

President’s Report to the Senate

September 12, 2018 Regular Business Meeting

Jack Wilson, GSO President

**Summary of the 2017-2018 Academic Year**

**Construction on Campus: Schine and Archbold**

Two separate construction-related issues caught the attention of the GSO this last year.

The first was a study of how the Schine Student Center may be redesigned. At our behest, the architects leading the program attended our 3rd Regular Business meeting of the 2017-2018 year and went to the Inn Complete to learn about how we use Schine and how we might use it that Thursday night prior to Trivia. Additionally, I suggested in meetings that a dedicated graduate study space, be included in the proposed redesign.

The second was an issue concerning the reconstruction of Archbold gym. It came to our attention that the proposed pool for the gym would not include a lap pool, instead having a pool space of similar size that could not accommodate lap swimmers. In response, we reached out to grads who used the pool and attended an April 26 meeting about the Archbold reconstruction to voice our concerns. I have since been informed by the Snr. VP of Enrollment and the Student Experience that a regulation 6-lane lap pool will be included in the new gym.

**Graduate Career Services**

Continuing an ongoing initiative by the GSO, career services for graduate students was centralized this past year into a formal Graduate Career Services program, under the Graduate School, run by Daniel Olsen-Bang. Two additional staff were hired as part of this centralization and expansion. This push was initiated some years ago by the GSO because the number of personnel dedicated to career services for grads was well below peer institutions and because the decentralized structure of graduate career services at the time created major gaps wherein, though some Schools provided robust career services for grads, some Schools and areas did not provide dedicated services at all.

**Graduate Student Housing**

This past year, multiple steps were taken to improve the process by which Grads may find safe, quality off-campus housing. These steps were taken after multiple GSO surveys last year and the year before showed serious problems with extant systems for finding housing, leading to exploitation by landlords and a deficit in housing quality and ease of finding housing among international students.

Syracuse University, in consultation with the GSO, approved a partnership with a housing listings website. Critically, part of this agreement was the power to exclude or restrict landlords who engage in shady business practices. This reduces the exposure of new Grads to exploitation by landlords directly and should, in the long run, improve the business practices of landlords around campus generally.

At our behest, new Grads who cannot afford to travel to Syracuse to personally conduct apartment hunting are now able to arrive and stay on campus during the month of July to do in-person inspections of potential apartments. Whether or not a person does this has the greatest impact on housing quality, over factors such as when they begin searching, the manner of their search, or when they sign their lease. This, therefore, allows students who could not otherwise afford to do so a better chance to find quality housing.

Furthermore, if a search fails, Grads now have the option of staying on South Campus on a semester-by-semester basis. This provides Grads a clear fallback option if they cannot find housing that meets their needs.

**Health Insurance Transition**

Beginning in the 2015-2016 academic year, representatives of the GSO began negotiation with the University over whether it was appropriate to transition Graduate Assistants (GAs/TAs/RAs) off of the employee health insurance plan and, if so, what the new plan would look like. After discussion with the Graduate School, consultants hired by the University, and expert faculty, and after input from multiple Senate meeting, the Executive Board agreed to bring to the Senate for approval a transition plan. This plan was approved by the Senate with 24 yeas, 9 nays, and 1 abstention.

The new plan transfers the subsidy applied to Graduate students on the faculty plan to GAs, TAs, and RAs on the student plan. The faculty plan is a Gold-rated plan as regulated by the Affordable Care Act (ACA): those on the plan pay 20% of health care costs. Hospitalization costs are covered by a copay and prescription costs are covered via coinsurance. The costs of insurance for Grads on the faculty plan was roughly $1,500 per year. The student plan is a Platinum-rated plan as regulated by the ACA: those on the plan pay 10% of health care costs. Hospitalization costs are covered via coinsurance and prescription costs are covered with a copay. The cost of the student plan for a Grad who receives the subsidy is $500 per year. The switch, in total, saves Grads affected over $1 million per year between increased coverage and reduced premiums. Additionally, dental and vision plans were included as options for all graduate students, rather than just those on the faculty plan.

**House of Representatives Proposal to Tax Tuition Waivers**

Last fall, the proposed House version of the US budget bill included language that would have made tuition waivers count as taxable income. Students taking 12 classes per semester in the 2017-2018 AY were charged $36,000 in tuition; under section 117(d) of the US Tax code, receiving a tuition waiver does not count as taxable income. Repealing that section, as suggested by the House of Representatives, would have meant those students would be treated by the IRS as earning $36,000 more than otherwise, which would mean such students would likely pay around $4000 more income tax per year.

In response, in coordination with the National Association of Graduate Professional Students, the GSO Executive Board encouraged Grads to call their congressmen (John Katko for those in NY-24) and senators to oppose this change. Ultimately, Rep. Katko co-signed a letter opposing the change—one of only 31 Republicans to do so—and the proposed change did not make it to the final version of the bill. This letter may be found here: https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/4324479/Rep-Pete-Sessions-letter-on-tax-exempt-tuition.pdf.

**Immigration Issues**

This last academic year saw changes made or proposed by the US Executive Branch that were harmful to international students on multiple fronts.

In response to the announcement of the DACA repeal last fall, we urged the Chancellor to reform the Ad Hoc Committee on DACA/Undocumented Students. Their work is ongoing, but this February they created a resource webpage (<http://diversity.syr.edu/resources/dacaundocumented-students/>) for DACA/Undocumented Students.

In response to travel restrictions for international students last fall, I circled back with the Graduate School to see what could be done for new students who could not travel to SU as a result. Unfortunately, little can be done on our end. In August, SU adopted a degree completion plan for students stranded abroad by changes in immigration policy which may be found here: <http://registrar.syr.edu/students/students-affected-by-u-s-immigration-policies/pathways-to-degree-completion/>

Additionally, we are tracking the changes proposed over the summer to the timing of immigration status violations, the new shortened visa length for Chinese international students studying in some STEM disciplines, and the increased costs of visas.

Additionally, the GSO Senate last September to support an NAGPS push for F-type visa revalidation in the US. Currently, international students need to leave the country before this visa can be revalidated, forcing them out of the country and halting their progress towards their degree for weeks.

**Investment in / Divestment from for-Profit Prisons**

Last year, the GSO Senate voted unanimously to call upon the Board of Trustees to divest (if necessary) and pledge formally not to invest in for-profit prisons, citing serious ongoing problems with prisons of that kind. This action was paralleled by similar calls in the Student Association Assembly and the University Senate. The Board of Trustees has replied, stating that Syracuse University is not currently invested in these institutions and does not plan to currently, which is encouraging. However, it has not made a formal pledge to not invest the future, a core component of the request made by last year’s Senate.

**Off-Campus Transportation**

After multiple reports of limited food access by Grads in upper Westcott, particularly during the winter, the GSO advocated for a bus route between Westcott and the Price Rite on East Genesee. This route now exists as Birnie Bus 35. However, traveling this route from the Price Rite to Westcott is timely (roughly an hour). In response, I further requested that Parking and Transit services alter (instead) Birnie Bus 33 to include a stop by the Price Rite both ways between James Street and Westcott. This change was in the process of being investigated as of the Spring semester.

**Ombuds Office**

Continuing an ongoing initiative by the GSO, we have secured an Ombuds Office and I now sit on the search committee for a permanent Ombuds. An Ombuds Office allows Grads to voice individual concerns with other Grads or faculty or staff in a confidential and informal manner. An Ombuds helps Grads resolve disputes in an amicable manner before formal action becomes necessary and in turn advocates for cultural changes in the University that would ameliorate frequent issues they observes.

**Orange SUccess / MySlice Issues**

This year revealed two major issues with the Orange SUccess system. The first is that Grads teaching courses were having their cell phone numbers being made public to their students without them being aware. This is due to the way MySlice categorizes phone numbers and how Orange SUccess accesses this data. The second is that on Orance SUccess and other publicly-facing SU webpages, the legal name and not the preferred name is being presented to students. ITS is aware of these issues; ongoing work has revealed that this problem was more complicated than originally thought. To my knowledge, ITS has not yet fully addressed them and I plan to get a better sense of when proper fixes may be rolled out this semester.

**Stipends**

Syracuse University increased the average stipend by 2.5% for graduate students (including new admits) who are awarded a TA/GA/RA position--graduate employees, colloquially this year. This value was equal across all schools and colleges, who then increased stipends as they saw fit.

This came immediately following a multi-year program of specifically targeting the lowest paid employees for raises: raising the floor on pay for assistantships. This has brought to this pay floor to be roughly consistent with universities SU compares itself to.

**Student Legal Services (SLS)**

After early signals suggested a joint plan by the University and Student Association to replace SLS with an in-house shop or otherwise endanger the independence of the office, the GSO agreed to contact the Daily Orange about this issue.

Talks following this about the future of SLS were productive. As a result, SLS offices were to Marshall Square Mall, closer to Grads, with no rental costs. Additionally, the manner in with SLS allows students in the College of Law to temp for them was formalized.

**The Welcome Shuttle Program**

Over the past academic year, consistent with the wishes of the 2014-2015 GSO Senate, Syracuse University formally took over operation of the Welcome Shuttle Program. The August before that the GSO President was ultimately responsible for hiring and management of Welcome Shuttle drivers and greeters but funded by Syracuse University. Day-to-day operations of the Welcome Shuttle program, including hiring decisions and strategy, are now handled by the Office of First-Year and Transfer Programs.