



President's Report to the Senate

Senate Meeting, September 28, 2016

Rajesh Kumar, GSO President

First of all, I would like to thank everyone who were able to attend the first GSO Senate meeting. Over 115 graduate students attended, which was a historical turnout. Also, the GSO Executive Board would like to extend deep gratitude to those who showed interest in being a graduate student representative in one or the other capacity. Special thanks to those who volunteered to serve on the GSO committees. Together with all members of the Senate, Executive Board, and committees, I am certain we will accomplish a lot in this academic year.

Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)

MSCHE accreditation is an important designation for the University to signal to its peers and other stakeholders, including the Federal Government, that the University is operating acceptably. **Without MSCHE accreditation, Syracuse students would not be eligible for any form of federal student assistance.** Currently, MSCHE operates on a ten-year cycle with accreditation affirmed at the 5- and 10-year marks. The 10-year process includes an institutional self-study and peer review (including a site visit.) Syracuse University is currently preparing for the self-study and 10-year review. The Self-Study Committee includes a Steering Committee and seven different self-study teams: (1) Mission and goals, (2) ethics and integrity, (3) design and delivery of the student learning experience, (4) support of the student experience, (5) educational effectiveness, (6) planning, resources, and institutional improvement, and (7) governance, leadership, and administration. The self-study teams address each of the Middle States standards as well as accreditation-relevant federal regulations.

Currently, I am serving on the Steering Committee and have nominated seven graduate students to serve on each of the seven teams. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Peta Long, VP of External Affairs, for helping me find people for the self-study teams. We are grateful to those who volunteered for these positions.

Graduate Student Employment and Benefits

Currently, there are three open issues related to graduate student employees:

(1) Review of minimum stipend: First, the Executive Board would like to thank our former leadership who took up this issue to secure a living wage for graduate student employees. The former GSO leadership had negotiated with the administration and brought the minimum stipend for TAs from \$12,000.00 to \$14,890.00 by increasing the stipend by 6-7% over three years. This three-year agreement ended last year and needs revision.

The current Interim Chief Finance Officer (CFO) agreed to a thorough review of graduate student employee stipends. The review will likely be based on two important criterias: minimum wage at peer universities and minimum living wage in the city of Syracuse. The GSO Graduate Employee Issues Committee will be tasked to work on this issue, collect required data, analyze that and make appropriate recommendations that will pave the way into a new agreement with the University administration.

(2) University-sponsored health insurance (POMCO): The University offers subsidized health insurance (POMCO) to its employees, including graduate student employees. However, two-to-three years ago, the University wanted to move graduate employees off of POMCO into a student health insurance plan. Cited reasons were: “preventing disparity between grad employees and nonemployees” and that “most other institutions do not provide this opportunity.” The GSO (graduate employees) heavily objected to this decision, and as a result, the University leadership backed away from this decision. The University (former Dean of Graduate School Ben Ware and Senior Vice President and Dean of Student Affairs Rebecca Reed Kantrowitz) agreed, in writing, to make no changes without our reaching an agreement with the GSO. We would like to commend our previous Executive Board and graduate students who made this happen. Graduate employees continue to remain eligible for POMCO this year.

The Graduate Employee Benefits Working Group has been working since last year, looking into all possibilities to fix this issue. We have strong representation (four seats) on the Working Group, which is chaired by Professor Tom Dennison (Maxwell). Can Aslan, former GSO President and current VP of Internal Affairs have been serving on the Working Group alongside three graduate student representatives.

Keeping in mind the urgency and critical nature of this issue, it was brought before Chancellor Syverud. A deadline was set (September 30th) for the Working Group to come up with recommendations. We will update the Senate on this matter, as soon as new information is available to us.

(3) Types of assistantships: It was brought to the GSO’s attention that some departments (e.g., iSchool, Newhouse, etc) are employing a number of graduate students on an hourly basis to do the same kind of job as TAs and Graders with no employment benefits. The former Executive Board did an excellent job taking up the issue with the upper

administration, Peter Vanable, Dean of Graduate School, Andrew Gordon, Chief HR officer, and Gwenn Judge, former Director of Budget and Planning (current Interim CFO).

Conversations on this issue was restarted with the beginning of Fall 2016 with the Peter Vanable, Dean of Graduate School, and Gwenn Judge, Interim Chief Finance Officer. Dean Vanable communicated with deans of relevant schools and colleges, and found that these temporary positions are being created to offer more assistantships to the graduate students. However, based on verbal feedback from fellow graduate students, the GSO continues to advocate for equal treatment among graduate student employees, including benefits.

We feel that while increasing the number of funded graduate students on campus is well within the graduate student community and the GSO's best interests, we will continue to advocate that as many as possible of these positions be fully funded, rather than hourly.

The issue was also brought to the Provost Wheatly's and Chancellor Syverud's attention. Chancellor Syverud promised to have this issue reviewed by the Offices of the Registrar, CFO, and Dean of Graduate School. We will follow up and make sure that the review happens in a timely manner.

Creation of an Ombudsman Office

Several graduate students expressed serious concerns over issues with faculty and/or staff (mostly academic advisors) that affect their day-to-day quality of life and studies. The GSO Committee on Student Life will be tasked to take up this issue on priority, gather and analyze qualitative data from students, and report to the Senate. We believe that the information gathered will help us advocate for graduate students more effectively. This has been a serious concern at various campuses across the US. An Ombudsman Office with a proper grievance mechanism would be extremely helpful for students who are facing similar issues; it will certainly help them express their concerns confidentially. The University Senate had also passed a resolution to create an Ombudsman Office with a deadline. The issue was brought to the Chancellor's attention, and he communicated with Peter Vanable, Dean of Graduate School. Dean Vanable will work with the Provost's Office and the University Senate, and will submit a report.

Free Speech Policy

Over the last two years, the Syracuse University community, especially the Student Association, Graduate Student Organization, Student Bar Association, University Senate, and Working Group on Free Speech, has worked hard to ensure academic freedom and freedom of expression is protected at SU. The University administration aims to have the relevant policies revised before October 31, 2016, publishing and implementing final versions prior to the end of the Fall 2016 semester.