Meet a Board Member: Ryan Collins

Ryan Collins is a third-year student at the UNC School of Law and is president of the Graduate & Professional Student Federation. Learn more about his goals for the Carolina Union!

Can you tell us a little about yourself?

I’m a third-year law student at UNC, and president of the Graduate & Professional Student Federation, and I went to undergrad here at Carolina. I served as the president of the Residence Hall Association. Before law school, I got a Master’s in Higher Education Administration from NC State and I worked in housing at UNC-Greensboro, so I have a background in Student Affairs work.

What are your priorities for the Board?

In terms of what I’m looking to bring, it’s a different perspective. I’m someone who went to Carolina as and undergrad, left, and then came back to go to law school. So I’m hoping to bring perspective because the majority of members historically and even now have tended to be undergraduate students. So I’m hoping to bring that experience and wisdom of having seen the Union evolved over time through the student lens. And certainly, I want to make sure that graduate and professional student perspective is there. Right now, we only have two seats of the 16, so I want to make sure that we have a voice at that table and that the decisions that are made reflect those interests. And that the services that Union is offering is mindful of my constituents because we fund roughly 40% of the budget. With us contributing our share of student fees, we want to make sure services are available and catered to our needs. The Union as a physical space is not one that is utilized by my constituents quite as much. Some of that is location, because a significant number of our constituents are not on this part of campus very often but that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t be trying to create spaces that that we can take advantage of.

So how can the Union serve graduate and professional students?

I think there are partnership opportunities that could come from this Board. I think of the work that Carolina Union Activities Board does, right now we have our own social programming component to GPSF. And that is something that I would like, frankly, to be able to phase out because we are a governing body not a programming body per se. I
want to work with CUAB so they can be doing social programming that is more geared toward graduate students with their larger resources be able to bring more graduate and professional students into social activities on campus.

The main thing that I think the Union could also do is the larger mission of bringing people together. Bring together graduate and professional students from across campus because we tend to be very siloed, again physically, but there is also less of a reason for us to interact with people outside our pods. So I’m hoping the Union can be our partner at GPSF in trying to foster more of that and to build more of that community.

For me and a lot of graduate students, we’re here mostly for academic purposes but I also appreciate the opportunity to build connections, build networks, to interact with people from outside my program so I hope the Union can be a partner in that.

What are some differences in utilizing Union spaces and programs as a graduate student?

At some point, most undergrads are going to pass through this part of campus, it’s just more naturally going to be a place for them to gather so there is more of a natural tendency to utilize the space for programs and events and that sort of thing. So many events that appeal to undergraduates are held here, whether it’s in the Auditorium or in the Great Hall. With graduate and professional students, just because we tend to be more confined to our individual programs, we have less of a reason to come to the Union. At the law school we have our own spaces to do our own programming so there is less of a need to come to this end of campus.

When you think about some grad students who are in research functions, their space is their lab, or they have an office or a grad suite where they spend a lot of their time. So there’s less of a need for a gathering space on campus. There is probably some utilization of Alpine and Wendy’s, although again depending where they are they may be plenty of options that are closer.

Programming-wise it’s similar. Graduate students may not see the programming that is offered as speaking to them or being interested in it. Part of that is not knowing that is accessible to them, but part of it is also the age and needs differences. We may have some folks right out of undergrad who are interested in the same types of social and developmental programs, but then you may have a fair amount of people who are married, they have families, this is a second career for them so they won’t want to engage in the same types of activities so it’s important to have a more focused and intentional outreach to those populations.

What’s it like to work with the board?

It’s a good group, it’s a lot of people that I have served with in other capacities whether it’s and then then on the Union staff side it is people I have interacted with too. It’s
good to work with. We all have different opinions and perspectives on things and that’s valuable. I wouldn’t want us to agree on everything, but I do want to make sure we are thoughtful about decisions that are being made. We have had some spirited discussions. That highlights the importance of an organization like the Board of Directors.

Since you were an undergraduate here, do you have a favorite memory of the Union?

When I was president of the Residence Hall Association, we hosted the state conference. We had 10 or 11 schools from North Carolina who brought students who were involved in counterpart organizations on their campuses. They came here, we hosted them for a weekend of professional development with workshops and things like that. So a significant amount of our programming took place within the Union. I was on the planning committee for that and my friend was Ramses so I managed to convince him to come and be a part of our opening ceremony. It was funny, you had students from all over, including NC State that were excited about getting pictures with Ramses. That was a lot of fun. And then 5 years later we were back here again and I was back as advisor of RHA at UNC-Greensboro. so I was back in the Great Hall again and it was great to see it again and see it come full circle.
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