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To be more informed

As the Student Bar Association discusses a potential raise in activity fees, a question of budgetary transparency arises

By Remington Cook

The Student Bar Association (SBA) is entrusted with representing the interests of the student body. Among its responsibilities is the management of funds intended to support student organizations, events, and other initiatives.

Foremost and importantly, *Certiorari* wishes to emphasize our genuine appreciation for the student representatives within the SBA, acknowledging their consistent efforts toward providing a more enjoyable and fulfilling experience for their constituents at the William H. Bowen School of Law. They have been more than helpful and willing to work with us in uncovering the facts of this story and making them known to the wider class.

The question before us is whether an organization funded by mandatory student activity fees and entrusted with representing students has an obligation to make its financial operations reasonably accessible to those students.

With the SBA considering whether to seek implementation of a further increase in mandatory student activity fees, the issue has become particularly relevant.

Importantly, SBA President Daniel Burley has clarified that no formal decision has been made to pursue the proposed increase, and that, for the first time, student opinion is being purposefully solicited before any such decision is made.

Burley has also emphasized the benefits of increased funding, including greater support for student organizations, reduced reliance on individual membership dues, and expanded opportunities for students to participate in national competitions and conferences.

“Every student who graduates from Bowen will be tied to the Bowen community,” Burley explained. “Its namesake and reputation will follow them for their entire professional career.”

These considerations are worthy of acknowledgment. Investment in student organizations and professional opportunities may benefit students well beyond graduation.

The merits of increased funding remain distinct from the question of how readily students should be able to examine its expenditure.

Our initial efforts to obtain information regarding SBA expenditures were met with some hesitation about making financial documents widely available. In one instance, I was permitted to examine the SBA budget during a conversation with Burley but was denied a request for a copy. At the time, Burley expressed uncertainty about whether distributing the document was permitted under the association’s and greater university rules.

Later, however, financial documents were shared privately with myself and other students seeking greater insight into the organization's finances. This willingness to provide information is appreciated and deserves positive recognition. Burley has since clarified his reservations regarding widespread distribution.

“The reason I am wary of mass circulating the budget is mostly out of concern for that information being misconstrued or misrepresented and other student orgs being harmed as a result,” Burley explained.

First-year SBA Senator Zoey Blackburn echoed these concerns, emphasizing the importance of presenting individual expenditures within the context of the organization's broader financial responsibilities.

These reservations are not without merit. Financial documents examined without adequate explanation may invite inaccurate conclusions about particular expenditures or the organizations receiving funding.

The distinction between private access and easily accessible public availability remains at the heart of the discussion.

Should students have to individually request access to information concerning their own student government, or should that information be readily available to everyone, accompanied by the appropriate context? Should transparency and context be mutually exclusive?

Encouragingly, the SBA has already begun considering additional measures to improve financial accessibility. Burley confirmed that discussions are underway regarding public budget allocation meetings and presentations intended to better inform students about how their money is being spent.

Blackburn similarly expressed optimism about these developments.

"I see this as an opportunity to strengthen the relationship between SBA and the students we represent, rather than a point of disagreement within our organization," Blackburn wrote.

Such measures would be welcome developments. Public presentations, accompanied by accessible financial documentation, could provide students with both the information necessary to independently evaluate expenditures and the context needed to properly understand them.

An informed student body is essential to meaningful discussion about the organization's financial future, particularly when additional mandatory funding is under consideration.

Both Burley and Blackburn have demonstrated a willingness to engage with students raising these questions, providing explanations, sharing financial information, and encouraging constructive dialogue. These efforts deserve praise and acknowledgment, as they represent a constructive response to students' requests for greater financial transparency. This level of public openness and willingness to discuss has not been afforded in past student governments.

Ultimately, the recent conversations surrounding SBA finances demonstrate that students and their representatives share an interest in transparency and accountability, even where opinions differ regarding their implementation.

As Blackburn aptly observed, "I don't view students questioning SBA as inherently adversarial, and I certainly don't believe that asking questions about the budget diminishes the work SBA does."

It's clear to both sides that transparency is not an expression of distrust, but rather, openness can provide an opportunity to strengthen the relationship between representatives and those they represent.

Regardless of whether the increase moves forward, it is the responsibility of the student body to make their voices heard. The proposed increase clearly has its benefits, as laid out succinctly by Burley and Blackburn, while coming at a slightly higher cost some may be opposed to.

Students will have an opportunity to continue that dialogue, hear a clear explanation of the benefits, and voice their own opinions at the SBA Town Hall on Friday, November 13 at 5:30 p.m. in the *Friday Courtroom* (Room 114) on campus, where the student representatives and members of the Bowen administration are expected to address the proposed fee increase, budget transparency, and other concerns.

We encourage students to attend, ask questions, and participate in steering the future of their student government and school.

FROM THE EDITOR

Certiorari is an independent student publication dedicated to accurate reporting, fair commentary, and *better informing* our law school community. We believe an informed institution is a healthy institution. We welcome responses, corrections, and contributions from all members of the Little Rock legal community, including those whose decisions we examine.

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