Message from the GSA President

Dear fellow graduate students,

First, I would like to express how grateful I am that I was elected to serve the GSA this year and the next. This has been a transformative year for me and I hope for the GSA as well. We have accomplished a great deal; advancing new advocacy initiatives, executing two President’s Forums, improving internal procedures, and reforming our grants program. That being said, we still have a long way to go.

Top of the list is reforming our professional development processes (mainly RGSO guidelines), developing a strategic plan, and most of all finding ways to inform all students of our existence! If you are reading this newsletter and are not on our listserv please sign up by emailing gsa@albany.edu asking to be added!

We are very excited about this upcoming year but we are faced with several challenges. The most daunting of which is moving our uptown office to rooms 307 & 308 in the Campus Center for the foreseeable future while the Campus Center Expansion project is underway. Due to the electrical requirements of our technology we will likely not be able to open our uptown office over the summer while more electricity is installed. We will keep you all posted.

Again, I am very proud of our work this year, particularly our advocacy initiatives at SUNY SA and our work on the President’s Forum. I am also thrilled that some submissions in this newsletter are reactions to those initiatives which follow up and continue critical dialogues. Overall, I would like to thank everyone who has worked so hard this year to reform the GSA. We still have a long way to go.

Sincerely,

Caitlin Janiszewski
UUP Applauds GSA on Contingent Resolution

By Bret Benjamin

On behalf of the Albany Chapter of UUP, I wish to publicly thank and congratulate UAlbany Graduate Student Association (GSA) President Caitlin Janiszewski for her tremendous efforts on the part of contingent faculty at UAlbany and across the SUNY system.

Caitlin, along with Jessica Aubin, Jackie Hayes, and the GSA Wages and Benefits Committee, successfully championed a resolution in support of contingent faculty at the state-wide Student Assembly meeting in early April. A version of this resolution passed the GSA here at Albany last fall, but Caitlin had the perseverance to get the state-wide SA to adopt the resolution as well.

Among other things this resolution called for SUNY to raise the minimum per-course salary for contingent academics to $5000, recommended that contingents be given appointments that make them eligible for health care, and called on SUNY Chancellor Nancy Zimpher and the Board of Trustees to advocate for resources to support better working conditions for contingents. This provides a framework for meaningful change in the working conditions of contingent faculty, among the most exploited laborers in higher education.

Quite simply, this is a tremendous victory. The Student Assembly represents a constituency of more than 400,000 students across the state. Such demographics, of course, are politically useful in that it opens avenues to mobilize students as a constituency to advocate with SUNY and the state. But more important, passing this resolution signals a conceptual shift; it recognizes students as essential participants in contemporary debates about the future direction of public higher education. The fight for contingent faculty rights is simultaneously the fight for students’ rights to the highest quality education. Students, therefore, have always been at the very heart of this campaign, and hence their entry into the debate is of enormous consequence.

Caitlin and the Albany GSA deserve great credit for the comprehensive argument they developed and presented. They successfully made the case that the interests of graduate students, undergraduate students, contingent faculty, tenure-line faculty, and even SUNY as an institution are profoundly interconnected, and that no “constituent group” within this relation can be thought of independently. The impetus for the resolution was never simply about funding graduate students; though that was an important consideration, recognizing that graduate students employees make up a considerable portion of contingent faculty. Contingency
contributes to financial stress, overwork, longer degree times, and so forth for grad students. Equally important, however, GSA made the case that the working conditions of contingent faculty are simultaneously the learning conditions of undergraduate students. The SA, which is dominated by undergraduate students (and which has historically been rather conservative on many issues), recognized that the resolution was an effort to improve educational quality across the SUNY system. Further, the GSA resolution makes the explicit claim that labor concerns and educational concerns are inseparably linked. The resolution does not pit employees against students or students against SUNY; rather it states that contingent faculty (many of whom are graduate students) play an essential role in higher educational instruction, and that for SUNY to provide the highest quality education will require a significant improvement in the working conditions of its most exploited employees.

These are the sorts of principled arguments, and the sorts of determined activism that will be required in order to bring about meaningful change for contingents. Resolutions, we all know, are a first step, not a final one. But first steps can be among the most important and difficult to take. I commend in the strongest possible terms Caitlin, Jessica, Jackie, and all the other GSA Albany members who worked on this project. The UUP Albany chapter offers its admiration and respect; we are proud to work in solidarity alongside such committed allies.

SUNY Smart Track

Stay Tuned!

Student Financial Services is pleased to announce the financial literacy tool to help students with financial decisions during college and after graduation. This tool contains valuable information such as:

- Loan Payment Calculators.
- Information modules on saving, investing, debt and MORE!
- Employment search tips for new graduates.

Be on the lookout for the release of a financial literacy site available from Student Financial Services coming soon!
Adjuncts and Administrators: Two Worlds, One Campus

By Jackie Hayes

Alysha has been a graduate adjunct instructor at the University at Albany on and off for 4 years now. When I meet her in her office, there are about nine other adjuncts, graduate students and faculty sharing the small office, divided by stuffy cubicles. She explains to me that the cubicles are first come, first serve, meaning that adjuncts do not have their own offices and instead vie for a cubicle when they show up each day.

The cubicles are an apt metaphor for adjunct job security, courses also get handed out in a kind of ad hoc way that can fluctuate from semester to semester depending on how long you have adjuncted and if you are a graduate student or not. During her first year as an adjunct, Alysha taught an upper division course for $3,000 and TA’d another class for $3,000 in the Fall. In the Spring, she only taught one course, making her adjunct salary for the year $9,000 total.

When I ask her how she survived off of $9,000 a year (well below the poverty line for Albany County) she said she worked a few off-campus jobs. The following year she was only given one course and the year after that two courses, making financial insecurity a consistent aspect of her life as a graduate student. Further, if an adjunct teaches less than two courses per semester they do not receive health insurance. In Alysha’s case, she has gone semesters without health insurance or paid out of pocket for COBRA insurance, taking more money from her already meager salary.

Alysha is also trying to finish her dissertation, a task made difficult by a demanding work schedule and an uncertain financial situation. On top of both teaching and “dissertating”, Alysha is also supposed to be meeting a number of professional expectations like presenting at conferences and publishing, all of which require either her free labor or cost money. “It costs about $1,000 to attend one conference if you factor in travel costs, association membership fees, conference registration, hotel and food,” Alysha stated. “In my case, I was able to secure grants from my department and the GSA, but it is done through reimbursement and it’s hard to front the money in the first place, and most of us don’t have that luxury—I had family help,” Alysha explained, meaning that it costs about one-third of her semester salary as an adjunct, an expense that few graduate students can easily afford.

While she considers herself lucky compared to many graduate adjuncts, her life has been significantly impacted by her working conditions, “I’ve been able to continue because of the support of my family and an amazing significant other but, at 32 years old, my life has nonetheless stalled: I have nearly $70,000 in undergraduate debt, and am unable to pay very much or very often. My fiancé is a schoolteacher and there is never any money left over at the end of the month. Saving is impossible. We are simply unable to begin our life together because of my being trapped in the adjunct vortex.”

Alysha’s story mirrors a national
trend in Higher Education; there has been a growing reliance on adjunct and contingent faculty labor to address the crisis created by declining state and national support for higher education funding. Declining financial support has occurred in tandem with a major restructuring of public education in general, which is characterized by policies that work to create a highly flexible workforce like the adjuncts at University at Albany. The New York Times reported that contingent and adjunct staff have increased from 43% to 70% nationwide in the last three decades. Due to this trend, future job security is a dwindling aspiration for many because they must compete for fewer and fewer tenured faculty positions. Whereas thirty years ago a PhD may have guaranteed you employment upon completion the future is bleak for current doctoral students whose working conditions and futures are marked by uncertainty, debt and years of working below the poverty line.

On the other side of University at Albany’s campus, almost directly diagonal to Alysha’s office sits University Hall, a building recognizable by the 3,500 mirrored glass panels that constitute its exterior. The building was opened in 2006 and cost $11.3 million to build and is home to the offices of about 100 administrators. It is a 45,000 square feet, well-lit, air-conditioned space decorated with the works of 20th century artists. The building and the working conditions and compensation stand in stark contrast to those of the hundreds of adjuncts working throughout the campus. In fact, if you add up only 14 of the administrative salaries of those who work in University Hall it equals about $2,666,763 or the annual pay of 444 adjuncts teaching two courses a year, illustrating another contemporary trend in Higher Education, the growth of a well-paid administrative class.

While the growth of Administrators has arguably cropped up to navigate the increasingly complex fiscal environment of the 21st century University, one problem with this trend is that administrative living and working conditions tend to be a far cry from the low-paid contingent staff that teach students day to day at the University. Administrative conditions may shape the way they think about and deal with the current crises facing public higher education. For example, to fill the giant hole left by massive cuts in state support, SUNY and CUNY administrators have lobbied for tuition increases. In 2011, their efforts were successful and New York State passed a bill entitled NYSUNY 2020, which included provisions to increase tuition by $300 every year for the following five years (the rate is higher for graduate students and double for international and out-of-state students).

Rather than seek out creative solutions or go on the offensive, SUNY representatives simply pushed the burden on to students and their families. A $300 a year increase may not seem significant to someone making $150,000 a year, but it is a substantial amount for those already struggling to pay for college. Similarly, Administrative leadership at the University at Albany have not expressed any concrete plans to deal with growing student debt, rising tuition or the difficult working conditions facing adjunct and contingent faculty. Instead, the policy solutions they propose, like SUNY2020,
By Sarah Zuckerman

I want to thank GSA President, Caitlin Janiszewski, along with University at Albany President Jones and his office for facilitating a third public President’s Forum on Wednesday the 23rd, in what will hopefully become a semi-annual tradition.

Upon its conclusion, I was left with an urge to refute some things presented during the forum. In the midst of a pointed conversation meant to illustrate a concern for the wellbeing of graduate students, including the significant pitfalls to UAlbany funding, the President told us that as a graduate student in Georgia, he lived off $3,000 a year. Not only is this exceptionally misleading, it could even be interpreted as a gesture intended to placate. Sure, it makes my current stipend of $13,000 look luxurious, but let’s take a look at that statement using his published bio on the SUNY website and the Bureau of Labor Statistics inflation calculator¹ to examine how misleading it really is.

President Jones was at the University of Minnesota for 34 years. Prior to that he was a doctoral student at the University of Missouri and earned his Masters at the University of Georgia. It’s hard to know how long it took the President to complete his doctorate degree because it varies between institutions and departments, but let’s estimate four years for the sake of this argument. Assuming a two year Master’s program, President Jones began as a Masters student in Georgia 40 years ago. Plug 1974 into the BLS calculator, and that $3,000 had the same buying power as $14,380 in today’s dollars. If his PhD took him a little longer, say six years—which is about UAlbany’s current year to...

¹http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm

Note: This article only compares one type of inequality that exists on campus of which there are many.

If you would like to share your story as a graduate student assistant, adjunct or unfunded student please email: gsapr@albany.edu Headline: “GSA Newsletter”
degree for a doctoral student—that $3,000 stretches even further to equate to $16,960. The point is that when he says he lived off of only $3,000 sometime in the early 1970’s, it is equivalent to living off more than the current average stipend for a graduate student at UAlbany plus several thousand dollars more than my own stipend. The large monetary gap when calculating for 1972 and 1974 points to another facet of the issue: the pernicious effects of inflation. Since I started in fall of 2010, I’ve watched inflation go up, but not my stipend. Meaning that each year, it gets harder and harder to make ends meet when our stipends do not increase to match inflation. My $13,000 stipend today has only the buying power of $12,000 in 2010. Additionally, as I’m sure the President is aware, tuition costs have risen at a substantially greater rate than inflation since he was a student. According to a 2012 Bloomberg News piece, “college tuition and fees have surged 1,120 percent since records began in 1978, four times faster than the increase in the consumer price index. Medical expenses have climbed 601 percent, while the price of food has increased 244 percent over the same period.”

Secondly, the President mentioned having given graduate student assistants in the top 15 of 37 departments an across-the-board raise of a thousand dollars last year. In the most recent US News and World Report rankings, UAlbany’s School of Education, in which I am enrolled, was ranked 513. Curious, I asked our GSEU rep which departments got these increases; her answer: the hard sciences. Biological Sciences at UAlbany ranks 175th, Physics 103rd, Chemistry, 117th and Earth Sciences also ranks 117th. For the record, Criminology is ranked number 2 in the nation, Rockefeller College of Public Affairs is ranked 76th, Sociology is ranked 28th, Economics is 76th, the School of Public Health ranks 25th and the School of Social Welfare ranks 24th. If these raises did indeed go to the hard sciences, then clearly they did not go to the top ranked departments using this often cited national ranking. It seems interesting in light of this data the President’s goal of starting new programs in Engineering and Allied Health instead of investing in our already strong social sciences and pre-professional programs, which not only train front-line workers who serve the public good in the Masters programs, but which also train the next generation of professors in these fields.

Obviously, many factors must be considered in setting pay for graduate assistants, but I urge the President to consider how inflation affects awards that do not include annual increases pegged to inflation and that are well below the living wage in the city of Albany, currently around $21,000. I also implore him to consider what graduate assistant wages are in our peer institutions within New York and across the nation; we cannot put the world within reach if we cannot even compete nationally for graduate students with the greatest potential for teaching and research. I would also ask President Jones to consider parity in funding of graduate students in recognition that all contribute to their departments in the teaching of undergraduates and the research that both sustains the scholarly reputation of our University and brings needed funds into the University at a time of decreased state support. Additionally, parity must consider that new students are not the only ones worthy of

3 http://www.grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools
a pay increase in new contracts and that these increases should be reflected in contract renewals for continuing students. I look forward to future conversations with President Jones on this topic and others that impact graduate students and their ability to contribute fully to the University.

Sarah Zuckerman  
Wages & Benefits Committee  
Ph.D. Student, EAPS

HAVE A GREAT SUMMER!

Graduate school.

What my friends think I do  
What my mother thinks I do  
What society thinks I do

What my colleagues think I do  
What I think I do  
What I really do