ASSOCIATED STUDENTS OF OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY
Office of the Vice President | Accountability and Review

December 1st, 2011

Accountability and Review
Creating a New Direction for the ASOSU

Since June 1st 2011, I have had the privilege of working with a most remarkable team of individuals at ASOSU who work tirelessly, with little recognition, advocating for the issues of students across our campus. These individuals are the reason why ASOSU continues through the turmoil and through the politics, as an organization that works for the students and for our school.

The many Task Force Directors, Executive Directors and Interns keep our organization afloat. They have all done great work and I hope they continue to do so. With that I extend the invitation to Senators and Representatives to get involved with the Task Forces and with the Government Affairs Team, table with different groups, advocate with our Directors and Interns, make use of ASOSU Services – like the Office of Advocacy and Legal Advising – promote and use the Human Services Resource Center and SafeRide, go to the ASOSU AHE Internship classes, and experience what it is like to be out in the MU Quad registering people to vote or educating campus about the issues that are important to students. That is the ASOSU I know – and the one you all should have a chance to be a part of it.

As students at a land-grant institution, we have the honor of studying side-by-side with those working in a place of higher learning and research unparalleled to any other in the nation. With this remarkable situation and our experiment into democratic, shared governance with the University, we have the ability to work for students and officials locally as well as at the State and Federal levels.

I know many of you are wondering how we can move forward from this past Fall Term and I assure each and every one of you that we will make it through our studies here, graduate, and call this magnificent place our alma mater in due time.

Yet while we are here, I want to charge ourselves with a mission to which all of us can relate. Going to school in Oregon gives us the privilege of working closely with policymakers, administrators, and university officials to keep our tuition low. This is something that students in California and Washington don’t have and we can see this in the increase of tuition and fees averaging almost 21%. Here in Oregon, we have kept it at an average 8% across our state – through the voice we have united as students.

We have the chance to practice democracy at a scale that many students dream of and if we don’t respect this privilege and take it in stride, we will lose it.

I want us as a campus to move forward. I want us as a student government to move forward. I want us to look inside ourselves to make sure that, when we leave our term of office this coming June, we look back with pride at what we have accomplished and what we hand over to the next group of student leaders.
The Executive Branch is working hard to gain student representation in Salem and Washington. We are making sure we have the ability to work towards gaining our Student Experience Center, securing our Pell Grants, and continuing the funding of higher education itself – a difficult task in this time of economic uncertainty and with so many calling for budget cuts from those two cities.

Since this past summer, we have been working with our campus to restore relationships between the student government, student-led groups and organizations, and statewide entities. We must continue to communicate respectfully and with transparency.

This past Monday, a conversation into whether or not ASOSU should be a part of the Oregon Student Association (OSA) began within a committee initiated by former ASOSU President Andrew Struthers in his current capacity as a Student Representative. OSA is important for all students across our state. It is essential for students to come together united in coalition and work towards making our voices heard. We as a campus, after decades of an assumed understanding on what OSA does specifically for OSU, must move forward. We build back our bridges and create a written form of agreement to best serve and defend the reasons for why OSA is important. It will ensure statewide student coalition is important for the coming years. I would like this committee to look into the relationship lost with the United States Students Association (USSA) – to make sure that we have the ability to join nationwide in an organization to push student issues to the top.

Along with advocating for issues of social justice and equity through our Task Forces, this Spring Term will be the Primary Elections and throughout this Winter Term, the Executive Branch will be prioritizing the registration and promotion of issues that affect students here on our campus.

Now I know that for many members of Congress, this term has been an especially difficult time where you may not have made the most popular decision - but you all stood by your convictions and worked within a system as you inherited it. If you respect this institution and if you respect the positions we were granted this year, we will all have the ability to work together and end this year right.

I want to leave my tenure here at ASOSU knowing that we worked together towards a government that is up for change and up for the ability to adapt to the needs of our campus and the students that have entrusted us with the responsibility to advocate for them. I want to push for us to look at ourselves and see where we need to improve – and from being here at OSU, I can clearly see that one issue I would like to charge the ASOSU in doing is a review of our statutes and constitution.

When Tonga and I ran, we ran under the goals of responsibility, accountability, and sustainability. These ideals were tested this summer and Fall Term in more ways than one.

It is clear that our current system is flawed, hard to navigate, and extremely slow.
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Now it’s our time to work towards creating a legislative body that is representative to the needs of our student body, an assembly of students that continuously works towards true representative democracy.

Our campus has expressed the same feelings of an ineffective student government. We have failed to come to consensus with increasing student representation by adding organizational delegates. The Daily Barometer wrote in an Editorial on Nov. 2:

“When a group of people has an enormous amount of authority over a relatively large sum of money, and yet none of them seem to know what they are doing, it scares us deeply—both as students and citizens of the United States. All those in government should have a basic understanding of how a representative democracy works, and what their responsibilities are and their actions should be.”

Is this the ASOSU that we want? Is this the ASOSU that Oregon State University needs?

I pose the hope that we look at a series of reforms that I think will be able to move the ASOSU in a new direction – a direction that I believe many of you agree with that we, as student leaders, need to take. This is a direction I see when we look at bills such as Senator Vandever’s bill for legislative accountability.

Let’s take these steps of accountability into steps towards sustainability – making sure that the ASOSU is still a legitimate legislative body that meets the needs for the ever-changing student body.

My plan is simple and can be characterized with two words: Representation and Review.

Representation:

- It is evident that from the past 3 years of having a House of Representatives and a Senate, that having at-large students elected without any ties to specific and direct representation does not work, nor does having student leaders from across campus sent as delegates – doing double time as both a representative and leader in their own group. This is ineffective and a waste of time.
- I propose that in the short term, we as the ASOSU Congress set up districts, assigning Representatives and Senators to different organizations, centers, houses, residence halls, and the different academic colleges. We will charge them with the responsibility of working with these groups and academic colleges to ensure our education and our experience is the best it can be.
- Since these are statute changes, Congress has the ability in the short term to accomplish this through self-review through the Student Government Committee. This committee will update the whole body of statutes, collecting and revising them along with the current structure of ASOSU.
This will require compromise, delegation, and understanding between those of the committee to work towards something that is truly democratic and has the ability of being plural. It will effectively increase representation to all of campus. Rather than having a single student delegate from these groups and students elected at-large with no direct ties of representation, we will have Senators and Representatives elected to specifically work with these groups, departments, and colleges. It will give greater accountability to our Congress and provide more ways for students to be involved in the democratic process.

My second point in this simple plan is to review. These I know are not solvable in the short term, but by looking into such questions of how to change ourselves, we can reform and restructure our student government into something better for OSU as a whole.

Review:

- I would like the Ways and Means Committee to begin looking into budgetary plans of creating compensation for Senators and Representatives. A report on how this would look is important for this to be possible. Being a Senator or Representative is quite difficult. They may not have to work 20 hours per week like the Executive Staffer of ASOSU, but they are difficult and bear a significant role in our democracy.
- For the work and the patience you all provide to our government in your meticulous understanding and advice of our procedures, for the many meetings and office hours you all put into these positions as volunteers, I propose the possibility of having compensation in some form of a stipend, to hold you accountable to the students and the student fees that you oversee.
- Moving forward, I would like the ASOSU Congress to look into the in-house selection of the ASOSU Speaker of the House. The United States Speaker of the House is selected from within the House of Representatives and not at-large like ours. The United States Speaker of the House is selected from the majority party in the House of Representatives. Our ASOSU Speaker of the House should be selected from within the ASOSU House of Representatives as a Representative who ran alongside other Representatives – selected to lead their meetings throughout the year.
- This position in the future should be reviewed – changed and settled to the same level of the ASOSU Senate President pro tempore, a position of similar status who is elected as a Senator and is selected by the Senate to lead the body in discussions. The Senate President pro tempore has the same level of responsibility, but receives little compensation and recognition in the ASOSU. Both positions work to represent the Houses of Congress, both should be held to the same accountability.
- This poses a bigger question: are we actually effective by having two separate Houses, poorly imitating the United States’ Congress? The ASOSU must review its current bicameral legislature and its effectiveness for our
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The joint committee of our ASOSU Congress should look into the possibility of a referendum. This referendum should pose the plan of combining our two houses into one body - for efficiency, for time, and for true democracy at a university level. ASOSU had a unicameral body for decades prior to its current bicameral system. The OSU Faculty Senate, the governing body representing all academic and administrative faculty in the university, operates as one body. Can we as student go back to one?

I propose that, if we do move towards a referendum changing our system from the bicameral legislature to a unicameral system, we put forth the need to make this process as transparent as possible. We must educate our campus on the work and history of ASOSU. Students must understand the importance of shared governance and autonomy in our university. Our student government has existed since 1897. If we do not respect the past and learn from it, we will not be able to be responsible, accountable or sustainable.

The ASOSU Congress should move towards one single body of students from all over campus. It should be a body elected at-large into positions which represent districts of student groups, departments, houses, cultural/resource centers, and academic colleges. These students should be compensated with a term-by-term stipend, holding them responsible and accountable to the work they do for our campus.

Over the years, the ASOSU Congress and Executive Branch have lacked transparent communication and work. We have become stuck in Snell Hall, working away without any ties to our campus. We have become muddled in meetings at the Memorial Union, asking for students and delegates to come find us. We have become large, ineffective, and bureaucratic - imitating what the United States government looks like. If we move towards this new direction, it will force us out of Snell Hall and into campus. It will hold us accountable in seeking out the students and working towards shared governance. It will give us the ability to educate the many on campus who don’t even know we have a student government with this much responsibility. It will give them a chance to volunteer, run, and become involved in a plural system with many ways to participate. We must stop pretending to follow the lead of a national government and start working to lead our university’s student government.

We have done great things in the past for students at OSU and across the state, but we can’t dwell on those accomplishments all the time. If our system needs to change and adapt, then we must find ways of implementing these changes to truly practice our democracy.

Sokho S. Eath
ASOSU Vice President,
President of the Senate
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