Date

To: Joseph Alutto, Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost
   William Shkurti, Senior Vice President for Business and Finance

From: Ralph Boerner, Chair, Senate Fiscal Committee

Re: Proposed increase in the Student Activity Fee

Senate Fiscal discussed at its meeting of February 17, 2009 the proposal to increase the Student Activity Fee (SAF) from the current $15 per quarter to $25 per quarter, effective Autumn Quarter 2009. The Committee compiled a list of questions and concerns and forwarded them to Ms. Kerry Hodak of the Council on Student Affairs (CSA), the initiating unit.

On March 3 the Committee met with Ms. Hodak, Ms. Tracy Stuck, Assistant Vice President for Student Life, and Mr. David Wiseley, Associate Director of the Ohio Union and discussed the written materials that Ms. Hodak had sent to the committee in response to the questions developed by the Committee during the meeting of 17 February. The discussion developed into a broad exploration of issues of timing, programming, staffing, and feasibility with our guests.

There was considerable enthusiasm among the Committee members for the programming that the CSA has produced with the current SAF funding, as well as a general appreciation of the need to ameliorate the effects of five years of losses of buying power to inflation; however, this enthusiasm was tempered by concerns about timing and feasibility and by general confusion among the Committee members about the administrative and fiscal arrangements that involve the SAF, CSA, the Ohio Union, and the Office of Student Life.
The existing Memorandum of Understanding for the administration of the SAF limits the use of SAF funds to programming and other direct student uses. As a result, the considerable staffing needs of this program were initially met, and continue to be met, by delegating the responsibility for oversight, fiscal management, and logistics of the SAF-funded initiatives to permanent staff members and GAAs employed by the Ohio Union. At present, all or part of the responsibilities of six Ohio Union staff members and two GAAs are devoted to these programs.

It is reasonable to anticipate that the move into the new Ohio Union facility will put additional responsibilities on the Ohio Union staff, and any budget reductions that might be necessitated by the current economic situation would only exacerbate this. In recognition of this situation, the CSA proposal requests funding to hire additional regular staff to help operate the SAF-funded programs. If this is funded, it will necessitate the development of a new Memorandum of Understanding that permits SAF funds to be used to pay for administrative personnel. Such a process would offer the opportunity to put the staffing contributions of the Ohio Union offices to SAF-funded programming on a more concrete footing, and Senate Fiscal recommends that the current informal staffing arrangements between the Ohio Union and CSA be replaced by a clearer and more specific listing of the range of tasks and responsibilities that the Ohio Union offices will supply to CSA from the current Ohio Union budget, as well as the duties and responsibilities of the additional staff to be hired with new SAF funds. The lines of responsibility for staff hiring, supervision, and evaluation should also be spelled out specifically in the new MOU.

The relationship between CSA and the Office of Student Life was also unclear to the Committee. Although Dr. Javaune Adams-Gaston, Vice President for Student Life, forwarded to the Committee a letter in support of the proposed increase in the SAF (copy attached), the degree to which and the arrangements by which the Office of Student Life conducts fiscal oversight of the diverse assemblage of SAF-funded/CSA-coordinated activities are still matters of some confusion on our part. Several Committee members expressed the opinion that any proposed increase in student activity funding, whether through the SAF or through direct General Fund support of the Office of Student Life might best be placed on hold until after a comprehensive review of all student life-related programs/activities currently in place. The Committee assumes that Vice
President Adams-Gaston will be launching such a program review, assessment, and strategic planning effort as she sets her agenda for Student Life, and perhaps the Central Services Subcommittee (CSS) could be of assistance to her in this process, given the new and improved unit review process that has just been put in place by CSS and OAA.

CSS included the Office of Student Life in the list of units we suggested to you be invited to submit proposals for additional central funding in the upcoming round of budget discussions. If Vice President Adams-Gaston should find some or all of the projects outlined in the CSA proposal to be sufficiently meritorious, she might consider including such items in Student Life’s submission to CSS for central funding, thereby avoiding (at least temporarily) a fee increase.

Several other areas of concern were expressed by the Committee and not entirely allayed by the discussion with Ms. Hodak, Ms. Stuck, and Mr. Wiseley. The first was the issue of timing. Given the state and national economic situation and the strong support for a continued freeze on student fees in the legislature, the Committee was concerned that any increase in fees, no matter how modest, would run counter to the perceived spirit of the freeze, even if a special legislative exception for the SAF were offered. In the absence of such an exception, an increase in the SAF would have to come at the expense of other General Fund budget lines, and this was not considered desirable by the Committee. Given that students face a possible increase in the RPAC fee, a new Ohio Union fee, a possible opt-in fee for legal services (to replace a more modest service now covered by the existing fee structure), and an expanding suite of technology, laboratory, and other academic fees, and given the need for time for the new Vice President for Student Life to complete her planning process, an increase in the SAF at this time seemed perhaps premature.

The other area of concern expressed by a number of Committee members was the assumption that the only way to enhance programming was by increased funding. The Committee asked whether a list of events/activities that should be eliminated (based on impact, efficacy, utility, attendance, priority, etc.) could be proposed that could, at least in part, free up funds that could be used for new programs. In the same vein, the Committee asked if a prioritized list of initiatives (both current and proposed) could be
provided. Perhaps such an effort might be undertaken either by CSA or by a joint CSA-Student Life effort, with the goal of finding economies?

In closing, I want to reiterate the enthusiasm Senate Fiscal expressed for the current range and diversity of student programming offered by CSA and the Office of Student Life, and our recognition that both changing priorities and chronic inflation have contributed to the need for enhanced funding for student programming. Whether the proposed increase in the Student Activity Fee is the best mechanism to remedy this situation and whether this is an appropriate time to institute such an increase remain to be determined.