

# 'Of the Students, By the Students, For the Students'

## SERVICE TO STUDENTS. THAT, IN A NUTSHELL, IS THE OBJECTIVE OF THE SLIPPERY ROCK STUDENT GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION.

The association, established in 1938, has a storied history of the ways in which it helps the students it is elected to serve. Besides serving as the voice of the students to University administration, it owns and operates the SGA Bookstore and the SRU/SGA Preschool and Child Care Center, a nationally accredited, state licensed, nonprofit center. The independent 501(c)(3) corporation funds the Happy Bus, which provides on- and off-campus rides – including shopping runs to Butler's Clearview Mall, Target and Walmart. It also provides free legal counseling and a free weekend movie series featuring recently released films. Last year alone, SGA allocated \$2.5 million to fund 134 student clubs and organizations.

And now, the SGA is taking what it believes is the next logical step in its continuing mission of service to students: helping to ensure student success by establishing a \$250,000 endowed scholarship.

"The SGA's board of directors started talking about endowing a scholarship a little more than a year ago," said Wendy Leiterra, SRSGA business manager. "The board took a look at the organization's reserves and asked themselves how (those funds could) best serve our students.

"The bookstore is one of the areas where we have a little more freedom and flexibility with our reserve funding, and as the mission of the store, like SGA, is to serve the students, we decided what better way can that be accomplished than helping to lessen a student's financial burden by funding a scholarship?"

The \$2,500 annual scholarship is open to all full-time students who meet the following criteria:

- Must have completed two semesters at SRU at the time of application.

- Demonstrate continued engagement outside of the classroom through work study, volunteer work, research, campus activity, athletics, intramurals, etc.

Recipients will be selected through an application process that takes GPA and financial need into consideration. Recipients who maintain full-time enrollment and a minimum 2.5 GPA will be able to renew the scholarship for up to four years.

"The SGA students who sit on the board were very much in favor of not only establishing the scholarship but also wanting to be involved in developing the criteria," said Leiterra. "They wanted to work hand in hand with the SRU Foundation, Inc. to structure it and meet the needs where they felt there was the most demand."



Leiterra



Keffer

That demand aligns itself nicely with an area of focus for the University: retention.

Enrollment at SRU remains firm. Still, the 2019 fall semester enrollment of 8,806 students showed a decline of less than one-quarter of 1% compared to the prior year.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again, no one likes to see the arrow point downward, even if it is only a fraction of one percent," said SRU President William Behre "But it is encouraging – especially when you consider the ongoing decline in the number of high school graduates – that we were able to hold our position when many of our sister institutions experienced double-digit losses.

"That being said, we are looking closely at how we get that arrow to go back up overall," Behre said. "We plan to be more aggressive in a number of areas, but particularly in the area of retention. While our retention rates are already higher than most institutions in our category, we can and will do better. Anyone in business will tell you





that it's easier to keep the customers you already have than going out to get new ones."

And the SGA agrees.

"Retention is a key factor anytime but it's especially important with the decline in high school grads," Leiterra said. "The SGA recognizes that and wanted to step up and do what it could to keep a student at the University who may have otherwise not be able to persist through graduation. That is the main focus. This scholarship isn't about leadership or extracurriculars as much as it is how successful a student has been and how the SGA can further that success by providing financial support that could make the difference in a student's pursuit of a degree."

"Establishing this scholarship was about asking ourselves 'What's the most impactful thing we can do that students really want and would benefit from the most?'" said Riley Keffer, an SRU graduate student from Grove City and 2017 SGA vice president of financial affairs, who, along with Logan Tupper, his 2018 counterpart and a 2019 graduate with a bachelor's degree in health care administration, spearheaded the creation of the scholarship.

"Traditionally, the SGA has provided money for things that touch a greater number of students – funding the Happy Bus or assisting in renovation or building a structure like the Smith Student Center – but we wanted to look at doing something immediate and what could be more immediate than helping to pay someone's tuition? It's about changing someone's life rather than changing the look of something on campus and that is something this scholarship will keep doing year after year after year. That's something special that everyone associated with the SGA can be proud of for a long time."

While Keffer and Tupper developed the idea and brought it to the SGA board, Kaitlyn Hazelett, a senior dual accounting and finance major from Sarver and current vice president of finance,



worked with the SRU Foundation to finalize the scholarship criteria.

"It really was a group effort over the course of the last year or so," said Leiterra. "Riley got the discussion rolling during his time as vice president and passed the torch to Logan. The two of them then continued working on the details as each of them transitioned into their current roles as senators, then bringing Kaitlyn up to speed before they all brought it home to the SGA for approval. It was important to each of them that this continued to move forward and that together they saw it through for the benefit of many."

To learn more about or donate to the SGA Scholarship, contact the Slippery Rock University Foundation, Inc. at 724.738.2047.