



James P. Harris, President

The State of the Senate

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Fellow Students, Faculty, Staff, Administration, and Alumni:

As the President of the GSS, I am afforded with the opportunity to tell you what has transpired this year as well as interject some of my thoughts regarding future efforts and needed directions. I will start by quoting the previous GSS President's words from last year's address:

"Even in the face of this year's successes, there remain many things to improve. If the Senate is to obtain more diverse representation—particularly from the arts, humanities, and social sciences—it must remain a priority until the goal is met. In past years, including this one, that objective has taken a back seat to other issues, and understandably so. But at its very foundation, the Senate is a representative body, first and foremost. Second and equally important, the culture of resistance toward deviation from so-called "GSS tradition" cannot be allowed to prevail if the Senate looks ahead to more involvement and enhanced effectiveness."

We have made great steps in both arenas: representation and change. We have improved the number of departments with senators from 26 to over 40 and the number of student organizations has climbed from 18 to 24. Additionally, the daylong executive bylaws retreat created a wide array of changes to the bylaws. Fruits of those labors have already started materializing as student groups have been creating larger events while we have just elected a 14 person executive board for next year. The board will have the opportunity to build and organize their plans for their term over the whole summer instead of just during the school year. I have a lot of trust in this group to continue the great work everyone has generated this year in addition to charting their own path of initiatives that they want to address. There is a long list of items they will need to prioritize.

Looking over the past year, I wanted to highlight many of the items that the GSS has accomplished or changed this year:

- The first year that reduced cost, optional RTA passes were offered to Graduate and Professional Students
- Removal of the Tech Fee
- Development of a GSS Senator Handbook to clarify roles, rights, and responsibilities associated with the senate.
- Several forums to address Graduate Student concerns: Health Care + Services, Billing Practices, University Architect/Campus Planning Forum, and the SIS Forum – many of which have been more than purely discussions, they have initiated change.
- Creation of the Mentor Survey Report and near final draft of the Student Mentee Guidebook, and the endorsement of the Faculty Mentor Guidebook by the Faculty Senate. Likewise, the committee was instrumental in two UCITE events regarding mentoring – one of those events led to the formation of a School-wide Student Mentoring Council led by Dean Rozek and composed of graduate students and representatives from each school's Dean's office – an effort that will be fundamental to overhauling the structure of the University to support faculty mentoring of graduate students.



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- New programming efforts in the Professional Development Committee including a Public Speaking Seminar, Leadership workshops, Mentor/Mentee seminar, and Negotiations Panel
- Activities as usual including the Grad Night Out, Baseball + Basketball games, as well as a the New Graduate/Professional Student Happy Hour with the addition of raising over 750lbs of food and \$400 for the Fall Food Drive.
- Health Care Committee drafted a GSS resolution that has already seen progress by the University to address optional dental plans for next year as well as a comprehensive overview of health care services and costs.
- Creation of the Graduate Professional Council, an initiative led by the GSS to improve communication and collaboration between graduate and professional students.
- Redesign of the Diekhoff Award Selection process with the addition of the first-ever awards for Grad Student Mentoring at CWRU. Additionally, the committee teamed up with the School of Graduate Studies to hold an award ceremony to draw attention to the leaders of graduate student teaching and mentoring.
- Student input and service on the other twenty plus committees that GSS is responsible for seating
- A new website and GSS Newsletter. A newsletter that is possible because the GSS can now email all its graduate students directly, a nontrivial accomplishment.

With all these developments, one might ask what else can be done for graduate students, but let me stress that there is much left to do to improve the graduate student experience at Case Western Reserve University.

While we have improved the numbers of students involved with GSS and the output of the different GSS committees, there is still more room for improvement for increasing the number of people active. We can also improve the diversity of people involved in almost every form. Additionally, the responsibility has traditionally fallen on the shoulders of a few. The excuses for this focus of responsibility are numerous, but I believe that we have shifted this by seating an executive team all at once and by improving communication regarding expectations of positions.

Bringing new and more people to the GSS will be the key to the continued success of this organization and its efforts. I think the last two years of the GSS have started this change, but the next few years will be just as important. While many people have filled spots to just fill the spot, the senate and the leadership of the GSS cannot be satisfied with people being an executive only in name anymore. Senators need to ask questions and wonder why we are behind the undergraduates on so many things, including University support, senate financial practices, and recognition among students.

Graduate Student life is very different than undergraduate student life, and while we have the School of Graduate Studies to answer our academic concerns, graduate student life has gone largely unaddressed. While we often think about social activities when we think of student life, we are here to be trained and develop as advanced degree holders. We seek professional development opportunities, support for our families, aid to minimize the cost of attaining our advanced degrees, and a myriad of other things that allows us to focus more time on research and creative work and to yield more productivity and happiness. The siloed nature between our home departments and schools has created a culture where everyone has had to create their own solutions – a situation that is rewarding for some students in the better schools and departments, but unfortunate for those in other departments and schools. This model has created an atmosphere where everyone creates their own wheel, a methodology that is practical at bigger universities, but not for ours, in my opinion and perhaps evidenced by our current rankings.



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Efforts initiated by the GSS Mentor committee, supported by the Professional Development and Diekhoff Committees, have provided the groundwork to start the conversation and efforts that are needed to occur at this University. A seachange to better utilize our smaller footprint to recruit better graduate students as well as produce higher quality advanced degree holders. This has been the direction of GSS efforts this year, and I believe the senate will have to drive efforts further by creating a job description or set of duties for a person or set of people to support graduate students, possibly including the GSS. I do not know what other Universities do, but understanding how peers support graduate students outside of academics will be an important first step in the improvement process. Much of the support and resources will already be tasked to individuals and offices in this University, so it is important that a review of the quality of graduate support occur as well, so that responsibilities and structure can be improved not excused.

Getting back to this year, a review of our '08-'09 goals that were posted by the GSS Officers at the end of last summer shows that we addressed several items including communication, representation and participation, activities, GSS Procedural improvements, and GSS Resolutions and Chief Grad Student Concerns. I can say we made progress on all of these and their subitems. Of the 35 some subgoals, I will speak to the 4 or so we did not do: Standard Operating Procedures (including advertising guidelines), have one recreational activity and one professional development seminar organized or directly sponsored by the GSS for each month of the year, move the GSS meetings to a central location that would be more inviting to people from all parts of campus, and create a monthly billing program for Grad students. Overall, I'd say we did pretty well on addressing most of our goals. My personal goals as I said last year during my nomination speech were 1) Monthly billing, 2) Grad Student Space, 3) Mentoring, and 4) Increased Representation. I have achieved progress on all of these except monthly billing, but I can assure you that I will continue to work on this.

In summation, we have done a lot, we have a lot to do, and we all, regardless of title, will need to contribute if we would like to see progress continue. I will stress what I said to start my term: Communication, Communication, Communication while adding Recruit, Recruit, Recruit.

Recruit: Bring more students into GSS efforts and activity. You are our best advertisers.

Communication: Let everyone know what GSS has done to meet its purpose to address the concerns of Graduate Students, let them know we are here to change things for the better, and ask your peers what we can do to help.

And remember, the student voice is the strongest impetus for change, but you need to exercise that voice if you want to see action.

Gratefully,

James P. Harris
2008-2009 GSS President