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Cornell GPSA

Graduate & Professional Student Assembly

<http://www.cornellgpsa.com/>

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Monday, February 20, 2012

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It has been a long-standing tradition that, at the March meeting of the Cornell Board of Trustees, the Presidents of the Graduate and Professional Student Assembly (GPSA) and the Student Assembly (SA) are invited to submit both a written report and give an oral presentation. As President of the GPSA, it is my honor and privilege to present the following report, informing the Board both of our actions over the past few months, as well as highlighting some future directions.

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Charter Revisions

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On May 14, 2011, the GPSA concluded a significant updating and revision of its Charter and By-laws. I wish to highlight one in particular in this context, namely the change in meeting structure. When the GPSA first came into existence as a separate Assembly, it was divided into two bodies: a Council of Representatives the Assembly itself, the voting and decision-making body. In Fall 2009, this distinction was blurred when the two bodies were merged into one Assembly. There were thus seven public meetings per semester, alternating between discussion with all members, and business with just voting members. Unfortunately, this system created an unnecessary hierarchical feeling, and meant that a significant portion of discussion meetings was spent updating the Advisory Body on the actions taken by the Voting Council at the previous business meeting. In May, we abandoned the distinction between the two meeting types: we now simply have seven meetings per semester, to which all members are invited to attend, in line with the other Cornell assemblies. In my opinion, this change has been enormously successful. It has improved the sense of diversity and inclusion, and we strive to make the meetings an open forum for all to share their thoughts and concerns. The new charter also refers now to “Voting Members” and “Field Representatives,” emphasizing the more clearly defined roles of each group.

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Graduate and Professional Student Activity Fee (2012–14)

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The largest task this past semester was the setting and allocation of the Graduate and Professional Student Activity Fee, over \$1 million, allocated over two years to 12 byline-funded organizations and nearly 300 graduate and professional student clubs. The Assembly was able to draw on the work of last year’s survey committee, who worked diligently throughout the 2010–11 academic year to prepare, run and analyze a survey of unprecedented rigor. Indeed, much of the information contained in this survey is collected nowhere else. The most significant component of the survey concerned usage of activity fee-funded organizations, and the Appropriations Committee drew on this extensively. Combined with numerous stakeholder meetings, the Committee, under the excellent and experienced leadership of chair Christoffer Heckman, prepared an extraordinarily thorough and well-informed recommendation.

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2 This recommendation was presented to the Assembly, in town-hall format, at our meeting on Octo-
3 ber 31. This was followed by the acceptance of the recommendation, on a line-by-line basis, on No-
4 vember 14. Resolution 6, containing the unchanged appropriations recommendation, was offered to
5 the Assembly on November 21. Most items were uncontroversial, with the exception of funding for
6 Slope Day. This organization, currently funded at \$3.07 requested a 95% increase to \$6.00, to
7 which our appropriations committee responded with a recommendation of \$3.50, an increase of
8 14%. (This was their largest recommended increase for any returning applicant.) Slope Day coun-
9 tered by saying that a minimum of \$4.50 was required, or they would turn down byline funding and
10 charge graduate and professional students at the alumni rate of \$25 each. Ultimately, the Assembly
11 recommended \$3.50, passing the unamended appropriations recommendation unanimously.
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13 This should not at all be read as a lack of appreciation for the value of Slope Day to the Cornell
14 community. Indeed, roughly a quarter of graduate and professional students typically attend, most
15 stay for at least an hour, and report that they are satisfied. However, I think it reflects the fact that
16 graduate and professional students, in general, have a slightly different vision for the event, one that
17 does not necessarily include a large concert in the form we currently see. At the moment, the SDPB
18 has not yet decided whether to turn down the allocation, and discussions are ongoing. We very
19 much understand their concerns about revenue and the GPSA has pledged to consider the possibility
20 of discounted tickets next semester.
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22 **Fall 2011 Resolutions**

23 In the fall, the Assembly passed seven resolutions; I wish to single out two resolutions in particular.
24 Passed on October 17, Resolution 4 expressed the GPSA's unanimous support to Cornell's bid to
25 construct a Tech Campus in New York City. Not only were members excited about the near term
26 potential for the campus to be a driver of innovation and a start-up incubator, but also about future
27 potential for activities in the arts and humanities. Initially, possible concern was expressed about a
28 new campus detracting from the excellent work already taking place here in Ithaca. The Board of
29 Trustees also expressed this same concern, and assurances were made that philanthropic efforts for an
30 NYC campus would not impinge upon development and capital projects in Ithaca. In so doing, the
31 only significant objection was addressed. This resolution was, I believe, an example of the kind of
32 productive and constructive engagement with the administration the Assembly strives for.
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34 On November 21, the GPSA passed a resolution calling for the development of an award to recog-
35 nize excellence in the teaching, advising and mentoring of graduate and professional students. To my
36 knowledge, an award of this nature, given by the students themselves, on a campus-wide basis, is un-
37 precedented; I'm excited for the first such ceremony in the spring semester. This resolution demon-
38 strates the importance of taking ownership over one's own education. Through what is sure to be a
39 fascinating debate, the ad hoc committee will establish criteria for this award, and in so doing, con-
40 tinue an important dialogue between faculty and graduate/professional students about curriculum,
41 teaching, learning, assessment, advising and mentoring. As demonstrated in the recently-released Na-
42 tional Research Council rankings, Cornell is already a center of excellence in graduate education, but
43 by working together, we can do even more.
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1 **GPSA Finance Commission**

2 In FY 2011, the Graduate and Professional Student Assembly Finance Commission (GPSAFC) has
3 received requests from an unprecedented number of graduate/professional student groups for an un-
4 precedented total dollar amount. As recently as two and a half years ago, in the spring of 2008, the
5 GPSAFC was running a roughly \$100,000 surplus, and now, for the first time in recent memory, we
6 will allocate all available funds this fiscal year. This is by no means a bad thing: in an ideal world, we
7 very much want the money intended for student groups to be spent on all the various activities, both
8 academic and social, that contribute to a vibrant environment for graduate and professional students.
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10 This dramatic change, we believe, is a result of cost shifting. The economic difficulties of 2008 obvi-
11 ously had an adverse effect on Cornell’s operating budget and over the past two years, these have
12 gradually made their way down to the individual department level. Services for graduate and profes-
13 sional students that were formerly supported by departments—both academic and non-academic—
14 are now coming before the GPSAFC. In April 2011 alone, when we evaluate most of the requests for
15 FY12, roughly \$310,000 was requested, or about \$20,000 more than our projected revenue of
16 \$290,000; we ultimately allocated \$190,000 at that time.
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18 In November, the GPSA leadership worked with the Office of the Assemblies to adjust the amount
19 of funds in reserve, and as a result, has been able to satisfactorily meet all December funding requests,
20 with enough left over for two meetings in the spring semester. Going forward, the Assembly plans to
21 take a careful look over its funding guidelines, with an eye to making sure that any possible redun-
22 dancy is reduced, collaboration is encouraged, expenses are properly documented, and ineligible ex-
23 penses are clarified. The commission, under the leadership of Mia Tootill, is to be commended for
24 their excellent work in ensuring the fair and equitable distribution of graduate and professional stu-
25 dent funds to nearly 300 registered organizations.
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27 **Communications, Advocacy and Programming**

28 Our Communications Committee, under the leadership of Steven An, has been engaged this semes-
29 ter in the production of a biweekly newsletter, the only one of its kind for all graduate and profes-
30 sional students at Cornell. So far, they have published ten issues. We are extraordinarily pleased that,
31 as of February 2012, the GPSA is able to send this clearly organized, professional and relevant news-
32 letter to all enrolled graduate and professional students. Indeed, we see this kind of service as a neces-
33 sary one in the task of community building, always a unique challenge for a constituency engaged in
34 work that can often be both solitary and isolating.
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36 The GPSA’s Student Advocacy Committee, under the leadership of Rebecca Robbins, worked espe-
37 cially hard to conduct “Dine and Discuss” on December 5. The event attracted a diverse group of 75
38 graduate and professional students, and key health administrators to listen to Vice President Susan
39 Murphy, enjoy a meal, come together and discuss issues surrounding mental health. After dinner,
40 individual tables, with the help of a facilitator and notetaker, conducted focus groups. These data
41 will be compiled in the coming weeks, and will help inform both the GPSA and the administration,
42 as we deal with this most important issue.
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44 As part of the charter changes discussed above, our Events Committee is being spun off into a sepa-

1 rate Graduate and Professional Student Programming Board (GPSPB). Under this change, they will
2 see their budget doubled, allowing them to do even more as the sole student organization at Cornell
3 tasked with providing social programming for all graduate and professional students. Last semester,
4 under the leadership of Yan-Jiun “YJ” Chen, they ran thirteen highly successful events. This semester,
5 they turn their attention to the annual Grad Ball, in addition to several other, smaller events.
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7 **Spring 2012**

8 With the activity fee debate concluded, the Assembly has high hopes for an engaging and productive
9 spring semester. We will continue working on the issues surrounding graduate/professional mental
10 health, and the different ways existing services can be targeted to this population, as well as discus-
11 sion of additional resources, if necessary. We will also take up the revision of our mandates for by-
12 line-funded organizations and seek to streamline the guidelines for FC-funded groups.
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14 So far, we have passed two resolutions, the second of which I will highlight here. Passed unanimous-
15 ly on January 23, Resolution 9 recommends to the Board of Trustees that you permanently adopt
16 the division of student trustee elections such that graduates run in even years and undergraduates
17 run in odd years. That the resolution was also passed by the Student Assembly signifies a wide-
18 spread agreement that this division has been highly successful, and we look forward to future
19 grad/undergrad collaboration.
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21 Respectfully submitted,
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