For the final Graduate Student Association (GSA) report to the University Council for this academic year we wish to provide some insight into graduate student life and issues which face us daily. Because as Nelson Mandela said: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” and we hope this report can help foster a change in our world—the university. Accordingly, the following information details our advocacy concerning food insecurity, grant funding and professional development, and access to child care.

Food insecurity has been an issue of importance for the GSA for many years. The Equity and Inclusion Chair Jaime Coffino has conducted a food insecurity study over the last two years. The preliminary findings suggest that there are documented issues related to food insecurity in our graduate student population. Slightly more than 50% of respondents self-identified as low or very low food security, roughly half in each category (J. Coffino, personal communication, April 13, 2018). This means that 50% of our students either have low food quality and variety or have the aforementioned, plus reduced food intake and disrupted eating patterns. Furthermore, the food insecure students were found to be more depressed, anxious and stressed than their peers who identified as food secure.

In recent years, GSA, in collaboration with the University United Professionals (UUP), the Student Association (SA) and the Interfaith Center, wrote a proposal to create an on-campus food pantry following the Stony Brook model. The proposal was rejected by the University administration and, in turn, in 2016 the University and UUP created a partnership with St. Vincent’s food pantry. The partnership is limited to community members who live on campus, in the Pine Hills or Eagle Hills neighborhoods (see attached flyer) and is only open from 12:30pm – 2:30pm three weekdays per week. As a small percentage of graduate students live in these areas, most graduate students are not eligible. Even the students who are eligible may have difficulty going to the food pantry as we often have classes or other responsibilities during the days and times that St. Vincent’s is open.

As addressed in Governor Cuomo’s 2018 State of the State, he supports the establishment of food pantries throughout the SUNY system. While the relationship with St. Vincent’s food pantry is commendable, it does not go far enough and does little to help the 50% of graduate students who have reported low or very low food insecurity. The GSA is committed to working with the University to ensure that community members do not go hungry. It is our belief that the University will offer the student body a more sustainable solution that is truly accessible to all community stakeholders. As with food security, grant funding is needed to ensure students have access and opportunity to conduct research without barriers.

The University at Albany’s reputation, like all research institutions, is reflected in the quality of research that is produced by the community, the quality of the students who graduate from it and job placement among students. Accordingly, the University at Albany’s graduate students are involved in all three activities. Grant funding has a large impact on each of these
activities. It is essential for conducting research, disseminating said research at conferences and attending additional professional development opportunities to increase our employment prospects.

Our graduate students have a desire to pursue these opportunities, but do not access to the institutional and financial resources to do so (see the blue-ribbon panel on graduate student stipends). The GSA recognizes the extreme lack of grant funding provided by UAlbany and therefore, devotes roughly 25% of its annual income from graduate student fees to provide research and professional development grants for our graduate student body. However, the funds we provide are never sufficient in relation to the student need.

Although we provide grant funding for graduate students, even with our funding, students are not receiving sufficient reimbursements for their expenses. For example, one graduate student is spearheading a study that will cost $1,700. She requested $650 from the GSA, and due to budgetary restraints, ultimately received $295, in the end she only received 17% of the money required for her research. Graduate student grant applications totaled $46,970 this semester which far surpassed the $20,000 spring grants budget. On average, graduate students requested $560 and received, on average, $238 – less than half of requested amount. It is important to note that while the GSA has a limit of $650 per semester, most graduate students spend substantially more on both professional development and research grants. The university at present has not matched this need and in talks with University administrators, the GSA has been told that perhaps endowments will provide assistance, but no timeline has been provided. Moreover, as with making sure graduate students have access to food and grant funding to ensure their ability to persist and graduate, another vital need is affordable child care.

Childcare, even for career professionals is a burden. The GSA estimates about 12% of UAlbany graduate students are parents. SUNY has acknowledged that childcare for college student is an issue and as a result, created the Operating Grant and Child Care & Development Block Grant. In the past, graduate students have not been eligible for this block grant, but we are hopeful that graduate students may soon have access to the grant. This is due to a recent change in the language of the grant. However, graduate students who are employed in an assistantship on-campus, would unlikely receive the award as the child care access times do not line up with grant guidelines regarding graduate student work and class schedule as the majority of graduate students attend classes in the evening. Therefore, SUNY needs to reevaluate the grant guidelines and find a way to make child care access more equitable and inclusive for graduate students.

In addition to our advocacy efforts, GSA has also had some victory’s this year. We were happy to increase our institutional participation and representation. The GSA appointed five graduate students to sit on each of the five working groups related to the University’s Strategic Planning process. Provost Stellar and Vice President for Student Affairs Christakis presented the Plan as part of their “road show” to the GSA Assembly. GSA was also approached by several
University administrative committees requesting GSA representation, which was a welcome change as graduate student representation had not been a priority in the past. In addition, we support Vice Provost and Dean Kevin Williams’ study of non-academic career paths for graduate students which he mentioned at one of the GSA’s fall assembly meetings. We also appreciate the University administrators who attended our assembly meetings this academic year and answered our questions and informed us about areas of the University we may have been unfamiliar with.

In a continued effort to advocate for graduate students, the UAlbany Graduate Student Association has confidence that President Rodríguez and the University Council will reflect on our advocacy efforts. Together we can work to provide a more equitable, inclusive, and accessible environment for graduate students at the University at Albany.

Sincerely,

Thomas Robertson
University Council Representative
Graduate Student Association
University at Albany
ST. VINCENT’S
Community Food Pantry

Mon, Wed & Thurs
12:30 PM — 2:30 PM

Eligibility
- Must live on-campus or in Pine Hills/ Eagle Hill Neighborhoods
- Don’t live in the area?
  Check out the closest pantry to you by going to thefoodpantries.org
- No proof of income required

How it works
- Bring in a current piece of mail w/address on it
- Bring a photo ID
- Select up to four days worth of food

Location
984 Madison Ave
Albany, NY