

Exit Statement

By the Biology Graduate Caucus Chair

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I have been with the Caucus for just over three years. I started as a DSC rep, held that position for two years, then “upgraded” to Chair in the Spring of 2019. I learned many things during that time, about how the university works and all the ways it works with and against graduate students. In the interest of carrying that knowledge forward to future Caucus members, I am writing this Exit Statement.

The Caucus Chair and their relationship with the organization of the Biology Grad Caucus

One of the most important (and least well-defined) roles of the Caucus Chair is to oversee the organization and overall momentum of the Caucus. The Chair has a lot of “invisible” power when it comes to controlling Caucus priorities - by strategically organizing the Agendas for Caucus meetings, and by coordinating with the various Caucus Committees, the Chair can influence how the Caucus spends its limited monies and energy. I have outlined a few of my guiding principles here, for the record:

1. **The Caucus, fundamentally, is a “do-ocracy”. Things happen because people *do* them, and for no other reason.** Every Caucus member is a volunteer, there is no way to hold them accountable if they don’t do their jobs, and generally it’s not a big deal if they don’t. Luckily, there are a lot of people who are able and willing to step up and do things outside of their regular research schedule, if you are reading this, you are one of them! In my experience, if you are upfront about your priorities and your plan for the Caucus, those people will find you. The best way to keep the momentum of the Caucus going is to take care of those people - check in on them every once in a while outside of a Caucus meeting, make sure they understand their roles and responsibilities, give them the freedom to make their own decisions, and above all, be compassionate. If someone needs a break, don’t make it their job to find a replacement. Ultimately, the most important thing we Chairs can do is try our best to make the people around us feel safe and happy.
2. **The majority of Caucus business does not need to happen in Caucus meetings.** The Caucus currently has three Committees: Events, Diversity and Inclusion, and Workshops. Each of these Committees represents one of the important fundamental roles of the Caucus within the Department: Promoting socializing and networking between students, increasing equity for marginalized students and raising awareness of D&I issues within the Department, and providing education for students on topics that are not covered in graduate courses. Before these Committees existed, the Caucus still wanted to do all these things, but all the discussion for those things had to happen

during Caucus meetings. This really limited the amount of discussion that could happen, and as an extension, limited the amount of work the Caucus was able to do. One of my priorities as Chair was to try and keep the Committees as independent from the Caucus as possible, giving them the ability to make as many decisions as they could independently of Caucus meetings. Generally, Committees would only need to report at Caucus meetings when they were announcing events or if they needed us to vote on spending. This increased the amount of time we could give to our various representatives, and ultimately led to more streamlined and shorter meetings. **Note:** This only works because anyone can become a member of any Committee at any time, without the need for a vote. Even more so than the Caucus, Committees only have as much capacity and momentum as their individual members can put in.

3. The social structure of the Biology Department works against graduate students.

Every lab group is a microcosm. It's very easy for students to get enveloped by the social structure of their lab group and not integrate into the grad student body as a whole. This is especially true in the larger labs. This can make it difficult to recruit new Caucus members, or to get grad students to participate in Caucus events; unless the more senior students in a lab are already involved with the Caucus, new students are less likely to reach out. This was, for me, one of the most frustrating parts of being Chair.

The Dean's Office

During my time as Chair, I was privileged to attend regular meetings with Michael Silverman, the Associate Dean of Science, and other Chairs from Caucuses within the Faculty of Science. Michael organized these meetings to give Chairs a chance to talk directly to members of the Dean's Office. They were very educational, and one of the real highlights of being a Caucus Chair. I will list here some of the more important and startling revelations that came out of these meetings:

- 1. When it comes to money, Parking Services is one of the most powerful units on campus.** This is because they are financially independent from the rest of SFU, acting as a for-profit entity. All revenue from parking tickets and permits goes directly to their pockets before being redistributed, and Parking Services is expected to be able to cover all their operational costs with these funds. SFU is given only a small (and unspecified) portion of any profit made within a given year. This is why it's so difficult to get any kind of special parking passes or exemptions - Parking Services has complete power over who gets passes. Every Departmental vehicle that is parked in one of their lots has a monthly pass, that is renewed each month and paid for by the Department.
- 2. All Departmental money for Graduate Fellowships and other internal scholarships ultimately comes from the BC Government.** Specifically, the BC Ministry of Higher Education. The Ministry gives a packet of money to SFU, which gets passed to the Dean of Grad Studies. This then gets doled out to individual Departments, and is put in the hands of those Departments' scholarship committees. Here's the kicker: The Ministry is

really only interested in supporting *undergraduate* education, and decides how much money each Department should get based on the number of undergraduates enrolled in that Department. Essentially, it only funds grad students because the university need us to act as TAs for undergrad courses. This is one of the reasons Biology is always so strapped for cash, we have a much higher ratio of grad student to undergrad student enrollment, meaning our DSC gets proportionately less money than other Departments.

3. Despite all it's efforts to make the University a safer place for women and other disadvantaged groups, the University has basically no power to get rid of Professors who act badly.

This wasn't really a surprise, but the extent to which it was hammered home really affected me. Although PIs are effectively middle-management within the business structure of the university, they hold an extraordinary amount of power, and are a major force when it comes to maintaining the status quo of the SFU culture. Students are unlikely to report abusive PIs for a variety of reasons, and even if there is concrete evidence of a PI abusing their students, SFU can do little to stop it. At one point in a meeting, we Chairs pressed the Dean of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (currently Dr. Mary-Catherine Kropinski) on what SFU would need to do in order to get an abusive PI fired, and she suggested filing a formal, non-anonymous human rights complaint. These invariably end up getting contested in court, and are such a financial drain for SFU that it's unlikely they will ever go through (not to mention the emotional and professional toll they are likely to take on the victims).