
Vice Chair for Professional Students January 2009 Report

Introduction

For the 2008-2009 academic year, the Vice Chair for Professional Students, and the Professional Students Council have begun to broaden the potential impact that the, now two year old, Council can have on behalf of the student it represents. By selecting specific areas of opportunity or concern, our representatives have been able to focus on concrete strategies, which will be discussed in further detail. The overall outlook for the council is to continue to build its efficacy in advocacy and programs for professional students.

In 2007-2008, two main groups were formed to evaluate interdisciplinary opportunities, and to run GAPSA's inaugural Leadership Development Retreat. These have since been broadened to four. Ultimately, the Professional Students Council will like to build upon its policy responsibilities for advocacy on behalf of its constituents. Our new areas of focus represent the Council's first forays into student recognition, and financial aid as key areas of advocacy for professional students, now and into the future.

Composition and Membership

The council has been fortunate to have each of its seats filled from representatives of constituent schools. These members have brought valuable insights on the council's primary areas of focus, and they have formed the four Task Forces developed to cover off the advocacy and program intents for the council for the 2008-2009 academic year.

Areas of Council Interest: Advocacy and Programs

To broaden the impact of the council in its second year, four primary areas of interest were developed and approved, and Task Forces (comprised of representatives) were convened. These Task Forces have been asked to devise strategies to improve the educational experience and value for the degree of each professional student at the University of Pennsylvania.

Task Forces

The following Task Forces were convened. A summary of their development over the past semester and their plans for the coming semester follows.

1. Leadership Development
2. Student Awards and Recognition
3. Interdisciplinary Opportunities
4. Student Financial Aid

Leadership Development

Last year, the Leadership Development group organized the inaugural Leadership Development Retreat, with support from the Office of Student Life. While the group has worked closely this

year, with a committee overseen by the Vice Chair, that committee is largely handling the development of the retreat. This year, the Professional Council Leadership Development Task Force has looked for ways to expand access to leadership opportunities to more professional students, throughout the year on campus.

The Leadership Development Task Force has focused on developing new events to showcase what leadership in a given school or discipline means, to the benefit of all graduate students. This will now include monthly get-togethers of the different schools to talk about our experiences and network with future leaders in other industries. Each month, a particular school and couple of students will present on their own school's specific subject: with Wharton, the topic will likely cover leadership during the current financial crisis, or the Medical School might overview leadership within health care, and the development of patient care technologies and techniques. The intent is to keep events light – mainly giving a brief overview and pointing people to resources that they can use to follow up if they want more information. Such an event will also have a social component, including GAPSAs sponsored refreshments. Ultimately, the hope is to fill an identified void, which exists on campus, for professional students to get to know each other and learn a little more about each other's fields.

Student Awards and Recognition

The Student Awards and Recognition Task Force is charged with expanding on our travel grant resources and devising strategies to promote student successes, and recognizing them publicly, improving the value of membership in the professional student community.

Going forward, one Professional Student will be picked monthly to be featured in an alumni website, in the Daily Pennsylvanian, on our website, for their superior achievements and contributions to academia. These profiles will be picked from among travel grant applicants, suggestions from GAPSAs reps, and peer/professor recommendations. In addition to the recognition, each student will also receive a \$50 Penn Bookstore gift card. The intention with this program is build pride in the vast accomplishments of the Penn graduate student community, and to encourage continued success with the support of each other.

This Task Force also manages the awarding of professional student travel grants. Last year, travel grants were awarded in excess of the \$9,000 budget, so this budget was increased to \$10,000. Also, the Task Force chose to alter the basis for making awards to increase the number of students that receive them, and the exposure that Penn graduate students as a body receives from them. In particular, awards to those simply attending conferences are now limited to \$150, enabling larger, more readily available awards to students that contribute or present to conferences to which they must travel. We have also noticed an increase in applications for groups of students going to competitions, or collectively attending conferences. These instances are adjudicated on a case-by-case basis, but usually receive more funding per event, though less funding per student.

To date this Task Force, under the adjusted rules has awarded \$2,500 in travel grants.

Interdisciplinary Opportunities

The Interdisciplinary Opportunities Task Force has focused on promoting events of interdisciplinary interest, and using GAPSA resources to bolster the success of those events. Graduate programs at Penn constantly host interesting events that are applicable to students from more-than-one degree program. However, students have a difficult time discovering these events in advance, and often if they do make it to an event, it costs money or has restricted access. To help, the Task Force will be amending the GAPSA calendar (or creating a new calendar on the GAPSA website) that will advertise interdisciplinary events. Students, student groups, and administrators will submit events via a submission form to GAPSA; the Communications Committee will review all events to ensure that they are appropriate, and then post them on the calendar. The Task Force will review all the events submitted and will select events to give extra money to (in the form of tickets, food, extra advertising, etc.). The events chosen are not exclusively professional student events but will be weighted in that direction.

Our estimated budget for this project is \$2,500; the funds will go towards event promotion, calendar promotion, and increasing interdisciplinary opportunities. Last semester, our concept, work plan, and submission form were created. This semester, we will work on creating a coding system for the calendar, and submission instructions in January with the Vice Chair for Communications. In late January/early February we will distribute the submission form to each school. The site will be promoted as soon as the calendar is up and running. Additionally, the Task Force will conduct ongoing promotion for interdisciplinary opportunities. Hopefully, this group's work will lay in place a system that is practical, inexpensive, and maximizes students' ability to connect effectively across schools and programs.

Student Financial Aid

The Finance Task Force is in the process of collaborating with the 12 graduate divisions of the University of Pennsylvania in order to create an informative and accessible document detailing the most important aspects of financial aid for graduate students. Due to the widespread use of loans for the majority of professional students, this method of funding will be our primary focus.

In particular, we are looking to obtain information from each of the respective schools on the following matters: (1) most frequently used lenders, (2) explanation of loan benefits/fees, and (3) advice on budgeting or paying interest.

Once this information has been received and discussed, the Task Force will combine the most valuable information into a brief newsletter or email that will be included in the weekly GAPSA emails and make it available for download from the GAPSA webpage. Other potential items that have been discussed include (1) organizing a talk from a financial aid advisor, and (2) sending a questionnaire to students to voice their concerns about financial aid. As the economy continues to hamper student access to funds, this group will be working hard this term to establish support and information in these ways.

Submitted by Mat Abramsky, Vice Chair for Professional Students