

## TGSA OFFICIAL STATEMENT

It has come to the TGSA executives' attention that there is a letter in circulation amongst the graduate student body that makes serious allegations about our goals and agenda as an organization, especially in regards to the recent survey sent out by the TGSA executive team.

The letter accuses the TGSA of planning to "cancel the funding" for the Symons Seminar Series and states that we "would also like to reduce the number of social events as well." The letter argues that "the reason behind this is that if they have an extra \$5000 and money saved up from not running social events they can pay themselves more." This information is unfounded and based on misinformation that we have not been privy to. This letter is to address these issues and offer an official statement from the TGSA executive about these rumours.

The TGSA executives decided that this year it would be a good idea to review the way that expenses are allocated in our budget, and we wanted to critically examine the various services that we offer to our members in order to ensure that they best reflect the wants and desires of the graduate student body. We only have so much money to go around and so we need to make some decisions about what graduate students think are the most valuable ways for these funds to be spent. This was the intent for the survey, and nothing more.

It is true that we wanted to figure out what events graduate students were attending, and we wanted to get a better understanding of which services graduate students find most important. The idea of creating a survey was introduced in our September 24<sup>th</sup> minutes under item 10.7, where we discussed the idea of having the larger graduate student membership vote on the types of events that would interest them. At our Executive Meeting on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, we felt that it would be important to get the ball rolling on this initiative, and so we designed and distributed the survey so that we could have these results to present to our board for the coming November 12<sup>th</sup> meeting, and so we could be able to analyze the results and present them at our Annual General Meeting (AGM). We also wanted to get some feedback on whether or not we – as an executive – are doing a satisfactory job in delivering our services to students since taking over these positions in May, so that we could better evaluate our own performances. We certainly did not anticipate the accusations and uproar that would result from the survey, and do not feel that any of the survey questions were designed to be manipulative or duplicitous.

We were hoping that the survey would give students the opportunity to tell us what they believed were our most important services, so that we could adequately reflect these concerns, and to pass on to executives in future years. The survey was intended to generate accountability and transparency, so that the TGSA would best reflect the needs of the larger student body that it represents. We intend to use the survey results to address changes moderately, but currently have no plans to make any sweeping changes to this year's budget.

At the moment the VP of Finance has sent the executives a proposed budget for the 2015-2016 term. This proposed budget is based on the previous year executives' model, but has been changed to make the budget sustainable for next year's executive, as per our bylaws. After being presented the budget, the executive team felt that we wanted to have more time to review and consult the larger membership before we finalize our draft to post on our website. When we do finalize our budget, it will be posted to our website for the greater student membership to see by November 5<sup>th</sup>, as well as be presented to our board at the November 12<sup>th</sup> board meeting for discussion. If you do have any concerns about the

budget, please be sure to notify your program representative. Our VP of Finance will present the budget formally at the AGM on November 18th. After the AGM, students will be able to vote to accept or refuse the budget. We will be more than transparent, and graduate students will definitely be given say in whether or not the proposed budget gets ratified.

The allegations that the TGSA is planning to cancel all funding of the Symons Seminar Series is completely groundless. The TGSA executive had not even met as a collective body with the Symons Committee to discuss these changes, as one of the Symons Seminar Series committee members was unable to attend, until just recently. The Symons Seminar Series Committee and the TGSA met on October 29<sup>th</sup> and discussed the relationship of the TGSA and the Symons Seminar Series committee going forward. Here, the TGSA presented a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the committee to let them know that it was not our intention to cut any of their funding for our term in office. We drafted changes to the letter together and both parties have agreed upon an MOU that will be signed at the next Symons Seminar Series Talk on November 4<sup>th</sup>. We also presented the committee with the first instalment of their funding support.

The TGSA has always been, and continues to be, supportive of the Symons Seminar Series, especially for its role in fulfilling the academic initiatives of the TGSA. At the same time, the TGSA executives felt that there should be a more clear policy followed by the Symons Committee that allows for greater accountability to the student body. Since the committee receives \$5000 from the TGSA (composed of ancillary fees from graduate students) we felt that it was necessary for the Symons Committee to follow the same procedures that the executives must follow in order to remain accountable to the student body. That is, we want the budget for the Symons Talks and the Gala to be presented at our AGM, and we believe that the appointment of Symons Committee members should be open and transparent. Since the money is coming from graduate students, we want to make sure that the TGSA takes due diligence to make sure that it is being spent responsibly. This certainly does not mean that we have concerns about how the funds are being handled, but simply want to establish a clear process going forward. With our survey, we were also interested in identifying how many students have attended the Symons events, and we were hoping for graduate students to offer their opinions about the event. If graduate students clearly value the Seminar Series, then, by no means are we interested in cutting their funds. We strongly encourage those who are in support of the Series to tell us their opinions, and the purpose of the survey is to do just that. Currently, there are not a lot of past records that offer this information, so we were hoping to generate some data on the student body's reception of the Series. We believe this information is important and valuable for going forward, so that future executives will have greater documentation about the Series in order to make decisions about it in the future.

Moreover, we certainly have not considered cutting all of our social events; however, in reviewing the budget, we were wanting to make sure that we were spending this money responsibly. We have had many GSA events with low student turnout and we do not feel that we should keep spending money on all of them if students do not attend. This is why we want your opinion on how graduate student money should be spent. Our budget is very small and we do not feel it should be wasted. For instance, the last TGSA event, the Autumn Social, was significantly under-budget, but was quite the success. We were able to feed all of the graduate students that came to the event, and even had quite a bit left over, around \$60-70. By making some of our social events less expensive, we would be able to allocate some of the funds for social events into other accounts. (For instance, we are interested in increasing conference bursary support, creating better student advocacy programs, and are looking at creating food pantries for the graduate student body, etcetera, which might better serve graduate students' interests. Obviously, we will not be able to take on all of these initiatives at once, since our budget simply does not

allow it, but we are wanting to see if we can create a balanced budget that might begin to address some of these concerns).

We will also continue to look for donations when it comes to social events, as we have been rather successful with this so far this year (for instance, we have received two BBQs, \$500, several gift cards, including the ones used for the survey, and donated food items), which has helped us to keep costs down for the events. We have no interest in making significant cuts to our traditional events, like Festivus, or the Spring Fling, but feel that it would be more responsible to reduce some of the spending on the monthly social events so that we can allocate this money to other pressing services. That certainly does not mean that we will not have social events going forward.

Furthermore, in the survey, we did ask whether or not graduate students considered the executive positions to be fairly compensated. We felt like this question was rather transparent in terms of our motivations, which is why students have the opportunity to answer “yes” or “no” to this question. Certainly, the executives feel that the demands of these positions are not adequately compensated, and are not remotely comparable to other Graduate Student Associations across Ontario. The current executive members have been working anywhere from 10-40 hours a week each since taking over these positions in May, and are expected to carry out this work for the entire year. Essentially, the positions have become part-time (and sometimes full-time jobs), and executives are performing these duties while simultaneously finishing their degrees and carrying out their teaching assistantships. It is the position of this TGSA executive that the work put in by these members is undervalued and undercompensated. At the same time, the TGSA was never interested in bringing forward this issue for the current AGM, which is documented in our minutes. Instead, the TGSA wanted to simply gauge graduate student attitudes and opinions about executive compensation in our survey. Ideally, we would like to eventually create a more fairly distributed stipend for the future TGSA executives, in order to make the TGSA more sustainable in later years. Additionally, rather than making executives wait 12 months before they are able to collect their compensation, we felt it would be better if the funds were distributed in smaller increments on a monthly basis.

The concerns over executive compensation stemmed from the last election period, where the TGSA positions remained unfilled for quite some time, and very few students expressed interest at taking on these positions. We simply want to review the honorarium and perhaps adjust the funding as a way to attract students for the positions in the coming years. This cannot be done without the student body's approval – we cannot do this without a student-wide vote, as dictated by our bylaws. This conversation was never intended to be addressed immediately, but was merely something that we wanted to bring to the attention of the student body. Yes, we have discussed this topic, but we certainly have not taken any official stance on any of these things. We have simply created the survey to consider the larger member's positions on these issues and to start a larger dialogue. The current TGSA signed on to these positions knowing their compensation before taking the positions, and so we are not interested in making any changes for this term, but it would certainly help make the positions more sustainable in the future. Again, any changes would obviously have to be voted on by Trent graduate students, and no changes would occur without this vote.

We hope that this statement will address some of the concerns that have been brought to our attention, and will dispel any of the rumours that are currently in circulation. Of course, if you do have questions or concerns, please do reach out to us and ask. And we strongly encourage you to attend our AGM to meet the executives – if you have not met us already – and to hear our plans and share input as we work together to move forward for the year.

Best,

Your TGSA team