September 28th, 2018

Dear Constituents,

The University of Rhode Island Student Senate (Senate) is currently involved in discussions regarding the manner in which student organizations are funded and the matters for which they may not be funded. Since May of this year, the Senate has been in correspondence with an organization known as the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), which has expressed concerns that the Senate’s current funding policies and practices are not viewpoint neutral. This correspondence was initiated by FIRE, at the request of five student organizations on campus, and has included three letters from FIRE and two responses from Student Senate.

The Senate is in the process of amending the policies and practices by which it allocates funds to student organizations, with a focus on eliminating opportunities for viewpoint discrimination. Per bill SS-18/19-14, approved at its regular meeting on September 26, 2018, the Senate committed to cease assigning labels such as “political,” “cultural,” and “religious” to student organizations; these labels had historically been used to assist in determining whether organizations were eligible to receive funding. The following amendments to the Senate’s Constitution and Bylaws, proposed by the Finance Committee, are currently being worked on by that committee or are scheduled to be voted on, after appropriate and productive discussion, during the regular meeting on October 3rd, 2018:

- Eliminating categories of recognition altogether from policy instruments;
- Amending Article 9, Section A, Part 3, Subpart d of the Senate’s Bylaws by inserting “content or viewpoint.” at the end of the final sentence, completing the policy that disallows viewpoint discrimination in gaining recognition status;
- Amending Article 9, Section A, Part 4, Subpart a of the Senate’s Bylaws by striking “having a mission that is religious in nature”, eliminating a potential source of viewpoint discrimination regarding eligibility for funding status;
- Amending Article 9, Section B, Part 3 of the Senate’s Bylaws by striking the whole of it.

The policy currently reads:

“PART 3. PURPOSE OF EXPENDITURES

No student activities tax fund may be distributed to organizations to be expended for such purposes which shall include but are not limited to:

1. Worship services and/or events held in a place of worship.
2. Activities that actively attempt to convert participants to a particular religion.
3. Activities that directly support a particular candidate running for any political office, or directly support a political party.”

which amendment would eliminate bars to organizations seeking funding for events and programs.

It must be noted that to alter many of these policies requires amendments to the Senate’s Constitution and Bylaws, which cannot be immediately implemented and should not be enacted without due consideration of their long-term impact. We, the Executive Committee, ask for your forgiveness for the inconveniences that may have been imposed on any student organizations, but further request your patience as we address the concerns brought forth by our recognized student organizations and FIRE with as much transparency as possible.

Sincerely,

The University of Rhode Island Student Senate Executive Committee, enumerated as:

Adriana Wilding (President), Tristram Howard (Vice President), Kevin Blewitt (Treasurer),
Ryan McWeeney (Reference Officer), Rachael Sardinha (Director of Communications);
Lexi Evers, Mark Gall, Jenny Kohl, Johnny Morabito, and Zach Taylor (Chairpersons of Standing Committees)