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5-16-2023

## Redbird Buzz Episode 24: Ash Ebikhumi, May 16, 2023

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### Recommended Citation

Kobus, Rachel Interviewer and Ebikhumi, Ash Interviewee, "Redbird Buzz Episode 24: Ash Ebikhumi, May 16, 2023" (2023). *Redbird Buzz*. 21.

<https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/redbirdbuzz/21>

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# Redbird Buzz

## Episode 24: Ash Ebikhumi

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*May 16, 2023*

**Rachel Kobus** 00:10

Welcome to Redbird Buzz, I'm Rachel Kobus from Alumni Engagement. Today's episode is giving listeners a glimpse into the life of a student trustee as we sit down with Student Trustee Ash Ebikhumi. Ash is a junior political science and economics double major. He has served as president of the Association of Residence Halls and is an active member of the Honors Program, a peer mentor and a director for Alternative Breaks trips. Upon graduating he hopes to pursue a career in higher education by first attending law school. So what's the word, Redbird? Tell us a little bit about yourself.

**Ash Ebikhumi** 00:48

So I am a political science major. I actually dropped the economics part of that.

**Rachel Kobus** 00:54

Just kidding. It's fine. Focus on that political science, you're going to do great things.

**Ash Ebikhumi** 00:58

Thank you. Thank you. And yeah, I've been involved in Alternative Breaks, I'm in the Honors Program as a peer mentor, this semester I was also a community assistant and I do plan on going into higher education. I don't know what that will look like, maybe Student Affairs, maybe in General Counsel, maybe in the Dean of Students. But I just kind of caught that bug in my three years so far. But yeah, currently I serve as a student trustee on the Board of Trustees and it has been a very enlightening experience.

**Rachel Kobus** 01:28

I'm sure, and just to be clear, our Board of Trustees for Illinois State University, eight people are chosen, or is it seven chosen by the governor? And you are the eighth.

**Ash Ebikhumi** 01:38

Seven chosen by the governor and I am the eighth.

**Rachel Kobus** 01:39

And the student trustee is elected by the student body.

**Ash Ebikhumi** 01:41

That is true, yes.

**Rachel Kobus** 01:42

All right. So what - and only for one term, so then if you're seeking - so Ash has already been elected for a second term. So you're a junior right now -

**Ash Ebikhumi** 01:50

Correct.

**Rachel Kobus** 01:50

And then your senior year, you'll serve a second term as our student trustee, which is exciting.

**Ash Ebikhumi** 01:54

It is, it is. The first year is kind of - I, like, kind of think of it as you're learning, you're growing, you're understanding what it means to be a trustee. And that second year you have an opportunity to really kind of, you know, get into your stride and like, okay, I know what I need to do, and so I can do the job.

**Rachel Kobus** 01:55

Yes, yeah. And you're a good, consistent - I think, like, that two years [can] really be a good consistent - as we know, our Board's changing a little bit and the governor's appointing [new members] and we have people that need to step back and [that's] perfectly fine but it's nice to have you for that two years. And seeing that change, I'm sure, helps you with, what's my future look like?

**Ash Ebikhumi** 02:24

Exactly.

**Rachel Kobus** 02:25

[Cross talk] things like this. So I guess that kicks me off. So what made you interested in being a student trustee?

**Ash Ebikhumi** 02:30

Well, before student trustee I was the president of the Association of Residence Halls and I loved the impact, the intentional impact that I was able to have with my fellow students, whether it be putting out programs, hosting diversity events, it really felt like I was I was serving people. And so I kind of found out about it in a weird way through one of the Assistant Vice Presidents, he's just like, this is a cool opportunity, are you interested in it? I was like, huh, seems interesting, you know? And so I'm a political science major so I love research and so I just started looking it up and I was like, okay, so it's a state position, you know, but I'm elected by the students. And so okay, I watched a ton of different board meetings to kind of understand what was going on and I was like, okay, I can have an impact, a larger impact on campus, if I get into this role. So I was like, okay, I'll take it on, I'll take it on. So it was March of 2021, I think that was the year, I think.

**Ash Ebikhumi** 03:30

We'll go with that. And I ran and I lost.

**Rachel Kobus 03:30**

We'll go with that.

**Rachel Kobus 03:35**

Oh, all right!

**Ash Ebikhumi 03:37**

So yeah, I did lose. But in a weird turn of events, I got another opportunity to run again in September and I won. And in October, I had my first board meeting.

**Rachel Kobus 03:49**

All right. Yeah, I did forget that you ran and then we had a situation where our student trustee that was selected went down so they had to redo the election. So good thing - I always say there's - I'm sure everyone can understand, like, there are opportunities that you don't want to give up, you want to keep fighting for, so it's great that we have you now and if you wouldn't have, you know, re-ran, you wouldn't have this opportunity. So glad you're here with us because you are an amazing - I always say, like, we talk to amazing people, and you are one of them. So what was it like once you found out you were elected, though?

**Rachel Kobus 04:19**

Well, and with that - I mean, the difference is, as student trustee, yes, our appointed trustees have the 30, 40 years of experience, but they've also been off campus for 30, 40 years. So you as student's trustee, you know what's happening on campus. So how did that work in - you know, did you realize that, I guess, at one point, that you're the voice of the body that's here right now? So does that work into, like, how you manage trustee meetings and feel comfortable discussing, you know, what's happening on campus because you see everything happening every day?

**Ash Ebikhumi 04:19**

You know, I was super excited. I was also super tired because I was just campaigning that entire week. And then I was just kind of sitting down in my apartment with my roommates and I just kind of felt the weight of 20,000+ opinions on my shoulder. And I was just like, how can I be the voice of all these students? I just didn't think it'd be possible and I also kind of felt insecure to a certain extent because I at the time was 20 years old. The board members got 20, 30, 40+ years on me. And it's like, so how is my opinion gonna be just as valid as theirs when I have very little life experience compared to them? So I just kind of felt nervous, but was also excited to kind of step into it and see what I could do and be.

**Ash Ebikhumi 05:09**

Yeah, so I definitely feel like sometimes they don't know what's going on campus, sort of the vibe of campus. So I definitely lead that into any meetings that we're having. If we're talking about certain subjects I say, okay, yeah, this is what I've heard from different students and I do my best to kind of walk around campus, talk with different folks. My roommates are all involved in different things so I asked them, say, hey, what are your friends [thinking], you know, what do people in your RSOs [Registered Student Organizations] think about what's happening on campus or, you know, potential future decisions that the board may make? And so I really try to, as best as possible, encompass all

these different perspectives and kind of share them out. I always kind of let them know like, I'm one person so I've got a bias. So I'm trying to remove myself from that bias, just kind of give you what is the sense of campus. And I told them, there'll always be that one or two or 15 people who disagree, but, you know, this is, from what I understand, this is how students are feeling right now.

**Rachel Kobus 06:39**

Yeah. So did this position help you become even more engaged with the student body and learn more about ISU and its students? So I guess, how did it kind of shape you? Like, you have to know a lot more, I think, than even with some of the leadership roles you've held previously.

**Ash Ebikhumi 06:53**

Yeah, so I - before getting on the board didn't know we had a master plan, didn't know we had a strategic plan. And so I spent winter break, this past winter break, reading those. And I was like, oh, this is long. And I'm like, oh, this isn't accurate, like, we're missing things here. And so I definitely learned a lot more. I learned a lot about who makes up our student body and how we serve those individuals. And it's, it's very interesting, because as an average, typical student, you go about your daily life, maybe you hang out with your friends, you're going to classes, you don't think about those things. You just think, oh, I'm here for college and I'm gonna get out in four, five, maybe six years and go out, move on with my life, where I'm like, oh, I'm not just an average student, I'm thinking about how is this university going to succeed, you know, in the next 10, 15, 20 years. So it is a very different perspective to have, but I enjoy it just because I'm like, oh, there's so much information and I'm always learning something new about the university.

**Rachel Kobus 07:51**

Yeah. So how do you make sure - you kind of talked a little bit about how you reached out to certain RSOs or tried to get yourself out there to find out what students want to know or want you to know - how do you do the opposite? How do you go back out to students to say this is the changes that are happening, this is what's happening right now. Have you seen a difference in that as a student trustee? Do you try to get out as much as possible to share what's going on on campus too?

**Ash Ebikhumi 08:13**

I do. It is so hard because sometimes the board makes decisions and you can't give every little detail about why it made it's decision. So I try to have intentional conversations with folks in the Student Government Association. I try to talk with my peers in the Honors Program. I definitely lean on them and they lean on me as well. You know, I tell my roommates - so, you know, if they hear someone's kind of getting angry or riled up, they can say, like, kind of just explain to them like, hey, you know, I actually know one of the board members and this is why they made their decision. I really try to have intentional conversations. When I hear people talking about things about the board I always think, okay, how can I insert myself in this conversation and kind of give them the truth, but also, like, make it not feel like I'm talking down to them, because there's so much knowledge that you acquire as a board member that the average student or faculty or staff member doesn't have, and you never want to make people feel smaller because you've got a seat at the table.

**Rachel Kobus 09:17**

Yeah, and again - that's a great way to put it, though, that you try to make sure that you're not talking down, that you are setting an example and showing, like, you are the voice at the table for others, you have the seat but they are the voice for you. So I think that's a great way to discuss it. So, you know, sitting at the table, then, what surprised you the most about being on the Board of Trustees then?

**Ash Ebikhumi 09:36**

You know, everyone's human. You know, it's weird to say, but, like -

**Rachel Kobus 09:42**

Oh, imagine that! No robots, real people.

**Ash Ebikhumi 09:45**

These aren't people in the sky making decisions about, you know, what goes - like, these are average people, they have their own personalities outside of their roles and they really do care about the institution, you know, they're not just sitting there just making decisions and like, all right, you deal with the mess. No, they're making intentional decisions, having intentional conversations about the future of ISU and the impact that it has on our students. So that's what's surprising, because I always think, oh, you know, these are just shady characters. But they're not shady characters. I love all of them, they're amazing. So that was a big surprise and kind of - and they also welcomed me in, you know, they didn't treat me like I was like a child, they treated me like I was a mature adult and that my opinion mattered. And that allowed me to get a lot of respect for them.

**Rachel Kobus 10:35**

And I'm sure, you know, lightened those nerves a little bit.

**Rachel Kobus 10:38**

It's obviously a more welcoming environment and that's what Illinois State wants to do in general. A welcoming environment reduces that anxiety, so it's good to know. Even our Board of Trustees needs to be a welcoming environment so that -

**Ash Ebikhumi 10:38**

Yeah, yes.

**Ash Ebikhumi 10:48**

Very welcoming!

**Rachel Kobus 10:48**

- students feel comfortable talking and really sharing true opinions too. So with that, too, because you've gotten to sit on the board for a year now, so what do you think has been something that you've been a part of, in all these discussions and all this moving forward - what's been one of the major impacts that you've had, do you think, on Illinois State, being part of the Board of Trustees?

**Ash Ebikhumi 11:10**

That is a hard one.

**Rachel Kobus 11:12**

Maybe it's not here yet because you still have another year, but right now - just something - [cross talk]

**Ash Ebikhumi 11:14**

Yeah, I've got another year, so who knows? I would have to say it is - my impact has just been being a steady and engaging voice. You know, sometimes you get a student trustee who maybe is just there as a senior, and so they're out in a year. So they care about their impact, but they sometimes don't see some of what their decisions brings about. I will be here for two years, and I'm really passionate about the role and about serving the university and they can see that, and so they're so willing to engage me in conversations, and they're so grateful for the perspective I offer. So I think just giving them, you know, an opportunity to engage with someone who offers a unique perspective. And I'm also willing to challenge them on things too, like, I'm not just gonna sit there and keep the seat warm. I'm there to kind of push them a little bit, say hey, think outside of the box. Think past, you know, when you were in college, and what college is nowadays.

**Rachel Kobus 11:16**

Yeah, yeah, very cool. So and then, besides impact, what's been a favorite memory? We always like hearing that, and you - I'm sure in the past you've gotten to do some things you probably wouldn't get to do as a typical student at ISU. So has there been something [where] you're like, this is fun, I didn't know this existed, or this event has been just eye-opening because I got to attend as student trustee. Is there anything that comes to mind?

**Ash Ebikhumi 12:34**

You know, Jane Lynch was - is here, actually. And I think two weeks ago or so I had the opportunity to - I was invited to meet her at the Ewing Culture Manor [Ewing Cultural Center], I believe that's - ?

**Rachel Kobus 12:46**

Yep, Ewing, yep, yep.

**Ash Ebikhumi 12:48**

And it was so fun. I was just like, oh, I'm gonna meet a celebrity. And in my mind I'm like, a celebrity! That's like, they're not normal people, how do I approach her, you know, oh, my God, I'm gonna say the wrong thing! And you know, it was really cool because she was so chill. I was like - she's just like us, she wants to have fun, you know, she jokes around a little bit. And you know, I was joking around with her and I was like, oh my, this is so cool, and I took one of my friends and she's just like, oh my god, yeah, she's just like a normal person. And we took a photo with her and it was a very different experience. And most students don't get that. Now she is walking around campus and she is meeting students, but I was like, I got a photo with her, I got to shake her hand, I was just chatting her up. I was like, I feel cool right now.

**Rachel Kobus 13:35**

You're on the same podcast that she's on now, too!

**Rachel Kobus 13:37**

No, I mean, that's fun, and a student trustee you work hard and there are other, you know, opportunities, I think, that come with that though too. And that you get to go to certain receptions and you need to be the, you know, the voice but also the image for ISU. So it's nice that you get to have some fun benefits from that too. So that's a great memory! I love - and then, like I said, she was on this podcast, so she is a genuine human being. So I'm glad you saw the same in that. So now that you're gonna be on the board for another year, will you - do you think once the next trustee comes in after you, do you see yourself, maybe you had one, being a sort of mentor? Is there a way that student trustees mentor each other or is that something you've ever considered?

**Rachel Kobus 13:37**

Yeah, I - so the student trustee prior to me, I met with her actually, we had a conversation, talked about her duties on the board. It wasn't really a mentorship but it was more of like a conversation, like this is what you do as student trustee, this is what you can kind of expect your workload to be. She's just like yeah, you should probably take less classes because it will be a lot of work. I was like oh no, I'll be fine, and then I got into it, I was like oh yeah, you were right. Less classes is a good idea.

**Ash Ebikhumi 13:37**

I am!

**Ash Ebikhumi 14:32**

Balance! Work-life - literal work-life balance, work-academic balance!

**Ash Ebikhumi 14:50**

Work-life balance! You know, work - I'm struggling with that a little bit this semester, but you know, it'll - I got plans. But I definitely, I certainly see myself as mentoring the future student trustee, I think it is just an opportunity to kind of just let them know about the perspective that they hold, that it's so unique to the board, that they really are making an impact on campus, whether they can see it or they can't see it, the board members will value your opinion, they'll respect you as long as you respect them. And you're - I'll also just let them know, like, they're going into the role with not as much information as everyone else at the table so don't be afraid to just sit there and listen first before you speak up. So yeah, it'll be interesting to see, because I came about it in a weird way, most of the time a student trustee comes through student government. It is a senior, typically someone who has been, you know, student body president or vice president. I have never been in student government at all, I was - I came up through, you know, the Association of Residence Halls, I was in Alternative Breaks, I was in the Honors Program, I was just an engaged student. So it'll be interesting to see who steps up next to the plate. I'll certainly be looking for folks and seeing who's interested and engaging in conversations. Because I just - I want the best student on the board so that all students are served well.



**Rachel Kobus 16:15**

And that's good to say too, that it doesn't matter what Registered Student Organizations you're a part of, it's that you're a leader among campus. So I think that's - you're a great person to talk about this with, all of our student body - that student government is a great place to start but if you've held leadership positions in other RSOs that's just as impactful as well, too. So making sure everyone is included, like you said.

**Ash Ebikhumi 16:37**

I agree.

**Ash Ebikhumi 16:38**

Wow, that's kind of a hard one.

**Rachel Kobus 16:38**

So, that's great. So what do you see, or what do you hope to do next year, maybe? Do you have any plans of how you're gonna leave your legacy as a student trustee?

**Rachel Kobus 16:40**

Well, you know, we create a legacy at Illinois State so I had to ask the question. How are you creating your - and maybe you'll - we've talked about it, I think, but you can always reiterate, how are you going to create your legacy at Illinois State before you -

**Ash Ebikhumi 16:59**

Creating my legacy? That's an interesting one. I always think about that, too, because I was like, you know, when will I die? Will it be 70, will it be 90, you know, how much time do I got left? I think just - I want to be that person that people can come to and share their opinions, share their thoughts, and really be able to translate that and be a bridge towards administrators, the board, and increase transparency, let people know that, yes, things are difficult, yes, sometimes we get it wrong, but we are always striving to, you know, be better, to progress. You know, Interim President Tarhule said ISU is one of the greatest, is a great enterprise, and I truly do believe that and I would like to leave a legacy that continues that progress, that makes sure, that ensures that we are amazing. Whether that is, you know, engaging students or whether it's engaging donors or alumni, or just, you know, having conversations with fellow board members, I'd like to leave a legacy behind that shows that I was involved, I was engaged, and that is what the student trustee does.

**Rachel Kobus 18:12**

Great. Well, and we look forward to seeing you all next year out on campus, at our board of trustee meetings and making a difference for the student body of Illinois State University. So it's been great to have you, Ash, and thank you again and hopefully we'll talk to you soon, yeah.

**Ash Ebikhumi 18:26**

Thank you Rachel, I appreciate it.

**Rachel Kobus** 18:38

That was Student Trustee Ash Ebikhumi. Thank you for listening to Redbird Buzz and tune in next time for more stories from beyond the quad.