Student Senate’s “Agenda”: Providing Students the Services They Need and the Leadership They Deserve.

By: Corydon Fish, Patrick Martin and Tyrel Zich

This week the Spectator published an article highlighting former Senators and unnamed student’s claims of an agenda being pursued by the Student Senate. Though we were disappointed the individuals quoted resigned their positions on Senate without ever having raised their concerns with executive leadership, we appreciate the opportunity to address them while illustrating the incredible work and achievements of Student Senate throughout this year.

The “Agenda”
This year, Student Senate has pursued an agenda with two overriding missions. These are, first, to guarantee and expand the ability of Senate to offer high-impact services and initiatives to students, and second, to secure the legal and operational capabilities necessary to advocate for our students to decision makers across this campus and state. We are happy to report that, with the end of the 56th session approaching, both have been overwhelmingly successful. Senate has revolutionized its approach to promoting crucial student services in areas such as tenant affairs and LGBTQ support and training despite the most pressing financial challenges in a decade. Further, we have made the largest leaps forward in the legal authorities of student governments across the state to work and advocate for students in more than 40 years.

The Executive Board having an agenda is foundational to Student Senate and elected governance in general. The President and Vice President of the Student Senate, like candidates for any elected position, ran for office in order to effectuate positive change and improve the experiences of their constituents. Candidates without platforms of issues to address and problems to solve are simply building their résumé. We applaud the Spectator’s repeated insistence that students critically examine the policy priorities of candidates for Student Senate, and encourage everyone to make informed decisions at the ballot box.

Financial Stewardship in Student Senate
The Spectator’s article made several references to Student Senate’s approach as fiscally focused and financially conservative. While Senate was able to secure the lowest segregated fee increases in years while maintaining and even strengthening services on campus, to focus solely on these financial successes ignores the incredible work our commissions and Senators have done in a variety of areas central to student life.

Last semester alone, Senate redesigned the entire Student Services Commission to provide high impact programs to our off-campus renters and to promote and support diversity in our campus community. Initiatives such as legal services to students and our campus readership program have been expanded and
reinvigorated. Our Intergovernmental Affairs Commission has been entirely
overhauled to interact with state and local governments in ways never before
possible on issues pertaining to Eau Claire students. Our Organizations Commission
will soon be implementing a range of new policies to streamline and strengthen
organizational communication on campus. The brief listing here does not even begin
to encapsulate our gains in areas such as improve meal plans, student health
services, technology, and environmental sustainability.

To be sure, Senate has had to make difficult financial decisions this year. But these
decisions have had nothing to do with ideology, and everything to do with
 guaranteeing the future of crucial services students our students depend on. To
focus exclusively on these gains is to ignore countless other successes which will be
supporting our campus’s commitment to excellence in student experiences for years
to come.

“Stacking the Deck”
Additionally, the Spectator’s article raised concerns of Student Senate executive
leadership “stacking the deck” when appointing students to fill vacant positions.
Simply put, if “stacking” Student Senate with qualified, knowledgeable, diverse, and
involved students is bad, then we don’t want to be good. While, understandably, a
student not selected may feel disappointed, everyone is encouraged to get involved
in a commission and apply again. As a general rule, someone sitting on a commission
who is knowledgeable about Senate’s operations and has demonstrated a strong
commitment to working for students is a far more likely candidate.

Consensus Building
Throughout the article, the Spectator features complaints regarding Senate’s efforts
to build consensus on legislation before it is voted upon. Collaboration outside of
meetings is a cornerstone of effective governance. The opposite approach, lack of
compromise and willingness to cooperate with alternative perspectives during the
drafting of legislation, is at the heart of dysfunctional leadership. Student Senate’s
many commissions and office in Davies Center is where most substantial and
productive debates about legislation occur. It is disappointing to see that those
raising concerns regarding Senate’s collaborative formulation of legislation rarely
participated in it, instead choosing to resign their positions.

Effective Means to Raise Concerns with Senate
Student Senate can only address the concerns that are communicated to it. While we
appreciate and depend upon a robust discussion of shortcomings and best practices,
to remain silent regarding perceived issues until four weeks before the end of a
Senate session only deprives the student body of the strengthening collaboration
which could have sooner occurred. Whether through open forums, public hearings,
or listening sessions, Student Senate has and will continue to incorporate differing
viewpoints and ideas. Individuals of diverse background and opinion running for
office and participating in commissions are the cornerstone upon which effective,
responsive government is built. The individuals who effect change do not quit, only recommit.