

January 16, 2019

Dear SFSS Board of Directors,

It is unfortunate that the Simon Fraser Student Society has again rejected our invitation to meet with the Rotunda Community. *In your previous email, dated November 23, 2018, you claimed to value the work we do on campus, but still refuse to use your power as a Board to provide dedicated safe space for Black students in the Student Union Building. Value is reflected in action: you cannot value the labour we do while undermining our ability to raise our voices against racism. This is reminiscent of the Black voices that have been silenced in academia, universities and in our society for decades, but still forced to labour through systematic violence and oppression from the days of slavery till now.*

Anti-Black racism is not a thing of the past: recent events reinforce the need for designated safe spaces so that members of our community can heal. Whether through a student inciting Racial Genocide in Vancouver, as was the case at Lord Byng Valley, or harassment by the Vancouver Police Department, who report that they disproportionately card Black people in Vancouver, or the fact that a Black person in Canada is 20 times more likely to be shot by police than a White person, systemic racism is a reality for us. This has a dramatic effect on the mental health and well being of students within the Black SFU community, and it is important that we have a consistent, permanent space to remedy the anti-Black sentiment rising in Canada and on university campuses. Similar to resources that are currently in place for marginalized communities who we stand in solidarity with, such as the First Nations Students Association, the Women's Center, and Out on Campus, Black students at SFU need student government to ensure that our space will be protected. Making decisions that impact us without our presence does not satisfy these necessary protections.

Joey Hansen, SFSS president from 1997-8 who oversaw the provision of our current space, illustrates the importance behind it:

"As an activist who got my start with the SFSS in the 1994 and who has spent the last 20 years working on college and university campuses across North America, I can say that anti-oppression work is as important now as it was in the 1990s. The election of leaders like Donald Trump and Rob Ford has emboldened those whose politics are based on discrimination. For anti-oppression work to be successful, anti-oppression activists require dedicated safe space from which to organize their activities. I urge the SFSS to continue to find and supply space to the various groups on campus engaged in this vital work."

Joey is not alone. Panther Kuol, Internal Relations Officer in 2010/11, states that *"I am saddened by the news that SOCA has been given notice to vacate its long held space. I find it highly disturbing."* These two examples show that in the past, SFSS has recognized the inequities in the current system and sought to remedy this by enabling a safe resource on campus specifically for the Black Community.

Our last meeting, on September 14, 2018, seemed to overcome barriers, as individuals expressed the importance of our space on campus and accepted that there was a breakdown in communication between the board and the Rotunda Community due to the actions of the board. Board members recognized then that changes were needed: VP-University Relations Jackson Freedman stated that *"It has clearly been found out today we don't have an effective model for SUB space."* Steven Hall drew on his experience at his previous college: *"If we're going for a shared model, I have seen it and I've witnessed it. It doesn't work."* Kalamity Hildebrandt from SFPIRG pointed out that *"Bookable space doesn't work for an organization with staff, [or] an organization that has to do ongoing, deep, meaningful work where there has to be continuity and equipment."* Samer Rihani, VP-Student Services and Acting President gave us hope, saying *"We can at least build a relationship within the*

Rotunda; let's see where a positive relationship gets us from there." Despite this message, our requests to meet in order to build this relationship have been consistently denied.

We hope that this letter brings a heightened understanding of the need for a safe space for the Black community on this campus and is followed with a shift in priorities within the SFSS board. Shutting down meetings and doubling-down on bad decisions is not the way to build a positive relationship, and we hope that your actions in the future will align with your claims to value the work that we do.

Best Regards,
The Executive Team
SFU Students of Caribbean and African Ancestry

References:

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