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Undergraduate Student Government

State of the University Address

February 9, 2016

When reflecting on the “state of our university”, I thought a lot about what Abby and I wanted to accomplish this past year. Immediately, I looked to, my inauguration speech, which laid out our vision for the year ahead and how we could change Ohio State for the better. We discussed our emphasis of the importance of a team. We envisioned an organization that would be united, but also encouraged debate to engage in important dialogue. Now, as we approach our final chapter, I am proud to say that USG has been an unbelievable team this year and has worked tirelessly to enhance the overall student experience. From cabinet projects such as Buckeye Road Trip, which expanded its numbers and cities, to getting two student appointments on the Framework 2.0 stakeholders committee that will have long-term effects on the physical layout of our University, we have seen tangible growth throughout our organization.

Buckeye Nation is passionate about student safety and USG has taken their call of action to heart. We, as a University, need to do everything that we can to help provide students with the education and resources to prevent crime on and off campus. Undergraduate Student Government’s health and safety committee executed the distribution of student safety packs, which included resources for students to help them stay safe on and off campus. This project was led by Sunder Sai, an example of one of USG’s young and accomplished cabinet members. While the University already provides a plethora of resources for students, USG has looked to make our mark and advocate for additional resources for students. Last summer, Michael Arato, our cabinet director of Health and Safety, approached me and emphasized the need for a student safety application for students. This project, which has been a USG initiative for years, connects students to available resources quickly and efficiently. Just two weeks ago, we launched the Lifeline Response Enterprise app. In just the first day, 700 students utilized the application and started their journey to reaching destinations safely. Looking to the future, this smart phone application should serve as a catalyst to continue to advocate for public safety initiatives.

Mental health has also been a rising epidemic across the world, and we believed that the Undergraduate Student Government had to take action at Ohio State to make an impact in our student’s lives. Last summer, I had the opportunity to attend a Big Ten Student Government conference and collaborate with other leaders. At that meeting, the Student Body President at Rutgers and I passed a resolution to increase collaboration on providing mental health resources throughout the Big Ten. Last semester, USG worked to help other Universities create mental health awareness weeks on their campuses. More locally, the Counseling and Consultation Services here has been an unbelievable partner, helping us prioritize and implement substantial policies that will be long lasting, and will help current and future Buckeyes. In conjunction with our efforts, we are excited to finally announce that Counseling and Consultation Services is in the process of expanding their team to ensure that all Ohio State students have access to the help that they need, when they need it. This expansion includes an increase in counseling staff along with a physical expansion to other areas of campus including Lincoln Tower, south campus and north campus. This achievement could not have been done without the hard work of USG members over the last few years along with the unbelievable partnership with Micky Sharma and the rest of the CCS team in the Office of Student Life.

Another safety concern that has been a top priority for USG over the last two years is the issue of sexual assault on college campuses. Last year USG released a sexual Violence Task Force Report, outlining tangible policies that Ohio State should prioritize surrounding sexual violence. In early September, I received a phone call from the office of the Vice President of the United States. As Abby mentioned, they were interested in having Vice President Joe Biden come to Ohio State to celebrate the one year anniversary of the It’s On Us campaign, a White House initiative to combat sexual violence at universities. After deciding to host the rally, we had five days to plan the entire event. With the collaboration of different entities across the University as well as constant contact with White House officials, we were able to successfully plan the program. During the main program, Vice President Biden spoke about the importance of advocacy, not only for today’s students, but also for future generations. He emphasized the need for work surrounding sexual violence, seeing it as an extremely prominent issue on college campuses. We, as USG and Ohio State, have been leaders that Universities across the nation are looking to emulate. Surveying future policies, we are hopeful that we will be able to fulfill one of the policy charges in the Sexual Violence Task Force Report and create a place to house a sexual violence center through the Framework 2.0 plan.

One of the core goals of The Ohio State University is teaching and learning, which has been another emphasis of USG over the last year. Working with the Provost’s office with Randy Smith and Jennifer Cowley, our administration has been able to bring the student voice to the forefront of the Teaching and Learning initiative committee’s attention. Collaborating with faculty and administration to help ensure that education methods are cutting-edge is important in our mission to provide the most desirable educational experiences to our students. We, as Undergraduate Student Government, have worked to provide feedback to faculty to help disseminate positive learning experiences throughout the faculty. We hope that, in the coming year, the teaching and learning institute will provide faculty members with the resources to help create more positive teaching and learning experiences. It is our job to create best practices in the classroom so students have the opportunity to learn effectively. The University is a seemingly overwhelming place, but an initiative in the classroom must be created due to this vastness to impact students from all majors and of all ages.

In addition to teaching and learning, another issue that has been our priority is the enhancement of academic advising across colleges to provide a consistent positive experience for students. As the University looks forward to applying for re-accreditation in 2017, the Quality Initiative that Ohio State has decided to focus on is academic advising. Working with the Office of Undergraduate Education, we have worked to create an advising summit that will be held in late March. The advising summit will bring together all stakeholders across the University to address concerns with academic advising as well as brainstorming potential solutions to ensure effective practices and create an increase in four-year graduation rates.

The work that USG does is often to benefit the current students, but a lot of the work that we do today will benefit future Ohio State students. One specific example is the advocacy for the Framework 2.0 plan. USG now has two students, Tim Villari and Derek Whiddon, who sit on the stakeholders committee, which makes decisions about the long-term structural plan for our University. This student advocacy is essential, since the decisions made today will affect future Buckeyes who won’t be able to make those choices for themselves.

One of the most important policies that our University is currently investigating is the Comprehensive Energy Management Plan. Last summer, I had the honor to attend a Climate Change conference with USG’s Director of Sustainability, Sam Reed, at the White House. After discussing the policies that student governments are advocating for regarding climate change, we knew that climate change would need to be a priority for USG this year and for years to come. The Comprehensive Energy Management Plan has proven to be an extremely divisive issue on campus. Sam has been an unbelievable advocate for Ohio State students regarding the Plan. While USG has had a part in the current advisory groups and we do believe that we should progress to the RFP stage, we can only support its further progress if more comprehensive information is disseminated to the advisory groups and that there is an avid commitment to carbon neutrality.

There is a multitude of ways that our University can move towards carbon neutrality. One way that USG has worked towards this goal on a smaller scale is the implementation of Bike Share here at Ohio State. Just within the first week, 180 bikers signed up for the Bike Share program. The program has become increasingly more successful as time has gone on and as students have become more aware of the availability of Bike Share. Through these efforts, we are working towards a more healthy and sustainable campus.

Tonight you have heard from Mariah, Abby and I about the continuous advocacy that USG has done throughout this last year. A consistent theme in all of our efforts has been the tremendous work throughout the entire University. Whether it is student organization collaboration, faculty members’ advice or administrator outreach, we are so grateful for the respect that Ohio State’s model of governance offers its students. Additionally, our administration is eternally grateful for our USG members’ tireless efforts to enhance the student experience.

As we press onward as a University and look to the future, we want to tell all students that we are here to work on their behalf. We are obligated to be representative of the student body and push for issues that affect students every day. It is our sincere hope that we can utilize our voice to have tough conversations, create strategic plans, and achieve our dreams together. The Ohio State University is a remarkable place and it is USG’s duty to protect and defend its honor. So, let’s continue to work hard as our university evolves; it is Undergraduate Student Government’s calling, duty, and hope that we must look to the future and create positive change for our present and future Buckeyes, while respecting the past.