Open Letter to the Executive Board on the Removal of Kevin Reuning

This is an open letter to the Graduate and Professional Students Association (GPSA) leadership team, including its president, Danielle Rhubart, executive vice president, Doug Whalen, vice president for external affair, Nicole Benevento, and the judiciary chaired by Emily McLaughlin to object to wrongfully removing the chair of the Student Concerns committee, Kevin Reuning. We consider this to be a rash, arbitrary and a highly harmful decision aimed at silencing concerned graduate students and quelling potential criticism of GPSA from graduate and professional student body at Penn State.

The decision to remove Kevin came after the committee he was chairing, Students Concerns, distributed a survey to graduate students that is attached to this letter. It is a shock to us to see Kevin removed from his position for sending out this survey that seeks to understand their concerns! The executive board of the GPSA was offered a chance to review the survey, and the president had confirmed its distribution. However, after its distribution, the individuals named above asked Kevin to shut down the survey immediately, with pretexts such as the survey being too critical of the GPSA programming activities. All the individuals above had the chance to provide input to the survey before its distribution and had agreed that a survey or a number of surveys would be beneficial.

To shut down such potential criticism, the individuals named above along with the GPSA judiciary cited the Article II, Section A of the GPSA bylaws that states “The president shall represent the Graduate Student Association to the University and will report in a timely fashion on matters affecting the graduate population to the Assembly,” and reason that the first half of this sentence means that the president is in charge of all mass communications to the graduate student body, and therefore has the power to ask a committee chair to shut down a survey. The president has used the same reading of this vague sentence to take control over the secretarial duties and effectively censor GPSA newswire. We find this to be a very arbitrary reading of an opaque sentence, aimed at shutting down any opposing voice within the GPSA. If we accept the Judiciary’s reading of this unclear sentence and the president is charged with representing all graduate students to the University and can override any decision she finds critical, then what real voice does any delegate have? What free speech is there, if, in the final decision, it’s solely up to the president?

The president, however, has failed to execute the clear part of the article, namely timely and full reporting to the assembly and that which affects them. She has very rarely reported on her meetings with high-level university administration as outlined above. The judiciary has failed to enforce this and this leads us to think that the individuals above are taking advantage of the constitution and bylaws capriciously to silence graduate students, which we find deeply disturbing and undemocratic.

Trying to silence criticism in this way can only be counterproductive, as is citing a constitution that has been recognized by all involved as needing clarity and necessary of amendment. Those of us who support Kevin and recognize his considerable efforts and talents can only be disappointed by such a short-sighted action. We believe that the challenges of the GPSA need people like Kevin and those who have come forward to support him.

We want to move forward and make the GPSA something vital. Right now the GPSA has a great chance to change the image that it has had in the past. We've made great gains in a short period of time by having dedicated people like Kevin working in the GPSA. Others are equally dedicated and some of those people have spoken out already on social media and are understandably concerned. Many in the student body are in support of this survey and will be concerned as well. We believe that there is room for all types of GPSA sponsored activities and hope to better serve the student body by actively engaging them as in as many ways as possible.

We have made gains convincing the grad and professional student body that we are serious about advocating, representing and serving them; let's not spoil it now. Please tell us who will be more committed in his or her time, efforts, and spirit in working to better the welfare of graduate and
committed in his or her time, efforts, and spirit, in working to better the welfare of graduate and professional students than Kevin Reuning? Tell me what direction should we take if you fail to listen?

We ask the GPSA leadership to immediately reinstate Kevin Reuning to the chair of the Student Concerns committee in an effort to rebuild GPSA's image and to establish trust, accountability and inclusion of other voices, and above all, democracy. We also ask the president to lead the organization with respect and transparency, “reporting in a timely fashion on matters affecting the graduate population to the Assembly”. Finally, we ask that all involved in this decision work in good faith with everyone in the GPSA assembly and beyond to represent, support and advocate for all graduate and professional students.

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