken place involving the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution, the details of which I have found appalling. For this reason, I feel it is my duty as a student to bring them to your attention and respectfully demand that they be investigated and actions be taken to correct any existing flaws in the department of Judicial Affairs.

I think it was Plato that spoke of how societies should be judged not by the behavior of their wealthy, but by the behavior and treatment of their criminals. So, should everyone be treated exactly the same? Should someone’s prior deeds count for or against them when they do something wrong? How fair is our society really? Every day in our court system we judge people by what they’ve done in the past, character witnesses come and testify for them, and witnesses of the alleged crime come and testify against them. The jury pays attention to the facts presented, they weigh the credibility of the accuser and of the defendant, the case is decided intelligently, and if a crime has been committed, then a fair, just and equitable punishment is presented. That sounds perfectly fair to me, but to my continued astonishment, this is not even close to the way things work here at Northeastern University.

Three times in the last year I have seen some of the brightest, most accomplished students at Northeastern get totally shit on by our Judicial Affairs office. The first instance occurred during the Spring of 2004. A good friend and undergraduate just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people one night in Stetson West. He had unwittingly walked in on a cocaine deal gone horribly awry, and when he attempted to diffuse the situation and report the facts to the proper authorities, he found himself before OSCCR. The officials handling his case managed to convince him to not only admit to being involved with the drug deal, but also to “assaulting” one of the drug dealers (a hand on the shoulder, attempting to diffuse the fight). Even further, he was asked if he had ever done drugs before, and when he replied honestly, but vaguely, just as I would have, that he had tried marijuana in the past, he was charged with use of an illegal substance as well. The fact that someone without knowledge of our judicial system was bullied into falsely claiming responsibility for baseless charges because he was threatened with higher sanctions had he not, is truly horrendous, and I’m not even done with the story yet. Thinking he did the honorable thing, accepted the decision of OSCCR to suspend him for one semester. His detailed list of sanctions included anger management classes and counseling, all at his own expense, and he respectfully complied without argument. Upon his return for a reentrance interview for all suspended students, he was informed that OSCCR had made a mistake and issued the wrong list of sanctions, and that he would have to complete another regiment of counseling and meetings again at his own expense before he would be readmitted. Through nothing but unfairness and incompetence was he effectively removed from Northeastern for a period of 12 months. Somewhere along the way, he lost hope and decided not to return to school at all. That Mr. [Ed] Klotzbier is one hundred percent unacceptable.

The next instance involved me personally, and as you may be aware of the outcome, but I sincerely hope you were not aware of what took place behind the doors of OSCCR. I sat in the room next to Andres Vargas thinking about everything he had done for Northeastern during his time here and everything he planned to do as President. I watched as witness after witness, after witness, came forward and truthfully testified to his innocence, integrity and his loyalty to this school. Then, I watched as one single orientation leader came forward and made his accusation, his voice filled with doubt and his story spotted with memory lapses. I participated as we were given the opportunity to cross-examine him, and when we were done, this guy didn’t have enough credibility to convince his parents that his name was Marc Lo. We
left the hearing confident that every fact from both sides had been presented. Then it came time to hear the verdicts. I went first. GUILTY. Then Andres. GUILTY. He and I looked at each other in disbelief for a few minutes trying to comprehend how a system that was supposed to be fair and just could have arrived at the conclusion it did. My continued feelings of disbelief through the tribulations of the first student, Andres and myself have now turned to fury.

The final instance involved Michael Benson and Chad Cooper, two tremendous, dedicated public servants of Northeastern University. These two put in countless hours trying to fix all the things we students bitch about on a daily basis, and they were making a difference. Then, one day, Mr. Cooper stumbled across some files on the open NU Network called "OSCCR." Mr. Cooper being the newly elected Vice President for Student Affairs was naturally curious because as clearly stated in the SGA Constitution, the Judicial Affairs Board falls under his jurisdiction. It was about that time that Mr. Benson was summoned, and at that exact moment when the two realized what they were looking at, they immediately shut down the computer, and called Information Services to report a number of unsecured files floating around on the network that were supposed to be secure. So naturally what did OSCCR do? They charged Mr. Benson and Mr. Cooper with a plethora of technical violations that they didn’t even come close to violating. These guys were trying to do the right thing. Who cares about old OSCCR files except to know that they shouldn’t be floating around on an unsecured server? I’ll be honest. I chuckled when Michael told me what had happened. I thought to myself, wow, what a pain in the ass. I know for a fact that everyone involved has more important things to do. And what’s Judicial Affairs going to do, find them guilty? Wow. Once again for some unknown reason, I had placed my faith in the system to do the right thing, even though I knew first hand that it was capable of quite the opposite. And once again, my confidence was shattered. I didn’t sit in on this particular hearing, but I know exactly what happened. These two gentlemen were one hundred percent honest and up front about what they did. They were one hundred percent innocent, and it didn’t matter for a second. They were victims of a severely flawed system.

At times I’ve thought to myself, maybe Andres and I were actually wrong, maybe we took it a little too far that night. But not once has it occurred to me that Andres deserved to be removed from his position as student body president, be suspended from school, be robbed of a full scholarship, be forced to delay his graduation, and ultimately have a bitch of a time getting into law school. Does that sound fair even in the most totalitarian sense? It took me almost a full year to recover financially from the period of my suspension. I lost a co-op opportunity (the only reason I came here) and over $45,000 in scholarships because of OSCCR’s decision, and that’s not making attending Northeastern any easier. And what about the man in the drug dealing example, Michael and Chad? The first had enormous potential to rise above his blue collar, Everett roots, get a degree from a top university, and lead a long and successful life. Michael delayed his graduation date voluntarily so that he could stay at Northeastern for another year as student body president and fix everything he didn’t get around to as a two-time vice president for financial affairs. Chad was a brilliantly creative, ambitious senator who founded NU & Improv’d, has been integral in the formation of NUTV, and had recently decided that he wanted to give back to the student activities program on a greater scale. All five of us are extremely bright and have extremely promising futures in our respective fields, and this school has done nothing but make our lives miserable. And that’s bull.

I am outraged at the performance of the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution. Why is our hearing system based on the guilty before proven innocent theory? How difficult can it be to select students who are intelligent enough to understand the difference between right and wrong and who have the integrity to deliver an objective, unbiased opinion after hearing the facts presented by both sides? Then, how difficult is it to pick five of these students who have no contact at all with the people being accused? Why was there a person on our hearing board that I knew personally and didn’t get along with at all? Why was that same person on Michael and Chad’s hearing board if he had histories with both of them as well? Why didn’t the students talked about at the beginning of this letter have a hearing at all? These are questions that I want answered. I’m calling out, to look into exactly what is going on in the
Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution and, if necessary, take action to ensure that our tuition dollars are not paying the salaries of five people whose jobs would be more fairly and efficiently fulfilled by an NUPD officer flipping a coin.

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