Present:
Officers: Robin Anderson, Ghazah Abbasi, Adina Giannelli
Staff: Craig Bidiman, Stefanie Robles
Others: David Vaillancourt (Associate Dean of Students), Samantha Sterba (GSS Vice President-Elect)

Robin Anderson called the meeting to order at 1:04PM.

The minutes of the meeting of November 14, 2013 were approved with 22 votes and 2 abstentions.

VP Election Report: Ghazah Abbasi provided updates on the Special Election for GSS Vice President, in which 291 graduate students voted. Samantha Sterba, a PhD student in Economics, won the election with 143 votes (49.14% of total). The other candidates were Avery Furst, who received 107 votes (36.76%), and Danielle Allessio, who earned 30 votes (13.05%).

Robin Anderson initiated discussion on how to better reach graduate students within and beyond senators’ departments. Robin noted that GSS officers and staff are willing to attend GSO and department meetings, as appropriate. On a senator’s question, Robin noted that only ½-2/3 of departments are represented by senators in GSS. Joy Jansen, a Senator from English, suggested GSS officer attendance at EGO meetings and its annual conference. Robin Anderson noted the importance of fostering relationships between the senate and departmental organizations. A senator asked how GSS would reach out to departments that don’t have GSOs. Juan Manuel Ruiz-Hau reflected that he shares information with his department via email as a means of constituency outreach, and inquired whether senators from other departments do the same. Another senator reflected that his department has a GSO, but that the most effective way to conduct outreach is internally.

Travis Salley (Music) suggested that it’s not the job of GSS Executive Committee to collect information, but that senators need to gather data on their constituents’ needs and report these back to the Senate. Travis called for volunteers or appointments, or a group
of people who represent all of the departments that don’t have senators, so these departments are aware of what’s going on.

Gina Occasion (English) commented that it is the job of senators to share information within their departments, but a greater web presence that is more visible, perhaps on the main UMass website, so that graduate students can access information about who their senators are and how to reach them. Robin Anderson concurred with Gina’s suggestion, and noted that requests have been made to put GSS information on the Student Affairs website as well as the Graduate School website. Associate Dean David Vaillancourt noted that University Media and Relations controls the content of the UMass website.

Jared Starr, Senator from Environmental Conservation, noted his own experience, as a representative of a department that previously had no representation and very limited knowledge of the role and function of GSS; the department now has an active graduate student organization. Starr suggested that for next year it will be critical to engage in significant outreach to attract interest in serving as a senator. Ghazah Abbasi concurred with Starr’s remarks, and noted the challenges of increasing participation, outlining the process of GSS in terms of broadening and deepening engagement with and representation of departments. A new senator from a department that has historically had no representation notes that senators can reach out to students in other departments who they know.

Travis Salley noted that one possible solution is to vote to restructure constituencies, so that departments that do not have representation can be represented by another graduate student within the school. Robin Anderson noted as a point of information that the type of change Travis proposes would require a change to the GSS Constitution, which is not inconceivable, but which would require a considerable process, and one that the Senate should consider thoughtfully. Robin reported willingness to engage in these conversations in the future, assuming senator interest.

Kathryn Accurso noted that it is important to determine why departments aren’t represented, and suggests that concerns of organizational illegitimacy may play a role. Garrett Gowen reflected that lack of a central means of communication / information dissemination is a critical problem here, and one that GSS should engage in collaboration with other groups on campus. Ian Coupal (Food Science), the first Senator from his department, noted that growth is a result of GSS outreach, but that fellow graduate students from his department perceived involvement in GSS as a waste of time. Juan Manuel Ruiz-Hau noted the importance of information dissemination via students, and noted that students within his department (who may be interested in the very issues GSS engages) elect not to participate on account of feasibility or scheduling. Ian Coupal noted that students also have course scheduling conflicts that may inhibit participation.

A senator from Geosciences noted that he is unsure if his department is better off in view of representation within GSS, and asked the GSS President to articulate the benefits of involvement. Associate Dean David Vaillancourt suggested that the more robust the Senate is in terms of disciplinary participation, the stronger the collective voice of grad
students would be in larger university bodies. Tim Sutton (Communication) acknowledged the Geosciences senator’s point, and noted several issues and campaigns around which GSS is organizing in the Spring.

Ghazah Abbasi reflected that it takes time for GSS to establish a solid relationship with some departments, and for these departments to organize themselves through a GSO. Ghazah noted that in her understanding, the real role of the Senate is for graduate students to understand the issues we face in broader contexts, and that the Senate allows for graduate students to ally with one another and make connections across locations and experiences. Faune Albert (English) echoed Ghazah’s comments, noting that her department has a robust history of participation in GSS, and a very active grad organization. The sentiment within the department is that it’s important to have voices within the Senate to report back to the rest of the graduate students within the department. Stefanie Robles (GWN Coordinator) noted the importance of graduate student representation within university-wide committees.

A senator noted that some constituents have discussed the concern of paying for campus gym membership, which might be an issue for GSS to explore. Robin Anderson noted that it is important to coalesce around issues that cut across departments and disciplines, explaining that undergraduates may express pushback (as their gym membership is not “free”, but paid for by a universal student fee). Ragini Saira Malhotra (Sociology) noted that GEO members receive an $80 reimbursement for gym membership annually. Craig Bidiman (GSS staff) articulated the option of joining an alternative gym on campus that is low-cost, primarily inhabited by faculty and staff, and relatively underused.

Joy Jansen (English) pointed out the necessity of identifying common objectives and overarching goals for semester, in the interest of ensuring that everyone is on the same page.

Organizing Committee Update: Tim Sutton noted the importance of continuing this conversation in the context of the organizing committee, and reported that the organizing committee met earlier this week, and discussed many of the same issues addressed today, including a more robust web presence and a resource page on issues of pedagogy, lesson planning, etc. Another suggestion raised was a “group therapy” session among TAs and TOs to discuss classroom occurrences, as well a group from comparative literature interested in launching a magazine journal and reading group on critical and radical pedagogy. Juan Manuel Ruiz-Hau questioned whether the Organizing Committee has engaged with the Graduate School’s Office of Professional Development at all in their efforts.

Staff and Senator Updates: Craig Bidiman announced the Grad Voice digital storytelling initiative. He encouraged participation of senators, and noted that he has distributed informational cards and will be available subsequent to the meeting for discussion.
Joe Sapp noted that the Senator handbook that GSS distributed last year was very useful, and suggested that GSS update and redistribute it, along with David Vaillancourt’s handout on parliamentary procedure.

Ghazah Abbasi announced that childcare awards this semester were very delayed, and awards were processed and awarded on November 21. Ghazah noted that mid-October is traditionally an ideal time for award allocation; award allocation is a very involved process, and she expressed her intention to work closely with incoming Vice President Samantha Sterba to ensure that next semester’s childcare award process is streamlined. 57 applicants and total amount dispersed totaled $17,999 among these applicants; average $299. Minimum award was $31; maximum award was $491.

Ghazah also provided an update about the most recent Faculty Senate meeting, noting her belief that much of the talk about diversity seemed contradictory. Several graduate student, including Ghazah were invited to CDAC (Chancellor’s Diversity Advisory Committee) to talk about these issues, where students raised concerns about diversity, which were well received. She noted that at this meeting, discussion ensued regarding the new humanities building, which some faculty feel is not an ideal replacement for the current spaces occupied by Humanities departments in Bartlett Hall. She said the Chancellor responded to this concern by articulating a need to balance competing interests. Emily Campbell (English) noted her experience in closed meeting, reporting concerns that new building will feature classrooms equipped to accommodate 60-80 students, which is not conducive to humanities teaching. Campbell noted that Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Art History have not been given a space in that facility at all, with little recourse. Alex Prince (Art History) expressed concern that there is confusion about timing of meetings and who is welcome at these meetings. Ghazah Abbasi suggested that GEO is working on this issue, and that GSS will collaborate with GEO on this work.

*Joint Task Force on Resource Allocation Update:* Tim Sutton noted that he serves as lone graduate student representative on this committee, and requested participation.

*CDAC update:* Stefanie Robles noted that CDAC is interested in diversity benchmarks by December 11, 2013.

Robin Anderson noted that the Chancellor is planning to set up Student Advisory Boards around the areas of Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, and Administration and Finance. He is hoping to form these advisory boards by the beginning of the spring semester with 6 undergraduate and 2 graduate student representatives.

Robin also noted that OIT is collecting data on internet connectivity issues on and around campus. He also outlined a plan to reach out to senators in terms of senate meeting schedule for Spring 2014.

Robin moved to adjourn at 2:27 PM.