

## **Vice-President University Relations Summer 2016 Work Report Arr Farah**

### **Introduction**

The transition from my previous role on the Board of Directors, as Arts and Social Sciences Representative to Vice President University Relations was quite smooth. Having previous experience on the board of directors and working alongside my predecessor, allowed me to come into the role with a strong lay of the land. Furthermore, continuing my involvement on the advocacy committee and the governance committee allowed me to pick up where I left off at the end of April. However, with past experience comes the pressure to not only perform but to lead by example and to assist new members as they adjust to a very unique work environment. The society has historically struggled with continuity, which makes the role of a returning board member all the more crucial, especially during a time of large structural changes.

It is the purpose of this report to provide a high level review of the work I have undertaken during the Summer 2016 semester of the 2016-2017 Board of Directors term. Before proceeding with this report, I would like to recognize the 2016/17 Board of Director's ability to overcome adversity. The Summer has presented the society with several unprecedented situations, that the Board handled quite well. I commend the Board of Directors as well as society staff and management for their commitment to the society and the membership.

### **Advocacy**

Prior to the beginning of my involvement with the Board of Directors in May 2015, I volunteered to be a member of the advocacy committee. I joined the committee because I thought it was a committee that identified the concerns of undergraduate students and worked to address them. But I soon learned that this was not the case. The committee ran campaigns, that came out of the platforms of board members, or out of the admittedly someone disconnected minds of board members.

Recognizing the aforementioned concerns the advocacy committee under the leadership of VP External Relations Christine Dyson began a large scale consultation process. This semester long consultation process took form in a first ever advocacy specific surveying of the membership. The membership was asked to rank issues in terms of how much they pertained to them. The issues spanned the society's 4 pillars; Health and Wellbeing, Social conditions, Financial conditions and Academic conditions. After the conclusion of the surveying process the

committee began take the data they received and conduct research on how to meaningfully address the top issues as prioritized by surveyed students. In the Fall the committee will be rolling out several campaigns that speak to issues that students have noted to be crucial.

While the committee and I have done the work of surveying students, I have also done some work off the side of my desk. Two campaigns that I think are meaningful to students are the Open Textbook Campaign and the Fraser Library campaign. My thoughts were confirmed after our advocacy survey this Summer made it quite clear that these two issues need to be addressed.

The Open textbook campaign focused a lot on student awareness thus far and has become a campaign that the society is known for. However, one criticism of the campaign has been a cost-benefit analysis. The SFSS over the years has spent a great deal of funds on the campaign but has not produced enough. This year we decided to focus on some more specific goals which include but are not limited to; seeing at least one adoption at SFU in the 2016-2017 year, assist in the assessment of the success of the SFU library grant program, advocate for funding of more Open Educational Resources development grants, present to the SFU Faculty Association and lastly collect more data regarding textbook use at SFU. I look forward to a busy year of working towards these goals and evaluating our success or lack thereof in late April.

As for the Fraser Library campaign, it is much easier to tackle due to its seemingly one-sided nature. The issue of opening up the Fraser library on Sundays and expanding operating hours will clearly benefit students. However, the university like any other public institution often takes an utilitarian view to issues that require budgetary maneuvering. The university often asks questions like; how many students will benefit, how often will the library be used, and will it be used by SFU students. These are all valid questions when talking about a service or a program, but the discussion at hand is a library at a university. Universities are primarily a place of learning much like a library. Libraries serve as places of research, study and group work, which SFU Surrey students are not being provided enough of.

Due to the complexity of the Surrey campus, the operations of the Fraser library are tied to the operations of the campus at large which creates a great deal of difficulty. Furthermore, the SFU governance model of Vice Presidents and campus Executive Directors makes the issue all the more convoluted. This summer the university committed to having our spring pilot project continue for the Summer 2016 and Fall 2016 semesters. This means the Fraser library will be open for the last three Sundays of both the aforementioned semesters. A personal goal of mine is to have the University, specifically the VP External Relations make a reasonable commitment to the Fraser library for the upcoming year. In closing, I am very excited for this campaign and

the other campaigns coming out of advocacy. It has been a pleasure thus far to serve on such a strong committee, filled with passionate and intelligent students and a very productive chair.

## **Governance**

During the 2015-2016 year the Board Directors began a significant shift in the way the society governs itself. The key issues the shift is meant to solve is; year to year continuity, staff and board accountability, meaningful membership engagement, and informed decision making. As the chair of the governance committee tasked with leading this change once again, the transition between the two board terms was quite simple. Moreover, i'd like to acknowledge the 2016-2017 governance committee for the commitment, work ethic and attention to detail thus far. The committee spent the Summer semester tackling the enormous task of rewriting the society's by-laws. Our focus with the by-laws has been to allow for sufficient flexibility, more coherent language, and to remove all inconsistencies, all while respecting the purpose of the society, and coming inline with the new BC Society Act. The goal is to have a first draft ready for the board (vetted through legal) for early October and eventually to the membership for consultation and approval.

The governance committee also began the work of clearing up the inconsistencies and ambiguity around the collection of student fees. One issues that has been ignored for far too long is why we charge the fees we do, who are they charged to and is the system used to monitor this process efficient and appropriate. Furthermore, the committee has also reviewed particular policies from time to time, as they apply to the activities of the society, and provide ancillary regulation to the by-laws.

The work of the governance committee may not be the most fascinating to most, but is absolutely crucial as the society needs to be more accountable to the membership and its stakeholders. The society has embarked on a much needed shift and I intend to ensure that, this shift is done sensibly and efficiently.

## **Nominating Committee**

Another committee I sit on is the nominating committee, which is comprised of VP External Relations Christine Dyson, chair and At-Large Member Mudi Bwakura and I. The purpose of the committee is to recruit, interview and recommend at-large members to populate SFSS committees. This Summer served as the pilot for such an initiative, which saw over 45 applications, which was a very respectable feat. The committee will continue this initiative going into the fall semester and will continue to evaluate its success.

### **Alcohol Policy Working Group**

The SFSS has historically provided core funding to student unions, which includes funding for alcohol. This has been a contentious issue over the years, and has seen many groups abusing the system. With all that being said the society decided to review its alcohol policy. I was tasked by the Board of Directors to lead a working group, which was to create a recommendation. After lots of consultation with council, board, and staff/management, the committee landed on core funding on alcohol would be limited to 30 percent. The committee also recommended that an appeals process be set up for student unions wishing to host large scale events. The recommendations were eventually approved by the Board of Directors.

### **Accessibility Committee**

The Accessibility committee was formed in order to meet the original terms of reference for the Accessibility fund, replacing last year AFAC. The committee spent the summer reviewing the Accessibility Report that was done last year. The committee spent some time contemplating some of the recommendations and landed on funding an accessibility worker. Since then the committee has been reviewing a potential job description. The committee also reviewed proposals from a few different groups, who were requesting accessibility funding. The committee also worked on reviewing the Hi-Five Project Coordinator position with SFU Health and Counselling. After the approval of the proposal to partially fund the position once again, I was appointed to be part of the hiring process, this coming fall.

### **Build SFU**

Since its inception via referendum in 2012 the Build SFU project has been highly contentious. Last September the Board of Directors received approval to take out a loan in order to finance the project. When my term as VP University Relations began in May, the society had already secured the Student Union Building (SUB) portion of the project, with groundbreaking taking place in June.

The Stadium portion of the project, turned out to be a much more costly project, than originally estimated. The stadium portion of the project wasn't as developed as the SUB do the lack of sufficient funds to enter a schematic design process for both projects at the same time. One the SFSS and SFU received the schematic design report in early July, cost was \$21.7M in hard costs and roughly \$30M including soft costs. After this report was received, it was agreed by both the SFSS and SFU that there was a need to see a revised design that would cost significantly less.

The SFSS needing a revised design as soon as possible and an agreement from SFU stating a solution to cost overruns was very much pressed for time. With the AGM deadline of September 21st 2016 on the horizon and the length of time needed to seek financing from the bank, the SFSS found itself in a very difficult spot. On August 10th the Board of Directors received a revised schematic design for the stadium which came in at \$16M for an excavated stadium and \$13M for an unexcavated stadium, which was still far more than the society could afford, especially without a commitment from SFU to cover the cost overruns. On August 11th at a meeting of the Board of Directors, it was formally voted to not proceed with the project due to the limited timeline and cost overruns.

Since then, the SFSS has received feedback both in favour of the decision and in opposition to the decision. We also have heard comments and offers from SFU to find a way forward with the project which we are currently trying to clarify. The SFSS remains open minded when it comes to the project. I think it is important to note that the SFSS has been in favour of the entire Build SFU project. I look forward to the busy Fall semester which should present some challenges regarding the Build SFU project.

## **Supporting Surrey & Vancouver**

One of the key points of my platform, which was based on a year of SFSS Board of Directors experience, was the need to have more support for students on our Surrey and Vancouver campuses. I think it is crucial to view our respective campuses as **connected** and **bridge the gap** between students in Burnaby, Surrey, and Vancouver, rather than operating in **independent** silos. During the Summer term SFSS FCAT Representative Prab Bassi and I held office hours at Harbour Centre, giving students the opportunity to ask questions and voice concerns. This is initiative that began last year, and we will work to continue and improve in the coming year.

Another way the society and I have worked to support all of our campuses this summer is to kickstart the Surrey Space Expansion Project which has been in the works for over two years. The society has been looking to renovate two separate locations on the Surrey Campus but have been faced with far too much bureaucracy over the last two years. It is a goal of the SFSS to find one consistent way to engage the university on space projects regardless of the campus. In order to achieve this goal SFSS representatives have engaged in dialogue with SFU senior administration and the administration of the surrey campus. Similarly the SFSS and the Vancouver administration are attempting to partner on a space project at the Harbour Centre

which would renovate and repurpose existing space to benefit students. It is my hope to gain ground on both these projects in the coming months.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude this report, I would like to take a moment to reflect on my first semester as an SFSS executive. The role of an executive is far more different than that of a Faculty or At-Large representative. Executives are still expected to perform many day-to-day tasks that are not formalized anywhere in policies or procedures. These include tasks like supervising management, dealing with HR, meeting on an ad-hoc basis for time-sensitive items and looking after large sums of money after pub nights and large-scale events. The society needs to capture some of these tasks in its governing documents, because many of these tasks are shared word of mouthful, rather than formalized.

It is my goal to formalize and capture as many SFSS tasks and practices into policies and written procedures, by the end of my term. I also believe the society needs to do a better job of recognizing staff contributions and work, and making our staff feel valued and welcomed. This is a key area of the society's strategic plan which I am very excited about. Despite the rough summer, I believe the society is on the right track and I can't wait to see what the fall has to offer.

Arr Farah  
Vice-President University Relations  
Board of Directors