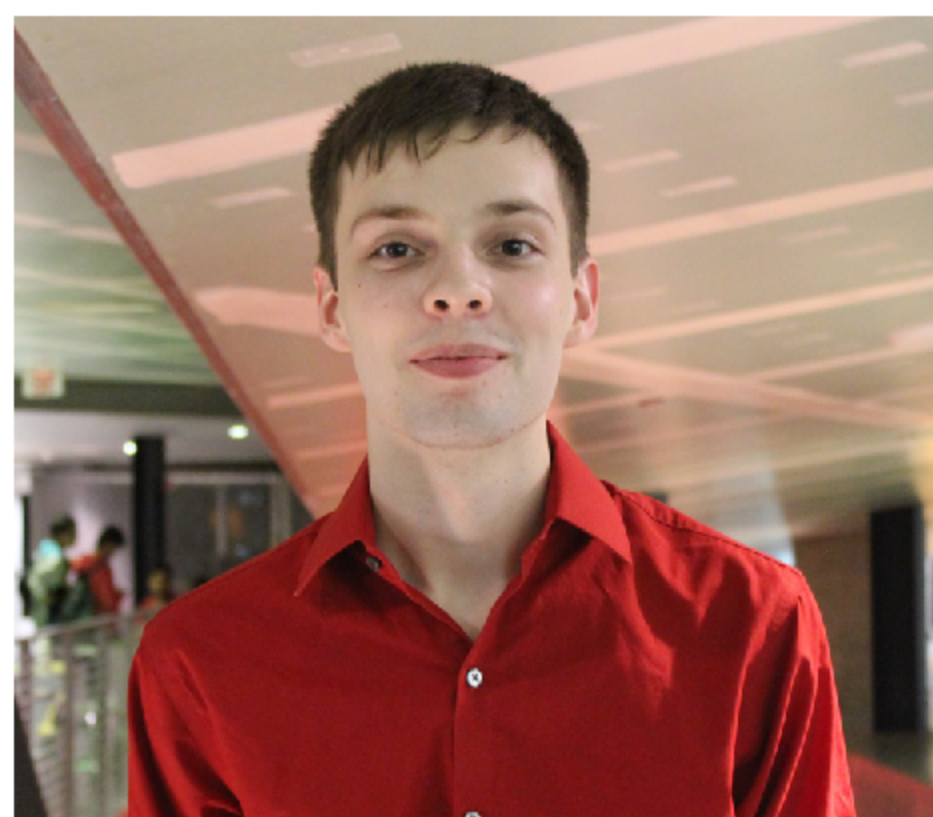# Why I'm running for SGA Executive Vice President

Soren Spicknall
TECHNEWS WRITER

Photo courtesy of Soren Spicknall

In the time since I last wrote an opinion piece for TechNews, I've learned a great deal. That article, titled "Let's Kill Cynicism Before It Kills This Campus", started a conversation that helped me re-think my preconceived notions of student input and involvement, and to see the issues from the eyes of those whose experiences here at Illinois Tech haven't been as positive as my own. I have spent a great deal of my time at this university as an advocate for others, starting as a Residence Hall Association Floor Representative during the first semester of my Freshman year, but many of the channels made available to me for advocacy have failed to address the needs of a great number of students.

I have decided to pursue a campaign for Executive Vice President of Illinois Tech's Student Government Association in order to make sure that everybody's voice is heard and seriously considered, regardless of the platforms they use to speak or the aims of their efforts. The students here deserve an SGA that reflects true public opinion in its initiatives, composed of Senators who are real representatives of their constituents' opinions in their actions and votes. I believe that SGA has the potential to create meaningful change on a large scale, and that we've made real progress in the last couple semesters toward those aims. However, there are a large number of legitimate problems within the organization, and the Executive VP position is unique in its ability to address those problems. Working together openly with every one of you, I hope I can be part of an Executive Board that will drive SGA to be the responsive, efficient, and receptive organization we all want it to be.

My first direct experiences with SGA were extremely different from each other, one very negative and another very positive. In the Fall of 2015, WIIT (for whom I was Music Director at the time) and TechNews (for whom I was a writer) were approached by SGA's Communications Committee to inform us that they would be forming an organization called Media Advisory Board, which was tasked with choosing the leaders of those two groups. This organization was put in place at the request of the university, following a controversial selection process the previous year which had been directed by OCL. While handing over some control to a student-led group was theoretically a move in the right direction, SGA seemed to simply accept this task without questioning whether it was in the interests of the students who they represented. The first time Media Advisory Board met (with representatives present from most of the largest student organizations on campus), the majority of those invited agreed that the mandate to choose a student organization's leadership set a dangerous precedent, and that there seemed to be no point in MAB exercising that power. In the end, WIIT and TechNews both negotiated leadership selection processes which turned most of the control back over to themselves, but the mere fact that they were brought to the table with such a confrontational, unpopular mandate in the first place reflected poorly on SGA's status as a body representative of the university's students. Instead of advocating for the rights of these organizations to choose their own leadership like any other group on campus, the individuals who formed Media Advisory Board simply took on a duty requested by administration, despite the fact that the majority of those from outside SGA who were aware of MAB disagreed with its mandate.

At the same time as the MAB debacle, I was learning that much of SGA's work was positive and open in nature for all students who wished to have input. As the Dining Chair for RHA, I joined the Food Advisory Board in Fall of 2015, headed at the time by Ricky Stevenson, who was a member of SGA's Student Life committee. That organization served as a liaison between unfiltered student input and actionable steps toward greater food quality and service at Sodexo locations around campus. Established as an initiative of SGA, Food Advisory Board brought four administrative members of Illinois Tech Dining to the table along with representatives of RGL, OCL, RHA, and SGA, as well as any student who wished to come voice their opinion during its meetings. Every other Friday, those who participated in Food Advisory Board were given the power to make decisions about options and issues that were brought forth by students, with every representative member present understanding that the opinions they presented were not those of themselves, but those of the students they were speaking for. In the Fall 2015 semester alone, Food Advisory Board made sure that Sodexo was publicizing its Meal Exchange program, expanded available vegetarian options, and directly addressed customer service issues with specific employees in the Commons and beyond. It was an example of the kind of work that SGA should be doing in all its activities, using its power as "the voice of the students" to push for popular, well-thought-out changes at a table with those who directly oversaw that facet of student life.

After participating in (or being impacted by) various SGA sub-groups and projects during my first year and a half on campus, I joined the organization as a Senator to become a voice for the students of the College of Science and learn more about its internal culture. I found a group of some of the most dedicated students on this campus, all of whom truly have the best interests of the student body at heart, but I also found some sources of the type of ill-considered decision-making that SGA (and some of its sub-organizations, like Finance Board) has earned a reputation for at times. Many of the problems I've seen can be traced back to cultural norms within SGA which I believe the Executive Vice President has the power to shift in a more positive, democratic direction, and I hope to be the person to oversee that shift.

In the current SGA Senate, there is very little emphasis on the fact that each Senator is elected as a representative of their College (or, in special cases, their student organization). Section 4.3.2 of the SGA bylaws state that "a Senator shall always offer legislation, debate, vote, and act according to the interests, concerns, and requests of his constituency", but there has not been a single time this semester when I have witnessed a Senator directly referencing the views of their constituents in debate or discussion. I am guilty of this behavior along with much of the rest of the Senate: there simply isn't currently a legislative atmosphere which promotes representation over personal views. This doesn't mean that any individual Senator is acting selfishly or that their projects aren't intended to benefit their constituents, but it does lead to a lack of direct consultation or open input from non-Senators. As SGA's Executive VP, I would be responsible for the Senate's general organization and the principles set forth at the beginning of each session. In that role, I would put a great deal of focus on the importance of representative service, and set forth an expectation that Senators seek active input from their constituents throughout their term.

In addition to encouraging Senators to actively seek input from their constituents, I believe that a hugely important step toward revitalizing SGA is to seek input from stakeholders in our projects at every stage of planning. While there are many SGA projects that do this well, there are countless others that bring in external voices far too late in the process. Sometimes this can be disastrous, especially when a Senator or volunteer spends a great deal of time on a single project only to be given a stern and concise "no" when they present their final product to the people impacted. Even at best, a project without external input leads to imperfect results, such as with the recent launch of the HAWKi app, which should have likely had some sort of public testing and input far prior to publication. The app itself is generally functional, but opening the testing pool to all students could have ensured that some of its current problems and quirks could have been addressed before now.

Most important of all the reasons I'm running, though, and something that I believe distinguishes me from other candidates, is a matter of philosophy. The nature of the Senate requires that its members are typically those who are most involved in student life, and those most willing to take on traditional leadership roles (and have faith in the impact of those roles). We typically have regular access to a number of resources that the average student doesn't know exist, and we know the "right" steps to take to have concerns addressed when they arise. For that reason, some Senators have a tendency to be dismissive of those who bring forward their concerns through non-traditional means like the ITSC Facebook group or through protest. Though those methods aren't necessarily the "correct" way of offering input or the most efficient manner of making change, I believe they should never be disregarded as invalid.

The reality that some students prefer non-traditional outlets for action does not mean that their opinions should not be represented in SGA, and it demonstrates an environment in which many students don't know who to go to when they want to get something addressed. SGA needs to always keep those realities in mind, and work hard to be a positive force connecting frustrated students to sources of change. And when necessary, we need to make change ourselves for those who don't have the time or the resources to do it themselves, but who care deeply enough about the issues to try to make their voices heard. I have been both an outsider and a participant when it comes to SGA matters, and I want to use the role of Executive VP to make sure that students can connect to our projects at every level. Some of our brightest and most passionate students choose to focus on academics alone, but when those students have a problem to bring forth, SGA needs to be there to help them through a productive dialog that's just as clear and open to first-time participants as it is for the SGA President.

Much of my platform deals in organizational culture and philosophy, but my track record proves that I am equally capable of putting specific action behind my ramblings. I was the sole author of WIIT's revised constitution after its Executive Board structure was re-established last year, and I have worked tirelessly to bring that organization back to the forefront of visibility and event curation on this campus. Through my positions in RHA, I have made policy decisions and advised changes to residence halls and dining, bringing that organization's constitution up to date as well. Writing for TechNews, I've taken the initiative to attend meetings of the Undergraduate Studies Committee and other groups which have a great deal of impact on our students, and to bring information from those meetings to the view of all those affected. In each of those positions, I've communicated openly with everyone who wanted to give advice or input, and sought new methods of input to make sure that my efforts reflected what the student body truly wanted. I hope I can bring that approach to SGA, serving as an advocate for this university's students and ushering in a year of engaged projects and initiatives that address the needs of our constituents before all else.

But I can't do it without your help, and I really mean that when I say it. SGA's Executive Board elections had a shockingly low turnout of 6% of students last year, meaning that individual votes truly did matter. While I sincerely hope that the Executive Elections Committee inspires higher turnout this year, it's possible that your vote could still make or break a campaign, no matter how many individuals participate. I encourage you to inform yourself about everyone running, attend the SGA debates next week, and vote for your interests between April 4th and April 6th. And of course, I hope you consider my platform and make me your next Executive Vice President.