

New Student Rep on the UM Board of Curators

*Exclusive interview with UMKC's Shawn Gebhardt **

[Fadhel Kaboub](#) Dec . 15 . 2003

Shawn Gebhardt was appointed on Dec. 8 by Governor Bob Holden as the student representative to the University of Missouri System Board of Curators.

"Shawn is an exemplary example of UMKC attracting, nurturing and developing responsible community leaders," said Chancellor Martha Gilliland in an email message she sent to the UMKC community

Shawn now represents the interests of the 60,000 students of the University of Missouri System. He will attend all Board of Curators meetings and will participate in discussions about the budget, student fees, admission requirements, construction projects and other administrative issues.

What follows is an exclusive Kansas City Aurora interview with Shawn Gebhardt

[FK] What motivated you to apply for the position of student rep on the UM Board of Curators?

[SG] I'm a bit of a nontraditional student; I'm 26, I transferred to UMKC as a Junior, and over the years I've had to work both full- and part-time jobs to support myself and to pay for my education. While putting myself through school has often been difficult, I'm grateful for the challenge because I've had many experiences and opportunities to grow and develop as a leader that I otherwise wouldn't have had if I had followed the traditional four year plan. Those experiences and opportunities, I felt, put me in a unique position to contribute more to the role while still understanding and appreciating the views my fellow UM system students.

[FK] Tell us about the application and selection process you went through.

[SG] It was very rigorous and well orchestrated. In addition to the usual submission of an application, personal statement, transcripts, etc., I went through three rounds of interviews. The first was with the UMKC Student Government Association (SGA) President, Geoff Gerling, and the Executive Vice President, Tom Kernan. I was then interviewed by the members of the Intercampus Student Council (ISC), which consists of elected student leaders from all four University of Missouri campuses and representatives from the Associated Students of the University of Missouri (ASUM). Finally, I met with three representatives from Governor Holden's office including Chris Brown, the Director of the Office of Boards and Commissions. I also had the opportunity to attend a Board of Curators meeting in Saint Louis and to meet some of the Curators with whom I now serve.

[FK] How do you envision the possibility of effective student participation in UM system decision-making in general and specifically at UMKC?

[SG] I can't emphasize enough that the only way for students to have an effect on decision-



making at any level is to get involved. Of course, there are two sides to the coin, because many students have perfectly good reasons for not being able to commit much time or energy to campus involvement: they're raising children, caring for family members, holding down one or more jobs to pay their increasing tuition and fees, and balancing commitments to their faith group, neighborhood association, sports team, etc., in addition to doing schoolwork! That's why those of us who are already involved need to make getting involved as simple and as appealing to others as possible. For my part, I intend to create ample opportunities for students on all four campuses to make their voices heard and to contribute. What I'd like to see, ultimately, is for more students to get engaged with the process.

[FK] Some students say "why should the students be concerned with the decisions made by the UM system?" how do you answer such statements?

[SG] That's simple. They affect you and me; they affect all of us. Period. If you're graduating next May (or even next week), you're probably leaving behind friends who aren't finished with their degree yet. Maybe you've got younger brothers or sisters at home who will be attending a UM school next fall. Maybe you or a family member lives in one of the cities or towns across the state that depends on the UM system for its economic well-being. Even if you're not from Missouri and intend to leave the state the day after graduation, you'll be carrying a diploma from a UM school. So there is every reason to be concerned with the direction the UM system is going.

[FK] Do you detect certain student passivity on campus with respect to administrative issues?

[SG] I don't think students are passive. I think they make educated choices with respect to their limited time, and they frequently perceive that either those issues don't affect them or that they're powerless to influence the administration, so they decide that working on campus issues aren't worth their time. Now, I'm not saying that there are no reasons for students to believe either of those two things. But I think that in general people who write off getting involved really miss out on something. Unfortunately, we as a community miss out as well. I'd challenge students who aren't currently involved to just join one organization or committee or attend one event next semester. Chances are that any administrative issue you're passionate (or upset) about probably has a group organized that needs to hear what you think. Make sure they do.

[FK] How do you intend to conduct your feedback with students throughout the UM system?

[SG] At some point in the near future, I should have an office set up somewhere on campus, and will have set office hours. So anyone will be able to contact me by phone, via e-mail, or in person. I'll also be attending monthly ASUM and ISC meetings, Board of Curators meetings (which take place approximately every six weeks), and as many other relevant meetings on each campus as I'm able to. I have to say, however, that I think one of the most important things for me to do is to avoid getting bogged down in meetings and to make connections with individual students. So I'd like to make sure that everyone knows that I welcome any feedback, comments, or concerns they might have. Please feel free to contact me any time. I can be reached by email at sjgf5@umkc.edu

[FK] What are the high priority issues on your agenda as the student rep on the UM Board of Curators?

[SG] I think all of us in the university community are aware that the budget crisis is our greatest concern, and I don't think the term "crisis" is an overstatement.

At the same time, there are always areas in which the system and the campuses can improve in the way services are delivered and in how efficiently we do business. I'd rather not try to list all of them, because I'd like to hear feedback from students before I determine what my main priorities will be. I'll make those decisions based on the comments I hear from students.

[FK] Are you ready for some good lobbying and fighting for higher education in Jefferson City in this year of budget crisis?

[SG] I hate to say it, but it's shaping up to be another difficult year. Our tuition increased almost 20% this year, and so far I haven't seen anything encouraging in next year's projections. The system has its own Government Relations staff, as do the campuses, and I certainly intend to work closely with those individuals to do anything we can to make sure that elected officials continue to understand how important higher education is to the state.

At the same time, however, the system and campus administrations have been working on these issues all along, and we're still looking at a disturbing fiscal future. I don't think that means that people aren't doing their jobs; I think it means we've all got to do more than we have in the past -- particularly we students and our families. I'm not blaming elected officials, because they're being forced to make some very difficult choices right now. But if they don't hear directly from students and parents, they have no way of knowing how higher education budget cuts are hurting their constituents.

On a related note, because of my appointment as Student Representative to the Board of Curators, I've had to vacate my seat on the board of ASUM. That's bittersweet for me, because I've really loved working directly on political issues on behalf of students -- it's something I'm very passionate about. Fortunately, it also creates an opportunity for another student to take my place and to get involved with ASUM. For those readers who aren't familiar with ASUM, I strongly encourage everyone to check them out. They do tremendous work that benefits all of us.

[FK] Thank you Shawn for this interview and good luck in this very exciting and demanding position.

[SG] Thank you!

* Shawn Gebhardt transferred to UMKC from Florida State University to complete a bachelor's degree in Economics and is currently working on his Master's degree in the field. Shawn received the Joe E. Brown Institutional Economics Award for demonstrated excellence in intellectual tradition from the Department of Economics. He is a member of the Economics Club, the Associated Students of the University of Missouri (ASUM), Omicron Delta Epsilon, Phi Beta Delta and Golden Key Honor Society. Shawn is currently employed as a Graduate Research Assistant at the UMKC Center for Economic Information where he is working on federally funded research exploring the connections between obesity and environmental/geographic factors. Shawn can be reached by email at sjgff5@umkc.edu

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