

SFPIRG is part of the Ecology of an Engaged University

My name is Alyssa. I'm an alumna of SFU and am currently working in athletics as a coach, gym manager, and semi-professional athlete. While pursuing my degree, SFPIRG was a large part of how I became an engaged student, learned to be a part of a community that embraces diversity, and developed deeper compassion for people with very different lived experiences from my own. I was also given the opportunity to develop professional skills during my time as an SFPIRG board member.

While in my last years studying geography at SFU I started to wonder how I could ground what I was learning in the real world. I enrolled in programs like the Change Lab and Semester in Dialogue because I wanted an experiential learning process that would connect the academic concepts I was learning about to people and organizations in the city. Around this time I took notice of SFPIRG. Through attending their events I got to hear from people working on issues I'd never been exposed to: prisoner research requests and access to information, sex worker rights, First Nations legal issues, and many more. As I became more familiar with their space, I noticed that their library was stocked with materials I wouldn't find at SFU's libraries. Browsing their collection gave inspiration and resources for research papers where I explored little known (to me) topics through the lens of the academic principles I was learning. I undertook an action research exchange, where I tweaked a term-paper assignment in order to suit the needs of a community organization that needed a primer document for one of their campaigns. Through SFPIRG, I was able to not only learn about current events in the community, but actually participate in them.

As an organization that supports events and groups that tackle issues affecting diverse people, SFPIRG is a community hub and a place for dialogue. SFPIRG's staff, board, and community supported me to better understand the experiences of others and challenged my preconceived notions without judgement. Opening one's eyes to the experiences of others is crucial in fostering meaningful compassion. In a time when media inflates extremes, and so much of our discourse about social movements happens behind a screen without social accountability, I cannot stress the importance of this enough.

Gyms are often comfortable places for only a thin cross section of people. Currently I'm very proud to work at a gym that supports diversity and generally has a welcoming and accepting community. However this isn't by pure luck. It's due to the leadership of myself and my teammates in setting a community culture that values all participants. At times it's meant having awkward but ultimately supportive conversations to help community members realize their impacts on others and make a positive shift. My experiences at SFPIRG are the model I look to when approaching these conversations. Internationally in my sport I've come to be viewed as a community leader not only due to my skills as an athlete or coach, but also because of how I've managed conflict and difference when they've arisen. This has helped lead to opportunities for travel, professional development, and even nominations for leadership in my sport's newly founded national federation.

SFPIRG was my first time experiencing what it is like to be at the helm of an organization. I served on their board from 2012 - 2013, and grew professionally as I learned about how a board of directors functions, how to work effectively with an organization's staff, and the responsibilities of leading. I learned an array of job-ready skills from simple things like effective minute-taking and task management, to more complex skills like meeting facilitation, inter-organizational diplomacy, and conducting employee appraisals. I was able to point to these experiences while applying for the role of manager at my gym, and they continue to serve me well in my position.

During my time at SFU the university adopted the tagline "engaging the world", and to celebrate its 50th anniversary a couple of years ago it used the slogan, "from radical roots to engaged university". As the university continues to market itself to students and youth who wish to "engage" with their world, SFPIRG's role becomes more important. The university is not always in the best position to connect students to current social issues or grassroots movements in their community, nor should the responsibility to provide these experiences be placed solely on the shoulders of official SFU bodies. An engaged university is one which facilitates student access to organizations that provide opportunities to wrestle with the social and environmental issues of our time. As an engaged university, it is in SFU's best interest to ensure that SFPIRG continues to exist, as it contributes to SFU's over all ecology of engagement on campus, while providing students grounded opportunities for professional and personal growth. I cannot imagine an engaged SFU without SFPIRG.

Sincerely, Alyssa Serpa