**Building an Inclusive, Integrated & Interdisciplinary Community**

*Introduction*

One of the primary recommendations of the 2007 GCI was that “Cornell explore options for integrating the graduate and professional student experience,” by expanding opportunities for cross-departmental collaboration and student development.” Cornell University can and should support the development of a diverse and vibrant intellectual community on campus. Graduate and professional students should be encouraged to be well-rounded and engaged with the broader Cornell community, as well as the local and global community. Engaged and active students are not only better scholars, but better citizens of the world. As was stated in the 2007 GCI, integrating the diverse and intellectually-engaged community of graduate and professional students into the wider whole at Cornell can only serve to energize our campus. The challenges of building such an integrated community are multi-faceted and complex, which touch on many different aspects of the graduate and professional student experience.

There are two ways to possible ways to look at the benefits of supporting the development of an inclusive, integrated and interdisciplinary community. The first is that increasing the social connectedness between students, by encouraging students to achieve balance in their lives, can serve as an important means to improve the mental health and well-being. A second approach recognizes a major opportunity for the academic mission of Cornell University: an engaged interdisciplinary community can serve as a platform for the open-minded and interdisciplinary exchange of ideas and, ultimately, collaboration. Cornell University’s strategic plan emphasized the importance of “connectivity” across diverse colleges, schools, and programs by “developing new integrations, boundary-crossing structures, and productive synergies”[[1]](#footnote-1).

Interdisciplinary collaboration is one of the best indicators of a healthy academic and intellectual environment at a university. Graduate students are very often the intellectual links crossing between departments and labs, benefiting from the flexible committee structure at Cornell to work on innovative and interdisciplinary research projects. However program requirements vary, graduate and professional students are not always encouraged to participate in activities or research projects outside of their fields or departments. In extreme cases, the demands of their coursework, research and teaching commitments means that students are unsupported and sometimes explicitly discouraged from participating in activities that may serve to develop their intellectual or personal breadth.

The reality is that the personal and professional benefits of an integrated and engaged community are not independent of each other. Fostering connections between graduate and professional students across schools and fields promotes not only lasting friendships, but also professional and academic relationships. Furthermore, graduate and professional student alumni who strongly identify with their experience at Cornell could prove to be generous donorsto the University. Indeed, international graduate and professional students, who are less likely to have strong allegiances to their undergraduate institution, are an untapped source of engaged alumni. Thus, a strategic approach to the development of the graduate and professional community on campus represents an opportunity.

**Objective 1: Improve opportunities for meaningful interactions and interdisciplinary collaboration across the broad graduate and professional student community**

*Rationale*: Students consistently indicate that their most meaningful relationships developed from interactions that required them to work together in some capacity, whether it was on an assignment in a course, on a research project, or as members of a team. Ice breakers, networking and casual social events are important, but following up with people that one meets in these superficial interactions can be difficult and awkward.

Actions:

1. Increase opportunities, through coursework and programming, for graduate and professional students to use their unique skills and interests to work collaboratively on interdisciplinary academic, professional, and outreach endeavors.
2. Identify ways to incentivize students and faculty to develop novel and innovative partnerships and collaborations.
3. Tailor the programming and marketing of existing service and outreach programs, such as the Center for Community Engaged Learning & Research, Cornell Cooperative Extension, and Cornell Public Service Center to appeal to graduate and professional students.
4. Increase opportunities for research graduate students to present their work to a wide audience in a casual setting, such as Ted-style talks or Nerd Nights.
5. Improve opportunities within departments for graduate and professional students to interact with faculty, including visiting speakers.

**Objective 2: Support programming, events and activities that encourage social cohesion, connectedness, and communication**

*Rationale*: In recent years, there has been a marked improvement in the development of and communication about graduate and professional student-focused social programming. The creation of Graduate and Professional Student Programming Board (GPSPB) as a GPSA Activity Fee Byline Funded University organization[[2]](#footnote-2) has also led to an increase in the ability of graduate and professional students to develop social and wellness programming for the broad community. During the 2012-2014 funding cycle, the GPSPB received $2.00 per student—a substantial increase in budget from previous years, when the organization was a committee of the GPSA. Furthermore, in Spring 2012, the GPSA accomplished a long-standing goal: the ability to email all students on an opt-out basis. The first edition of the GPSA Buzz, a well-written and high quality newsletter-format mailing, went out to 6,000+ students on February 19, 2012. However, there is substantial room for improvement. Many students are still unaware of many events occurring on campus and there remains a lack of a coherent sense of community identity for graduate and professional students on campus.

Actions:

1. Continue to improve communication about on-going programming and events
2. Improve communication between student organizations on campus, encouraging broad participation and co-sponsorship events
3. Include a graduate student organization fair in Orientation to increase awareness about the many student efforts on campus.
4. In the design and construction of the replacement for the Maplewood Housing complex, consider ways to create a vibrant scholarly residential communities, emphasizing community spaces interdisciplinary scholarly communities

**Objective 3: Support and encourage student development and personal growth**

*Rationale*:

Actions:

1. Develop supportive mentorship networks
   1. Among different cohorts of graduate and professional students,
   2. Between graduate and professional students and undergraduates,
   3. Between graduate and professional students and faculty, and
   4. Between graduate and professional students and alumni.
2. Reward and recognize students for outstanding commitment to development, engagement and service
   1. Support university-wide awards for outstanding artistic or athletic achievement, public engagement and outreach, campus leadership, and teaching, etc.
   2. Encourage fields to recognize extraordinary commitment to intellectual and personal breadth
3. Encourage faculty to have supportive conversations with students about work-life balance, outreach, and personal growth and development.

**Objective 4: Improve integration and communication across departments and units**

*Rationale*: Cornell University’s strategic plan called for the development of “stronger connections across colleges to enhance educational opportunities for students.” This needs to be felt on the graduate and professional student level, with better integration of information about seminars, workshops, and courses that would be of interest to students in a wide variety of fields. In addition, more can be done to recruit graduate and professional students in such efforts, empowering students to take an active role in their education and providing unique professional development opportunities.

Actions:

1. Increase faculty and departmental support for active graduate and professional student involvement in developing cross-disciplinary programming, such as journal clubs, interdisciplinary events and conferences, and cross-departmental social functions.
2. Support departmental efforts to maintain updated websites to advertise seminar schedules and courses.
3. Generate easy ways for individuals across campus to sign up to receive emails about events going on across campus that may be of interest to them.

1. <http://www.cornell.edu/strategicplan/docs/060410-strategic-plan-final.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://assembly.cornell.edu/GPSA/20110418R9> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)