In line with our last report, which provided a graduate student perspective on recent events in higher education and on our own campus, the GSA expects to continue reporting in a style which provides feedback to the University Council. We feel that the most pertinent business to comment on at this juncture is the strategic planning process which the President's Chief of Staff described at the last meeting. This report will primarily describe the issues which frame the Graduate Student Association's approach to strategic planning.

First, it is very exciting to hear that the President wants to develop a transformative strategic plan, rather than just planning because it’s time to plan. The graduate student job crisis and increasing student debt makes this a timely moment for graduate students to help transform a university. One might consider the following concerns to be “GSA stakes”, because in many ways they speak to the stakes established by President Jones for the University at Albany.

The anchoring idea which will guide our approach is the notion of graduate student support in the 21st century. Student support at the graduate student level has traditionally, and in many ways should still fall on the shoulders of the full time faculty. Faculty has, and should continue to carry the responsibility to provide us with guidance, support, proper academic advisement, and training in our fields. But the high numbers of part-time faculty and low numbers of full-time faculty create conditions that make it difficult for faculty to support their graduate students. The objective to hire more full time faculty has been on the President’s agenda since day one. But we have to reiterate what the United University Professions’ report on contingent faculty argued, that the number one strategy which will strengthen the already established organic networks in our departments are pathways to permanency for contingent faculty. Refining our university model in this way not only strengthens our university but sets an example for other universities who have also tried to close budget gaps by increasing contingent labor and reducing their full-time faculty. These patterns in higher education have shrunk the academic job market, leaving UAlbany PhD students to compete against hundreds of applicants for tenure track jobs at community colleges, not even research universities. We need full time faculty to help prepare us for this competitive job market, but we also need to be allowed to step outside the academic job market.

The fact is that many PhD students that graduate from UAlbany in the years to come are not going to be employed as full time professors. Our chances on the job market have forced a shift in graduate students’ professional development trajectories which are at odds with the priorities of our faculty and administration. We cannot only focus on the academic job market. We have to use our time as doctoral students to develop networks and gain experience for other sectors of the economy. Doctoral students need faculty and administration to recognize how this reality affects how we pursue our degrees, our approach to research, teaching, service, and especially how this affects our time to completion. Adding years of funding to GTA contracts is a critical step in getting graduate students to complete their degrees in a timely fashion, but it is not enough. One only needs to think of myself as an example. Facing today's academic job market as an ABD student with over 80,000 dollars in debt, there is absolutely no incentive for me to complete my degree. It would only leave me jobless with huge student debt payments. There is an incentive to stay enrolled and not graduate. If this strategic plan is supposed to be a
transformative plan, it needs to be a plan which recognizes this problem and finds ways to address it. PhDs need institutional support in pursuing non-academic tracks. This does not just mean the availability of something like Career Services, but recognition by the faculty and administration that non-academic tracks are valid rather than a sign of failure. There are incredible opportunities out there for PhDs from STEM to the humanities, but we are rarely offered opportunities to connect to those networks and seize those opportunities. One might hear it argued that there is an overproduction of PhDs. However, if there is anything the post-academic and alternative-academic movements have shown us is that we are not producing too many PhDs, we are forgetting to produce opportunities for them. At a community conversation regarding public engagement in 2014, Assemblywoman Fahy spoke of the great benefit a community sees from retaining a PhD. She noted a labor statistic which said that for every PhD retained in a region it turns into 20 jobs down the line. PhDs are a benefit to a community, but doctoral students need institutional support to capitalize on those opportunities. Our Public Engagement agenda at this university seems to be the perfect way to facilitate this institutional support.

We applaud the University for seeking to engage in deeper reciprocal partnerships with the community, but within these efforts we also see the need for reciprocity within our campus community. So far, the process of becoming publicly engaged as a university has inspired little excitement among graduate students. The assessment mechanism which we have helped develop for several years has the potential to capture graduate student engagement, but appears to simply serve as a way to capture our free labor to achieve a Carnegie designation without offering any benefit to the graduate student taking the survey. There are a number of arenas in which great things are happening at this university, in terms of promoting sustainability, social justice, and public engagement, but as you know strategic planning is about developing a culture of intentionality in these types of areas to make sure all already-established momentums can become productive synergies. We think it is critical for the strategic plan to set intentions in areas such as social justice, sustainability, and public engagement with a clear vision of how graduate students are included. And we also believe that this inclusion should be clearly tied to the institutional recognition of non-academic career tracks. It seems obvious that if faculty are asked to engage in and report publicly engaged research, teaching, and service, then these activities should be valued in the tenure and promotion process. If graduate students are going to report their publicly engaged activities and pursue more of them for this university’s benefit, we need this institution to develop mechanisms to help us maximize the benefits of these activities for our careers and for our communities.

The final area of concern also refers to one of the four stakes in the ground established by President Jones: the increase of international students. While we believe this objective may produce great benefits for the university, the internationalization strategy presented to this council is lacking in one serious area which is going to be a central issue for the strategic plan: student support. Our institutional culture must reflect an approach to international student support which does not forget the particularity of their experience. The objective to integrate this population rather than isolate them sounds good but always risks falling into the trap of pretending they are everyone else's problem. Intentionality is again the key in this regard. If the Writing Center is struggling to provide academic writing support for international students, then it needs to be more than just a problem for the College of Arts and Sciences, it needs to also be a
problem for International Education. If international students are having trouble finding jobs after graduation, then that needs to be both Career Services’ concern and International Education’s concern. If international students are having health issues it needs to be more than a Health Services issue. International Education should be a key advocate no matter which area of the international student life is affected. If we are going to make international students a quarter of our population, then support for those students should not be a bullet point embedded in an internationalization plan, it should be a framing component of that plan. There are enough hurdles for our international students to begin with; we should not add another hurdle by forgetting the particularity of their experiences.

This report is hardly an exhaustive list of issues the Graduate Student Association would like to see considered in the strategic planning process. However, we do hope that the concerns elaborated help form an understanding of the new terrain graduate students in the 21st century stand on. Our success will not look like the graduate student success of generations before us. We have no choice but to envision new pathways to success and we need university leadership to see this vision with us. We look forward to the strategic planning process.

Sincerely,

Caitlin Janiszewski
University Council Representative
Graduate Student Association
University at Albany