Student Senate Update Oct. 22: Student Life Leadership Panel

Senators prodded various administrators about housing, budget concerns and dining issues during the student senate’s fifth meeting

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At the fifth meeting of the student senate, members of Student Life Leadership at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) hosted a question-and-answer session, where senators asked questions about issues that impact students on campus. From the panel, Ruth Abelman, director of residential life, answered questions about housing and potential issues for students alongside Andy Petters, director of university housing. Bill Mcnamara, executive director of hospitality and campus services, also took questions about issues relating to bus and dining services.

**Housing Hassles**

Amid new housing requirements, student senators raised questions about the selection process for housing.

Petters said the housing department decided to change the process for assigning time slots for students to select a living assignment. Time slots are now randomly assigned for all students, which scrapped the previous method in which time slots were assigned by number of credit hours completed.

“The with the housing requirements, we went about things a little bit differently, to encourage our required students to really focus on getting to know UNH, figure out who they want to live with and where they want to live for the second year,” Petters said.

Many on campus worry that with an additional class of students now being required to live on campus, the university may run short of housing options for those who seek them. UNH has a wide variety of housing options, although some buildings are designated for certain groups, such as those in the same colleges/majors and first year students.

“We still wanted as many junior, senior and grad students as possible to live on campus, but we knew that there had always been a lot of focus around that advantage that those who came in with a lot of credit hours would be able to go earlier in the selection in the past, so we decided to randomize that,” Petters said.
“We should still have a large number of spaces for juniors, seniors and grad students, but we really wanted to level the opportunity for students who applied for housing,” he continued.

Dining Dilemmas
President Dean explained in his Q&A session with the student senate that enrollment has been lower than administration anticipated for the year, which has resulted in a reevaluation of budgets, focusing on budget changes that will allow student services such as transportation and dining services to stay intact. Mcnamara explained that they are already planning on raising rates for dining hall packages for next year.

“We are going to be asking for support on a five percent increase for the next year for the dining hall rates,” Mcnamara said.

For context, the inflation rate sits at 3.7%, as of September of this year.

Dining hall packages are required for on-campus students. Currently, the core meal plan, which includes unlimited meal swipes and two guest passes, costs $2,431 a semester. The university also offers two other meal plan packages: the campus meal plan and the campus premier meal plan. The campus meal plan includes 200 dining dollars, which can be redeemed at restaurants and stores on campus, as well as six guest passes, which costs $2,631. The campus premier meal plan includes 300 dining dollars and 10 guest passes, costing $2,731.

The 5% increase would change rates to about $2,552 for the core meal plan, $2,762 for the campus meal plan and $2,867 for the premier plan.

McNamara explained that maintaining suitable wages for staff in these areas is a major element of the decision to raise rates for dining hall packages. It’s no secret on campus that UNH has had troubles with hiring staff for the dining halls. Stillings Hall has been closed for over a year due to trouble finding staff. In an online statement, Christopher Clement, chief operating officer and VP for administration, explained the closure of Stillings Dining Hall.

“The national labor crisis, particularly in the hospitality field, is being felt at UNH,” Clement wrote. “In order to maintain the excellent quality, service and value the university’s dining program is known for, the decision has been made to delay the opening of Stillings Dining Hall.”

Second year students moving into apartments on campus (Gables, Woodsides) will not be required to purchase a meal plan. Only those living in residence halls are required to buy a meal plan.
Transportation Troubles

McNamara explained that since the COVID-19 pandemic, transportation services have seen a decline in hiring and training of staff members. Due to decreased operations, there was less of a need to hire and train staff for transportation services, he explained.

An additional hurdle causing hiring troubles is the requirement of a commercial driver's license (CDL) to operate a bus. Attaining one of these licenses can take anywhere from three weeks to six months, based on a student's schedule, according to McNamara.

"Just last week, we had three more students pass their CDL, so we have three more licensed drivers on the road," McNamara said. "The beginning was a little slow and we're hoping to see better things for the spring."

Resolution Review

The first resolution passed concerned gender neutral bathrooms on campus. The resolution stated that "many students on campus who are gender non-conforming, nonbinary, or transgender may feel more comfortable and safer in gender-neutral bathrooms."

The resolution requested "administrators to continue working toward offering gender neutral bathrooms in more buildings."

The resolution highlighted that "these changes will help future students have greater access to the bathrooms that align with their gender identity, fostering an inclusive and safe environment."

Afterwards, the resolution urged the university to prioritize accessible and gender-neutral bathrooms in the 2023 Campus Master Plan, as well as in any ongoing construction projects.

The second resolution approved at this week's meeting thanked the ID office for waiving the standard $25 replacement fee for a lost ID card and allowing name changes for free. This resolution had been introduced at a previous meeting, but was passed unanimously by the senate on Sunday.