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## EXPLORING THE MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE UNIVERSITY STUDENT UNIONS: JILIN UNIVERSITY EXAMPLE

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On the new wave of Chinese University Student Union reform, university student unions in China have experienced obvious changes over the past years. However, some worrying signs such as unreasonable amount of student union members, lack of training mechanisms, inadequacy of work style formation of student unions and so on, remain hidden in the process of their development. The realities coming with the current situation need to be continuously explored and addressed in practice. After systematically combing through the existing literature on Chinese University Student Union reform, and through empirical research with Jilin University (China) as an example, we explore the status quo, conduct questionnaires and structured interviews, as well as analyze the existing problems in this Chinese university student union management structure, in terms of personnel scale, system of mechanisms, organizational structure, etc. Using social investigation methods and some other approaches, we summarize the challenges in Chinese University Student Union reform and present some corresponding measures and suggestions in order to provide general reference values.

**Keywords:** Chinese university student union; student union work style construction; management development; student union reform.

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## ИЗУЧЕНИЕ РАЗВИТИЯ МЕНЕДЖМЕНТА СТУДЕНЧЕСКИХ СОЮЗОВ КИТАЙСКИХ УНИВЕРСИТЕТОВ: НА ПРИМЕРЕ ЦЗИЛИНЬСКОГО УНИВЕРСИТЕТА

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В условиях новой волны реформы Союза студентов китайских университетов за последние годы в студенческих союзах Китая произошли очевидные изменения. Однако некоторые тревожные признаки, такие как необоснованное количество членов студенческого союза, отсутствие механизмов обучения, неадекватность построения стиля работы студенческого союза и так далее, все еще скрываются в процессе его развития. Реалии, связанные с текущей ситуацией, необходимо постоянно изучать и учитывать на практике. После систематического изучения существующей литературы о реформе студенческого союза китайских университетов и эмпирических исследований на примере Цзилиньского университета (Китай) мы исследуем статус-кво, проводим анкетирование и структурированные интервью, а также анализируем существующие проблемы в структуре студенческого союза данного китайском университете с точки зрения масштаба персонала, системы механизмов, организационной структуры и т. д. Используя методы социальных исследований и некоторые другие подходы, мы суммируем проблемы реформирования студенческого союза китайских университетов и даем некоторые соответствующие меры и предложения, чтобы обеспечить общие справочные значения.

**Ключевые слова:** Союз студентов китайского университета; построение стиля работы студенческого союза; развитие менеджмента; реформа студенческого союза.

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## Introduction

“On the promotion of university student union (graduate student union) to deepen the reform of several opinions” stipulates: “student union is the main student organization under the leadership of the party, is the bridge and link of the school to contact the vast number of students. The student union must face all students and insist on coming from and going to students”<sup>1</sup>. As an association for students to carry out self-management, self-education, and self-service, Chinese University Student Unions are not only the window for students to express their voice to the university, but also the link and bridge for the university to connect the majority of students. Chinese University Student Union plays an important role in enriching students’ campus life and assisting the university to carry out management. As an important part of the school management system, the university student union can participate in the democratic management of the university, and supervise the work of the university. It can also participate in the work of the school through specific channels on behalf of the majority of students. However, there are still many practical difficulties in the management mechanism of the student union. In 2019, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China, the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, and All-China Students’ Federation (ACSF) [1] have initiated a new round of university student union reform, which aims at improving student unions’ work efficiency and help them better serve the students. “Several Opinions on Deepening Reform of University Student Union (Graduate Student Union)” (hereinafter referred to as *Several Opinions*) were issued then, which kicked off the reform<sup>2</sup>. In order to promote the reform to be more effective, this paper takes student unions in Jilin University (China) at both school-level and college-level as research samples to explore the current problems in the management development of the University Student Union and put forward corresponding solution measures.

## Overview of Research Targets

Using social investigation methods, we conducted questionnaires and structured interviews among faculty and students in China. 220 questionnaires were distributed and 216 valid questionnaires were returned; structured online interviews were conducted with 22 faculty members and students (Fig. 1). We have launched 20 questions in each questionnaire, and the questions are totally divided into three parts, including basic information, opinions on student unions, and expectations on the new round of university student union reform.

Among the Jilin University students who participated in the questionnaire survey, 159 of them, or 74.3%, have served or are serving in the Student Union; 25.7% have not previously served in the Student Union (Fig. 2). Among the 22 students and staff members who participated in the interview, there are 4 teachers of the Jilin University Youth League, 9 members of the college-level Student Union, 3 members of the school-level Student Union, and 6 non-members of the Student Union. The research participants covered the main audiences, participants, and administrators of the Student Union.

<sup>1</sup> China Youth Daily: *The student union reform is going on; serving the students is the fundamental tenet of the student union*. [http://news.youth.cn/gn/202006/t20200615\\_12368299.htm](http://news.youth.cn/gn/202006/t20200615_12368299.htm). 2020-06-15

<sup>2</sup> Commentator for the Newspaper. *Let the Debriefing Review Enable Student Union to Develop Healthily*. China Youth Daily. 2020-08-05(001)

**All the faculty members participated in the research**



Fig. 1. Faculty members at different levels participating in the research (22 institutions in total)

**Are you currently serving or have you ever served in a college student union?**

Options	Num	Proportion
A. Yes	186	67.64%
B. No	89	32.36%
The number of valid fill in this question	275	

Fig. 2. The form shows the proportion of Jilin University students who have served in college student union. It reflects that nearly 70 percent of them have joined the student union

**Problems in the Management of Student Unions at Both Levels in Jilin University**

Through the field survey, it is found that there are still some problems in the structure of Student Unions at both levels of Jilin University. To begin with, the number of Student Union members was redundant and this problem still exists after volunteer recruitment system was implemented. Moreover, from the perspective of mechanism and regulations, the Student Union at both school and college levels failed to establish an effective training mechanism [2]. Last but not the least, in terms of the structure of Student Unions, the work style is far from being adequate.

**Unreasonable Amount of Student Union Members**

Ahead of the current round of reform among Chinese University Student Unions, there was a relatively serious problem at both levels of Student Unions in Jilin University, which is staff redundancy. The redundancy in the student union will not only breed the lazy work style of students but also lead to the failure of information transmission. When the message is transmitted from top to bottom or from bottom to top, due to the different attitudes of information transmitters to receive the information, the information will be expanded or deleted during transmission. Therefore, the more links of information transmission there are, the greater the interference of the information will be, and the more easily the information will be distorted [3]. *Several Opinions* requires that “the departments of Student Unions should not be overlapping and complex. In general, Student Unions at the school-level should have a staff number of about 40, and in principle no more than 60; Student Unions of colleges should have a

staff number of 20 to 30". However, through the field survey, it is found that in the spring semester of 2020, Jilin University's school-level Student Union has reached a staff number of more than 400; some college-level Student Union presidents interviewed by us said that the number of their Student Union members ranged from 40 to 100<sup>3</sup>.

Since the *Several Opinions* was issued, the Student Union of Jilin University at both school and college levels has been reduced in size, i.e., the number of staff members recruited by each department was limited in the selection of the Student Union, in line with the principle of streamlining. However, this kind of rapid "downsizing" has led to the phenomenon of "inability to adapt" in Student Unions: the sudden decrease in the number of staff members has led to a significant increase in the workload of individuals, and the organization and planning of large-scale events is even more strained and overstretched. Even if we recruit temporary volunteers in a project-based way as suggested in *Several Opinions*, it brings a series of problems such as how to carry out volunteer training, how to keep an effective communication between volunteers and Student Union members, and how to overcome the difficulty of friction pulling down efficiency. Therefore, while there is a need to streamline the redundant membership, the realities that come with it need to be continuously explored and addressed in practice.

#### **Lack of Training Mechanisms for Student Union Members**

The training of Student Union members is neither systematic, professional nor continuous. This results in the fact that some Student Union members do not understand the working environment and working conditions, cannot clearly state the work ideas, lack active innovation consciousness and work enthusiasm [4]. Based on our research results, it is found that Student Unions at both levels of Jilin University lack effective training mechanisms for their members. We noticed the qualities which students and teachers expect most from Student Union members are initiative, organizing capacity, collaboration and executive ability (Fig. 3). Undoubtedly, it is important to attract students with excellent academic performance, good character, and strong comprehensive ability to join the Student Union through a reasonable selection mechanism. Whereas, a rational talent training mechanism is also fairly essential in the process of forging excellent student leaders in Student Unions.

During the interview, a college-level Student Union president told us the current Student Union lacks an effective mechanism for developing student leaders. He also pointed out that neither work skills training nor organizational team building has been given sufficient attention in the Student Union. The results of our questionnaire survey also reflect this problem. More than 66 percent of the respondents suppose that Student Unions should "standardize the process of selection, assessment, cultivation and work style of all student leaders" to better serve college students. When asked about what can be done to improve the efficiency of Student Unions, more than half of the 214 Student Unions members at both levels of Jilin University who participated in our survey agree that it is necessary to "improve the executive ability of Student Union members, strengthen the intercommunication between them, and timely exchange their work methods and experience". Besides, they suggest Student Unions should "strengthen team building, enhance the consciousness of cooperation, and create a more positive team atmosphere". According to our findings, we can conclude that the current Student Unions at both school and college levels in Jilin University are still inadequate in terms of professional skill cultivation, team spirit building, and some other key aspects of member training.

#### **Inadequacy of Student Union Work Style Formation**

Interviewees in our survey reflected that the current Student Unions of Chinese universities at both levels are generally inadequate in work style formation, which leads to the internal Student Union being prone to bureaucracy, loose atmosphere, lack of work initiative, and some other phenomena. The specific manifestation of these problems is that some members of the Student Union do not have a clear understanding of the purpose of the Student Union, which is "to serve the students"<sup>4</sup>. Besides, some of the stu-

<sup>3</sup> Unstructured interview. *The status quo of student unions in Jilin University*. 2020

<sup>4</sup> Commentator for the Newspaper. *Serving students is the fundamental purpose of the Student Union*. China Youth Daily, 2020-06-15(001).

### What qualities do you think should student union members possess?

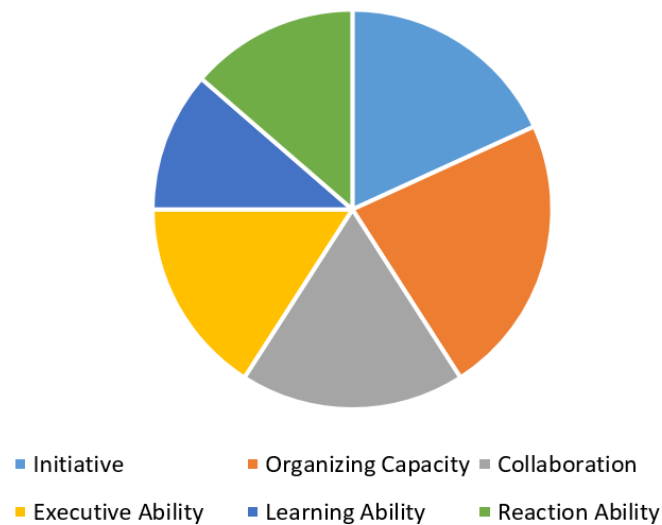


Fig. 3. Results of our questionnaire survey

dents lack the awareness of theoretical learning, and even have a tendency to be utilitarian in the sense of “judging heroes by their positions”<sup>5</sup>.

The work style of a Student Union fundamentally reflects its culture and continuously influences the way Student Union members behave<sup>6</sup>. The pragmatic work style and positive Student Union culture can benefit each other. Only by promoting, cultivating, and refreshing these two factors can we radically put an end to the tendency of bureaucratization, administration, and utilitarianism of the Student Union.

#### Suggestions for University Student Unions to Improve Management Structure

Fig. 4 shows the results of a student survey on how the Student Union should be strengthened in order to better serve students.

##### Optimizing the Scheduling of Student Union Members

Based on the requirements of Chinese University Student Union reform, in order to cut the staff numbers of Student Unions at both levels, universities should further explore how to optimize the division structure of Student Union members and explore concise and efficient ways of working.

Promoting a new round of University Student Union Reform is not simply a rough reduction in the number of staff members, but at the same time has the significance of simplifying its institutional hierarchy. Before the reform, there existed some redundant positions in addition to the presidium and departmental members, which resulted in a complicated hierarchy within the organization. The distribution and approvals of work had to go through various levels, which seriously wasted time, reduced efficiency and stirred up bureaucratic atmosphere within the organization. Since the reform was launched, *Several Opinions* clearly required that “The presidium of Student Union is collectively responsible for major matters in the Student Union. The position of president and vice-president should be replaced by executive president”. It also claimed that “No other positions should be kept except the presidium and the staffs in different working departments”. As a result, the internal of the Student Union has been flattened, and the presidium can directly assign tasks to members of each department, which greatly saves the time and cost of confirmation and execution in the work [5].

<sup>5</sup> Commentator for the Newspaper. *Let the Debriefing Review Enable Student Union to Develop Healthily*. China Youth Daily. 2020-08-05(001).

<sup>6</sup> Commentator for the Newspaper. *Student Union Should Cultivate A Fresh Organizational Culture*. China Youth Daily. 2020-07-09(001).


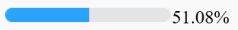

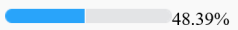

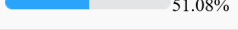
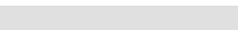
Options	Num	Proportion
A. Improve the mechanism for safeguarding students' rights and interests, and conduct assessment and evaluation.	116	 62.37%
B. Pay attention to the construction of online student union and attract students to participate in the supervision work	95	 51.08%
C. Standardize the selection, examination and cultivation of student cadres as well as the construction of style	120	 64.52%
D. Hold Student cadre training regularly to help them learn relevant knowledge and promote their self-reflection	90	 48.39%
E. Import ordinary students to participate in the management, by way of recommendation and election	110	 59.14%
F. Reasonable the arrangement of student cadre tenure	95	 51.08%
G. else	0	 0%
The number of valid fill in this question	186	

Fig. 4. A survey on how should Student Union strengthen itself to better serve students

In addition, University Student Unions should further explore a suitable and project-based approach to recruit its volunteer. For example, at the beginning of the school year, Student Unions can make an annual work plan, determine the large-scale activities which need to be carried out to recruit volunteers, make detailed volunteer recruitment regulations, institutionalize the system of volunteer training, the scope of volunteer participation in the work, the criteria for awarding volunteer hours, etc., so as to reduce the friction in the work, and smoothly achieve the goal of “employing volunteers according to activities, and dispersing them afterward”.

#### **Building the Talent Development Mechanism**

Student Union staffs are key advocates of the organization value, key shapers of the organization culture, and direct bearers of the organization image<sup>7</sup>. The reform of university Student Unions in the new era should be carried out from two aspects, including implementing more professional training and enhancing the team-building of Student Unions, which are dedicated to cultivating young talents for all-round development and enhancing the comprehensive quality of Student Union staffs.

In terms of implementing professional skills training, the Student Union should organize regular lectures and cultivating activities for its members, focusing on the use of common office software, newsletter writing and photography, professional communication etiquette, speech, and hosting, etc., so as to enhance the practical working ability of its members and improve the efficiency of the Student Union.

Student Union’s members are both workers and learners, so it is the responsibility of the Student Union to cultivate high-quality student members [6]. To promote the development of an excellent Student Union team, group discussions and team building activities should be regularly carried out within the department and the organization. Through all these activities, Student Union members can dilute their position concepts, discuss their gains and losses, create equal and free communication space, and develop a harmonious atmosphere. Moreover, quality development and other collective activities should be regularly conducted, in order to deepen the mutual understanding between Student Union members, cultivate the cooperative spirit of all members, enhance internal cohesion, as well as make the Student Union more like a warm and united family.

#### **Strengthening the Formation of Work Style**

A positive and pragmatic work style is a necessary condition for the healthy development of student organizations. “Student Union Organization Reform Plan” pointed out that the basic orientation and functions of a Student Union should be clear, its organizational structure should be streamlined and optimized, and the “administrative” tendency should be eliminated [7]. To promote an upright work style, university Student Unions should establish an effective supervision and evaluation mechanism, carry out

various forms of self-improvement and supervision mechanisms, and build a comprehensive and effective evaluation system. Assessment is the key measure for the effective management of the members of the student union [8]. For example, they can organize self-evaluation and mutual evaluation among Student Union members as an organic part of the assessment mechanism. Besides, carrying out the three-level linkage of school, college, and class through organizing mutual evaluation between the Student Union, the Class Committee and the Student Association is also a good method [9].

### Conclusion

Over the past decades, student unions in China have become mature in the process of self-management, self-service and self-education. However, in the process of their development, there are still problems such as positioning deviation, redundant institutions, low efficiency, and unclear development concept. Only with optimizing the scheduling of student union members, building the talent development mechanism of student union, and strengthening the formation of work style, can we restart the new round of student union reform and contribute youth strength to the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era.

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