



Georgia Tech Graduate Student Government

2022 – 2023 Year in Review

Dear Yellowjackets,

As this academic year comes to a close, I would like to reflect on the many accomplishments and ongoing initiatives of the Graduate Student Government Association (GSGA). Over the past nine months, GSGA, faculty, and administrators have collaborated tirelessly and in good faith to advance the needs of graduate students, as well as the broader Georgia Tech Community. This document will highlight some of the key initiatives, events, and progress made by GSGA this year. I am tremendously thankful for the opportunity to have served as your Graduate Student President, and I am looking forward to GSGA's continued advocacy over the years to come.

In progress and service,

Will Reichard

Key Initiatives

Ensuring Comprehensive & Effective Representation

The most important duty of the Graduate Student Government is to effectively represent the voice of graduate students. The first step of that process is to build connections between the graduate student body and GSGA. Functionally, this is accomplished by electing a Senate with a diverse range of experiences, perspectives, and peer groups. I am proud to report that we currently have 45 active Senators, which is the largest Senate cohort in recent memory. These Senators represent the majority (but not all) academic departments at Georgia Tech. We are continually seeking to have representation from every department on campus.

Furthermore, GSGA has organized several meetings with graduate student advocacy groups housed within various departments, including the Graduate Student Association School of Computer Science, the Aerospace Engineering Graduate Student Advisory Council, the Association of Chemical Engineering Graduate Students, the Mechanical Engineering Graduate Association. We have been in communication with numerous additional groups, including the Civil Engineering Graduate Student Advisory Council and the Student Planning Association. Each of these organizations acts as an advocacy group for graduate students within their respective departments. Moving forward, GSGA hopes to help initiate communication between departmental graduate student organizations to help synergize efforts relating to common issues between departments.

Broad representation within GSGA is important. It is equally important to ensure that the Graduate Student Government can effectively identify and address the most pressing issues. To accomplish this, we've established several standing committees to help guide conversations concerning certain topics in perpetuity. These newly established standing committees include the Academic & Research Affairs Standing Committee, Campus Services Standing Committee, Graduate Events Standing Committee, International Student Affairs Standing Committee, Online Student Affairs Standing Committee, Professional Development Standing Committee, and Student Life Standing Committee. The Academic & Research Affairs Standing Committee will discuss topics relating to academics and research, including program structure, courses, GTA/GRA related concerns, and other similar topics. The Campus Services Standing

Committee will discuss issues relating to campus infrastructure, including housing, transportation, and information technology. The Graduate Events Standing Committee will plan and operate events hosted by GSGA, including the fall and spring graduate student picnics. The International Student Affairs Standing Committee will ensure that the unique needs and issues pertaining to international students are properly considered within GSGA. The Online Student Affairs Standing Committee will ensure that the unique needs and issues pertaining to online students are properly considered within GSGA. The Professional Development Standing Committee will plan initiatives and events designed to support the professional development of graduate students, including the Career, Research, and Innovation Development Conference. The Student Life standing committee will discuss issues relating to graduate student wellness and community.

Further, it is also important to ensure that graduate students are sufficiently represented on various institute committees housed within faculty governance. Most institute committees are composed of representatives from administration, faculty, the graduate student body, and the undergraduate student body. These institute committees have direct jurisdiction over some of the other key priorities discussed in this document, and have broader indirect influence over campus policy. For example, the Student Academic & Financial Affairs Committee (SAFAC) has jurisdiction over issues relating to academic advising, academic standing, financial aid programs, and a number of other important aspects of our education. Notably, they also have influence over graduate research assistant stipends. In recent years, graduate student enrollment has surpassed undergraduate student enrollment. However, many of Georgia Tech's institute committees have more seats for undergraduate students than for graduate students. For example, undergraduate students have two seats on SAFAC, whereas graduate students only have one. Our Senate Chair, Andrew Ten Eyck, has led the charge for a more equitable allocation of student committee seats, which has prompted a larger discussion of institute committee structure reform. These conversations will continue throughout the fall semester, and will result in more just representation for graduate students.

Graduate Student Researcher Bill of Rights & Responsibilities

A graduate student researcher's relationship with their faculty advisor is extremely influential on their overall graduate school experience. However, the power dynamic between graduate student researchers and their faculty advisor can be problematic due to the inherent asymmetry of the relationship. Faculty advisors hold significant power over their students, as they heavily influence the direction of research, provide funding, and ultimately decide on a student's success or failure. This power dynamic can lead to situations where graduate students feel pressured to work long hours or sacrifice their personal time to meet the demands of their advisor. Additionally, faculty advisors may use their power to exploit their students, either intentionally or unintentionally, by not providing adequate support or resources or by taking credit for the student's work. This dynamic can create an environment where graduate students feel powerless to speak up or assert themselves, leading to potential harm to their mental health and well-being.

Many of our peer institutions have implemented a Graduate Student Bill of Rights & Responsibilities (or similar document) that outlines expectations, responsibilities, and protections for graduate students. Georgia Tech has some relevant provisions outlined across separate documents, including the faculty handbook and the expectations of advisors and advisees document, but current guidance adopted by Georgia Tech does not fully cover the most pertinent aspects of the issues at hand, and should be consolidated into one easily found document. The Georgia Tech Graduate Student Government has completed a draft Graduate Student Researcher Bill of Rights & Responsibilities that supplements current policy. The drafting process has included an extensive stakeholder engagement process, including hosting multiple town hall events and meeting directly with various departmental graduate student advocacy groups and relevant administrators within Georgia Tech.

This Graduate Student Researcher Bill of Rights & Responsibilities seeks to protect the rights and interests of graduate student researchers while balancing the expectations and obligations of being a member of the academic and research community. Stating these rights will (1) ensure students can be educated on their roles and expectations as researchers, (2) advocate for the support and resources that are needed for their success academically and professionally, and (3) provide safeguards against exploitation and mistreatment. Upholding these responsibilities will allow

graduate students to contribute to the betterment of the Georgia Institute of Technology and the advancement of knowledge and society.

The goal for this document is to be a statement of values held mutually by students, faculty, and administration. The drafting process will continue throughout this year as additional feedback is received from relevant stakeholders, including relevant institute committees. Once adopted, the Graduate Student Researcher Bill of Rights & Responsibilities will help guide future conversations regarding policies impacting graduate student researchers.

Financial Support & Benefits for Graduate Student Assistants

Georgia Tech prides itself on attracting the best and brightest students from around the world to study at our prestigious institute. Attracting the most brilliant students to Georgia Tech allows us to remain on the cutting edge of research and innovation and attracts partnerships and philanthropy from external organizations and donors. Likewise, students benefit from being surrounded by a talented peer group that generates new ideas and approaches to solving problems while contributing to a culture of excellence. However, due to inflation, the rising cost of living in the City of Atlanta, and broader economic trends, it is becoming increasingly difficult to financially sustain oneself as a graduate student assistant at Georgia Tech. To remain competitive in the labor market, it is absolutely necessary for Georgia Tech to increase support and benefits for graduate student researchers.

The bottom line is this. It is a disgrace when sufficiently qualified and talented prospective graduate students are forced to attend a different university for financial reasons. It is a tragedy when currently admitted graduate students are forced to drop out prior to completion of their degree for financial reasons. Georgia Tech strives to be an equitable and inclusive institute. To this end, it must better ensure equity of access for students lacking in wealth.

In pursuit of this goal, the Graduate Student Government has advocated for an increase to the institute minimum graduate assistant stipend, and we have made legitimate progress towards an

increase being approved. Furthermore, GSGA has encouraged and assisted departmental graduate student advisory groups to advocate for increases to departmental standard stipend rates. As president, I have also voted against proposed increases to the Student Activity Fee and the Transportation Fee.

Likewise, the Graduate Student Government has worked with the Office of Graduate Studies in their initiative to establish a family and medical leave policy for graduate student assistants. This policy will provide financial support and work flexibility for students experiencing childbirth, an acute medical condition (affecting the student themselves, or the student's child, spouse, domestic partner, or parent), or a period of incapacity connected to medical care. This policy has received broad support from the institute and is in the final stages of discussion prior to implementation.

Ensuring Adequate Student Housing Availability

At a time in which many American universities are experiencing declining applications and enrollment, Georgia Tech has continued to experience sustained enrollment growth. This is a fantastic sign for the long-term health of Georgia Tech, and the entire campus community benefits from the inclusion of additional student perspectives. But, this will also place substantial strain on campus services, many of which are already at or near capacity. Perhaps the most pressing concern is the availability of affordable and adequate student housing.

The extraordinary nexus of talent within Georgia Tech has contributed to the revitalization and renaissance of Midtown Atlanta. What was once a sea of surface parking lots and dilapidated single-family homes is now the location of major companies like Google, Cisco, NCR, etc. These companies have moved to Midtown to be near the Georgia Tech student body. Ironically, by moving to midtown, these companies have contributed to a rapidly increasing cost of living in the area, which is increasing pricing students out of the neighborhood. The cost of off-campus housing is similarly skyrocketing in other adjacent neighborhoods, including West Midtown and Home Park. There simply is not enough existing housing supply to accommodate the demand for housing in these burgeoning neighborhoods. As a result, landlords can justify charging higher rents, and students are forced into housing units that are at times unsafe, exploitive, and/or a great distance from campus. It is incumbent upon Georgia Tech to expand its on-campus housing availability to ensure student housing demand is met. President Cabrera has taken our

concerns seriously. Georgia Tech will break ground on a new 800+ bed on-campus dormitory soon, and the institute is actively investigating additional short- and long-term measures to increase on-campus housing supply, prompted by advocacy done by the Undergraduate and Graduate Student Governments.

Advocacy on Behalf of International Students

International students compose approximately half of the Georgia Tech Graduate Student Body and have a unique range of concerns and considerations beyond the issues faced by domestic students. Yet, international students have traditionally been underrepresented in the Graduate Student Government. Considering this, it has been crucial to specifically advocate on behalf of international students.

Within the Graduate Student Government, we have established an International Student Affairs standing committee. This committee will serve as a perpetual catalyst for conversation regarding issues specific to international students, such as finding community, immigration concerns, visa processing fees, etc. Furthermore, international students have been well represented in leadership positions on our executive cabinet, holding four of the nine available positions.

Conversely, we have aggressively advocated on behalf of international students in conversations external to the Graduate Student Government. This culminated in meetings with several elected officials and/or their staffs, including Senator Jon Ossoff, Representative Hank Johnson (GA-04), Representative Nikema Williams (GA-05), Representative Rich McCormick (GA-06), Representative Lucy McBath (GA-07), Representative Mike Collins (GA-10), and Representative Rick Allen (GA-12). In these meetings, we advocated for the easing of restrictions on highly skilled immigration. We've also advocated for increased federal funding for research, including additional availability of funding for international students.

Maintaining a Safe Campus

Our Joint Vice President of Sustainability & Infrastructure, Grace Pietkiewicz, has done extraordinary work to identify unsafe areas of campus caused by inadequate physical

infrastructure, including poor lighting, dangerous intersections/crosswalks, poor road/sidewalk/bicycle lane conditions, and other miscellaneous concerns. These advocacy efforts culminated in the campus safety walk, which was a walking tour of the areas of campus identified as being the most in need of intervention. The campus safety walk was attended by students and administrators alike, including President Cabrera and GTPD Chief Connolly.

Registered Student Organization Funding Policy Reform

Other than advocacy, the other primary function of the Student Government is to allocate the Student Activity Fee (SAF). Nearly two-thirds of the SAF is used to fund Registered Student Organizations (RSOs). The SGA policy governing the allocation of the SAF was rewritten and adopted in 2020, amid the Covid-19 pandemic. This year has been the first full year in which RSOs have fully returned to normal operations, meaning that this is the first full year in which the new SAF allocation policy has been truly tested. Predictably, this year has revealed several deficiencies within the current allocation process.

In a nutshell, the newly adopted policy does not allow for any subjectivity in the approval or denial of funding requests. A funding request either meets our criteria for funding, or it doesn't. There is no existing mechanism for denying exorbitantly large funding requests. As such, approximately 2% of our RSOs receive approximately 40% of the portion of the SAF dedicated to supporting RSOs. What's more troubling is our budgeting process. If the total amount of funding requested exceeds the total amount of funding available, every RSO has their budget cut by the same percentage. In other words, if one RSO requests \$100, and another RSO requests \$700,000, both RSO's would receive a substantial budget cut, despite the funding request overrun clearly being driven by the second RSO. In FY24, the total funding requested exceeded the total funding available by 40%, resulting in a 40% cut to the budgets of every RSO, despite the excess 40% being primarily caused by exorbitant funding requests from a select few organizations.

I've personally been in constant communication with Rohan Sohani, the President of the Undergraduate Student Government, and Maxwell Oglesby, the SGA Joint Vice President of Finance, regarding the sustainability of our current allocation procedure. Together, the three of

us have coordinated with the Student Organization Finance Office, the Department of Student Engagement and Wellness, the Office of the General Counsel, and the Georgia Tech interim Executive Vice President of Administration & Finance to work towards solutions that are both equitable and legal. I have advocated for a funding model that places a far greater emphasis on the budgeting stage (and a corresponding decrease in focus on the bills stage), with the implementation of a budget reduction formula that has a greater impact on large outlier funding requests and a minimal impact on small requests. Work towards a more sustainable and equitable funding model will continue over the summer and will hopefully be implemented in the fall. At the same time, we recognize that our larger organizations have a tremendous positive impact on the Georgia Tech community. We have taken steps to ensure that these RSOs will be able to access alternate funding sources to counteract the impacts of SGA policy changes.

Additionally, President Sohani, JVP Oglesby, and I have begun a transition of SGA funding requests from JacketPages to Engage. This transition will make the funding request process much more intuitive and efficient for RSOs. Simultaneously, it will allow JacketPages to be used solely for SGA legislation, allowing student leaders to better track the status legislation that has been proposed.