
September 2, 2018

Dear SFU Administrators,

It is with sadness that the SFU Students of Caribbean and African Ancestry (SOCA) have to be contacting the SFU Administration regarding space due to a lack of support from our very own student society, the Simon Fraser Student Society Board of Directors. It is heartbreaking, sad and outright unempathetic to the plight of the Black Community that SFU SOCA represents.

Who we are

SFU SOCA was founded in 1994 as the Black Students Association and has gone through several name changes including: The Association of Students of African Descent (ASAD), African Caribbean Heritage Students Association (ACHSA) and now SOCA. Though having a variety of names over the years, the organization has always had the same vision - that is, to expose the campus community to issues significant to the African and Caribbean Diasporic communities by initiating and maintaining fellowship between the black community and its allies at SFU. We do this through hosting conversations and discussions on political, economic and social issues affecting the African and Caribbean Diaspora and providing a space for this dialogue through our Black Community Services Centre.

SOCA also holds various events including Symposiums, Panel Discussions, Cultural Nights, Evenings of Excellence, Galas, Pub Nights, Afro-Caribbean Parades and Festivals as well as participates in performances and cultural events on and off campus. These events are hosted with the aim of sharing and raising awareness of the diverse cultures within the diaspora, and providing a context for students to understand the issues significant to people of African and Caribbean descent, at SFU, Canada and the world at large. In addition, SOCA works to raise awareness surrounding the importance of having conversations to deconstruct issues of race in academia and the representation of black professors in faculty and for African and African Diasporic narratives to be in course offerings. SOCA emphasizes the desperate need for Afrocentric education curricula that seek to dispel myths and stereotypes, and gives the true historical account on issues related to people of African descent in Canada and also that critically examines issues of race and removing systemic barriers to people of African descent in academia and society at large.

Our Black Community Services Centre- a safe space for the black community- has enabled us to attain our vision, as it has provided a space where our community can meet to share our stories and engage with each other. Moreover, in this space, we strategize and fight for the issues which affect our community; we meet to make persons aware of the rich history of a people who continue to be oppressed as well as share positive prospects for the future through having dialogue, and providing a space for members to meet and belong. It has not only been efficacious in building community but also has the practical benefit of providing a physical place where we can collect, store and archive resources concerning Black History at SFU and the larger Canadian context - practical example of this is our library where students can borrow books to learn from a myriad of African, Caribbean, African-Canadian, African American and other African Diasporic writers. As such, SOCA seeks to highlight challenges we are currently facing at SFU regarding retaining a space for black students to belong on campus. It is very important that institutions support initiatives that address anti-black racism so that they are not complicit in the systematic racism occurring in the wider society.

SOCA's Eviction

SOCA received an eviction notice from the SFSS to vacate our current space by December 14, 2018 at 12:30. As such, SOCA had been trying to work with the SFSS to make the SUB a new home. However, even though the SFSS consulted with SOCA and other rotunda groups in 2013/2014 and assured the groups that they won't be displaced in the process of building the new SUB, the SFSS has insisted on reneging on this decision and instead has proposed the idea of a timeshare or hot desk model where no club, student union or equity seeking group is allocated dedicated space -not even the student groups which are the only element of SFU's institutional structure which addresses key social justice issues.

The initial meeting with the CEO of the SFSS, Martin Wyant, got off to a rocky start. He was not negotiating in good faith and tried to dismiss the conversation by affirming that SOCA did not need dedicated space and even threatened that "conversations [would be] shut down if we see stuff in the Peak tomorrow". He was not empathetic to the specific needs of black students at SFU. Afterwards, we reached out to the Board of Directors and proposed an alternative where one suite (containing three offices and a lounge) in the new SUB would house three earmarked groups who would share an Equity and Inclusion Lounge. In addition, the remaining suites would be allocated among groups such as SFPIRG, FNSEA and CJSF. However, this proposal was rejected. The SFSS then communicated that there would be no permanent allocations in the SUB, which ignored the fact that we have been in dialogue about a proposal. As such we went for clarification with the President.

In this clarification meeting, SOCA made a pointed reference to the tumultuous atmosphere of the first meeting that was held with the CEO of the SFS and that since then he has not been acting in good faith and is hurting the relationship between the SFSS and various equity seeking groups. In response, SOCA was told that "The CEO has a direct approach". This response reflects a larger systematic problem where the CEO has a disproportionate amount of control over important decisions that affect marginalized students, especially in that he is not required to consult with these students ahead of time. Also in this meeting, one of our members, a white female, was questioned as to whether she was a member of SOCA. She replied that "SOCA lets white people in as well", which the President took offence to, thinking that he was being "called out" on racism when, in fact, it was merely a misunderstanding. This resulted in a conversation about systematic racism and how those in power can unintentionally be discriminatory in their actions and decisions. The conversation then came to a halt and we asked the President to clarify via email what he was stating in person - that there had been no decision made regarding permanent space allocations.

After this clarification meeting, the SFSS instead followed up by sending an email which condemned SOCA and stated that they 'don't support hateful, racist or otherwise demeaning speech' and that 'verbal harassment is not tolerated' - clearly using this situation to deflect from the issue. They subsequently called off the next meeting to discuss our proposal.

In response, SOCA stated "let's not think of how SOCA or SFSS as institutions feel attacked for being perceived as complicit in institutional racism, but to see how we support people who are uncomfortable, and how to de-escalate and address these types of situations; to acknowledge the power differentials". The SFSS then doubled down stating that "this is a minimization and misappropriation of what occurred" and proceeded to shut down meetings.

These interactions and the actions of the SFSS evicting a black student group that has been operating in the TC317 The Black Community Services Centre in the Rotunda for 24 years is a textbook example of institutionalized racism against communities of colour where new developments render the most marginalized groups homeless.

Our Ask

These problematic situations are occurring in the SFU community. We hope that when such institutional roadblocks are put in place - especially as it relates to marginalized groups such

as SOCA representing the Black Community on campus - SFU will step up and support these groups. In line with SFU's strategic vision to engage communities, and in line with SFU's President, Andrew Petter's speech at the recent 2018 CAUBO conference where he firmly asserted that universities need to play a greater role in building and harnessing social infrastructure, SFU should support the recognition of black student spaces as it has since 1997 and continue to provide a more tight knit support mechanism for black students through our student group.

We understand that SFU is unable to lease space directly to us. As such, we ask that SFU publicly support SOCA in our fight to retain a space on campus. This will allow the SFSS to see that the SFU administration is truly engaging the world; addressing the tough conversations around race and the realities of racial hierarchies in academic spaces as well as the reason for these safe spaces.

We have grave concerns that the SFSS is making decisions in such a way that lacks empathy for the plight of the Black Community on campus. Specifically, we believe that Martin Wyant and the BuildSFU Manager, Marc Fontaine, have not been acting in good faith regarding the issue of space allocation and have led the SFSS to such a decision based solely on their own political goals. They have not truly allowed the Board of Directors to see the harms of their decisions and have not been empathetic to the plight of student groups losing space.

As such, we propose that SFU, via its Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Initiative, be present at any subsequent meeting that SOCA has with SFSS regarding this space issue. It is also requested that further meetings exclude the SFSS's CEO, Martin Wyant, as he has caused emotional distress; used marginalized groups as scapegoats and has eroded trust in the SFSS's intentions due to his lack of empathy in dealings with us.

Moreover, we call on SFU to strengthen the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion initiative so that they can be in alliance with SOCA and push for space in the new SUB alongside groups such as FNSEA, SFPIRG and SOCA. We require specific and targeted support that we can't find elsewhere institutionally.

Finally, we want to assert that even if people outside the black community cannot understand why SOCA's space is needed, they can still have compassion and trust our voices enough to support us in this fight. This is not the case with the current student leadership and as such, we desperately require the support from SFU.

We have attached correspondence we've had with the SFSS to this email.

The SFU Administration can support us, SFU has the power to ensure that our voices are heard and that we are not evicted. We sincerely hope that SFU will live up to its commitment to marginalized groups and we are sure the supportive administration will not be silent on displacement of Black Communities at the hands of an indifferent Student Society leadership and CEO. Looking forward to hearing from the SFU Administration.

In Solidarity,
The Executive Team,
SFU Students of Caribbean and African Ancestry