Graduate Student Senate

Senate Meeting
Thursday September 12 2013
Campus Center 163C

Minutes

Present:
Officers: Robin Anderson, Ghazah Abbasi
Staff: Srinivas Lankala, Stefanie Robles, Tim Sutton, Craig Bidiman.
Others: John McCarthy, Dean of the Graduate School; David Vaillancourt, Associate Dean of Students.

The meeting was called to order at 1.05 PM. Robin Anderson welcomed the students and senators-elect asked everyone to introduce themselves. Maureen Gallagher proposed to approve the minutes of the last meeting and Dani O’Brien seconded. The minutes were approved unanimously.

Ghazah Abbasi welcomed and congratulated the newly elected senators and explained the online nominations and elections process. Anna-Claire Simpson asked how many senators each department was entitled to and Ghazah explained that a department was entitled to one senator for every 50 students or part thereof, so that a department with 50 students would elect one senator, a department with 51-100 would elect 2 and so on. Dani asked if they were elected in January 2013, whether their term would run for one year or a semester. Ghazah said each academic year is seen as a new term so they would have to be elected again in the Fall. Ghazah then explained the childcare application process and encouraged all present to spread the word to grad students with children.

Robin said the meeting could break for a few minutes for food, and invited the staff to introduce themselves. Srinivas, Stefanie, Tim and Craig introduced themselves and the work they do. Craig also announced upcoming events including the family event and the ice skating event in October.

Robin then explained why the current slate of officers ran for office and their plans for the current year. These include: collaboration with undergraduates through the SGA, because they are the main focus of the university but also because they are good organizers and are affected by the same issues as grad students; collaboration with GEO; expansion of graduate student representation on the Board of Trustees. Ghazah continued and said issues she would focus on for this year include: grad student housing and family housing, funding issues in departments, international student issues (together with GEO), healthcare issues with UHS and SHIP changes including expanding benefits, working
with the graduate school on issues of professional development and academic progress, and chairing the organizing committee within GSS. She was also looking to expand the role of the senators and grad students at large in university governance, working more closely with the faculty senate and encouraging more communication between the senate, grad students, officers and staff.

Robin said one of the goals of this meeting was to hear about objectives and goals that the senators have for the senate, and for their own departments. He asked senators and students present to take some time to write down issues in their departments that they would like the senate to take up. After five minutes, he asked all present to read out the issues that they had and wrote the issues on the blackboard.

Wendy Dagle from Public Policy said communication with new students about assistantships would be helpful. She said isolation of the students within the program was also an issue.

Mike Clauss from Linguistics seconded the point about isolation within the department and said more outreach to younger grad students would be helpful.

Gina Ocasion from English said more funding, expansion of grants, travel funds and summer funding were big issues. She also agreed that isolation was a problem and said one way to improve interaction across the campus would be to gather information about all the talks and seminars on campus in a central place and find ways to increase interdisciplinary conversation.

Xueting Jiang from Management said the lack of writing workshops is an issue because the existing Writing Center is only geared for help with undergraduate writing.

John McCarthy responded to say that the Graduate School has hired an advanced grad student to organize writing workshops. On the issue of travel grants, he said that the grad school gives block grants to departments, and has tripled the amounts this year.

Katrina Rieger from Chemical Engineering also said greater interdisciplinarity and ending isolation, especially in terms of interacting outside the engineering school was an issue. She said an introduction to the patent office, business office, etc. would also be very useful for grad students looking for non-academic careers; and more information about soft skills, especially in writing, public speaking and teaching skills other than what is involved in the TA work would be a big help.

Alexandra Prince from Art History said that the space in Bartlett Hall has many problems, including badly designed classrooms, no airconditioning and a general deterioration of the building.

Maureen Gallagher from German, said that isolation, in equity and lack of transparency in funding within the department were major issues. She also said international students in the department faced many problems especially in terms of their ineligibility for
research grants. Inadequate teaching support for TA’s, lack of office space and technology issues in classrooms in Herter were also some other issues.

Dani O’Brien from TECS also agreed that isolation was an issue and said there was a lack of communication even within the School of Education, a lack of student representation in faculty meetings and decision making and a lack of any grad student space, such as office or meeting spaces in Furcolo.

Julie Rose from Philosophy said there was no teaching training for TA’s and TO’s except for informal guidance from professors and no information on things such as preparing teaching portfolios. She said there was a need for seminars on topics such as syllabus construction and classroom techniques. Ghazah mentioned that the Center for Teaching has hired a TA to specifically assist grad students with teaching guidance. John McCarthy clarified that Rachel, the TA, is employed by the graduate school and added that her role is to guide grad students with their teaching issues. He said the Graduate School does want to build up a culture of more TA training within the departments. Katrina asked how to get in touch or more info about the teaching programs. John McCarthy said they will be posted when the events are scheduled.

Ragini Malhotra from Sociology said increased TO loads were a problem in sociology as was the lack of teacher training before TO allocation, and the expectation to teach in the third year when grad students are also expected to write comps papers. Cassandra Rodriguez from Sociology added that this expectation to be a TO was now starting even earlier than that in previous years. Ghazah explained that this expectation started two years ago as a one-off change to offset faculty absences that particular semester, but has now become a standard expectation.

John McCarthy said all these issues seem to be mainly about asking for support and the Graduate School owes it to the students to provide these services. Robin summarized the common issues as asking for teaching and professional support, ending isolation and providing opportunities for more dialogue across campus and opportunities for interdisciplinarity. Ghazah said it was really important to bring these issues out and to continue this conversation within the senate and also with the Graduate School and other bodies in the university. She said Katrina’s point about the need for professional development is a real need for STEM departments and that she has been talking to GWIS (Graduate Women in STEM) about professional development initiatives.

Announcements: Robin said having slots for other organizations would now be a permanent thing on the agenda to increase collaboration, although he said this time only GEO representatives were present.

Anna Waltman from GEO introduced herself and the collaboration with GSS. She spoke about the issues GEO is working on: delayed paycheck issues, housing issues for grads, more collaboration with IPO to ensure proper support for international students. She added that this year was especially difficult because GEO has lost half its staff positions, including organizer positions. She said some of the issues that were mentioned earlier
such as problems with space and facilities in Bartlett and Furcolo could be considered contract violations and invited affected students to stop by the office to discuss the issues.

David Vaillancourt mentioned that the Graduate School has an emergency loan program that could be helpful in dealing with the delay in paychecks and explained the procedure to apply. About the issues of isolation across campus, he said that the support services for grad students exist but they are scattered around the campus. He said he would like to send out emails to all students about services or activities that are helpful but added that he does not know if emails are really effective for communicating with grad students. Katrina said that having the information on a website like the department or grad school is more helpful than getting frequent emails. Maureen agreed and said that e-mails are sometimes repetitive, so it’s difficult to keep track of information through them. David said that since everyone saw themselves as primarily belonging to their department or program, it would be easier and more effective to reach grad students through the departments. John McCarthy provided an example and said that the e-mail about the $1000 writing grants that went out today, was sent to the GPD, the administrative staff and the students directly and it may have been forwarded among them multiple times, so that ‘s why it may seem repetitive. Mike Clauss said that senators also have an important role to play in publicizing the information in their departments.

Dani O’Brien asked if senators can have access to the listserv of the grad students in their departments. David said that he can set up a listserv for a GSO in the dept so one solution could be to form an Education GSO and create an e-mail list that way. Ghzah said some depts, like sociology, already have grad student listservs maybe you can set one up in education. Katrina said that is how it works in Chem. Engineering as well.

Robin announced that there would be yoga sessions for grad students from today in the CC terrace, weather permitting.

Sarah Mathena from Anthropology said that there was one other important issue which was that student conference organizers have to pay UMass Campus Center and catering services a lot of money for organizing conferences. She said it might be a good idea to reconsider this policy. John McCarthy said that a GSO can also ask the Graduate School for money for conferences. Robin added that other funding sources include ECSA grant and GSS. He said that the GSS is going to collaborate with SGA to talk to CC and SU administration about expanding accessibility to CC space since the SU complex was built with student money originally. There was a committee to manage this space earlier which had student participation but it is defunct. He said the GSS may also try to revive this committee.

Dani pointed out that Robert’s Rules of Order were a barrier for these meetings last year because they are too formal and structured, and she asked if GSS might consider using other rules of order. Robin agreed that they can be constraining but said they are also very effective for smooth progress of the meeting. There has to be open discussion around these rules but we can strike a balance to use it for official business. He said the GSS by-laws also stipulate the usage of Robert’s Rules. Ragini agreed with Dani that
these rules are really alienating and uncomfortable for many participants. Dani said the Democratic rules of order might be useful, and perhaps the senate can change the stipulation in the bylaws. Robin said that the senate will be setting up an ad hoc committee for changing bylaws in the next meeting and said this can be brought up in that committee. Anna Waltman mentioned that GEO has a info sheet for rules of order that is very useful in GEO meetings and offered to forward it to the senate. David Vaillancourt said Robert’s Rules are useful in fighting the tyranny of one, but they have to be used appropriately and pointed out that the speaker can always suspend the rules in certain situations to allow a less structured conversation. Robin said that the senate can look at other models as well, and added that the conversation can continue in the next meeting and in the bylaws committee.

Ghazah moved to adjourn the meeting and Dani seconded. The meeting was adjourned at 2.35 PM.