

Cornell Graduate and Professional Student Assembly 2005–2006 Annual Report

Approved by the GPSA, February 27, 2006

Introduction

The Graduate and Professional Student Assembly (GPSA) brings together Cornell's 6,000 graduate and professional students to represent our common interests. The GPSA consists of two governing bodies: 19 voting members referred to as the "Assembly", and a larger body, the Council of Representatives, which is charged with electing the Assembly voting members and subsequently providing advice and feedback. The members of the Council of Representatives consists of at least one representative from each Graduate School field of study, as well as representatives from each Ithaca-campus professional school. This report describes the major actions of the GPSA in the past year, and then highlights the most important issues that we continue to work on.

Actions

Addition of two Assembly seats reserved for Masters Degree students

In the spring of 2005, the GPSA amended its charter to add two Assembly voting-member seats that are reserved for graduate students who are in a Masters degree program and are not part of a professional school. Although the rest of the graduate student members of the Assembly are elected in the spring, the masters-degree members are elected in the fall. The GPSA believed these masters-degree students to be under-represented in the Assembly, in part because holding spring elections for the following year made it impossible or difficult for students in one- or two-year programs to participate.

Pay and Benefits Survey Report

The GPSA Pay and Benefits committee, in collaboration with the Graduate School, and with the International Students and Scholars Office, conducted a survey of all graduate and professional students in the spring of 2005, achieving a response rate of 40% of the total graduate and professional student population. The full report is available on the GPSA website. Important results of the survey include:

- Of the graduate/professional students who live off-campus (87% of all graduate/professional students), 57% said that they did so because on-campus housing was too expensive.
- When asked to rank their priorities for "areas in need of improvement", graduate students overwhelming selected stipends as the highest priority, followed by health insurance, dental insurance, and housing. Professional students, however, gave health insurance a higher priority than stipends.
- 20% of all graduate/professional students commute to campus by car, 34% commute by bus, and 36% walk. Transportation was a very popular topic in the free-response portion of the survey.
- The average annual after-tax stipend reported by graduate students with stipends was \$14,300, slightly below the "Living Wage" for Tompkins County as calculated by the Alternatives Federal Credit Union. There are a number of reasons to believe that this value is an under-estimate, including the fact that it is below the Graduate School's mandatory 9-month minimum stipend. The GPSA Pay and Benefits Committee has identified this as an issue requiring further investigation.

Activities Fee Recommendation: \$68 per student per year

The GPSA first adopted its recommendation for the '06-'08 Graduate and Professional Student Activities Fee (GPSAF) in November 2005. However, at its January meeting, the GPSAF by-line funding of \$5.60 for the GPSA account was deemed a violation of the GPSA Charter by majority vote of the Assembly, and the GPSA therefore revised its activities fee recommendation, reducing the GPSA by-line to \$2.60 and the total activities fee to \$68 instead of the original \$70. The details of this process and its outcome are described in two letters to the President of the University, dated Dec. '05 and Feb.'06, respectively, which are available on the GPSA web-site.

The activities fee decision this year was made extremely difficult by a last minute request for funding from the Slope Day Programming Board, which had not followed the usual procedures for obtaining byline funding from the GPSAF. Faced with a threat to exclude graduate and professional students from Slope Day, the Assembly originally voted narrowly to add \$3 per student to its own operating budget for '06-'08 in order to give future years' Assemblies the ability to negotiate to protect the interests of the minority of graduate/professional students who regularly attend Slope Day. This \$3 addition was ultimately found to be a violation of the GPSA charter. The GPSA suspects that the number of graduate/professional students who are interested in Slope Day festivities is significantly lower than that suggested by the Slope Day Programming Board, but we will continue to work with the Slope Day Programming Board to find ways of contributing to the event that will be acceptable to our constituents.

Issues

Request for the establishment of an off-campus housing office.

The GPSA is currently considering a resolution requesting the establishment of an Off-Campus Housing Office, as recommended by the Off-Campus Housing Task Force in May '05. The Campus Life office does provide some off-campus housing related services, including listings of apartment complexes and rental vacancies. However, Campus Life is unable to meet the critical need for assistance and advice on the legal issues inherent in renting. We understand that the administration has been working to establish such an office, but has not yet found funding for it. We urge the University to complete the process of establishing an office-campus housing office that provides mediation and conflict resolution services as soon as possible.

Childcare

The GPSA has a long history of advocacy on behalf of the 8% of graduate students with children, and the GPSA commends the University and the Graduate School for a great deal of recent progress in this area, ranging from childcare grants, to family leave policy, to changing tables in the Big Red Barn graduate student center. The most important missing piece is availability of childcare on and near the Cornell campus.

Improvements to the student health insurance plan

The University is currently in the process of accepting bids for the Student Health Insurance Plan. The GPSA has asked the Student Insurance Advisory Committee to consider the following requests during its vendor-selection process:

- Increase the maximum annual prescription drug benefit. 5% of all students, and probably a larger fraction of graduate/professional students, are affected by this annual maximum. A one-in-twenty chance of exceeding this cap represents a substantial financial risk for students with incomes in the \$10,000 – \$20,000 range.
- Increase or eliminate the lifetime cap on physical therapy office visits. The current cap may be appropriate for students who are at Cornell for only four years, but it becomes a significant

constraint for those who are at Cornell longer, especially undergrads who remain at Cornell for graduate school.

- Improve services for graduate students who are located at Geneva, NY. In most cases, Geneva students must drive an hour to reach Gannett Health Center in Ithaca in order to receive routine medical care. We have suggested that Geneva's Hobart College health system be added to the health plan as a primary network provider.

Housing, Transportation and Parking

The challenge and expense of getting onto the Cornell campus is increasingly discouraging graduate/professional students from coming to campus except when absolutely necessary. This phenomenon tends to isolate graduate students from the rest of the Cornell community. In spring '05, the University undertook, at the initiative of student-elected-trustee Josh Katcher, a survey of student attitudes regarding fees. In this survey, graduate/professional students ranked parking as the fee of highest concern. Meanwhile, vacancies in on-campus graduate/professional student housing are increasing, a phenomenon which the previously described Pay and Benefits Survey suggests is likely related to issues of affordability. The pilot program of free bus passes begins to address the issue of affordability, but many graduate students need to travel to and from campus at hours when bus service is not available. Vet-school students are the most dramatic example of a population not effectively served by public transit. Over 85% of these students purchase parking permits, a rate which was unchanged when student parking prices were doubled in 2002, according to data from Cornell's Department of Transportation. This parking fee increase is routinely raised as an undue burden on the vet students, who are predominantly supported by loans, and who need reliable parking access due to their on-call schedules.

The GPSA is currently collaborating with other campus governance bodies as well as the Cornell's department of Transportation to develop the Parking and Transportation Referendum mandated by the "Redbuds" agreement of July 2005. We applaud the University for undertaking the Transportation Generic Environment Impact Study, and we will work to ensure that this study adequately measures the needs of the graduate/professional student population and important sub-populations thereof. We are confident that the University takes campus transportation seriously, and we hope that it will devote the resources necessary to make getting to campus easier, rather than simply maintaining the status quo in the face of the current construction boom.

Student-Elected Trustee seat for Graduate/Professional Students

The GPSA is aware of the difficulties involved in adjusting the student-elected seats on the Board of Trustees. There has been a strong effort in the past couple of years to support graduate students who are interested in serving in this exciting capacity, and we have been thrilled with the advocacy that graduate student Doug Mitarotonda has undertaken for all students in his role as the 2005-2007 student-elected trustee. Most of the issues of concern to graduate and professional students are very different than those of concern to undergraduate students. With another strong graduate student candidate running for the elected trustee position this year, it is entirely possible that the board would be left without an undergraduate voice, a situation which both the Board and the undergraduate student community would find undesirable. We maintain that having no graduate or professional student on the Board is equally undesirable, pointing towards the need for guaranteed representation for both constituencies. We hope that the board will continue to consider ways to meet this need.