

Introductions

My name is Alexis Jordan and I am an anthropology PhD candidate and a former member of the Student Association - Student Appropriations Committee. I am here to share important information regarding attacks on a critical source of student funding for academic conferences, the Student Appropriations Committee grants for student organizations. It is my belief that the continually crippled function of this committee, the devaluing of academic conferences by the professional staff that work with the SAC, and the ever increasing budgetary concerns brought on by this pandemic will see funding for academic conferences disappear completely from this committee unless action is taken. I've invited my colleague Reed Heintzkill, one of the Student Association Graduate Student senators, to join me today to provide additional information if needed. To be clear we are both here speaking as individuals, we do not represent the Student Association. A thorough summation of the issues I will be discussing is available in the documentation shared with this body for today's meeting.

Background on Student Appropriations Committee

A subset of the segregated fees the majority of UWM students pay are designated as allocable and are distributed to various bodies on campus by the Student Association also known as the SA. The Student Appropriations Committee (also known as SAC) receives some of these funds and uses them to provide support for student activities by reviewing and funding grants submitted by student organizations. The committee is made up of student senators and members of student organizations. SAC grants are one of the few opportunities on campus for students to have a say in how the fees they are required to pay are spent. One type of grant, the travel grant, can be used to allow student organization members to attend academic conferences.

Recap

As some of you may recall, in Spring 2019 approval of travel grants for academic conferences was threatened by a series of critical misunderstandings by SAC members. In the middle of the grant hearings the committee decided to disallow funding for academic conference travel. This was based on a misunderstanding that academic conferences resulted in academic credit for students and unfounded accusations being made that graduate student orgs were attempting to manipulate the SAC grant process in requesting academic conference funding to obtain more than their “fair share” of the budget. The Graduate School was accused of encouraging this behavior. Only after a number of graduate student and academic focused orgs attended a Student Association meeting to express their concerns was this ill-advised course of action ceased. It was at this time that I and a number of other concerned students joined the SAC in order to have oversight on the grant-awarding process. My time on the SAC from Spring 2019-Fall 2019 made it apparent to me that the problems with this committee run deep and attacks on travel grants were not based on a one-time misunderstanding.

Problems

There are a variety of structural issues that leave SAC perpetually in chaos with little opportunity for student members to receive adequate onboarding regarding the function of the committee and their duties. As a committee member I was constantly lacking adequate information to make informed decisions about how best to combat this chaos and fairly distribute the allocable fees. All this is outlined extensively in the documentation shared with this body.

Entwined with these issues are those related to the Student Association Professional Staff (SAPS) which is a part of the Student Involvement (SI) office. Each of these administrative

offices are hierarchically connected to the Student Association and are meant to advise and assist students in their roles. The same SAPS and SI staff members have been engaged with the SAC process throughout its increasingly crippled capacity to function. I observed that some of these administrators do not share the same concerns that myself, other SAC members, and student organizations have regarding these issues. Staff members encouraged funding reductions on academic conference travel grants and made statements that travel grants were less deserving of money because they provided a great deal of funding to fewer students when compared with on-campus event grants. These same staff members also expressed no concern or intent of action regarding Spring 2019 SAC misinterpretation of academic conferences nor the unfounded accusations made against graduate students and the Graduate School.

Academic conferences award students meaningful opportunities to develop their research skills, generate project ideas, and make valuable connections with scholars and potential employers who can and do provide future career opportunities. While travel grants do not entertain dozens of students on campus in the same manner as some event grants, I would argue that the impact of this funding on student lives is critical to their futures beyond UWM.

To be clear, my goal in stating this is not to disregard the hard work which many of the administrative staff in these offices engage in to help distribute SAC grants. I am well-aware and appreciative of this work. However, it is clear to me that there are those among the SI and SAPS staff who do not see the value in the professional development opportunities that are possible through travel grants and choose not to listen to students who seek to demonstrate said value.

This situation contributed to certain SAC members' negative and ill-informed perceptions of these grants and the student organizations that requested them in the Spring of 2019.

I foresee the same or similar situations arising in the future. I expressed my concerns at a Student Association meeting on February 16th of this year and learned that the SA has recently formed an informal working group to investigate and troubleshoot problems in the SAC. However, to my knowledge this working group currently consists of only the SAC-chair, the campus and community outreach officer, and professional staff. Thus far only a small selection of student orgs have been invited to participate by means of a single line at the bottom of an easily-overlooked email, but due to the nature of this invitation none have joined to my knowledge.

As it is not a formal committee, no meeting minutes, audio recordings, or public meeting notices (which would enable public attendance and input) are required. Any recommendations made by the working group would not necessarily be voted upon by a quorum of members nor would recommendations have to be formally presented at a SA meeting for discussion prior to being voted on as SAC by-laws changes. I find the lack of a formal and publicly accountable committee very troubling. This is not conducive to a fair and transparent restructuring of the SAC that considers how the UWM student body as a whole wants to spend the allocable segregated fees set aside for student organizations.

In concluding my original statement to the SA, I urged them to create a formal committee that actively involved any interested student organizations. Graduate student senator Reed Heintzkill made a motion to add a discussion regarding the possibility of forming a formal committee to the

agenda. However, the SAC-chair described such a committee as unnecessary and the student senate ultimately voted against even discussing the matter.

Requests

Making meaningful change with regards to this process is only possible if students across UWM get involved. If student organization members do not voice their concerns or demand a formal committee to resolve SAC grant issues, it is my adamant belief that travel grants for academic conferences will cease to exist. The SA president is aware of my concerns and shares some of them but he believes he has adequately discouraged attacks on travel grants. I do not agree. As far as I know the working group has stalled in the midst of the pandemic and the SA president and other SA members who share my concerns will no longer be on the SA next year but the professional staff that actively worked against funding academic conferences will still be there. If academic conferences continue to be depicted as unworthy of funding they will be an easy target for future cuts.

I am requesting that the Faculty Senate share this information with students in their departments and I am encouraging any students that share my concerns to contact two of the student senators who strongly supported the creation of a formal committee to review SAC- Reed Heintzkill and Robert Bavisotto, to inquire after the current status of these issues and the best courses of action moving forward. I also recommend that anyone who shares my concerns should listen to a few of the audio recordings of the SAC and SA meetings from the Spring 2019 and Fall 2019 in which SAC and professional staff members explicitly target conference travel, graduate student orgs, and the graduate school. The senators' contact information and dates of the relevant audio

recordings and instructions on obtaining them are available in the documentation shared with this body.

If this body shares my concerns, I would request that the Faculty Senate reach out to the SI and SAPS offices and educate these student support services as to the importance of student participation in academic conferences, as well as encourage these offices to allow students to make informed decisions, independent of the SI and SAPS' offices desires, as to what the funding priorities of SAC grants should be. Were the Faculty Senate to work with their colleagues in these non-academic departments to impress upon them the significance of academic networking for graduate student success while increasing transparency as to the decision-making processes in place for SAC grants, I am convinced this process would change for the better and see students, both undergraduate and graduate, return to a post COVID-19 campus with a more robust system of support in place.

At this point I am happy to answer questions and I am also seeking any advice the faculty senate has regarding how students can better defend academic conference travel grants. Thank you for your time.