

## SG Debate Transcript - Spring 2024

### **6:03 pm – Welcome from Supervisor of Elections, Ethan Halle**

Ethan Halle: Good evening,

Welcome to the 18th Annual Student Government Debate.

My name is Ethan Halle and I serve as supervisor of elections for student government here at the University of Florida. Tonight, we will provide a comprehensive debate featuring the two next executive tickets vying to be your next Student Body president, Vice President and Treasurer. I hope tonight is a valuable experience and that all members of the student body remember to participate in student body elections on February 27th and 28th.

Before we begin, I would like to take a moment to thank a few people who were instrumental in preparing for tonight. Michelle Marino, my advisor, Jerome Scott, Jackie Phillips, RyAnn Gavin, Jorge Moros, and Justin Donnelly. Thank you all for your help in preparation for tonight. Thank you to UF Video and Collaboration Services for agreeing to film tonight's debate so that it can be viewed by students who are unable to attend. Finally, I would like to thank and now introduce our moderator for this evening Mr. Marna Weston.

Mr. Marna Weston is a 1994 graduate of the University of Florida, receiving dual degrees in history and telecommunication. As a UF undergrad, he was involved in campus and community activities. He received the city of Gainesville's highest award for diversity and multicultural awareness in 1991. He also served as president of the UF speech and debate team. Mr. Weston has served as moderator for many community debates, including ACCENT Presents: Governor Richard Thornburgh and Michael Dukakis, and more recently, an ACCENT marijuana debate. Mr. Weston serves or has served in a variety of campus positions, including consultant to the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, administrative assistant to Upward Bound, UF speech

and debate team alumni Coach, instructor for Public Speaking in the Colleges of Agriculture, CLAS, and Warrington College of Business, and University Writing Program instructor for the AIM program. Without further ado, here is Mr. Weston.

**6:05 pm – Moderator welcomes candidates to the stage & covers the rules of the debate**

Moderator, Marna Weston:

Good evening, Gators, and thank you Ethan for a very generous introduction. It's my pleasure to be here again. It's one of the things I look most forward to when I think of the University of Florida: the transition of power that students give to each other, and then renew at these frequent elections. “Civium in Moribus rei Publicae Salus”, the welfare of the state, rests on the character of the citizens. That's what this election is all about.

So for the Gators who are at home and those who are here, please listen. With attentiveness, I would like to say to the audience, remember that there are many Gators not in the room. It's your obligation to please lead as a civil audience, a civil environment so everyone listening at home can understand the important points being made by these candidates.

Allow me to introduce, on my right, the candidates for the Change Party. For President, Simone Liang, for Vice President, Antonio Hendricks, and for Treasurer, Anghelo Gangano. On my left, the candidates for the Vision Party are: for the President, John Brinkman, for Vice President, Laura Thomas, and for Treasurer, Saketh Damera.

It is now my pleasure to read for you the rules of the debate as they have been given to me. Both campaigns shall be granted a maximum of 5 minutes to deliver an opening statement and 3 minutes to deliver a closing statement. One candidate per campaign shall be chosen by the campaign to give the opening statement, and one to give the closing statement. This selected person may give both statements if the campaign so chooses. Any of the specified executive

candidates are eligible to speak during this time. Speaking order for the opening and closing statements was decided by flipping a coin presented by the moderator. Actually, in this case, it was Ethan, shortly before the debate began.

The winning campaign decided to speak first or second in both the opening and closing statements. When it was performed just a few minutes before we started, the Vision Party won the toss. They chose to speak second, in both the opening and closing rounds; Change Party will be speaking first. The speaking order for the questions will go in alphabetical order by campaign name and will rotate for every question. The campaigns will be provided with equal time for responding to each question. The time provided to respond to each question shall be 2 minutes. A one-minute period will be provided for the rebuttal and 30 seconds for a second rebuttal. Questions will be asked to the campaigns and the campaigns will have to decide which candidate will respond to the question. Once the chosen candidate begins to speak, no other member of the campaign is allowed to respond to the same question during the two minute answer period. Rebuttal may be provided by a candidate other than the candidate who responded initially for any question. Any candidate who goes over the time limit will receive a warning, let's not have that happen. Upon receiving a third warning, that candidate will be removed from the debate, and let's certainly not let that happen. With the rules of the debate established and agreed to by both parties prior to the start of the debate, as a final reminder, we ask the audience to hold applause until the end of Debate, except for right now. You may show your love.

Thank you very much. That was a great Gator tradition. Our first question is for the Change Party. The university utilizes a shared governance model. Oh pardon me, thank you very much. My apologies. Opening statement, please, from the Change Party. I hope I didn't give away too much.

**6:09 pm– I now invite a representative from the Change Party to give their opening statement.**

Simone Liang: Good evening, everyone. I want to start by saying thank you to student government faculty who have organized tonight's debate. To our host providing this platform, to our moderator and his guidance throughout this discourse, and to the students attending in-person and online, staying involved this campaign season. Your dedication to fostering meaningful dialogue is truly commendable. Passionate and resilient, my name is Simone Liang, and I'm determined to serve as your next Student Body President. As someone who has taken on the mantle as both the past Majority Party Leader for Change and currently as a founder and Co-Chair for the Women's Caucus, I've witnessed firsthand the incredible impact we can have when we prioritize inclusivity and engagement on campus. Under my leadership, our caucus flourished in turning promise into progress, with over 160 bills authored. From my involvement promoting civic engagement under the Bob Graham Center for Public Service, to leading advocacy efforts for Change, I have seen how our party's commitment to active representation sets us apart from the rest. However, my involvement on campus has been followed by the daunting political encroachment on my rights, education, and even my identity. As a woman of color and as a Chinese-American, there have been times in which my experience at UF has been taxing, and even fearful. In the last three years, I've witnessed state crackdowns on academic freedom, students being punished for participating in reproductive rights protests, and the stripping and disappearing of DEI funding. I believe what makes the University of Florida the best school the state is the people here. All students and faculty deserve to feel safe and empowered to be a Florida Gator. Not in spite of their identities, but because of their diverse identities. Since joining Change Party and leading my caucus, I no longer feel powerless. I get to

work alongside the most passionate and fearless individuals, who find joy in leaving behind a campus and a legacy that serves and welcomes all students. Tonight, I want to share with you the triumphs of the Change Party and why our approach to student government matters. Our party is built on the belief that real change happens when we roll up our sleeves and we engage directly with our communities. Our Treasurer candidate, Anghelo Gagano has been a prime example of this. Time management is Anghelo's best friend. As a dedicated graduate assistant, Anghelo grades papers and studies in the chemistry lab on the weekdays, using his weekends to sing for his bands and even compete across the state with the UF competitive tennis team, all while being a senator on the Budget and Appropriations Committee. Here, Anghelo has brought his passion for these student groups, fighting for equitable funding for team sports and student organizations, authoring a call for \$1 million towards graduate student rent relief and works on the Reproductive Rights Committee to bring research and data to the forefront of a contraceptive vending machine proposal. Anghelo's work ethic is nothing short of inspiring, bringing resilience and dedication to every workspace. I am excited to see what a term with him as my Treasurer would bring, not only for my administration, but for this campus and student body. Much like our Vice Presidential candidate Antonio Hendricks. I can confidently sit up here and say that he is the only member running for an office which he's held before. As a former Student Body Vice President of his undergraduate university, Antonio understands his role inside and out. With his commitment to inclusion on campus, Antonio and his cabinet stood on the front lines to advocate for students at the state level to provide newly acquired Title IX coordinators and mental health counselors. He secured the resources to make it happen. His cabinet brought more than just free T-shirts and selective student experiences. Instead, it was one that redefined student experience and accomplished campus wide goals for all students. With one term already complete, Antonio

is looking to master his leadership and bring a new framework to UF Student government. One that brings real progress and legislation, not rhetoric and lip service. Our stories are not unlike yours. You see greater representation and resources for our fellow Gators. But here is how we set ourselves apart for those before us and those against us: our slogan, moving forward together, is more than just a phrase. It's a movement. Empowering students to create a campus of their own with agency to make a difference, to make change and continue the pursuit of progress. When students were faced with adversity from the state level, our senators stepped in, encouraging student government to direct funds at vulnerable and underserved student organizations. We channeled resources to accessing free menstrual health products in dorms, and are working alongside student orgs to fight period poverty and sexual health barriers across campus. Sitting across from the Change Party on the podium tonight is an executive ticket made up of the following: those who orchestrated a gerrymandered electoral map. Where Change received 45% of the popular vote last fall, Vision received 100% of off campus seats, while an entire Gainesville Zip code goes unrepresented in the Senate right now. Vision Party may harp “our mission, your voice,” but how often do they let the cries of students needs echo past them? It is time to remind our executive branch that they cannot be seated on a pedestal and receive their crown with that criteria. So as we delve into tonight's debate, I urge you to consider not just the promises made, but the actions taken. Let's remember that making change is not just a spectator sport. Vote Change Party this February 27 and 28. And let's put the power of student government back into the hands of all students.

**6:14 pm– Thank you. I now invite a representative from the Vision Party to give their opening statement.**

Laura Thomas: Good evening, everyone. First, I would like to take the time to thank those who worked to put this debate together alongside the Supervisor of Elections and all of you for taking the time out of your day to hear why the Vision Party ticket is the most qualified, experienced, and prepared people on this stage to serve you. My name is Laura Thomas, a third year majoring in criminology, and I am running to be your next Student Body Vice President with Vision Party. For the past three years, I have been dedicated to serving my community and representing all students who feel like they don't have a voice within their own university. I started my pathway of leadership within the Freshman Leadership Council with the Bob Graham Center and Leadership Development Institute through the Black Student Union solely finding my capabilities as a leader within my freshman year. I became a Florida Cicerone the next year, being able to serve as an official ambassador for the university, greeting and welcoming university guests and the future of our campus. Understanding our students' concerns and driven by a commitment of proactive engagement, I served within the faculty Senate, hoping to bridge the gap between our students and faculty which transcended to working on multiple presidential committees. But my proudest achievement is my current position as the President of the Black Student Union, leading 16 cabinets and seven committees. We're one of the largest union organizations on campus and a member of the Big Nine, a collective of minority-based community organizations on campus dedicated to promoting diversity, inclusion and fostering a sense of unity among students from various backgrounds. I sit here today with two men proud to serve you with selflessness and unwavering passion. Saketh Demara, your current Senate President Pro-Tempore, is the only choice to serve you as your next Student Body Treasurer and manage your \$23 million simply because he has already done it before, as your Budget and Appropriations Committee member. His opponent, Mr. Gangano, also served on this committee,

but it's regrettable that he missed five meetings, which is enough to be kicked out, which makes me wonder how many more meetings regarding your money he will miss if elected as your next Student Body Treasurer. Outside of Senate, Saketh has a wealth of experience from the student organization perspective through his involvement with the Indian Student Association, Asian American Student Union, and Dream Team at UF fighting for the interests of all students. Through this, he gained a firsthand insight into the insufficient financial backing of student organizations, spurring him to spearhead the creation of the Students First signature event program aimed to ensuring sustained funding for their higher level events. He carried this passion into his position as chair of the Reitz Board of Managers forming the You Belong campaign illuminating UF resources for our most vulnerable student population and advocating for more. Your next Student Body President is a leader who has always stepped up to any challenge he has faced. John Brinkman's unparalleled drive and passion sets him apart on this campus. When identifying a need, he exhibits relentless determination to implement innovative solutions and see them through to completion. As the founder of the Vision Party, he saw the growing rift within student government and the negative impact toward the advancement for our students. His three and a half years in Senate serving as Judiciary Committee Chair, Junior Class President, Budget and Appropriations Committee Vice Chairman, and now as your Senate President, give him more experience than the entire ticket sitting on the other side of the stage. Senate President Brinkman has broken from the precedent set by previous Senate leadership by supporting equitable distribution of Senate committee seats to the minority party, giving Change a voice when he didn't even have to. Together, John, Saketh, and I bring diverse perspectives of the student experience from our involvement and pathways to this point today, allowing us to be the perfect people to represent all students. We can promise to utilize our experiences to ensure



the permanence of diversity, equity and inclusion, ensure student organizations have established funding for their staple events and promote increased safety for our students on campus. For four years, Change has overpromised and under-delivered. They claim their pillars are representation, equity and social justice. But what I have seen is everything but that. When they won a majority in Senate, they failed to represent students' interests and even went further to attack minority community student organization leaders. At the same time, they deceive organizations with false promises of funding, all the while favoring certain groups over others. Does that sound equitable to you? And despite their poor intentions, they continue to propose unconstitutional and unlawful bills showing their inability to grasp the fundamentals of the basis of our governance. With John, Saketh, and I, we promise tangible results because we've each done it before. It is time to close the gap between our Student Government and our actual students. It is time to vote Vision Party. By the end of this debate, I hope you'll not just see us as candidates but as visionary leaders ready to champion your needs. Together, let's forge a new era for Gators where the Vision Party stands as the embodiment of progress, promise, and power to elevate our university to new heights. Thank you.

**6:19 pm – Our first question is for the Change Party: The university utilizes a shared governance model which relies on the interconnectedness of faculty, students, and administration. What strategies would you employ to build trust and credibility with university administration, faculty, and staff while representing the interests of the student body in student government? You have 2 minutes to respond.**

Simone Liang: It's important that we lead with transparency and trust when we are working with UF administration and faculty. As a current faculty Senate delegate and as someone who has served on the Mental Health Ad-Hoc committee as Co-Chair, I've seen firsthand how student

government has been insulated from faculty and UF administration. I have sat in meetings where UF administration has even said that they have never even heard from student senators, even while reaching out. To avoid this, I would set up several commissions under my administration revolving around health and wellness, LGBTQ+ affairs, and other DEI initiatives as well, to also on board senators and executive branch officials to work with UF faculty and UF admin to form solutions and address these issues on campus. Furthermore, as a member of the Board of Trustees, I would also advocate and lobby for important issues that are being under attack by the state right now. This includes a protection of DEI funding and salary pay for the employees under Center for Inclusion and Multicultural Engagement, advocating for protecting a Bright Future scholarship, and also reversing the anti LGBTQ+ legislation, specifically gender neutral bathrooms and gender affirming care, which Vision failed in the Senate. We authored a resolution to provide more access to family restrooms and simply Vision failed that down the line and refused to understand the importance of having these resources to LGBTQ+ students and students under attack by the state. Furthermore, I would also work to improve funding for mental health counselors to increase staff and salaries and also work to include graduate assistants union representation on the Board of Trustees Committee. Time and time again, we've seen that Change stands up for students and that we fight to represent these issues in the Senate, issuing legislation on things like book bans, the banning of certain graduate students from countries of concern. It's important that we advocate for these marginalized communities. And by setting up commissions and working with UF faculty administration, I believe this can be done.

**6:21 pm - Vision Party – You may now have a 1-minute rebuttal**

John Brinkman: As student government leaders, our role between the student body and upper level administration at the University of Florida is pivotal in achieving our platform goals. We understand the importance of effective communication and collaboration with administrators to enact meaningful changes. Laura and I have both served as faculty senate delegates, as undergraduate representatives, and in several university committees and presidential committees. I myself have served on the Capital Improvement Trust Fund Committee and the Land Use and Facilities Planning Committee, and Laura and I and Saketh have already met with numerous administrators and UF admin to make sure that the points that we mention on our platform can actually get done. Additionally, one of the plans that I have, if elected to be your next Student Body President, is to ensure communication with admin through the Task Force for Construction Campus Safety alongside UFPD and the Office of Construction Facilities and Auxiliary Operations. \$2.6 billion will be spent on construction in the upcoming several years at this university, and it's time that students have a voice in that.

**6:23 pm - Change Party – You may now have a 30-second rebuttal**

Anghelo Gangano: It is vastly important to work with the other branches of government and levels of administration here at University of Florida. And that's why, for the first time in known history, we're running two graduate students on the ballot, not only to make up for a significant loss of disenfranchisement and being pushed aside by graduate students. But also, our Vice President candidate has lobbied already at the state level. This is how he received the funding for his Title IX coordinators when he was the Student Body Vice President at his undergraduate university.

**6:24 pm - Our second question is for the Vision Party: In Fall 2022, the headcount for graduate students was approximately twenty thousand people. Your campaign chose not to have a separate category of campaign points for graduate students and does not currently include any graduate students running for executive office. Considering graduate students are nearly a third of the student body while also serving as teaching assistants, research assistants, and graduate assistants, how will you ensure the voices of graduate students are represented should you be elected? You have 2 minutes to respond.**

John Brinkman: I myself will be a graduate student if elected to become Student Body President, and I believe that to enhance the representation and to address the concerns of our graduate and professional students at UF, our administration will prioritize proactive engagement and tailored support to ensure their voices are heard and their unique needs are met within Student Government policies and initiatives. Our party and our administration has three ideas when it comes to how we can address the needs of graduate and professional students, which is a very important group of campus as these students individually contribute about 7 to \$8 million in our activity and service fee budget. Our three main ideas for graduate students are: one, to expand the Baby Gator program so that students who have families and students who have children are able to have affordable childcare. That way, they can attend to their academic and professional needs outside the classroom. Secondly, we're also planning on increasing the travel grant for the graduate student council, so that graduate students are able to attend our conferences and work on their PhDs and dissertations, without having to front that cost out of pocket. Additionally, we're going to consistently advocate for affordable graduate student housing through my student task force that would partner with UFPD and the Office of Construction Facilities and Auxiliary Operations. With the demolition of the recent graduate housing, it's more important than ever to

make sure that graduates have a space close to campus where they can live and they can thrive, and they don't have to worry about exorbitant rent rates from outside of the local apartments around campus. Additionally we're going to commit to fill our open senate seats designed for graduate and professional students. It's of the utmost importance to us that graduates have a voice and will be maintained as an important group of people when it comes to deciding on our student government administration's policy and our direction and how we are going to lead.

**6:27pm - Change Party – You may now have a 1-minute rebuttal**

Anghelo Gangano: I will not speak about what Change Party plans to do for graduate students, you can see that on our platform. I will tell you what I have already done for graduate students in the last year. I wrote a \$1 million rent reserve transfer in response to the housing demolition that Senator Brinkman just brought up. I authored the resolution demanding the reversal of that graduate student housing. Senator Antonio Hendricks and I have written multiple bills trying to get graduates carved spaces in student government, all of which have been failed by the Vision Party this semester. In fact, there isn't a piece of graduate legislation that I have written in the last year that has been approved, other than resolutions, by the Vision Party. Furthermore, Senator Brinkman, if I remember correctly you gave a presentation in the Senate promising to fund Baby Gator with Senate funds, and you have not done so, but you're running for the Student Body President now, which would mean you don't have access to those funds anyway. So where is that promise?

**6:28pm - Vision Party – You may now have a 30-second rebuttal**

Saketh Damera: I think it's unfortunate that Change party will claim to be passionate advocates for graduate representation, but when graduate students come in through the Replacement & Agenda Committee, they happen to only support the representation when they believe their same

political beliefs align. I also think that it's not very representative of graduate students when current Change senators will stand in front of the table for slating and openly tell graduate students that, "they never have to be in Senate if they win" for the sole purpose of filling their slate of candidates.

**6:28pm - Our third question is for the Change Party: Your platform includes funding the Center for Inclusion and Multicultural Engagement, establishing a sustainable rent relief program for all graduate students, discounted childcare for graduate students, free Spotify subscriptions, ice machines in residence halls, and a Student Performers Festival hosted by Student Government Productions, among other costly initiatives. How much do you estimate these initiatives would cost? What sources of funding would you look to utilize and how do you juggle promising these initiatives in a financial environment where the activity & service fee has not been raised for nearly 8 years?**

Anghelo Gangano: This is an outstanding question. Of course, the money has to come from somewhere. And it is a problem that the activity & service fee hasn't escalated to the number of students that we continue to support on this campus. But in order to really address this issue, we have to first ask, is the Budget & Appropriations allocation even equitable? And I would argue that, no, it is not. Currently, student organizations need to come in on a first come, first served basis to receive student org funding. This is ridiculous. Every single student that pays into the activity & service fee should get a piece of the pie. As a grad student here looking to fund the graduate initiatives that I am a proponent of, graduate students don't get a voice in the Senate. I am one of only four graduate senators who have left the constituency since the last spring election. Furthermore, the Budget & Appropriations committee really needs to fix their current funding model. First come, first serve basis is, as I said, not okay. There are multiple student orgs

that are going without funding. Change Party actually just initiated a very large rent reserve transfer to try and last-minute fund multiple diverse student organizations who received zero funding this fiscal cycle, including the Indian Student Association Islam on Campus, Pakistani Student Association and Bangladeshi student associations. This rent reserve was shot down by the Vision Caucus. If we really want to look at addressing how we're going to pay for all of our initiatives, we first need to say, well we're not even doing a good job now. We need to fix the current problems before we can address these new ones.

**6:30pm - Vision Party- you now have a 1-minute rebuttal**

Saketh Damera: So I'm glad you mentioned the reserve transfer for South Asian organizations because, to the members of the student organizations mentioned, Change is lying to you. ISA, PSA, BSA, IOC, Change Party knew that proposal was illegal, and their proposal to get you funding was illegal. But hey, when administration reached out to you individually, and told you it couldn't happen, they still lied and said it could, all because they felt like they needed your vote. I've even spoken to members of Change Party who have explicitly told me they knew it was illegal. This administration is not in the habit of lying for votes, but here's what we will do. Let's talk about the initiatives that they also mentioned on their platform. So just starting off with their map, let's just look at their Spotify platform point. Sixty thousand students times \$5 each, I think that comes out to \$3,647,000. Where in the budget are you looking to find \$3,647,000?

**6:31pm - Change Party- you now have a 30-second rebuttal**

Antonio Hendricks: What Saketh Damera just admitted is that the Vision Party sits on their hands, not willing to fight for the students, for their voices, for their place on campus. Saketh Damera and John Brinkman abstained from voting on that bill, and didn't offer a single solution to make change happen on campus.

**6:32pm - Our fourth question is for the Vision Party: The past year in Senate has been characterized by gridlock and inefficiency. Reflecting on this, what role have you played in navigating these challenges and what lessons have you learned from this experience?**

Saketh Damera: To address the issue of gridlock in student government, let's look at what Vision Party has already done after winning its majority in Senate. Breaking from some of the precedents set by previous administrations, Vision Party has made sure to ensure representation on committees for the minority party. On top of that, I myself co-authored a bipartisan accountability bill reinventing the Student Government Accountability Agency alongside Senator Liang. Our administration has undeniably been one of the most bipartisan in recent history in terms of legislation and representation. I'm going to ask you all, when was the last time two members of opposing executive tickets authored a bill together? Now, looking at what we can do in the future. First, we recognize the importance of setting aside partisan differences and focusing on common goals for the betterment of the student body. Despite ideological differences, there are areas of agreement between parties, such as significance of diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives. By acknowledging these commonalities and working together on shared objectives, we can minimize gridlock, ensure effective governance. Additionally we are committed to promoting a culture of accountability and timelessness within student government. This involves prioritizing the timely nominating and confirmation of executive leadership positions, ensuring that agencies and departments have the necessary leadership to fulfill their responsibilities. We've pledged to streamline the nomination process and prioritize filling vacant leadership positions promptly to prevent disruptions in our student services and initiatives. Furthermore, our party emphasizes the importance of communication and transparency and preventing gridlock by fostering open dialogue and collaboration among student government



members, we can address differences constructively and reach consensus efficiently. Our party's approach to preventing gridlock in student government involves prioritizing collaboration, accountability and communication by focusing on our common goals and streamlining leadership nominations promoting open dialogue. And we also aim to ensure effective governance.

**6:34pm - Change Party- you now have a 1-minute rebuttal**

Simone Liang: Senate President Pro-Temp Damera, I think it's funny that you bring up the Senate SG Accountability Agency bill when it was myself that came to you to ask the co-author that and add considerably more accountability to cabinet agencies. But I'll tell you how Vision understands and solves gridlock: they gerrymander a map to gain a supermajority in the Senate, they also skip debate when also deliberating on executive branch officials when there's an impending climate crisis and we were considering a nominee who hadn't even sent a single email as Outreach Director for Gators Going Green, Vision stood up and called to end debate. They also failed six pro-democracy bills in the Judiciary Committee, not even letting it hit the floor. But let's talk about solutions that Change wants to promote to solve gridlock. First, we value debate and deliberations in democracy and our senate. We would like to have party leaders come together after each election to discuss ways in which we can move forward and have a peaceful transition and ensure minority representation on every single committee. That is the bare minimum, but Change will do far more above to ensure that we have a peaceful transition following this election.

**6:35pm - Vision Party - you now have a 30-second rebuttal**

John Brinkman: You blame my party for the Fall 2023 election map. The map that was put in place for the Fall 2023 election was imposed by the UF Supreme Court, after Change's majority

in Summer 2023 was unable to create a map for the election. Change also failed to reapportion the Senate seats for this election for the months that Change had the majority, and it was Vision Party which did the necessary work in time so that this election would be possible.

**6:36 - Our fifth question is for the Change Party: Both parties have supported legislation to allocate funds to specific student organizations, outside of the allocation process, which would allow certain student organizations privileges over others. In your capacities, how would you support student organizations while remaining objective and content neutral?**

Anghelo Gangano: As I mentioned earlier, the system is very broken. Orgs go without funding every year. I've spoken to student government finance administrator, Gary Bryant, who told me that they would love to switch to a model that involves only the president or treasurer of a student organization being allowed to access such a system. This prevents clubs from banding together, spamming requests to the SAI fee budget. This prevents bots, which are being rumored in the government finance offices, from submitting forms on behalf of students, and this also streamlines the process. As it currently stands, Google Docs is no good means for thousands of students to receive funding for their organization. Rent relief transfers are not the solution. They are just the Band-Aid that we are trying to put on to a deep wound. If elected to the treasurer position, I would streamline this process, make it more exclusive to org leadership, and I would also open it up to sports clubs. As it stands, no student sports club here at UF is allowed to receive funding from student government.

**6:37pm - Vision Party - You may now have a 1 minute rebuttal**

Saketh Damera: First thing we'll do is not lie to student organizations about where they can get funding. But second and more tangibly, we'll prioritize revisiting the 800 Codes that govern our funding process. Vision Party President Damien Rodriguez and I already submitted a bill

expanding flexibility in the operational budget line, which currently imposes restrictions on how funds can be used by student organizations. Our aim is to allow organizations to use allocated funds for items that they genuinely need, moving beyond constraints like plates and napkins. It comes down to the fact that student organizations deserve to have to use every last dollar they're allocated. Addressing persistent issues within the current funding model, we're committed to securing funding for organizations and their keystone events through a critical and resource and funding injections into SAI's signature event program. This is the same program that brought to you the Black Student Assembly and Asian-American Student Assembly. Our administration understands the importance of education for our funding process, so I plan on expanding the Treasurer's office to include a task force or commission.

**6:39pm - Change Party - You may now have a 30-second rebuttal**

Antonio Hendricks: Saketh Damera has created a ghost org that receives over \$1,500 every year, called the South Asian Student Association. It is disgusting to say, "where are we going to get the funds for student orgs?" when you yourself have been stealing essentially from the student government and preventing other students from getting the resources that they need.

**6:39pm - Our sixth question is for the VISION Party: What do you consider the greatest weakness for your party and how would it impact your ability to lead?**

John Brinkman: I think the most important thing that we can all do together as two parties sitting up here on this stage is more effective communication. That's why this past Senate meeting, when there was an illegal or potentially illegal reserve transfer proposed, we made sure to recess the meeting for a little bit and have that discussion and have that open line of communication rather than individually shutting each other out and failing the bill entirely. Communication is of

the utmost importance, and that's something that Vision Party is committed to working on forward. And I believe Change Party is as well.

**6:41pm Change Party – You may now have a 1-minute rebuttal**

Simone Liang: I would agree with Senate President Brinkman's statement that effective communication is his party's biggest weakness. Vision Party has wasted over a thousand dollars in student fees to pay for the Reitz Union closing at 2 a.m. for multiple weeks without consulting either myself or the current Change Party Leader, Pelton. But I think the biggest issue with Change Party is that maybe we simply work too hard. Vision Party likes to accuse us of not paying attention to things such as legality or unconstitutionality, but unlike Vision, we don't sit on our hands. We fight for students and we find every single way. Anghelo Gangano, when receiving notice that the Budget Committee failed his rent relief bill in front of his face, 30 minutes before the Senate meeting was supposed to start, he went to every single legal office related to that issue, such as the Office of Off-Campus Life and even the Legal Counsel for UF. Time and time again, Change will always push forward and find a solution because saying that it's illegal or it's unconstitutional isn't good enough and we're going to fight for students through and through.

**6:41pm - Vision Party – You may now have a 30 second rebuttal**

Laura Thomas: Thank you for that answer, Simone, but I truly do not agree that you work too hard because you obviously don't put the time and effort behind your platform points, specifically the DEI platform point of giving \$200,000 to the Center of Inclusion and Multicultural Engagement. So if, for instance, if those funding went away, \$200,000 wouldn't even cover one of the institutes to hold for the Center of Inclusion Multicultural Engagement, which also goes under programming. But if you would have met with the directors within the

Center of Inclusion and Multicultural Engagement and put in that time, you would have found an answer to that and understood that \$200,000 is not real action, But meetings and coming up with tangible solutions is how you can fix that.

**6:42pm – Our seventh question is for the CHANGE Party: The state of Florida recently faced criticism regarding its handling of certain controversies related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. As an executive officer, how will you navigate such situations while representing student interests and advocating for responsible change?**

Simone Liang: It's important as student government officials that represent the student body that we are actively pushing for their rights and ensuring that they feel protected and safe on this campus. In Senate, Change has authored bills related to condemning the book bans, the stripping of DEI funding, the banning of the gender neutral bathroom access, and more. It's important that we take this to the state level, while lobbying for the reversal of the ban of graduate assistance from the seven countries of concern because it's important that we actually have graduate assistants that are willing to communicate and contribute to this university. Furthermore, we'd also advocate to reverse anti LGBTQ+ legislation because it's important that these students have a space on campus. We would also advocate to provide resources for them to change your name legally through One.UF and to also provide access to gender affirming care, which was recently reversed and banned by the state legislature this year. In Senate, Vision has shown that they are complacent in allowing these state attacks to go unnoticed. They have not authored a single piece of legislation related to any of these current issues and do not stay on top of it and do not proactively seek out solutions. We have fought time and time again for these issues, and we want to continue bringing that to the executive branch as well. My administration will lobby for these issues and ensure that there's academic freedom in classrooms, that students feel safe enough to

express their views, and that they have professors that are willing to teach them the content that they feel is necessary, not because they are prevented, but because they're able to do so.

**6:44pm - Vision Party – You may now have a 1-minute rebuttal**

Laura Thomas: As the current president from the Black Student Union and a member of the Big Nine, I know firsthand the impact of recent legislation and fear instilled in UF student orgs and minority communities. In the face of the consistent attacks against diversity, equity and inclusion from the state level, our administration is committed to championing initiatives that promote and maintain diversity, equity, and inclusivity on campus, which is why our administration has already had a meeting with Dr. Marsha McGriff, the Chief Diversity Officer, and multiple administration and faculty within the Center of Inclusion and Multicultural Engagement to come up with real tangible, actual items that we can put forward to make sure that we can actually have a plan if anything does happen within the legislation. Thankfully, the UF community has already lobbied and got the carve out in the recent legislation for student orgs to still occupy the same spaces that we have in the past, but our faculty and our administration and our classes are still at fault. And so that is what we are working for already plans for that. Which is why we are going to put in the DEI student task force and a school-wide diversity week to bring together education and programs for our student body to still be educated no matter what happens with legislation.

**6:45pm - Change Party – You may now have a 30 second rebuttal**

Anghelo Gangano: Again, I'm proud to say that I don't need to talk about what Change Party is going to do to address the state, we are no strangers to addressing the state. It was Change Party who formed the Reproductive Rights Committee when Roe v. Wade was overturned last year. It was Change Party who wrote the anti-union busting bill when SB 256 passed last year. It was

Change Party who authored the resolution condemning the banning of graduate students from the seven countries of concern. We have already been doing this and we will continue to.

**6:46pm – Our eighth question is for the VISION Party: Neither candidate for Student Body Vice President has served in Cabinet previously. Please outline specific changes you would propose to enhance Cabinet’s operations and programming?**

Laura Thomas: Cabinet is extremely important to the unity and belonging of our students. With four divisions created specifically to target populations, effectively addressing the evolving needs of UF's diverse student body. You're correct. I have not served in Cabinet before, however, during my position as President of the Black Student Union, I have been overseeing 16 cabinets and seven committees. In addition to programming multiple general body meetings and more events than Cabinet has even programmed this year, specifically. So with that, I do have lots of program experience as a Student Body Vice President position is all about programming and serving the needs of our UF diverse student body. So with that, I pledge to create two new cabinets, the Career Development Cabinet under the Student Life Division and the Senior Experience cabinet under the transition division. Specifically targeting the Senior Experience Transition division, all cabinets under that division only focus on transitioning into the University of Florida and no preparation for students transitioning out of the University of Florida to any graduate programs or any jobs that they want to have. So, I want to focus on graduating students within their last year, an intentional program to prepare them for the life following their graduation. And within the Career Development Cabinet, I want to work alongside our 11 colleges and Career Connections Center to bring opportunities to our own student body and prepare them for the following life after their graduation. Which is why, on our platform, we have those free student government business cards, which we will fund through that

Career Development Cabinet to ensure that all of our students have their best foot forward when attending any job opportunities or any career fairs that our university will host.

**6:48pm - Change Party – You may now have a 1 minute rebuttal**

Antonio Hendricks: I have uniquely on this stage served in every branch of student government across two state universities. As Student Body Vice President of my undergraduate university, I lobbied the state legislature on behalf of more than 430,000 students in the Florida State University system. I worked with a constrained budget to provide programming and keystone events on campus. As an engineering graduate research assistant, I'm used to overseeing large projects that others don't fathom to be possible. The Vision ticket doesn't. The Change Cabinet will work with a system of feedback and review. Hearing the voices of students before and after programming, implementing mandatory performance evaluations and audits of the SG Cabinet and agency committee heads. We have projects planned for each of the 25 cabinet positions; from ensuring ADA compliance to the creation of Greek Honors Leadership Councils.

**6:48pm - Vision Party – You may now have a 30 second rebuttal**

Laura Thomas: Like Hendricks, I have also worked with a constrained budget at our own university, through the Black Student Union, as our budget was not the same budget that we've had in previous years before COVID and have worked to program with that as well. But if Hendricks' main qualification is being something at a previous school, then I guess I should call Mary Wise and ask her to be captain of the volleyball team, like I was in high school. Your position at Florida Polytech in its constitution outlines no responsibility for its Student Body Vice President and I have more responsibility in the current BSU Constitution and the current student body that I have already been serving for my three years.



**6:49pm – Our ninth question is for the CHANGE Party: Please share a personal experience where you felt a strong sense of belonging within the campus community and how will you apply those lessons to your role in student government?**

Anghelo Gangano: I am in the fourth year of my chemistry Ph.D. Program. I have been serving as a TA for all four years. I teach classes, I grade papers, I proctor exams. I have office hours. And I never really thought I would like teaching, but I think I really found myself in the laboratory with those undergrads. Teaching is such a unique experience. I was thrown into it immediately with no training. That's just how they do it here in Florida. But it was so rewarding. I found myself drawing diagrams of atomic orbitals and electron pushes and organic synthetic reactions and seeing students really start to understand what you're telling them when at first, it felt like a different language, but then it became natural, seeing students grow, people who never thought they could pass organic chemistry and coming with you, one on one, and going on an adventure on a whiteboard. That was beautiful. I have never found an experience like that before coming to the University of Florida. I kind of don't want to stop teaching.

**6:50pm - Vision Party – You may now have a 1 minute rebuttal**

Laura Thomas: When I was deciding where to go to college, I didn't consider many other things except what major I was going to study and that I didn't want to go to school in Georgia and just not go to in-state. Sorry to the Bulldogs, but I wanted to go out of state. I wanted to find myself in a different area and in choosing the University of Florida, I didn't know what I would expect. I didn't know what community I would find. I didn't know what friends I was going to find. But I was introduced to a program through the Center for Inclusion and Multicultural Engagement called PAACT, also standing for Pledging to Advance Academic Capacity Together. And that is where I truly knew I belonged. There was a program here dedicated to first-year black students

to ensure that we had a three-day program to ensure we knew exactly what the university had for us in terms of resources and everything. And so our administration pledges to ensure that we can come back to those programs like PAACT, like FIND, like ADELANTE, and even those first-year Florida classes to ensure that we present our welcoming face to our incoming freshmen and we know that we are the faces that they can come to at all times to say their problems, to ask questions, and so we can help them and guide them just like PAACT peer leaders did for me.

**6:51pm - Change Party – You may now have a 30 second rebuttal**

Antonio Hendricks: Transitioning to Florida, to the University of Florida, from Florida Polytechnic University, I was very interested in joining student government here, having seen the harm that previous administrations has posed onto this campus. And I was severely disappointed to see that there was very little graduate representation at UF, but the Change Party embraced me, not because of my experience at the previous university, but because I was engaged.

**6:52pm – Our tenth question is for the VISION Party: As our final question, we want to provide the opportunity for you to shed light on your favorite Student Government service. Which of the SG Services do you wish students knew more about, and how would you propose increasing awareness and utilization of these resources among the student body?**

Saketh Damera: So just from my perspective, Students Taking Action Against Racism is one of the greatest agencies on this campus. They've done some amazing work for the student body. They have consistently been one of the most proactive and engaged organizations on this campus in the face of some of the attacks that are coming from the state, and I'm sure that Senate President Brinkman, when elected to the student body presidency, will prioritize Students Taking Action Against Racism, as well as some of the other wonderful agencies prioritizing diversity, equity and inclusion on this campus. But that's just one of the many services at the University of

Florida, specifically in our student government, that I think and I personally have seen the impact of.

**6:53pm - Change Party - You may now have a 1 minute rebuttal**

Simone Liang: I think the greatest SG resource that I most admire here in student government is our ability to have ad-hoc committees in the Senate, where members of the student body, not just being in Senate, can serve on these committees. For example, we have the DEI Ad-Hoc that we established under former Senate President Oscar Santiago Perez. We have members from CARIBSA and things like that join our senators to issue resolutions and conduct research on the history here at UF. I think it's really important that we have that bipartisan resource. We're able to also welcome in people on campus who may not have the opportunity to have served or been elected to Senate but still have the chance to impact campus through tangible policy. Our administration will work to continue that spirit by setting up commissions within our executive branch that welcomes in members of the campus community who are viable in providing perspectives, such as leaders of the Big Five organizations, as well as the different black institutes here at the University of Florida under the CIME. I think it's really important that we have those representations here in voices, and I want to continue having those students provide their experiences so that we can properly advocate for them at the Board of Trustees and to UF administration moving forward.

**6:54pm - Vision Party – You may now have a 30 second rebuttal**

Laura Thomas: I'm glad that you mentioned this diversity Ad-Hoc committee that was created because as Black Student Union President, I have never heard of that committee and I've never had any work done within my own student organization from this committee. You mentioned CARIBSA. What, who served on that committee? Because the Black Student Union also works

with CARIBSA collectively, and we have never heard any resolutions or results come from that committee that have helped our student body and the black student body on campus. So I pledge to bring the Student Government Diversity and Programming Committee back and pledge to have 3 to 4 meetings every single semester.

**6:55 pm - Thank you very much. At this point, we have now concluded the question portion of the debate. We will now move into closing statements. Change Party, you will go first and you now have three minutes for a closing statement.**

Antonio Hendricks: UF, Tonight, you've watched us unveil our plan to restore power to all students. You've also seen Vision deflect on their record and fail to deliver on their promises. Since you entrusted us with your votes last semester, we've tirelessly fought to rectify the injustices plaguing our campus. We've worked to restore funding to organizations that lost it, provided rent relief for struggling graduate students, advocated for a Green New Deal and shielded our campus communities from state initiatives, from state interference. Our actions speak volumes. We've delivered 170,000 student orgs, implemented safety measures, such as crosswalks and established much needed mental health days for our students. The Change Party's path to success has demonstrated a commitment to putting student government back in the hands of students. Unfortunately, this past impact makes waves and the political system utilized executive powers to deplete those effects. The Vision party is disillusioned. It's the seed of manipulation and in an effect to subvert democracy and remain complacent, detaching student government from the student body. You want us to believe in Brinkman? In our experience in the Senate, we have delivered. We have seen the bare minimum from Brinkman, having to take photographic evidence for him to uphold his responsibility to reply to emails. Even with pictures, he fell short of his party, neglecting the Indigenous groups by refusing land acknowledgements

and backtracking on statements to fund Baby Gator. Remember, Vision without action is merely the status quo. We have been promised a Vision by student government, by the majority party, for far too long, where these visionary projects, these visionaries project the same ideas as changemakers. You'll see one clear difference. The level of commitment to action. Tonight, I represent those tired of the do nothing establishment that the Gator Vision Party represents. Those who'd like to see a meaningful change on campus. I represent those who feel that Student Government is out of reach with the limited voting access, speaking events, and university resources. I represent those who feel that the university is slowly becoming out of touch, wishing that more of us, more of our focus was on resources for student mental health and wellbeing. Living wages for graduate students and student workers. Don't be a victim of Vision's disillusion. Vote Change on February 27th and 28th. Turn in your absentee ballots.

**6:58pm - Vision Party - You will now have three minutes for a closing statement**

John Brinkman: I would first like to thank the Supervisor of Elections, Ethan Halle, Moderator Marna Weston, and SG Advising and Operations for hosting tonight's debate. I'm John Brinkman, and I'm running for Student Body President because the student body deserves a competent leader that understands how to implement policy and do the work and not give frivolous talking points that are either blatant violations of the law or are empty promises that aim to get your vote. When you take a look at Laura, Saketh, and I, you see three people with the collective experience to run our Student Government. I have served in two branches of Student Government for the past three and a half years, serving currently as the Senate President. Laura serves the student body as President of the Black Student Union, and Florida Cicerones on several presidential committees, and Saketh has held roles on the executive boards of the Indian Student Association and Asian American Student Union, as well as serving on the Budget

Appropriations Committee in our Senate. We will work endlessly to carry out our platform, and will understand and take input from the student body throughout our terms. This ticket's goal is to ensure campus safety, protect diversity, equity, and inclusion at the University of Florida, and to protect funding for the most important events that our registered student organizations hold.

Now, when you take a look at Change's ticket, you will see three unqualified people who would be vastly unprepared, if elected, to hold these offices. Miss Liang used her position as the leader of Change party in the Senate to hold the previous executive nominations hostage in the branch she is running for lead in exchange for political capital and budget negotiations. You deprived our student body of an operational executive branch for its first 100 days and caused our student organizations to not get their full base funding amounts in a timely manner. Mr. Hendricks' chief qualification, which he speaks on, was being Vice President at Florida Polytechnic. However, I don't think he believes in himself, given that he lied on his LinkedIn and said he was SGA President, not Vice President. Laura Thomas doesn't have to lie about being BSU president or being qualified for Vice President because she actually holds the position she has on her LinkedIn. Mr. Gangano used his position on the Budget Appropriations Committee to propose illegal reserve transfers, which were not viable solutions for the student body, including graduate students. Voting for Mr. Gangano means opening up our state government to lawsuits where Saketh has a proposal to solve the problems our student organizations face with legal solutions.

When you all elect your next leaders, you should choose the people who know how to get the job done. The people with the qualifications and the people who are committed to true leadership are Laura, Saketh, and myself. Our goal is to continue to lead our Student Government with transparency, inclusiveness and unity. Believing in us and casting your vote for Vision, on February 27th and 28th, means actual forward progress rather than empty promises. Thank you.

**7:01 pm - Event ends.**

Moderator: Simone, Antonio, Anghelo, John, Laura, Saketh. The choice is really tough. Gator Nation, this event is ending. We want to thank everyone for attending and encourage them to vote on February 27th and 28th. Please give all of these candidates a big round of applause. Good night, and go Gators.

*Note: This transcript has been written verbatim to the best of our ability. Please reach out to [senatesecretary@sg.ufl.edu](mailto:senatesecretary@sg.ufl.edu) with any corrections. The recording of the live stream can be found at <https://mediasite.video.ufl.edu/Mediasite/Play/2509731c75794e4dabe1556db1db7e601d>.*