



GSA Executive Council Meeting Minutes
March 16, 2021
3:30-4:45pm
Zoom

This meeting is moderated by GSA President Shayna Bennett. Minutes of the meeting have been prepared by GSA Internal Communications Officer Jordan Collignon.

Members of Executive Council in Attendance

- Shayna Bennett (President)
- Benny Nguyen (Internal Vice President)
- Zunaira Iqbal (External Vice President)
- Taylor Fugere (Academic Affairs Officer)
- Jordan Collignon (Internal Communications Officer)
- Ritwika VPS (International Affairs Officer)
- Karla Seijas (Solidarity Officer)
- Betsabel Chicana (Legislative Affairs Officer)

Officer Updates

Shayna

- Meeting with the Regents and the Chancellor to talk about our basic needs plans.
- Grad council is evaluating rights and responsibilities. Not everyone appears to be on the same page; expectations of Grad Council are not lining up with what GSA reps are envisioning.
- Elections: There already been a few nominations submitted with one acceptance. The nominees we have so far are for LAO, ICO, President, and EVP. There is also one nomination acceptance for Political Science Delegate. Please help get the word out to other students who may be interested in running for GSA this year. The Union is also hosting an election, but there appears to be no one running. Please talk to Ritu if you are interested in running for a position in the Union next year!
- Coffee event: the event overall has been a great success. We had more than 30 people show up to at ASIP and slightly less at Coffee Bandits.

- There will be a letter coming to support the new graduate student researcher union. This letter is expected to be presented to us at the beginning of April.

Ritu

- Two different letters have been drafted, one for the utility stipend request and the other about Dishanka. Another letter for IH is still being written; I still need more info before proceeding any further.
- Proposal for students who TA/don't TA and clarifying the expectations progress to degree. This should be sent to everyone when a draft is finished. A recommendation is to have a first draft by Monday.
- Housing plan being written in the basic needs committee.

Jordan

- The UC Disability Committee has its next meeting scheduled for Sunday. I'm serving on one of the six subcommittees on emergency planning and crisis response. Meetings have yet to be formed due to a lack of responsiveness from other members, so it's unclear whether the subcommittee will remain. If it does, there is a chance that I may co-chair this subcommittee. More about the status of the subcommittees will hopefully be made clear at Sunday's meeting.

Benny

- The DA today has approved two of the letters we plan to send out soon. The first is the utilities stipend letter which is being voted on in this meeting. The second is the IH letter.
- Have we answered previous questions about the travel awards? This discussion has been moved to a later section in these notes.

Zunaira

- Had a meeting with the UCGPC last week. They are currently focusing on getting information on legislative bills ready for next month.
- Progress on nonresident supplemental tuition (NRST) fees: Has there been any update? Earlier it was made clear that once an international student advances to candidacy, their NRST will be waived for 3 years. Due to the pandemic and rapid changes in protocol, many students nearing graduation had their research progress delayed. It had now been about 1 year since these changes took effect. Throughout this time, students have been advocating for an extension of the NRST waiver. Reports indicate that UCLA was successfully able to get a 1-year extension. A couple other UCs were able to give some degree of support for international students.

- The basic needs committee had a meeting last week. I'm planning to meet with Karen hopefully after the break to discuss more about the current transportation system.
- Housing updates: the committee is planning to gather resources to clarify the rights of tenants. We will begin by reaching out to the ASUCM Law Clinic to help find reliable sources around the area.
- Planning is being done on a large-scale housing plan that seeks to adjust the housing market in a way where it can work more closely with the community and students while addressing the current housing crisis. The UC is the largest landlord of California; they effectively set rental rates across the state. Housing prices are extremely variable; a 2-bedroom apartment can be as low as \$300 according to Zillow, while some 1-bedroom units can be as high as \$1200. The new proposal would aim to help students find housing easier while preventing drastic effects on housing for the overall community. In the future that is something to have the GSA support. The goal is to bring the proposal to the UC to consider. If they decline, an alternative option is to talk with non-profits that can collectively provide similar means of support.

Betsabel

- Noelle, Danielle, and Ritu have joined the UC Merced advocacy committee. The committee is researching upcoming state and local bills related to broadband access, basic needs, and childcare. Bill info is due to the UCGPC on Wednesday. These will be compiled with bills from other topics assigned to the other UCs on the Week of April 19th. Work does not include bills at the federal level since there are far more to consider, some of them are insane. When the work is completed, the full report will be presented to Ana Caballero, Adam Gray, and Jim Costa.
- UC Merced has begun planning a regular "Healing Garden." Anyone in the UC Merced community is invited to participate in the planning process, including faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students. No budget nor a timeline has been proposed yet, but this healing garden is something the UC really wants to make available. The more people, who join, the better; people with an art background are especially encouraged to join. It will be important to get graduate student outside of GSA elected positions to join in the planning. It was suggested that a primary representative for the Healing Garden planning come and present at our next general meeting.
- Recently sent the EC information about events from the Wesley Foundation. It was proposed that we share this info through the GSA Facebook page. There were some concerns about posting info on our page from religiously affiliated organizations. It was suggested that posting this information on personal accounts would be more appropriate.

- A motion was made to include this info on the GSA Facebook. However, this motion did not pass (2 yeas, 4 nays, 1 abstention, 1 not present). Officers can still post this info on other pages using their personal accounts.

Karla

- Six members comprise the Graduate Student Rights and Responsibilities Workgroup. A Doodle pool has been created and filled out recently. The first meeting will be taking place next week.

Taylor

- Continuing to reach out to others about committee opportunities. Also leading the next session of the teaching workshop today.

Discussion on Travel Awards

- When the pandemic took hold, many conferences scheduled to take place between this March and the last have either been cancelled completely or postponed to a later date. As a result, students who were given a travel award for one of the cycles within this period and found out about their conference being cancelled were unable to use their award. Furthermore, those who were awarded travel funding were not eligible again for 12 months under current GSA policies, regardless of whether they could use it or not since there not an established precedence. This has created a major issue during the pandemic, resulting in significant amounts of travel funding being unused. Earlier, the GSA stated that students could use the travel funds to pay for a virtual conference, but this didn't address how to solve the issue with conferences being cancelled. In this meeting, a discussion was held to consider temporary policy changes to the travel award program that addresses the students affected by the pandemic and to ensure that the overall process remains fair under significantly abnormal circumstances.
- In previous conversations, a few officers expressed concerns about a lack of structure in the travel award system when unforeseen circumstances occur such as this current pandemic. They have suggested that the GSA grant exceptions to awardees who have not been able to use the funding for the cycle they were awarded. One of these suggestions was to grant exceptions to students whose conference was "postponed" to a later date, and have students reapply if their conference was "cancelled." The travel award application asks students to enter the name of the conference that they will be attending as well as the days at which the conference takes place. The awardee can only use funds related to that particular conference and would have to show proof that they participated in that conference. If the conference was postponed to a later date, then a student could be given an exception if they could show proof of the new conference dates and can prov that they will be presenting in that conference.

- The current situation of the travel award program during the pandemic has emphasized the need to consider restructuring the program itself, not to correct past mistakes, but to prevent the mistakes from happening again. We can at least acknowledge that we don't like the system as it is, and that the next cohort should consider making appropriate changes. Fixes may not happen until the fall, but until then we must put a band-aid on the problems the system caused this year.
- Three suggestions have been brought to the table. The GSA should contact all the awardees that fall into the suggestion approved by the EC:
 - Students who received a travel award and were not able to use it due to the conference being postponed would be given a one-year extension to use the funds for a conference. However, these students would not be allowed to reapply for 12 months after using the funds.
 - Students who received a travel award within the last 12 months but were not able to use it would be allowed to reapply again. These students would be given an exception to the 12-month eligibility policy.
 - Students who received the travel award during the pandemic and were not able to use it would be given a one-year extension AND be allowed to reapply starting the next academic year. These students would be given an exception to the 12-month eligibility policy.
- Due to lack of time, a vote will be held online regarding one of these three suggestions, and officers will notify Quy with more details about the suggestions to help determine whether these suggestions will be feasible.

Letter Updates

- Utility stipend: A draft has been written and is awaiting approval from the EC. Comments were requested a few days ago. It was suggested that a conclusion be written to tie all the points together. Who should his letter be addressed to? A suggestion was to cc all graduate group chairs and send to other student organizations to get support. Have each of them fill out a form if they want to be added as a signatory.
 - With no major revisions suggested, a motion was made to approve the letter following minor changes. The motion passes unanimously (8 yeas, 0 nays, 0 abstentions, 0 not present)
- Dishanka: A draft has been written and is awaiting approval from the EC. Who should this be sent to? It was agreed that recipients should be limited to those at UC Merced,

and it's important that the Chancellor is one of the recipients. Also send the letter to Naoko in the Academic Senate.

- With no major revisions suggested, a motion was made to approve the letter following minor changes. The motion passes unanimously (8 yeas, 0 nays, 0 abstentions, 0 not present).

Votes Held

- The EC voted to pass the letter regarding the utility stipend following minor revisions (8 yeas, 0 nays, 0 abstentions, 0 not present).
- The EC voted to pass the letter in support of Dishanka following minor revisions (8 yeas, 0 nays, 0 abstentions, 0 not present).
- The request to post religiously affiliated events on the GSA Facebook did not pass (2 yeas, 4 nays, 1 abstention, 1 not present). Officers can still use their personal Facebook accounts to share this info.

Meeting adjourned at 5:00pm.

The third General Membership meeting will be on Wednesday, April 7th from 4-5pm.

The next Executive Council meeting will be on Tuesday, March 30th from 3:30-4:45pm.