Greetings from your Graduate Student Government!

The mission of the GSA is to support the social, cultural and academic enrichment of the Rutgers graduate student body. Among some of our most important tasks are providing funding and oversight of Rutgers graduate student organizations, running graduate student social events, and advocating for the interests of graduate students to the university and beyond. This report, the first of its kind in at least five years, is meant to highlight the activities of the Graduate Student Community and the work that the GSA has done in the last year.

In the 2017-2018 academic year our board endeavored to undertake an ambitious growth agenda. One aspect of this was to increase the GSA’s overall activity and professionalism with more events, better marketing, and more organizational collaborations. At the same time though, we realized that this type of improvement has only temporary significance. To ensure the long-term wellbeing of the GSA, we also had to analyze and confront structural issues that have historically made it difficult for the GSA to reach its potential and caused frustration for graduate student organizations at Rutgers. We hypothesized that the three most significant of these issues were the stress placed on the organization by inefficient funding policies, constitutional limitations that ensured that the GSA board could never be bigger than a handful of people, and a lack of institutional memory. As you’ll see in this report, we made it a priority to confront each of these issues.

We hope that this report will help to shed new light on the vibrant and diverse organizing of the graduate Student community at Rutgers and the exemplary work of the staff and volunteers of the Graduate Student Association in the past year.

17-18 GSA Executive Board
Graduate Student Organizations and Events

This year the GSA recognized and provided funding for 73 graduate student organizations (or GSOs). The GSA categorizes individual GSOs as “academic” GSOs that represent the students of a particular academic department or school and “non-academic GSOs.” In 2017-2018, 42 academic GSOs were recognized, spanning 7 schools of the New Brunswick Piscataway campus. The remained 31 GSOs were non-academic.

Over the course of the year GSOs made 742 requests for funding to support event and event series. 341 of these requests were made for Fall 2017 and 401 were made for Spring 2018. In total, the GSA issued and distributed 887 checks to GSOs to fund social events, reading groups, and to invite speakers. In total, the GSA paid for GSOs to invite 59 speakers to visit Rutgers this year.

In total, the GSA funded GSOs for $161,358 of funding. This represents a 13% increase from last year and reverses a two-year downward trend in the amount that GSOs have requested and spent to run events.

GSO Event Spotlights

- On 3/23/18 the Rutger’s Women’s Leadership Coalition held its 7th Annual Women’s Leadership Conference consisting of speakers, panels, and workshops highlighting tactics women use to make space for their vision in high stakes environments and advocate for themselves as leaders.

- Each month the Enviromental Sciences GSO hosted mentoring hours as a chance for faculty and graduate students to communicate and engage in mentoring across multiple research groups.

- On 2/9/18 the Rutgers Taiwanese Graduate Student Association and Taiwan Study Association hosted a potluck dinner celebrating the Chinese Lunar New Year.

GSOs receiving funding to invite guest speakers last year:

- Anthropology
- Art History
- Classics
- Ecology and Evolution
- Endocrinology and Animal BioSciences
- Enviromental Sciences
- French
- English
- Geography
- Applied and Professional Psychology
- History
- Italian
- Joint Molecular Biosciences
- Linguistics
- Mason Gross Visual Arts
- Natura, the Science and Epistemology Working Group
- NeuroConnections Club
- Nutritional Sciences
- Oceanography
- Musicological Society
- Social Work
- Spanish and Portuguese
GSA Run Events

Due to construction that occurred in the Graduate Student Lounge this year, the schedule of regular GSA run events was interrupted. Nevertheless, the GSA was able to continue its tradition of running weekly yoga events for four months of the academic year and operated its annual Halloween Party, End of Fall Semester Party, and End of the Year Party. The GSA also worked with the Office of Graduate Student Life on the planning of a fall BBQ and a welcome back Spring Social.

This Spring the GSA launched a new and improved version of monthly movie nights (a GSA tradition that ended in 2016.) Over the course of three months the GSA ran three free movie nights for graduate students at the Rutgers Theatre, attracting an average of over 100 students per event. This represents a major advance from historical GSA movie nights which were held inside of the graduate student lounge and generally attracted between 20 and 40 students per event.

Advocacy

In the 16-17 Academic year the GSA ran “Seminar on the Legal Implications of Recent Executive Orders,” an event focused on helping graduate students understand and navigate new government policies on immigration. Building on this precedent, this year the GSA partnered with other organizations on campus to run and co-sponsor further advocacy-based events. Working in concert with the Office of Graduate Student Life, the GSA co-sponsored two more events on graduate students and immigration policies, and two events for LGBTQ veteran students.

Additionally, the GSA was active in distributing information to graduate students about changes in US policy affecting them. The GSA partnered with the Rutgers Ta/Ga union to organize a rally opposing a proposal by the United States House of Representatives to tax tuition waivers for graduate students. The GSA also used its council meetings and online resources to promote awareness of the changes to graduate education proposed by the Prosper Act and instructing graduate students how they could provide their representatives with feedback on the bill.
Policy Changes

New Funding Policies and New Freedoms for Graduate Student Organizations

On April 8th the GSA General Council passed a sweeping overhaul of the GSA’s financial policies and financial systems. These new policies (officially approved by the university as of June) were the product of over seven months of work by the GSA’s committee on financial affairs and executive board, four council meetings of GSO feedback, and multiple meetings with university officials.

These changes will, for the first time, allow GSOs to fund field trips, request durable goods like coffee machines to improve campus spaces, and save money from year to year for big events. GSOs representing large constituencies and with a strong history of funding will see increases in the amount that they are able to request from the GSA of up to $3000, and the newly simplified procedures will eliminate the need for the GSA’s cumbersome and often buggy funding application site.

From the side of future GSA executive boards and staff members these changes will turn a process that could take anywhere from 40 to 60 hours of work annually into a process that could take as little as three.

Standing Policies and Constitutional Revisions

While the changes to the funding policies were the most dramatic changes passed this year, they were far from the only changes. For the first time in three years, we took a comprehensive look at the GSA’s constitution and passed nine constitutional amendments through the GSA council. Resolution 2017-1A successfully removed constitutional limits on the GSA’s funding policy that limited the changes we wanted to pass. Resolution 2017-2A resolved seven ambiguities and contradictions written into the constitution and loosened cumbersome reporting requirements on GSO council attendance. Finally, Resolution 2017-3A dramatically expanded the powers of the executive committee and GSA council to create new officer positions. Whereas in the past the constitution placed harsh limitations on the number of GSA officer positions, now the only limit to the number of officers is the creativity of the council and future boards in thinking up new roles to be filled.

The EC was also active in authoring and passing standing policies. Building on Resolution 2017-3A, on March 30th the EC passed a standing policy laying out a blueprint for the GSA’s planned expansion in the number of officer positions. Whereas previously the only appointed positions in the GSA were vice presidential officers with yearlong and very general commitments, the new policy creates new “directorships” which are yearlong but initiative specific positions, and “coordinatorships” which involve only short-term commitments. Additionally, the EC passed standing policies to increase the transparency of the board and to provide more structure to EC decisions to co-sponsor events that are primarily organized by Rutgers administrators.
This has been a big year for the GSA’s marketing. When the new EC took over in June we could tell that the GSA’s marketing had massive issues. The GSA’s email reached only a fraction of graduates. The GSA’s attendance forms were dated. Worst of all, the GSA’s website contained massive amounts of outdated information and dead links, had not seen a news post since March 2016, was extremely static, and did not even present a clear way for new students to become involved in the organization. Our approach was to take on these issues one by one.

The first and biggest issue was the outdated website information. From May through June we went through the website in depth, noting over 50 issues with the information. From June through August we worked on an extensive overhaul of the organization and content of the website, managing to correct every issue by the time the year began. In the fall we took things a step forward and began to make active additions to improve the quality of the site. Among the most important additions to the website were 1) a streamlined involvement form that made it easy for graduate students to learn about our open positions and get involved in a way that fit their schedule and interests and 2) a dynamic content slider to display news posts. Throughout the year we used this display to raise awareness of our events, advocacy and programs. Our over 40 posts this year nearly quintupled the number of posts made by the next most active year since the website went online and was likely a key contributing factor in the 13% increase of web traffic the GSA website has experienced relative to previous years.

As the fall ended, we updated the GSA’s standard sign-in sheet for the first time since 2014 and began to turn our attention to improving the quality of the GSA’s events emails and reach. At the February 11th meeting of the GSA general council, we presented our plans for feedback and received formal council approval on 1) a plan to update and improve the appearance of our events emails, and 2) a plan to cooperate with GSOs to increases our email reach with the goal of doubling our reach within the next year.

GSA main site (gsa.rutgers.edu) web traffic by academic year:

- 2015-16: 12,276
- 2016-17: 13,426
- 2017-18: 15,148

2016-17 showed a 9% increase in web traffic from 2015-16. 2017-18 showed a 13% increase from 2016-17.
Operations

This year posed significant operational challenges for the GSA. For the first time in years the GSA was forced to operate away from its historical offices and was relocated not just once but three separate times since June 2017. This posed special challenges for receiving post event form reimbursement requests from graduate student organizations in situations where we did not have ordinary access to our drop box and for check processing in offices where our computer was not able to reliably establish an internet connection. To make matters worse as the fall semester opened we discovered the third major website bug in our funding portal in three years. Nevertheless, our staff and executive board did our best to adapt, and we were able to turn around GSO funding approvals in the fastest times in years. Although in three of the six semesters prior to this year, funding applications were not approved till over four weeks after the start of the semester, our board was able to complete the funding application process in under two weeks for both semesters. Even more impressively, while the turnaround time between the last day for GSOs to submit their applications and their approvals has generally spread anywhere from a week to three weeks, our board was able to complete the spring turnaround in only three days, and the fall turnaround in under 16 hours.

In addition to the ordinary financial operations of the GSA, the board this year made three significant changes to how the GSA operates. The first was to seriously investigate changing the standard Council meeting time away from Sunday nights. The Sunday meeting time had been a complaint from GSOs for years and has made it difficult for the GSA to invite speakers or university administrators to hear from graduate students. After completing a survey of GSOs, on April 8th the Executive board presented several new possible meeting times to the GSA Council, who voted to move the standard meeting time for future years to Monday nights for all but one meeting of each year.

The second was to start the construction of an online archive of documents and resources that could augment the GSA’s institutional memory. Prior to this year, GSA records were split haphazardly across the persistent accounts of each GSA executive board member. To rectify these issues, in December the board created Records@GSA. The goal of Records@GSA was to compile all official GSA documents across executive board members to a single location and to create an organized record of the GSA’s institutional history and resources. Although still a work in progress, by the end of the 17-18 academic year, Records@GSA has been filled with hundreds of documents and contains meeting notes and agendas of council meetings for the last decade, a track record of the GSA’s historical interactions with administrators, and a library of prior resolutions debated and passed by the GSA.

The last was to increase the efficiency of the GSA’s web operations. By working with the Office of Information and Technology directly on web issues, the board was able to eliminate the paid position of web admin, saving the GSA money that could be spent on GSOs and events.
Organizational Partnerships

A key goal of our year was to deepen our existing partnerships and build a history of cooperating with new offices at Rutgers and beyond. This year we set precedents of working with Rutgers Office of Institutional Research and Planning directly to learn more about the graduate student body, delivered graduate student feedback to the Office of Student Conduct, worked with national graduate advocacy organizations Student Advocates for Graduate Education and the National Association of Graduate and Professional Students, and cooperated on a networking event for graduate students with the Rutgers Club of New York.

Meanwhile, we continued our support of New Student Orientation and Commencement programming with the School of Graduate Studies, and significantly expanded our cooperation with the Office of Graduate Student Life. Building on the two successful events we ran last year with the Office of Graduate Student Life, this year we worked together on seven events targeting graduate student audiences.

Lastly, we worked to dramatically advance our relationship with the TA/GA Union. We stepped up our collaboration on social events for graduate students from one event last year to three this year. Even more importantly, we successfully collaborated on a rally opposing the tuition waiver tax proposal that was defeated in congress this December. Additionally, we provided union representatives the opportunity to receive general council feedback at seven of our nine council meetings this year.

Conclusion and Special Thanks

We hope that this document has helped to provide further transparency on the work done by the GSA this past academic year. Our work has only been possible due to the support of others and we would like to give special thanks to our GSO council representatives, the members of our Financial Affairs committee, and to our staff and officers.

Outside of our student organization, we’d particularly like to thank Dean Barbara Bender, Alex Bachman, and Simona Turcu for their assistance with our overhaul of the GSA’s funding policies and Dean Mark Schuster and Matt Cinnirella for the support their office provided in co-sponsoring several of our social and advocacy-based events. We would also like to thank Matthew Walsh, Lauren Frazee, and Anna Barcy of Rutgers AAUP-AFT for making themselves available for council meetings and for their work with the Tax Rally and co-sponsorship of three of our social events.
2017-2018 Student Officers, Staff, and Representatives

Executive Board

Nathaniel Flores
President

Suzanne Thornton
Executive Vice President

Erin Royals
Treasurer

Tahiya Chowhury
Secretary

Appointed Officers

Neelakatan Krishnan
Vice President of Marketing, Orientations, and Communications

Nishka Uberoi
Vice President for Events and Programs

Tushar Aggarwal
Election Commissioner

Staff Members

Brittani Hudson
Business Manager

Mayur Barai
Events Manager

University Representatives

Nathan Honeycutt
University Senator

Igor Ivanovski
University Senator

Aakansha Roberts
University Senator

Dahea You
SGS Representative

Tianya Zhang
SGS Representative
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<th>Academic</th>
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<td>Anthropology GSA</td>
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<td>Cognitive Science GSA</td>
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<td>Greek GSO</td>
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<td>Molecular Biosciences GSO</td>
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<td>National Science Policy Group</td>
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