University Council Report – 12/4/15

At the recent National Conference of the National Association of Graduate-Professional Students (NAGPS), the UAAlbany GSA was named Northeast Regional Member of the Year for our advocacy work, professional development programs, services, and leadership. We have been reporting our accomplishments via University Council reports, but it seems a better use of everyone’s time to use these reports to express where we stand on the progress of the University. Our representation on this Council is set up for such a report. That will be where we begin - student representation.

As mentioned in the August report, student representation on councils, committees, task forces, advisory boards, blue ribbon panels, etc. is one of the most critical problems the graduate student population faces. Meaningful inclusion in the process of shared governance is essential if graduate students as a whole are ever going to emerge from under the weight of crushing student debt and a shrinking job market. In my time as a student representative I have heard more times than I ever imagined that graduate students "don't care" about the issues the administration is handling. This is justified by pointing out that maintaining students on a committee can be difficult and it has been suggested that administrators have to "beg" graduate students to participate. What becomes an accusation of apathy is actually graduate students being strategic about their time, commitments, and most of all - managing their sense of where they can be affective. Graduate students on tasks forces, committees, panels, etc. are not careless; they believe that no one cares what they have to say. Additionally, their selection is random, often not routed through their representational body (the GSA) which means that they have no mechanisms of support behind them to provide research, context, or data to back up their contributions. Graduate student reps face tokenism and isolation in the domain of governance and with the weight of all of their other responsibilities it cannot be surprising that maintaining a graduate student's participation is a challenge. The GSA has brought the details of this concern to the attention of the Governance Council of the Senate. We also briefly addressed it in a memo to the President through our follow up memo after the Graduate Student President’s Forum. We are working through the Governance Council to develop solutions to the student representation problem. But this council should be aware of the problem, and given the long history of us hearing that most of us "don't care", I am going to take this opportunity to express some of what graduate students do care about in this report.

1 - Of the 14 SUNY Excels applications only one of them, a proposal for more GTOP funding, addressed graduate student issues and it was one of the 3 that were not moved forward in the process indicating a troubling double standard for supporting poor minority students only at the undergraduate level but not at the graduate level.

2 - The President seeks to increase the percentage of international students at this University as one of his stakes in the ground but the compact budgeting process and SUNY Excels
applications show no meaningful steps towards providing the type of academic support that is needed for these students both at the graduate and undergraduate level. Many international graduate students already face enough of a crisis with few employment options, visa limitations restricting travel for professional development or time to see family, and high level English writing expectations.

3 - We care about the sexual assault training that the state has forced all student leaders to engage in. The reactions to these training have ranged but a general consensus about the combined graduate and undergraduate trainings are that they were unhelpful because they spoke more to the threats which emerge through on campus social lives of undergrads rather than graduate student work environments.

4 - We care that the Blue Ribbon Panel on Graduate Student Stipends has come back with a recommendation for raising TA stipends but it concerns us that it does not seem to address GAs in administrative units. These GAs are performing at professional levels in offices such as the Office of Environmental Sustainability, International Student Services & Support, and Career Services yet they will be left making about 800 dollars a month. In addition to our concern that the panel neglected to look at GAs, we also care that the University at Albany has also capped Student Assistant hours preventing graduate students from being able to support themselves once their GTA contracts are up. They are left choosing between adjuncting and working for the museum because the two jobs add up to more than 25 hours a week. So rather than work these two jobs which contribute to their teaching and research portfolios they need to work unrelated jobs to secure health insurance or make ends meet. These types of policies which are theoretically intended to keep us focused on our academic trajectory in fact cut off our potential to networks, preventing us from being able to focus our efforts, and ultimately extend time to completion. The 25 hour cap on Student Assistant jobs does not prevent students from working too much and losing focus on school, it leads us to work in environments disconnected from our academic trajectories.

5 - We care about the activism happening at the University of Missouri. Just days before health insurance subsidies were suddenly canceled at Mizzou, some of the graduate student leaders were here at UAlbany for our Summit on Sustainable Leadership tackling the pragmatics of how to start and sustain movements for graduate student interests. During that summit we also engaged with the concept of higher education itself and our responsibilities as student leaders who despite being at the bottom of the academic totem pole need to capture our collective intellectual power and privilege to stand up not just for ourselves but for the values we hold such as sustainability, social justice, and the belief that higher education is not a business but a site for the nurturing of democracy.

6 - The Graduate Student Association leadership and many UAlbany graduate students are proud to be a part of this University. But every intellectual community has a responsibility to constantly reflect and improve. Like President Jones we also have a vision of the future, some stokes of our own.

A-When we envision 20,000 students by 2020 with nearly a quarter of them international students we also see the need for significant increases in academic support at both the graduate and undergraduate level. If our international student population is going to
increase, teaching loads for TAs must decrease so that sufficient attention can be given to these students.

B- When we envision a publicly engaged UAlbany we also see graduate students finding opportunities for professional development and networking through these relationships rather than the current sense of this initiative. For many graduate students public engagement just feels like the University is seeking to take credit for our volunteer work. Given the already low wages graduate students live with, the University benefiting from further free labor drives the low response rate on the Public Engagement Survey. Even with increased TA stipends it is unlikely that the graduate student population will buy into the public engagement initiative until some meaningful attempt is made to ensure that the relationship is not only reciprocal with the University and community but within the University community - between students and the institution itself. We see no reason why public engagement cannot be the driving force to account for and try to remedy the graduate student job crisis. As the market for tenure track faculty suffers, the answer is not only to create high needs programs but to help students seek new opportunities with traditional degrees. We need the administration to recognize this crisis and take steps to help us take steps to be successful in alternative academic or even non-academic careers.

C- As we grow those high needs areas, particularly in the sciences, we envision programs built through our social values. We envision engineering with sustainability at its core and allied health with community responsibility as its driving force. We envision a UAlbany that builds new programs with these values as primary, not secondary concerns.

D - And with all the complexity of these stakes we also imagine some things that are as simple as they are significant. The next time we hold a national leadership summit which teaches leadership principles drawn from Iroquois epistemologies, we would prefer not have to be embarrassed by one of our quads carrying the name “Indian”.

Graduate students care very much about the future of this University and higher education in this country. We are the future or higher education if UAlbany is going to leave an enduring legacy on higher education it’s going to be through its graduate students shaping the future. We expect to be at the table for the upcoming strategic planning process and we also expect that the University grant us the right to choose our own representatives to participate in that process rather than choosing for us and sometimes not informing us. I believe you will be surprised and pleased to see what great contributions graduate students can make when we are given the opportunity to support our student reps.

Sincerely,
Caitlin Janiszewski
University Council Representative
Graduate Student Association
University at Albany