

SFU SOCA and Calls to Action

Introduction

Students of Caribbean and African Ancestry (SFU SOCA) was founded in 1994 to connect the SFU Campus community to the African and Caribbean Diasporic communities in Burnaby. As a club that previously begun as the Black Students Association and has gone through a range of name changes, such as Association of Students of African Descent (ASAD), African Caribbean Heritage Students Association (ACHSA) and now SOCA, the association has consistently strived to initiate meaningful conversations on political, economic and social issues affecting the African and Caribbean Diaspora on and around the Simon Fraser University Campus.

SOCA's Organizational Values

Inclusivity

SOCA has contributed to creating a welcoming space celebrating African and Caribbean identity at the Black Community Service Centre while encouraging relevant engagement with neighboring communities.

Representation

SOCA continues to host various events such as Symposiums, Panel Discussions, Cultural Nights, Evenings of Excellence, Galas, Pub Nights, Afro-Caribbean Parades and Festivals as well as participating in performances and cultural events on and off campus

Social Justice

Staying true to SOCA's mission of "*Celebrating Oneness Through Diversity*", events are hosted with the aim of sharing and raising awareness on the diverse cultures of people of African descent, while simultaneously 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.

Community-Building

The Black Community Services Centre, SOCA's safe space for the black community, has enabled SOCA to attain its vision of creating a central space for visible black minorities to share and engage with each other. The space provides a home and resources for students who, as members of a visible minority, may feel lost as on campus. The library is one such example for students to access a variety of texts from African, Caribbean and African-Canadian, African American and other African Diasporic writers.

SOCA seeks to highlight challenges the association is currently facing at SFU regarding the Black Community Services Centre for black students at Simon Fraser University. It is very important that institutions are continually being pushed to support initiatives that address anti-black racism so that they are not complicit in the systematic racism occurring in various institutions. In addressing the need for black community spaces, we reiterate the importance of having conversations deconstructing 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.

Obstacles & Challenges

SOCA faces eviction from the space held since Fall of 1997 in the Rotunda Community at Simon Fraser University. The Space currently occupied by SOCA will be handed over to SFU upon the completion of a new Students Union Building that is to be built by the Students Society. SOCA has received an eviction notice from the SFSS for December 14, 2018 at 12:30.

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 stating they won't be displaced, the SFSS is insisting on shredding the current relationship of granting us and others a permanent space allocation and instead proposes a plan where no group will get space. Instead, they're introducing the idea of a time sharing or hot desking model where no club or student union receives dedicated space.

Description of Events:

The SFSS has not been empathetic or understanding of various' community groups desire to create a safe space for visible minorities in the Rotunda. The CEO, Martin Wyant, has been responding in ill faith to students' concerns and disdain towards SOCA's efforts to retain the space, going so far as to threaten student groups, not just SOCA: "conversations [will be] shut down if we see stuff in the Peak tomorrow".

The SOCA has taken active steps to advocate the retention of the space by the association on behalf of its student members.

- SOCA reached out to the Board of Directors proposing an alternative where one suite in the Rotunda can house 3 earmarked groups.
- These 3 community groups would be sharing an Equity and Inclusion Lounge
- The additional recommendation, to have the remaining suites allocated to other student groups(SFPIRG, FNSA and CJSF) 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 raised the tumultuous atmosphere of the first meeting that was held between the CEO of the SFSS, in that SOCA believes the CEO hasn't been acting in good faith and is hurting the relationships between the SFSS and various groups. SOCA was told that "The CEO has a direct approach". This shows a systematic problem with how the SFSS is operating as a Students Society 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 those students ahead of time

Implications & Next Steps

This brings forth the need for Afrocentric education curriculum that gives the true historical account on issues experienced by people of African Descent in Canada, seeing as the treatment of SOCA by SFU officials is indicative of a larger, systemic, problem centered on silencing black voices. It needs to be a curriculum that critically examines blackness in Canada and objectively critiques systemic barriers to people of African Descent in Academia and Society at large.

Such ambitious efforts would be relevant to not only building community but contribute to SFU's scholarly diversity by providing a place to access, collect, share and archive resources by writers of African descent in Canada. 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 have been oppressed in the past as well share positive prospects for the future through having dialogue and providing a space for members to meet and belong.

Collaborative Efforts and Reason to Have Cross Communication:

It is very important for SOCA to have communication between many groups in the community as this is an indication of a greater issue. These situations affecting people of African Descent in Canada do not happen in a vacuum. It is important that perspectives and experiences are shared among groups that do similar work of addressing anti-black racism and constant inequities. These situations occur due to systemic and institutional oppression that happens within the system of white supremacy

SOCA works in partnership with various groups in establishing a greater footprint in Vancouver and asserting a black presence in Canada through partnerships with various organizations, both internal and external to SFU. SOCA has collaborated with the wider Vancouver Diasporic communities to achieve our goals on campus, for example, being involved with initiatives led by The Hogan's Alley Society, The African Descent Society, The Unity Centre Association for Black Cultures, the British Columbia Organizations of Caribbean Cultural Association, and the UBC Africa Awareness Initiative.

We work hand in hand with various organizations in the Black Canadian Community to ensure that our histories are preserved, recognized and celebrated in fighting for justice and tackling the inequities faced by Black Canadians. The main reason for such collaborative efforts is to ensure that support is shared such that no organization has to endure the intellectual and emotional labour that comes with activism. By having a supportive network of pro-black community organizations, SOCA establishes a supportive backbone comprised of close alliances of the various organizations affiliated with it. By strengthening each group individually, black communities in Canada, Vancouver especially, are collectively empowered to bring about relevant change.

As such it is important that for SOCA to find common ground and collaborate on events that intersect with the goals of other groups to increase knowledge sharing. It is important when representatives of government and various visitors come to the city, the black community has a unified presence and can meet collectively, showing the strength of the community due to the constant communication and efforts to work together. It is important that we be there for each other.

ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN BY SOCA

We want all students at SFU to call on the SFSS to provide space to the SFU Students of Caribbean and African Ancestry in line with the previous decision made in 1997. In a meeting with the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Honourable Ahmed Hussein, The Minister expressed his disappointment in SFU's handling of the matter, as well as his expectation that black student groups be given the support that they need in spaces where black students face systemic racism.

The following outlines SOCA's strategy in combating this act of racial insensitivity and institutional racism within the SFU Community:

1. Letter Writing Campaign - Have Letters sent to SOCA and the SFSS in support

- A. Send letters highlighting the Situation to SFU Faculty seeking letters of support
- B. Send letters to external organizations on situation, seeking letters of support
- C. Send letters to Alumni and Current Students Seeking letters of support
- D. Ask Politician/Advocates for letters of support

2. Create a Petition Highlighting the Situation - Petition for SFU Students and Online:

- Call on the SFSS to be transparent in the dealings with all student groups on campus
- Call on SFSS to fully outline the details of the Students Union Building to the SFSS community and not give the impression of 'space for all'
- Call on the SFSS to act in good faith and grant SOCA, SFPIRG, FNSA and CJSF permanent space in the Students Union Building.
- Call on the SFSS to stop bullying groups and individuals that challenge their harmful decisions
- Call for the Removal of CEO Martin Wyant for the constant disregard of the various student groups and for the inability to empathize with marginalized student group

3. Release the information to News Agencies on issues facing SOCA

- Highlight all the transcribed documentation on the issue facing SOCA
- Highlight the Systematic Issue with the SFSS and how the Student groups are voiceless
- Communicate the Reluctance of SFU to intervene

4. Have a press release relating to the Underlying issues

- Call for more persons of African Descent in leadership roles in faculty and in positions of power on these decision-making bodies
- Call for greater accountability for persons tarnishing relationships with equity seeking groups on Campus such as the FNSA, Out on Campus, Women's Centre, SOCA
- Call for more African Centred Programming and Africana Studies Dept at SFU highlighting discourse centred on People of African Descent globally