

2022-2023 GAPSA Leadership | Major Accomplishments and Historic Wins

The 2022-2023 Graduate Student Government leadership recognizes their momentous work in improving student life, while setting sights on future goals.

What does student government at Penn do for us?

This question remains one of the most frequently-asked among Quakers, and is one that often receives a vague and incomplete answer.

After a major restructuring effort in 2022, this year, as Penn's graduate student government, we have made it our mission to continue the legacy of previous graduate student leaders by focusing on three student-facing goals: advocacy, programming, and institutional support.

Student leaders from all of the twelve graduate schools have fought for student representation on Penn's Board of Trustees, the top decision-making body of the University, and have pushed administration to allow for student-led agenda items on University Council, the University's internal governing body. GAPSA has also taken advantage of opportunities to actively represent students on Penn's strategic planning Red & Blue Committee and the Provost and Vice Provost for University Life Selection Committees. These efforts have importantly centered around one central goal: student voices at every decision-making table that impacts our livelihoods.

Our advocacy efforts, however, didn't end at getting students in the room with administration.

Graduate student leaders also represented Penn at the Ivy League's annual Ivy+ Summit hosted by Columbia University in New York, where student leaders came together to discuss shared goals, initiatives, and potential synergies. In the meantime, to ensure we are representing the voices of the students we serve, we publicized policy statements, hosted the GAPSA Leadership Summit to strategize with G12+ and affinity group leaders, and organized a multitude of town halls on discussions ranging from wellness to international student issues.

Where students most likely encountered GAPSA was through our historic programming efforts that had record-breaking student attendance.

This year, GAPSA broke attendance records for all three of its large annual programs: GAPSA Fest, GAPSA's Spring GALA, and Beyond Penn. Through each of these events, students had the opportunity to celebrate their time as graduate students at Penn, get connected to campus resources, and think about their careers after Penn. With the establishment of GAPSA Alumni, we substantially increased outreach to alumni to help build community, networking, mentorship, and fundraising opportunities for students and alumni alike. GAPSA also hosted a variety of small-scale cultural and social programming efforts designed to target the diverse needs of students, including friendgiving

dinners, lunar new year dinners, a Broadway series, and popular boat cruises. Through all of these initiatives, GAPSA remained persistent in ensuring that student fees go right back to students in the form of meaningful programming.

Most importantly, through advocacy and programming efforts alike, graduate student government leadership relentlessly pushed for increasing holistic institutional support for our student body.

Empowered through our largest budget ever and improved transparency and feedback mechanisms, GAPSA was able to promulgate a first-ever Meal Voucher Program, host pop-up food pantry to address food insecurity, advocate for affordable university housing, and distribute numerous travel grants and President Gutmann Leadership Award grants to support students' educational goals. GAPSA was also able to - for the first time ever - compensate its student government workers in order to promote socio-economic diversity within student leadership. We hope these efforts empower students from underrepresented backgrounds to seek leadership positions in GAPSA this upcoming year and beyond.

GAPSA has been attentive to the significant financial challenges that Ph.D. students face, exacerbated by the pandemic, and has utilized various means such as town halls, surveys, and representative feedback to gather crucial information and perspective. GAPSA Research Council and Advocacy Division embarked on a multi-year advocacy campaign to lobby for higher stipends, which came to fruition this year, resulting in the most substantial increase in stipends in the last decade.

GAPSA also focused on students' career goals through providing significant funding to create an endowment for unpaid internship funding, and securing the purchase of a professional headshot photo booth for all undergraduate and graduates to use beginning this summer.

Graduate student leaders also focused on a variety of specific topics and communities in its efforts this year. These issues included better supporting international students on campus through collaboration with student leaders on the International Student Table for Advocacy & Relations, English Language Program workshop scholarships, tenant workshops that help students understand their rights, and World Cafe coffee chats designed to connect students and foster a global community. Our efforts also included improving student wellness through advocating for health insurance workshops for students and increased menstrual product access.

The Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Access, and Leadership (IDEAL) Council, representing eleven affinity groups, launched successful initiatives to promote equity and support underrepresented graduate and professional students. They re-established representation of the Black Graduate Women's Association (BGWA) in GAPSA and secured a historic increase in affinity group funding to offset significant community-building and financial barriers. They also established new funding mechanisms to promote collaboration and intersectionality among affinity groups, guidelines for

leadership development events, and initiated collaborations with cultural resource centers in the renovated ARCH building. The IDEAL Council also hosted mixer events to foster a supportive community. These have contributed to a more inclusive and diverse graduate community at Penn and have laid the groundwork for future student leaders to continue this important work.

With all of these efforts, our primary goal this year was to relentlessly support and advocate students, and there is so much more to be done moving forward.

GAPSA is looking forward to hearing from the University regarding our efforts to better include students in Penn's governance, including on University Council and via the Board of Trustees. GAPSA is also looking forward to being involved in the soon-to-be implementation phase of the Red and Blue Committee's strategic plan for Penn's future. We also hope that our administrative advisors will better support GAPSA's initiatives at their inception so that student leaders can expediently accomplish their goals.

We also know that our programming efforts could better extend to certain schools who have traditionally not been as involved in GAPSA programs, and that future GAPSA leaderships should work to continue our efforts in fostering culturally responsive programs to target specific audiences of students. We encourage current and future students to advocate for increased involvement and access to GAPSA resources should they identify gaps in programming or advocacy initiatives.

While so many amazing initiatives were started this year that have the potential to radically influence graduate students' experiences while at Penn, we know that they will only be truly successful with sustainability beyond our time here.. These efforts include GAPSA's historic meal voucher program, summer internship funding program, student government worker pay, and advocating for student representation in all aspects of the University's governance. We have confidence that these efforts will continue into the foreseeable future with the support of future graduate student leaders.

On behalf of all of GAPSA this year, it has been an honor to serve our 16,000+ student constituents as your student government leaders. We hope that we have left you feeling inspired by various advocacy efforts, impacted by meaningful programming, and imparted with the resources students need to succeed at Penn.

Thank you for believing in us and for celebrating a historic year for student governance.

Collectively,

Robert Blake Watson, 2022-2023 Graduate and Professional Student Assembly (GAPSA) President

Hoang Anh Phan, 2022-2023 GAPSA Executive Vice President & Vice President of Advocacy

Rexy Miao, 2022-2023 GAPSA Vice President of Finance

Helen Jin, 2022-2023 GAPSA Vice President of Operations

Keshara Senanayake, 2022-2023 GAPSA Vice President of Programming

Joelle Eliza Lingat, Spring 2023 GAPSA Vice President of Advocacy

Jorge (Jay) Ortiz-Carpena, 2022-2023 GAPSA IDEAL (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Access, and Leadership) Council Chair

Michael Krone, 2022-2023 GAPSA Professional Council Chair

Ludwig Zhao, 2022-2023 GAPSA Research Council Chair