

DAILY COLLEGIAN TRANSCRIPT: 2025 SGA STUDENT TRUSTEE DEBATE

The transcript was compiled by Daniel Frank, Head News Editor. Please direct any questions or complaints towards news@dailycollegian.com

Many thanks to the Student Government Association for hosting the event.

Editor's note: This transcript has not been edited for tone, clarity, or grammar. The audio recording was run through a transcribing software and then combed through to ensure accuracy. Parentheses indicate clarification for an acronym, and brackets in text indicate words added for clarity in extreme situations. Brackets outside of text are non-transcribed events.

The first candidate to speak was drawn randomly, and that designation then moved clockwise, to the ticket's left. Candidates were given two and a half minutes for opening statements, one minute for responses, thirty seconds for rebuttal, and 15 seconds to respond to a rebuttal at the moderator's discretion.

Kundayi Mazando, Student Trustee Candidate:

Wow, for those who were here for the presidential debate, I can say that was tense, to say the least, but I hope that we will have a nice, formal and great discussion to share our platforms and why we want to be the student trustee.

So for introductions, for those who do not know me, hello. My name is Kundayi Mazando. I am a sophomore dual-degree seeking political science and economics major. I'm also a member of the Commonwealth Honors College, and some involvement on campus is, I'm the current chair of the undergraduate Services Committee for the Student Government Association. I am the Director of Social Engagement for the mock trial team here at UMass. I'm also one of two political science representatives for the Dean Student Advisory Council, and I'm also a board member of the Political Science Undergraduate Board.

And first I want to start off my opening statement with: what is student trustee? During my nomination period, I got this question a lot and I feel like this is the best avenue to adjust to a wide variety of people. So the student trustee: think of it as the representative of the university to the Board of Trustees and the UMass system. The Board of Trustees is what make, ultimately makes all the important decisions that not only affects this current university, but also every single university in the UMass system, including UMass Boston, UMass Dartmouth, Lowell and even the medical school.

What I want to do as student trustee is make big goals that we can get that best helps the student body. First thing I want to do is not only lower tuition, because they're the ones who decide the hike. But I also want to do a better allocation of funds. If you look at your tuition and you see how much you're paying to attend, especially if you are an international student or an out of state student like me, you see that not everything that we are paying for we are actually using and we are actually benefiting. One example is books. I still have to pay for textbooks. Why am I spending hundreds of dollars for textbooks that I should just have available for me for free? Another thing I wanted to address is the housing crisis and the lack of affordable housing on campus that is available for students, especially multi-years. And finally, I want to talk about DEI efforts in protecting our rights as students, as people of this country.

Thank you everybody.

[Applause]

Ava Marino, Student Trustee Candidate:

Good evening, everyone. My name is Ava Marino. I love the UMass community, and I have loved involving myself in student life here, but I've also seen the glaring issues of this institution.

It can feel as though the higher education system is out to get students. Our tuition continues to rise, and yet the value of our degrees does not. We need these degrees to get jobs in this economy, but the cost of our debt often exceeds the income we earn from our job opportunities.

The Board of Trustees is a group that makes decisions based on our tuition, our campus sustainability efforts and financial transparency of our investments, we do not have financial transparency right now. They hide our investments, and I think it is important that we expose them. I'm not asking you to have blind faith in me to deliver results. I've had the, I ... as an straight A student, dedicated student at the Isenberg School of Management, I have had the opportunity to engage with industry leaders and can learn to communicate with professionals, business professionals. Through my time in House Council, I have taken on administrative and budgeting responsibilities, which has taught me how transactions work at UMass, and I've worked closely with SGA officials to learn how decisions are made at UMass.

UMass Amherst has raised our tuition and invested those dollars in war. Our planet continues to heat up while they push back carbon zero to 2050; that is unacceptable. These are all issues that are important to our student body, and I think that they should be addressed in these board meetings. I'm going to fight for these issues so that students know where their tuition dollars are going, push for stronger sustainability initiatives and ensure that every student has a voice they get by being an active representative.

Thank you.

[Applause]

Abby Joyce, Moderator:

So for the first question, we're going to start with Ava, what is your experience working with administrators, and how do you plan on maintaining and building that relationship with them specifically?

Ava Marino:

[Technical Issues] In my time in house counsel, I worked very closely with the residential director, two residential directors so far. I've worked with Noel, and now I'm working with Ariel. With these administrative personnel working within our residential halls, I have been

able to one: communicate with them about how to spend our funds and how to get land securities for events that we wish to hold.

There is a lot of bureaucracy involved with UMass, as I'm sure many of you, especially those in RSOs, are concerned, but I am aware of how these processes happen, and I would like to be able to push administrators to communicate more with the student body as well.

Kundayi Mazando:

Okay, everyone so fun fact, me and Ava were actually on the same House Council together in Northeast, and we got cluster of the year. And so we, I... we know that we work well together and to have the same experience in terms of that sense, but I want to focus on more specific experience to what I've done after House Council.

So during the summer, I was on the Campus Demonstration Task Force (CDTF) that was announced to the student body and administrators and faculty. That's where I worked directly with administrators to advocate for the rights of students in terms of our policies, including the famous Land Use Policy that Chancellor Reyes used as an excuse to arrest students on campus. So I worked directly with them on that.

Additionally, in my time in SGA, that is half the things I do. In order to get the initiatives done on campus, I got to talk to the administrators, and so I'm really comfortable, and I do it all the time, and a lot of administrators know me, and we've already established that connection. Thank you.

Daniel Frank:

Thank you. And this question is for Kundayi as well, in what ways do we do you think the Board of Trustees does not serve the university?

Kundayi Mazando:

From my time in the SGA, and specifically my time with working with Felicity Oliveira, the current student trustee ... Board of Trustees does not serve our institution and the students that are in their institutions, because there is a severe disconnect from them to us. Majority of students don't know the Board of Trustees exists, let alone what they do. It's like this mysterious Illuminati group that makes decisions on our lives, and we don't know. We just have to take what they give to us.

But that shouldn't be the case. We should be able to go have a free forum of ideas from the students who aren't in positions of power like we are trying to be in, but have an active route of communication that lets the student trustees know, the Board of Trustees know, what the students and the school actually have to go through on a day to day basis. And

from what I have known from my time studying the current trustee, that is the biggest disconnect.

Ava Marino:

The Board of Trustees has not set foot on this campus since 2022; they do not communicate with the SGA at all beyond the trustee position, and I think that is a serious problem. As trustee, I plan to work closely with the president and vice president, whoever may be elected, so that I might create a better dialog between the Board of Trustees and Student Government, and I would as well push the board to actually come onto this campus and hold town hall meetings with them, so that students can actually meet these people and address their concerns.

Abby Joyce:

Thank you for your responses. As a member of the Student Government or the student body, what is a tangible achievement of yours that has improved the campus climate? And for this one, we're gonna start with Ava.

Ava Marino:

I'm a member of an RSO, the Isenberg Sustainability Club, where we connect students with more resources to potential job opportunities, hire speakers and create a community of Isenberg students who are interested in sustainability.

Within my Residential House Councils, my first year as Vice President we held events such as formals Kundayi's aware of, and this year, more specifically, I have been holding events on holidays that can help our low-income students celebrate even not needing ... while not needing to spend money. We've done pumpkin painting on Halloween, which, was, had a great turnout, as well as bouquet making for Valentine's Day, because I think that all students should be able to give their loved ones something on Valentine's Day, even if they don't have the funds to do it.

Kundayi Mazando:

So some of this was mentioned in the president and vice president debate, because my vice-chair was in that debate, but one of my happiest, proudest things that I've done so far, that I will continue to do; because unless kosher dining is at the same quality as UMass number one dining, then it will never be enough, but adding in those extended resources in breakfast, for a program that didn't even serve breakfast, kosher student ... kosher practicing students have been forced to eat vegetarian even if they didn't want to, because there was just no options and there's no services available to us. And so that's one thing I really, really push for, as dining is a major thing of what I do.

Additionally, my work for elections, the US elections and trying to bring out more participation, more information and advocacy in our student groups, no matter who you voted for, was one thing I'm really proud of, how many people I was able to help directly through that process.

Daniel Frank:

Thank you. This question will be for starting with today as well. What have you done to advocate around college affordability and food insecurity, and how do you plan to support first-gen, low-income, or impoverished students in your role as trustee?

Kundayi Mazando:

I talk with a lot of people from all different walks of life, one part of my job as an undergraduate... Chair of Undergraduate Student Services is dining. It is food insecurity. And so what I have done, and what I will continue to do, is advocate for students who need it and talk to administrators.

A lot of the times, just like the Board of Trustees, the administrators on this campus are so far removed from us that somebody just needs to talk to them. It's all it takes is sometimes the first step, and everything just plays into motion. I promise to take that first step, to take that leap, and to continue to advocate for those who need it, because that is why I want to be in this position. Someone needs to speak up for the people who aren't being spoken up for.

Ava Marino:

This is a lived experience for me. I am a first-generation student and a low income student, and I think that one of the core issues being from both groups is that networking is incredibly difficult when you don't have connections from your parents. I think that it will be important to support our first-generation students by holding network events specifically for them. I think that it's important for them to get the same resources that all of our other students get. Also, I would like to mention the MASSGrant Plus extension, which made it so that low-income students could get a state funded free tuition. Where is the money going that would have been put into them by UMass, though. I want students who have been pushed just over the line but are still struggling with tuition to be able to have, to the, that funding as well as push for further grant funding.

Abby Joyce:

With the Trump administration seeking to exert pressure on public universities, what would you do to monitor and push back against federal actions?

Ava Marino:

I think that working with our campus' cultural RSOs are going to be a huge step in ensuring that DEI is protected on this campus. I intend to show my face at RSOs. I have made it my goal to attend at least one general body meeting for as many RSOs as possible, especially cultural RSOs, in this case specifically with DEI. I want to implement a survey system so that these RSOs can get back to us about what issues they are facing and if they feel as though they are being discriminated against by SGA processes.

I would also like to say that I want to work with the President and Vice President once more in creating an email in Google Forms for RSOs to specifically fill out and ensure that we have a direct line of communication.

Kundayi Mazando:

Now, I want to preface this by starting off with what the Board of Trustees are currently doing right now. Right now, there is a threat on public education and public higher education, such as institutions like this. This is what they're working on right now. This is what the current trustee and the current Board of Trustees is doing to help mitigate this. Now it is important to do all of the things my opponent says.

It is also important, that we gotta actually go to the Board of Trustees themselves. If we keep our problems and our grievances, with, only in our space here at UMass, nothing gets brought up to them. They don't know there's an issue unless somebody brings it up to them.

And so one thing... went, while shadowing the student trustee that I have learned is that they are actively fighting this administration in order to give us the opportunities that we can to keep running as a public institution, and I have every intention of repeating what they're doing and tenfold.

Daniel Frank:

Thank you.

Although it didn't last year, the trustee election has struggled in the past meeting voter turnout minimum required to seat the student trustee. How do you plan to get students engaged with the trustee election, and explain students how, why the trustee role is so important?

Kundayi Mazando:

I will say this frank. The student trustee is probably the most important position a student could have on campus. It is of utmost importance because we can do the most amount of

big change that cost multimillion-dollars' worth in funding and maintenance and allocations. And so one of the things I want to do in this election, during this campaign, and if I am elected is bring more attention to the position itself. Most people don't even know what it is.

I can, there are countless many times where people have asked me more what is a trustee do, rather than what do you plan to do. And so one thing I want to do is after the election period, if elected, news, my campaign Instagram and work with UMass administration and UMass', UMass Board of Trustees to make a permanent student trustee Instagram and social media to help with outreach, because social media is a powerful tool that's just not being utilized.

Ava Marino:

In my time in nomination, I went across eight different dining halls. Oh, sorry, four dining halls. There's only four here. But for the span of eight hours, going around tabling to strangers. I'm not afraid to talk to strangers. I will go up and I will tell you exactly what you need to know about the student trustee position. But you can't just rely on direct outreach. You need to also be utilizing social media.

I absolutely agree that the student trustee needs to have a social media page so that we may discuss issues that are being brought directly to the Board of Trustees. As well as allowing for input, I want to allow for input through a Google Form and also in my goal of reaching out to RSOs and attending RSO meetings, I want to inform people of what the student trustee does in actual general body meetings of RSOs.

Abby Joyce:

Thank you for your responses. This is our last question. How. How can the student body hold you accountable? And we're gonna start with Ava.

Ava Marino:

To hold me accountable, you need to actually know that I'm here first. Like I said previously, I intend to make my position very clear to people and have myself accessible to them at all times through social media.

I also want to implement a survey system to help inform students and also get their opinions on trustee matters. If I'm not doing my job correctly, if I'm not advocating for the problems that you want, I want you to tell me, and I want to be able to bring those to the Board of Trustees, because I think that representing the student body is the most important thing that student trustee can do.

Kundayi Mazando:

Since I started working for the SGA, I've always made my priority to be able to look at myself in the mirror and be... feel great about the decisions that I make on behalf of students, because I serve the entire undergraduate community already. I'll say this now, and you can look at the minutes, but on the SGA vote on whether to increase the pay, I was the only member of the SGA leadership team who said, "No." This is active change I'm taking to make sure I can look at myself in the mirror and make sure that I am not taking advantage of the students, that I am listening to what they want, that I am trying to put my best foot forward and make sure that they know that they have a leader who they can trust and rely on.

And a lot of that, as my opponent says, is about reach. But what happens when you have the reach you need the actions to back it up too.

Daniel Frank:

Thank you, everyone. Well now proceed with closing arguments... who was the first ...

Abby Joyce:

You started correct you had the first.

Daniel Frank:

Yeah, so you'll start first, sorry about that.

Ava Marino:

I am running to be your representative at the highest level of decision making at UMass. The Board of Trustees makes choices that impact our tuition, our sustainability initiatives and where our money is invested. Basically, this decision cannot be taken lightly whatsoever.

We need a student trustee who has clear goals and tangible plans to enact them. I promise you that I will do my best to establish a direct line of communication between RSOs, because our student body is the most important and most powerful force, if utilized correctly, and RSOs are the heart of our campus.

The Board of Trustees is more likely to listen to me If I bring demands and data backed by students, and I know that I'm capable of getting myself out there on campus. I've done so every single semester I've been here. I'm screaming for solutions on tuition, sustainability and financial transparency because I think that they're important to our student body. But at the end of the day, I want to hear what you care about and what you would like to see represented at the Board of Trustees.

I hope that I've made my dedication as clear to you all as it is to me, and remember that a vote for Marino is a vote for your voice.

[Applause]

Kundayi Mazando:

First, I'd like to say thank you everybody who moderated. Thank you everybody who is taking the time out of their busy days to come here. And thank you to my opponent.

Now we share a lot of the same goals; that says that we want to make student trustee known to all the students, but let me ask you this question: who is the person, the only candidate here, who's actually told you what this Board of Trustees are doing? That's the problem. No one knows what they're doing, unless you have access. But the people who have access, they're not sharing.

For example, people don't know that the Board of Trustees hired a contractor for a P3, P3, something like Fieldstone, but different from Fieldstone, there are certain criteria our contractor will have to meet, like making it the same cost as on campus tuition. But not everyone knows that.

Also, in terms of student trustee, you need somebody there who knows how to get the job done. I am the only candidate here who does not need training. From day one I can start acting because I shadowed the current student trustee. I have worked alongside her to get things done, and I continue to do so during my time as student trustee.

This is a vote not for who can bring the most reach, though, that will be important, but who will actually know what they're doing once they get up in front of the Board of Trustees and say what needs to be said?

Juliana Pinelli, Timekeeper.

Time

Kundayi Mazando:

Thank you.

[Applause]

[Moderator ends debate]