

TechNews

STUDENT NEWSPAPER OF ILLINOIS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY SINCE 1928

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Let's kill cynicism before it kills this campus

Soren Spicknall

TECHNEWS WRITER

For the last several years, Illinois Tech has consistently ranked near the top of The Princeton Review's annual list of "Least Happy Schools". While the metrics used to make such rankings are always inherently dubious, there is some merit to that dishonorable title. Despite the consistently stellar outcomes of an IIT education and the university's ability to attract more and more new undergraduates each year, students seem to become disenchanted at an alarming pace once they start their studies here. Some among the school's faculty have remarked that such a poor happiness ranking likely has to do with the rigor of classes and the general academic focus of the institution, but that perspective seems to ignore the fact that pride can overcome academic challenge, as if evidenced by many other largely technological universities across the nation which score well on student life metrics, such as MIT and Carnegie Mellon University. And besides, hard work alone does not cause a negative campus atmosphere; there is much more to it than the academic side of the story.

Before even entering IIT as a freshman, I had already come across some degree of negativity from current students. During Scholarship Weekend that February, Camras Scholars hosting visiting Illinois Tech applicants had occasionally let slip little bits of intriguingly troubling information about the school's staff, various student organizations, and other entities on campus that could be blamed for some negative aspect of their life. During my freshman year, I was continually bombarded with comments from older students, speaking with authority, claiming that some office or another was corrupt, that Finance Board was incompetent, that Sodexo was an actively malicious organization, and so on. Given that it was my first year, I didn't yet have the resources to form my own opinions, and if it hadn't have been for a few more positive-thinking individuals in my life, I would never have bothered to get involved in campus life and find out the truth: very little of the jaded assumptions of our student body have any basis in reality.

In the Fall semester of 2015, the Student Government Association (SGA) held a well-publicized Town Hall meeting on the topic of dining feedback and improvements. During the course of the event, perhaps 50 students came through, speaking directly to a panel composed of IIT Dining Services staff, university administration involved in meal plan formulation, and Ricky Stevens, who was then the head of the student-led Food Advisory Board (FAB). Throughout the event, all those involved stressed student participation in the latter organization as a way to have their input heard on a regular basis. Food Advisory Board was mentioned at least ten times during the Town Hall, but when all was said and done, I walked into to the next FAB meeting that week representing IIT's Residence Hall Association, as I usually do, to find no new faces in the room. The students who had participated in the Dining Town Hall had taken the opportunity to vent their frustrations at Dining staff, but had decided not to follow up and join the productive conversation that is had within FAB. This phenomenon is common on this campus, when even our most outspoken voices deny themselves the chance to make real change by dismissing available methods of real, impactful advising. This is generally followed by vocal pessimism passed on to others, perpetuating the cycle of cynicism.

When the new fire alarm policy was put in place for residential buildings on campus last Fall, the initial email sent out on the topic angered the vast majority of residents and was cause for a great amount of discussion over the following week and beyond. I heard over and over again that Residence and Greek Life (RGL) and Dean of Students Katie Stetz

had "gone rogue" and that students had no power to make their voice heard or to change the decision. During that same time, Dean Stetz made appointments available for any student wishing to offer input on the policy, and barely two weeks after the announcement, the Residence Hall Association (RHA) made feedback about it the topic of a Hall Council Leadership meeting, which includes its executive board (all students) and executive liaisons, who represent each section of the residence halls. Speaking with Nikki Dunham from RGL, they gained clarification about the grounds for a fine, and agreed to prepare an email sent from RHA to each resident explaining some of the most pressing questions about the policy. In addition, Dunham stressed that the policy was fluid and was intended to be changed based on student feedback, a point stressed in RHA's explanation email as well. When many students were decrying the policy as yet another sign that IIT's administration had no care for its students, IIT's administration was working hard to give its students as much input and access as possible.

When I first became involved in a few student organizations on campus, I often heard complaints about how the Student Activities Fund (SAF) was distributed. Common threads of conversation involved Union Board (UB)'s perennially large allocation, comments about how it used to be much easier to get money from OCL before the advent of the current system (a point I can't comment on with any expertise, since I've only been involved in recent years), and complaints about inadequate funding for new or small organizations. To the first point, students don't seem to realize that a huge amount of UB's funding goes directly to other organizations' events, since every Bog-hosted event is partnered with and funded by UB. Additionally, UB is one of the largest and most active student orgs on campus, and has a long history of putting on impactful, well-planned events. It's natural that they receive a large amount of funding, since they've proven that they are capable of using it efficiently. To the second point, it should be noted that SAF proposals exist because Finance Board is made up of a small group of students, run through SGA, that manages funding for all 220 registered student organizations at IIT, and their work is rather impressive with that in mind. If such a system didn't exist, it would be up to the direct discretion of OCL, not students, to determine what proposals merit funding. Finally, our Student Activities Fund is incredible in size for a university with such a small undergraduate population, and the financial freedom given to student organizations here is almost without peer. WIIT's executive board, then all new, proposed for \$50,000 to fund Bill Nye's visit at the beginning of this academic year, and not only was that funding granted, but OCL took on much of the contract negotiation and logistics for them. I am currently part of a small group of students working to revive the Illinois Tech Model Railroad, and OCL staff obtained permission for us to enter the empty Main Building and retrieve equipment that belonged to the club historically, something they had no obligation to do, especially for a group that wasn't yet even reactivated as a student organization. Both of these groups were unproven in the eyes of OCL or Finance Board, but we were granted significant funding or powers based on the quality of our proposals.

Of course, while trying to avoid cynicism, it's also important to keep idealism in check as well. I am fully aware that there are large issues facing this school, both in campus life and in the academic realm. One of my organizations had its leaders chosen for it at one point by OCL, and then the next year by an SGA committee, both of which were unpopular among members and were destabilizing to the organization in the short term. And no matter what RHA advises, there

are just some building upgrades that won't be done, especially in residential complexes with limited lifespan. President Cramb has said there are approximately eight years left for MSV in its current form. No matter what goes on in a Food Advisory Board meeting, Sodexo is still a private company, and will have to make a profit. One of the most important points to make is that, in order for all of the school's input systems to work properly, they must be properly publicized and regulated. SGA has a responsibility to advertise open Senate seats and put as much information out as possible about our elections, and at times that responsibility hasn't been fulfilled. Many other organizations and offices face similar visibility and policy issues. In addition to enthusiastically joining many organizations, I've also worked to improve them and combat problems that arise. I've rewritten two student organization constitutions to make sure they comply to their own rules, I've become unintentionally privy to inter-office drama at times when searching for funding information for organizations, and I've even recently submitted a Judicial Board petition in the hopes of ruling certain SGA actions illegal.

I don't see Illinois Tech as some perfect environment, but I do see in the school plenty of opportunity for input and change. For an institution with barely 3,000 undergraduates, the variety of our food service is frankly amazing. IIT Dining staff manage seven separate locations, providing options for a huge variety of religious, health-related, and voluntary dietary restrictions. Quality and customer service have both improved as a result of input from the Food Advisory Board, organized by students. That direct decision-making is a hallmark of many of our professional offices: it's downright easy to make an appointment with most of our academic Deans, department heads, and campus life staff members. On the subject of student organizations, joining SGA or attending its meetings is a great way to have control over approval of each new organization, as well as funding for each organization. Additionally, SGA has a measurable impact on professional offices, organizing Town Hall meetings and representing the students to academic and administrative staff members.

The problem with IIT isn't Dean Stetz, Sodexo, Finance Board, or whatever else you were told your first few years here and perhaps perpetuated to the students who arrived here after you. The problem is our cycle of cynicism, wherein we constantly deny ourselves opportunities to create change based on the supposed fact that we're up against a big, well-oiled machine designed to suck money and make students unhappy. The thing is, in the end we're in control of that machine, and it won't work properly unless more of us take up the reins and take steps toward the things we want to see implemented. When only six percent of students vote for SGA's executive board, we can't reasonably expect them to represent us accurately. When only half of all residence hall floors have an active Floor Representative, we won't see our views communicated to RGL. When we dismiss certain staff members based on assumptions, we will never learn how dedicated, engaged, and hardworking the members of OCL, the Office of Student Affairs, IIT Dining, our colleges, and more really are. Some of the burden lies with the institutions of this university, but most of it lies with us in the end. If we sit here, jaded, and declare that Illinois Tech's interests aren't with its students, those interests never will be. But if we speak up, join organizations, and find the channels that already exist to communicate our concerns, we can build a positive campus from here. It's up to us to change the narrative, and kill cynicism before it kills this campus.

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