



Report of the Graduate Student Representative to the Board of Trustees

Board of Trustees, November 7, 2014

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Transparency in Decision-Making – Students as Shareholders

Over the course of this semester, students have loudly categorized themselves as shareholders and not customers of the university. Many students, deeply engaged in Syracuse, feel a personal stake in improving the university. Students have communicated to the GSO a feeling of responsibility toward SU, that they should be drivers of positive change. As a student leader, I am overjoyed that graduate students feel such a strong connection to this university and its community. However, this has produced considerable friction between students and top university leadership, expressed in rallies concerning the changes to the Advocacy Center on September 17; issues of diversity, inclusion, and marginalization on September 19 and October 2; fossil fuel divestment on September 30; and transparency on November 3. These are visible demonstrations of the passionate devotion these students have toward the university as well as their frustrations toward policies and processes they feel are not aligned to their values and priorities.

In particular, many students want clearer, honest communication about upcoming decisions and planning processes. This is exemplified in the call for greater transparency at all levels of the university. Conversations have started with Eric Spina, Rebecca Reed Kantrowitz, Jaclyn Grosso, Jeff Kaplan, Hoang-Anh Tran, and others on improving the university's communication methods to students, discussed in more detail in the next section. We also look to future conversations within the Graduate School to improve communication between departments and their students, an area of continued concern for graduate students.

Furthermore, students have called for a larger seat at the table. In particular, many students have called for larger student representation in front of administrators and trustees. While the efforts of the SA and GSO Presidents are appreciated, students have grown more realistic about the ability of two students to accurately represent over 21,000 of their peers. We have begun examining the GSO's own representational system as a part of this discussion. Additionally, the feeling of responsibility from students has driven them to seek a direct connection with university leadership. We are engaged with the Division of Student Affairs in creating a Student Affairs Advisory Board to consult with Rebecca Kantrowitz. A new group is being formed with Lou Marcoccia to discuss tuition increases. We have also begun discussions with Hoang-Anh Tran, Rebecca Kantrowitz, and Eric Spina on involving students with the university leadership team meetings. We are also exploring ways of getting top leadership in front of student groups more often, to encourage a more collegiate and productive relationship between student activist groups and administrators.

Students are ready to step up and take greater responsibility for their university, and the GSO is eager to institutionalize this level of relationship. The GSO and the university leadership are particularly concerned with the current method of holding one-off sessions with students when issues arise, instead of holding consistent meetings and consultations in order to discuss matters before they become major issues. The GSO and SA jointly embrace this move toward a deliberative and responsible approach to the administration/student relationship.

Fast Forward Syracuse

Students who know the goals and purpose of Fast Forward Syracuse are excited and hopeful for the university's future. Unfortunately, many graduate students remain confused about the nature of Fast Forward. Students associate it with every change now happening across campus, with the student competition last semester, or are simply clueless about it. We have discussed ways to improve communication with Jaclyn Grosso, Fast Forward Communications Director, and Jeff Kaplan, Senior Advisor to the Chancellor, amongst others. A key improvement is monthly emails detailing the progress of the various committees and workgroups, allowing students to feel they are a part of the ongoing process, instead of merely asked for input at select points. This also combats various rumors and misconceptions about Fast Forward. Particularly, there are worrying rumors that the strategic plan is written but being kept purposely hidden as well as bad information about the Operational Excellence exercise, all of which can be squashed with additional information.

The GSO has stressed the need for concise messaging utilizing multiple media, including more partnerships with the Daily Orange, direct emails to students, and physical flyers. The forums, town hall meeting, and other mass meetings have been somewhat effective already, but have the disadvantage that students are in classes for a great proportion of the day, making attendance difficult. This feedback has been well received by the Fast Forward team in recent weeks, and we look forward to working with them more closely on communication. Boris Gresely and I are particularly interested in clearer guidelines on what we can and cannot make public from our various meetings with the Fast Forward teams; with clear guidance on what can be made public, we can take messages directly to students.

Fast Forward is and has been a highly transparent process by design, and with this new communication effort, we will see students better understand the avenues they have to interact with the process, better understand the goals of the project, and improve their buy-in to the final products.

Diversity and Inclusion across all University Communities

Since the Hanna Strong incident on September 6, a broad array of students and student organizations have come together to discuss diversity and inclusion on campus. From this have come rallies and protests on September 19 and October 2, the Express Yourself forum with the Chancellor, and a widespread call for action to improve the climate at the university. The core problem, as communicated to the GSO, is a difference between the statistics on the diversity of the student body and the lack of broad appreciation of this diversity amongst that student body. Students with marginalized identities often feel that they are underrepresented and that their peers and instructors do not understand their identities. While exercises like the Express Yourself forum are useful, they do not bring students,

faculty, and staff to the table who do not traditionally engage with such efforts. Therefore the GSO agrees with NAACP, Pride Union, and other student organizations that we need to overhaul the diversity and identity training which occurs in freshman and graduate student orientation as well as during the faculty and staff hiring and onboarding process. All students, faculty, and staff need more instruction and direction in this area, especially those who would not otherwise choose to engage.

At the root of this problem is a need to shift the campus culture and climate to prevent the marginalization of any of our community members. Students need to feel safe at their university, and this is not the case for all students at this time. Repairing this situation will involve not only more robust trainings and discussions of identity, but better enforcement and arbitration processes as well. Of particular concern are students who report faculty members for inappropriate remarks and actions who see no resolution or action of any sort come from their reports. Often students are unaware of any complaint resolution systems at all. The GSO looks to the workgroups established after the Express Yourself forum as one avenue to address these issues. Additionally we plan to engage with administrators across all areas of the university on how to create and maintain a safe community for all students, particularly within our classrooms.

Sexual Assault and Relationship Violence Services

Services for students who are victims of sexual assault and relationship violence have expanded greatly over the last several months. With additional new staff members within the Counseling Center, comprehensive advocacy services are now available which again put Syracuse University at the forefront of sexual assault and relationship violence services. Advocates will meet with students wherever necessary, assisting and escorting victims to campus offices and off-campus resources. This matches or exceeds the level of care provided under the previous model. The Campaign for an Advocacy Center, the student activist group spearheading the call for improved services since June, applauds the improvements that have been made. At this stage, the GSO and these student activists are working toward better cross-campus communication to ensure everyone knows what services exist and how to access them. This includes working with the Division of Student Affairs to update the remaining outdated bathroom and dorm stickers, auditing information on the Counseling Center's website, etc.

The Chancellor's Workgroup on Sexual Violence Prevention, Education, and Advocacy is working hard to identify any remaining gaps in service and recommend improvements across a wide range of topics. Of particular concern to graduate students generally, and a topic the workgroup will consider, is the creation of a standalone office dedicated to prevention and education about sexual assault and advocacy work. Sexual assault prevention needs to remain a priority going forward, and such an office would be instrumental in keeping this conversation alive in our community in future years.

Library Funding and Prioritization

The graduate students continue to have severe concerns over the future of the libraries at Syracuse University. The GSO supports the University Senate Committee on the Library's work toward prioritizing the library system and increasing its funding. In particular, we are highly concerned about the past use of principal collections funds for operations and the deficiencies in the collections in areas of active

research at the university. The library is the backbone of the university, relied on by graduate students to successfully complete their degrees. A weak, underfunded library threatens the productivity of both faculty and students across all units. We request, alongside the Committee on the Library, significant investments into the libraries. We are encouraged by recent conversations into increasing the libraries' development activities and finding new revenue for the libraries.

In addition to these concerns about the collections, the physical structures need urgent improvements. We applaud the work done to renovate Carnegie Library and improve the Reading Room, an oasis of quiet space for scholarly work. The improvements to the basement and first floor of Bird Library are similarly appreciated. We urge the administration and trustees to commit to further improvements in the remaining floors of Bird Library. Of particular concern to graduate students is the rarity of quiet space to work. Due to a lack of good study space and other informal spaces across campus, Bird Library is often highly crowded and noisy, even on the quiet floors. The GSO has had productive conversations with the Interim Dean of the Library, Matthew Dames, over this concern, but a final resolution is contingent on the development of appropriate student spaces across campus.

Graduate Teaching and Research Assistantship Stipends

The graduate assistantship minimum stipend increased to \$13,000 for a nine month, 20 hour contract for this fiscal year, an increase deeply appreciated by all affected students. However, this amount still lies below the living wage level for the City of Syracuse, forcing graduate assistants into further debt to finance their education. As these contracts forbid outside work without department approval, many graduate students are unable to make up this shortfall except through loans. Due to Congress's actions surrounding student loans earlier this year, graduate loan interest rates are no longer tied to undergraduate loan rates, and have a significantly higher cap. Combined, this causes graduate assistants to spend considerable time finding ways to make ends meet, instead of focusing on completing their degrees on time or providing world-class instructional service. Teaching assistants comprise approximately 1/3 of the instructors here, and often communicate that they would like to improve their teaching, but must focus elsewhere due to financial issues. Additionally, some departments see potential students decline offers because of better offers from our peer institutions.

The GSO advocates for continued increases in the minimum stipend rate of 6.25% over each of the next two years. This would raise the nine month, 20 hour contract rate to \$14,676, a sustainable and livable income level for graduate students in FY 16. We estimate the total impact across all units combined to be less than \$300,000 annually. The GSO is excited to engage the Office of Budget and Planning and the Graduate School once more to discover how affected departments can absorb this increase.

The problem of rising student loan interest rates mentioned above is a concern for all graduate students, especially those who do not have assistantship contracts. We are actively working with the National Association of Graduate-Professional Students, of which GSO is a member, to lobby Congress to bring graduate loan rates back in line with undergraduate rates and restore subsidized Stafford loans for graduate students. While the political climate makes any changes difficult, NAGPS provides nationwide pressure for change.