This year, The Gateway is celebrating a decade of free student press at the University of Alberta. In last week’s issue, we detailed the story behind the birth of an independent Gateway, autonomous from the Students’ Union. This week, we go over the final steps in the success story — how The Gateway challenged the status quo and entered a new era of autonomy.

Be sure to check out Part One online at www.thegatewayonline.ca

If at first you don’t succeed...

The first failed attempt at autonomy didn’t deter Lazin — or anyone else involved with the campaign. Everything, it only served to drive them to succeed, and they launched a more organized and comprehensive plan for the following year.

“We really didn’t have much choice but to do it again,” Lazin says.

When the 2001-02 publishing year began, the Gateway staff and volunteers set out once again to earn their autonomy. David Alexander took over as Editor-in-Chief, and Lazin took on the role of Autonomy Manager, dedicating himself to campaigning for an independent Gateway. He dove into the process armed with all the knowledge and experience he needed to carry out the autonomy campaign more efficiently, righting the mistakes of the past.

“We wrote up a new, different petition. We looked at our old one and said, frankly. If this had worked, it wouldn’t have been ideal in a number of ways. We’d written the term ‘pretty unsuccessfully for the Gateway because we were concerned about getting it to pass,” Lazin remarks.

“We submitted the petition pretty early, with plenty of signatures and ID numbers — we just told people they had to give them to us, and they did.”

Even with enough signatures, the SU remained unconvinced that The Gateway had legal right to go forward with the petition based on consultation with their administrative law specialist at the time, Bill Shores. However, Lazin argued they were misinterpreting the legalese of the petition.

“As part of the University Act, the SU can’t sell real property. They can own it, but they can’t dispose of it at all, because rights automatically revert to the university in the event that the SU can no longer own the property. Real property, in this act, refers to real estate, buildings and land,” he says. “Jamie Speers, then VP (Operations and Finance), interpreted the act differently and incorrectly to mean any kind of property owned by the SU — not just real estate,” he explains.

“Speers said that the provision of our petition that said the Students’ Union would let The Gateway keep all of its computers was illegal out of the University Act, which made the whole petition illegal.”

Despite this, the SU didn’t reject the proposed question, but instead rewrote the proposed referenda to be less in The Gateway’s favour, removing the one dollar reduction in SU fees and increasing the amount of levy The Gateway would receive, making the overall proposal of a free student press more expensive to students than originally proposed.

“I think they thought a larger student fee would cause it to fail,” Lazin says.

“The ultimate question on the ballot was really nothing similar to what we proposed — but the bylaw still required that the wording be approved by Students’ Council.”

Realizing the prospect of autonomy could be in jeopardy, Lazin made sure to submit the proposed question for the referenda far in advance of the March election deadline, hoping to ensure it would actually go through this time around.

Some of the SU executives were strongly in favour of maintaining their ties to the paper and tried to place roadblocks in between The Gateway staff and their goal. But as then-Editor-in-Chief David Alexander points out, it everyone involved with the SU wanted to push for an SU-owned Gateway:

“All of them felt this way, but they had to toe the line, which is understandable,” he says. “In the end, though, it worked in our favour, because some of their tactics were so underhanded and juvenile that it made them look pretty bad.”

Alexander says it seemed like the SU found every loophole possible to prevent the paper’s autonomy campaign from moving forward, including “trying to buy last-minute ads to use as editorial space to attack us, and even going so far as to call private council meetings that we were barred from in order to pass motions that affected The Gateway without anyone from the paper even being there.”

“They really embarrassed themselves at certain points,” Alexander adds.

“Luckily, we also had supporters (within) the SU to help us.”

“Some of the SU’s tactics were so underhanded and juvenile that it made them look pretty bad.”

—David Alexander

2001/02 Editor-in-Chief, The Gateway