



## **Report of the Graduate Student Representative to the Board of Trustees**

Board of Trustees Executive Committee, November 4, 2016

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### **Graduate Student Employment and Benefits**

The graduate student teaching and research assistants contribute significantly to achieving the core educational and research goals of Syracuse University. Syracuse University has been very supportive of graduate student employees by providing them with a good working environment, keeping their wages above the minimum wage, and providing subsidized employee health insurance (POMCO) over the course of the last few years. However, there are some long-standing issues that need the administration's attention, such as the lack of a formal, anonymous grievance mechanism (ombudsman), child care, and family or sick leave policies.

The following are some of the important issues that need to be addressed as early as possible:

**Review of a minimum stipend** - The Executive Board would like to thank our former leadership and the university administrators who ensured that graduate student employees were well paid during the last three years. The three-year agreement between the GSO and the university administration ended last year and needs to be revised. The issue was brought before Interim Vice President and Chief Financial Officer (CFO) Gwenn Judge who agreed to carry out a thorough review of graduate student employee stipends. The review will likely be based on two important criteria: minimum wage at peer universities and minimum living wage in the city of Syracuse.

Simultaneously, the GSO Graduate Employment Issues Committee is tasked to carry out a comprehensive analysis of this issue by collecting and analyzing the required data and making appropriate recommendations that will pave the way for a new agreement with the University administration.

This issue needs to be resolved before the end of December 2016 as many of the schools and colleges begin sending out offer letters for teaching, research and graduate assistants in January.

**University-sponsored employee health insurance (POMCO) for graduate student employees** - The University offers subsidized health insurance (POMCO) to its employees, including graduate student employees. However, the university administration is in the process of finding alternative viable options due to regulatory restrictions by the IRS. Fortunately, the issue does not affect current graduate student employees as they continue to remain eligible for POMCO for this academic year. However, the issue needs to be resolved before December 2016 (if there is any change) for two reasons. First, departments begin sending out offer letters (mentioning the health benefits associated with the offers) to potential teaching, research, and graduate assistants in January 2017. Second, the change will affect more than 25% of the graduate student population that includes existing and incoming graduate, teaching, and research Assistants.

The Graduate Employee Benefits Working Group is currently looking into the issue and has come up with three potential alternatives. The options are being discussed from the cost-benefit point of view and recommendation should be sent to the office of the Chancellor within a month.

**Types of assistantships** - Some schools and colleges (e.g., iSchool, Newhouse, etc.) are employing a number of graduate students on an hourly basis to deliver similar duties of teaching and

research assistants without employment benefits (health insurance, tuition waiver, etc). The former Executive Board did an excellent job taking up the issue with the upper administration, Dean of the Graduate School Peter Vanable, Chief Human Resources Officer Andrew Gordon, and former Director of Budget and Planning (current Interim CFO) Gwenn Judge.

Conversations on this issue started in the beginning of fall 2016 with Dean Vanable and Gwenn Judge. Dean Vanable communicated with the deans of relevant schools and colleges and found that these temporary positions are being created to offer more assistantships to the graduate students. Based on verbal feedback from fellow graduate students, the GSO understands that increasing the number of funded graduate students on campus is well within the best interest of the GSO and graduate student community. However, the GSO believes that the university administration should provide equal treatment to all graduate student employees by making these temporary positions fully funded, rather than hourly, as well as extending the benefits to all of the graduate student workers.

The university administration has promised a thorough review of such temporary arrangements and will attempt to find a long term solution. The GSO is following up with the administration in order to ensure that the review happens in a timely manner.

### **The GSO Committees**

The GSO has a total of eight standing committees and one task force: Academic Resource and Affairs, Diversity, Finance, Graduate Employment Issues, Travel Grant, NAGPS, Outreach, Student Life, and Child Care Task Force. Most of these committees were inactive the past two years. This year more than 70 graduate students have signed up to serve on these committees. The majority of the committees have begun working and have set their agenda items for the whole academic year.

The lack of available data and information from previous years is one of the bottlenecks the committees are currently facing. The GSO is planning to roll out two or three surveys to collect the required data for analysis. Additionally, the GSO is exploring the possibility of enhancing the support (designing and hosting webpages, sharing standard operating practices, forums for discussions and collaborations among) for more than 40 recognized student organizations (RSOs). The GSO president would like to thank GSO Vice President of Internal Affairs Can Aslan for his tremendous effort in putting the committees and task force in place, helping them deciding on their agenda items, and helping them begin work on several important issues of graduate students.

### **GSO Travel Grant Program**

The GSO Travel Grant Program provides funding to graduate students in an effort to defray the costs of attending academic and professional conferences. Travel grants are awarded on the basis of merit and are intended to partially reimburse transportation, lodging, registration, and membership expenses. The GSO Grant Committee makes final decisions concerning all awards. To do so, all applications are graded on a rubric. The committee does not make comments on applications, and will not disclose the details of a specific application's decision. Not all students who complete the application will receive a grant. The maximum cap for each grant was set at \$500 for the 2016-17 academic year by the GSO senate.

During the 2015-16 academic year, a total of 263 travel grant applications were received, of which 230 earned an award. The average award was \$363.41 for a total amount awarded of \$83,583. This year, the GSO senate has allocated \$80,000 to the program and the committee has so far awarded roughly \$19,480.00, which includes applications received between April 15th and September 15th.

### **Review of Career Services for Graduate Students**

The GSO insisted on creating a timeline for the review of career services for graduate students. Chancellor Syverud tasked the Dean of the Graduate School to consult with Provost

Wheatly and possibly form a working group to look into the issue and find out what is desired for the development of career services.

### **Graduate Student Representatives on Search Committees**

No graduate student representatives were included on two recent search committees, namely, senior vice president for enrollment and the student experience, and the CFO. Several graduate students raised questions regarding this citing university's transparency and shared governance policy. The issue was brought before the Chancellor and a request to include graduate students on all of the search committees was made. The Chancellor acknowledged the importance of the same and made necessary arrangements for a GSO representative to meet all the candidates for the CFO position. Additionally, Chancellor Syverud provided reassurances that the oversight will not occur in the future and that there will be graduate student representatives on all search committees. The GSO is grateful for his immediate response.

### **Off-campus Housing and Safety**

Chancellor Syverud has tasked Dean Vanable to work on the issues of off-campus housing and safety in consultation with Provost Wheatly and in collaboration with the GSO. The Graduate School and the GSO found that the Office of Off-campus and Commuter Services (OCCS) has a great deal of information on housing locations, housing costs, lease agreements, landlords etc. The problem is with the method of communication as the majority of the incoming graduate students do not get access to this material in a timely manner.

It was also found that some schools (iSchool and Newhouse) collaborate with OCCS to provide important and sufficient information related to housing and safety, whereas the remaining schools and departments do not provide adequate information to their incoming students. Another problem is that the circulated information is inconsistent from school to school. For example, OCCS advises students NOT to sign the lease without looking at the property, whereas iSchool suggests signing the lease as soon as possible. The GSO is working with the Office of the Graduate School, OCCS, and Office of Graduate Enrollment to figure out the best possible way to inform incoming graduate students on the off-campus housing and safety. GSO Committee on Student Life has been tasked to work on this issue.

### **Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)**

The GSO president is serving on the MSCHE Steering Committee. Additionally, seven graduate students were nominated to serve on seven different teams of MSCHE. GSO Vice President of External Affairs Peta Long reached out to the graduate student population and selected the most qualified students as per the requirements. I am thankful to Peta Long as well as grateful to those students who expressed their interest for these positions.

### **Outreach efforts**

One important facet of graduate student life that has often been neglected is work/life balance and graduate student quality of life efforts. To address this aspect of graduate life Peta Long organized several cultural, social, and political events/activities. Cultural events included Apple Fest, Oktoberfest and Festival of Colors that attracted plenty of graduate students during last two months. Political events included two debate watch parties that included dinner at the Inn Complete, both of which were well attended. Social event included a Tea Party that featured the discussion on Child Care Policy for graduate students and was attended by the Executive Director of Syracuse University Advance Marie Garland and several graduate student parents.