
Ivy Summit “State of the Eight” Address, October 25, 2008

Good morning,

I'd like to thank this year's organizers here at Harvard for putting on the summit this year. We're pleased to see that the summit, which Penn started six years ago in the spring of 2004, is still alive and thriving. On behalf of the Graduate and Professional Student Assembly (GAPSA) and the 12,103 graduate and professional students we represent, I bring you greetings from the University of Pennsylvania. Half of our Executive Board members are here today; so let me briefly introduce you to the Penn delegation:

Andrew Rennekamp, GAPSA Chair (Medicine, Ph.D.)
Christa Heyward, GAPSA Vice Chair for Finance (Medicine, Ph.D.)
Mat Abramsky, GAPSA Vice Chair for Professional Students (Design/Wharton, M.C.P/M.B.A.)
Jessica Kim, GAPSA Vice Chair for Social Activities (Education, Ed.D.)
Nikki Thope, GAPSA Vice Chair for Student Life (Design, M.C.P.)
Christina Arlt, GAPSA Vice Chair for Student Programs (Design, M.C.P.)
DeAnna Cheung, Assistant Director of the Penn Graduate Student Center

We're excited to be here this weekend and to be able to tell you that the state of graduate and professional student government at the University of Pennsylvania is stronger than ever. Before I tell you about what's been happening at Penn, I'd like to point out that all of the information that I'm about to share with you, including the text of this address can all be found on our website: <http://www.gapsa.upenn.edu/>.

If you go to our website, you'll quickly find out that graduate and professional student government at Penn is very big, very active, very well organized, and pretty well funded. I say that GAPSA is big because we are a unified student government representing *all* 12,103 graduate and professional students enrolled in the University. We have a 12 member Executive Board, comprised of a Chair and 11 Vice Chairs. In addition, we have 12 Deputy Vice Chair positions. The Executive Board is elected by the General Assembly, which is composed of 47 School Representatives elected and sent to GAPSA by the 12 graduate and professional schools at Penn. The number of Representatives per school is based on school population. The schools at Penn are:

The Annenberg School of Communication, The School of Arts and Sciences, The School of Design, The School of Dental Medicine, The Graduate School of Education, The School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, The Law School, The School of Medicine, The School of Nursing, The School of Social Policy and Practice, The School of Veterinary Medicine and The Wharton School of Business

Each of these schools has at least one school-specific student government organization that sends Representatives to the GAPSA General Assembly. I'm not able to tell you about all the things that the more than 12 school-specific student governments at Penn are involved in, because I only have 15 minutes. You'll have to take my word for it that each group is active in providing programming and advocacy for students at the school level.

GAPSA, on the other hand, focuses on programs and policies that are set at the central level, intended for, or affecting, a cross section of graduate and professional students across the entire University. In addition to the Executive Board members, the Deputy Vice Chairs and the School Representatives to the Assembly, there are also about 80 other students directly involved in central student government. These are students whom GAPSA appoints as representatives to the more than 35 different University-wide committees, councils and advisory boards on campus.

So as you can see, we're a very big and complex organization mirroring a large and often innavigable University, and because of this, we are necessarily very well organized. The organizational chart that we handed out is taken directly from our GAPSA Handbook and it gives you an idea of how we're structured. Each member of our Executive Board (with the notable exception of the Vice Chair for Operations) chairs his/her own internal GASPA committee. There are several types of committees, and I won't go into too much detail on how the committees are composed, but it suffices to say that this division of labor allows our group to focus on a variety of different issues at one time. I would also like to point out that many of our internal committees and councils oversee the activities of the external, University-wide committees to which we appoint student representatives. On this chart the external committees are listed below the dashed line whereas the internal GAPSA committees are listed above.

So now that you know how we're structured, let me give you a brief overview of some of the things our various committees have been able to accomplish recently. I'd like to start with our Student Programs Committee led by Christina. Christina's group has been hard at work planning and executing subsidized, ticketed events for graduate and professional students and their families. These have included Schuylkill River Kayak Tours, an Orchard outing, where participants picked apples, pumpkins, went on a hayride and roasted s'mores on a bonfire, and a trip to the number one ranked haunted house in the country at Eastern State Penitentiary. Christina's committee is also actively planning athletic tournaments and community service opportunities for our students.

In contrast, Jessica's group, the Committee on Social Activities, plans our large-scale events. These include our big annual traditions like "Moshulu" where we rent out the world's largest 4-masted ship in the world still afloat for an evening of good food, drink, DJ music and dancing. With uncanny predictive powers Jessica's group also purchased advance-sale tickets to what became the exciting ninth-inning, National League East Division-clinching win for the Philadelphia Phillies against the Washington Nationals on September 27th – 300 of our students were able to cheer the home team on their way to the World Series. Currently the Social Activities committee is in the process of planning another annual favorite: our GAPSA Halloween Costume Party as well as several University-wide happy hours. In an effort to further integrate our students, we rotate the venue so that these events are hosted at different Penn school each time.

I'd also like to tell you a little about the funding that we give out. As I said before, GAPSA is pretty-well funded. Under the watchful eye of Christa, our Vice Chair for Finance, GAPSA distributes or spends more than half a million dollars annually. Our funding comes from the student's General Fee and 60% of what we receive we give to the school-specific student governments. With the remaining 40% we partially fund non-government student groups and individual student summer fellowships and conference travel grants. We currently give out about \$50,000 annually in travel grant funding.

Our travel grants and academic event funds are actually awarded by our Professional and Research Student Councils. These two Councils are the academic policy arms of GAPSA and each member of our Assembly is either a member of the Research or Professional Council depending on the degree program they represent. Our Research Council is able to boast several accomplishments last year. They were able to successfully advocate for positive changes to the rules that govern all Ph.D. programs. These include a new standardized tuition system, a 10-year cap on the length of all Ph.D. programs, new, nontrivial requirements that faculty must meet regularly with their advisees, and provide grading and feedback within a maximum of 30 days, and an extension of the childbirth leave policy from 6 to 8 weeks and to include fathers and cases of adoption. The Research Council was also able to convincingly demonstrate a need for increased student stipend levels, and I'll be elaborating more on that work during one of the concurrent sessions this afternoon.

Our Professional Student Council, led by Mat, is relatively new. We're excited about the many ideas coming from his group this year; they've set up various task forces to work on several projects including a GAPSA Leadership Development Program, Student Recognition Awards, and an online Forum where students can identify interdisciplinary and interschool learning opportunities across campus. They are also in the process of identifying creative ways to entice lenders to compete for Penn student borrowers and to better educate borrowers about the whole lending process.

We're also excited about the work planned this year by our Pluralism and International Student Councils. These Councils are also relatively new, and I'll just tell you that they are both interested in improving Career Services and Alumni Relations for internationals and minority groups. The International Council is also working through some Financial Aid issues, such as employment opportunities and loan co-signer difficulties, and they are organizing events that facilitate cultural integration and exchange.

Our Student Life Policy Council, headed by Nikki, has undoubtedly the biggest mandate of any of our committees. As one member of our Board put it, "the Student Life Committee deals with all things physical." Student Life encompasses Housing, Transportation, Safety, Health Services, Health Insurance, and more. In the past, our Student Life Committee has been particularly successful in their advocacy on the Student Health Insurance front. Among other things, they've been able to reduce student co-pays for the HPV vaccine, and one of their biggest successes has been to encourage the University to put Student Health Insurance out for competitive bid this year. Nikki's group is also going to focus heavily on improving Housing options for graduate and professional students. They've already begun the process of collecting information, in fact we just had a very well planned "Dinner and Discussion" on Housing options at Penn this past Wednesday night where focus groups of about 10 students each provided valuable input and ideas, which we will use going forward. One goal of the Student Life Policy Council is to put together a white paper on housing options, with recommended actions, before the end of the year.

I should also add that all of these committees and activities have been supported by two very important entities. One is our Communications committee which, among other things, has revamped the GAPSA website, and is now working on creating an online housing forum where student can evaluate and discuss and rate specific rental and landlord experiences. The other important support structure has been the Graduate Student Center with their team of staff who do so many things on, a day-to-day basis, to enhance, facilitate and supplement all that GAPSA does.

Let me end by saying that you, our peer student government groups, play a significant role in helping us to improve educational opportunities for our students. We rely on you to tell us what has been happening at your institutions so that we can replicate, in part, some of your successes. We're particularly interested in collecting four items of information from you:

- (1) What housing options do your institutions provide for your graduate and professional students?
- (2) To what extent do your institutions rely on graduate and professional alumni donors (including international alumni)? And are Alumni Relations and Development carried out at the central University level?
- (3) Do any of your institutions survey your graduate and professional student populations to determine campus "climate" concerning diversity, satisfaction etc.?
- (4) What support does your institution provide student loan borrowers (including international students) who need to identify the best loans, the best lenders, and possibly even co-signers?

Thank you for your time. I look forward to meeting each of you, and I'll take any questions.