



GSA Executive Council Meeting Minutes
May 11, 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)
- Larisa Gavrilova (Climate, Diversity, and Equity Officer)
- Karla Seijas (Solidarity Officer)

Officer Updates

Taylor

- Larisa and I finished the CETL teaching practices series. About 81 students have attended five or more sessions and will be receiving a certificate.
- There will be positions next fall to work with TA trainings. Shoutout to Larisa for leading the effort to make this happen!

Larisa

- Catching up with the Mental Health survey workgroup. The survey is now being finalized. We plan to meet with Dean Kello to and the data analyst team to discuss survey distribution.

Jordan

- In the last meeting I mentioned that two subcommittees within the larger UC Disability committee have merged into a single basic needs subcommittee. The subcommittee meeting last weekend was cancelled since it conflicted with a scheduled meeting of the UCSA. The next subcommittee meeting will be taking place this Sunday immediately after the monthly meeting with all committees. I will not be able to attend either of these meetings since I'll be moving on that day. If anyone wants to attend one or both of those meetings, I can send the links.

Zunaira

- Me and Jordan met with Bavneet and the CalFresh outreach team last week to talk about how the GSA can help graduate students sign up for CalFresh benefits. Most graduate student's monthly income exceeds the threshold for eligibility, but programs that are "approved student programs" and have students work a certain number of hours may have exemptions that will allow graduate students to qualify for CalFresh benefits. Me and Jordan were asked to investigate what programs in each department fall into this category. Will be reaching out to Bavneet for clarity on how to identify these types of programs.

Karla

- The Graduate Student Rights and Responsibilities workgroup will be meeting one more time before the semester ends. We are waiting for feedback on the current draft from Grad Div and the Faculty Senate. The process will be continuing through the next academic year.

Benny

- CAPS has announced that starting in the Fall semester, UC SHIP will cover the \$15 co-pay for services through LiveHealth.

Shayna

- The election results were finally sent out this week. We were unable to send the results until the Chancellor could approve them. There were a few other problems with this election process that I'll bring up in a bit.

Things for the Next Cohort to Work on

- Officer handbooks
 - We need these to be drafted so that the next officer has a clearer idea of what their responsibilities are.
 - In past GSA cohorts, new officers were unable to get in contact with the outgoing officers. As a result, new officers had to learn everything about their position from the ground up, which can take an entire semester to finish. By the time they know what to do, half their term has already passed. Having a document to guide each new officer will make the transition far smoother.
- Elections
 - In previous elections, it used to be the case that any student could vote a DA candidate, even though we wanted only the students in the corresponding department to vote. In the Fall election that issue was solved.
 - The nomination process is still quite rough. We require a third-party to ensure that the elections process remains fair. This third-party was also in charge of notifying nominees about their nomination for a position. However, the commission received complaints that nominees were notified as little as 5 minutes before the deadline to run for office.
 - A suggestion for next time was to change how candidates choose to run for office. Instead of having to be nominated for a position, students can apply to run for the position. This will eliminate the need for the third-party to send reminders for nominees; only candidates will be sending information to the third-party to be included in the ballot. The proposal aims to improve elections under the time constraints that every election process had to deal with.
 - A couple officers had concerns about the proposal. Applying for GSA positions may work better for those who want to join the Executive Council, but it might make it harder to elect new Delegates. It was stated that most positions in the GSA are filled by nominations, particularly those who were urged by a colleague to run for office.
 - If the GSA decides to keep the nomination process in place, another suggestion would be to find another third party. The third party we worked with each semester allows us to use Catlife to host elections. A comment was made that whoever we choose as the third-party should not have a conflict of interest regarding the items on the ballot such as referenda.
 - If there was a way we could have a system that can reach out to nominees automatically that would save a lot of time for the election commission and the third-party.

- Graduate Student Rights & Responsibilities Document
 - As mentioned earlier, the process of getting this document approved has been getting slower. The workgroup is collaborating with Graduate Council to finalize the document for subsequent approval by the Faculty Senate. Without the approval of the Faculty Senate, the document will not hold any power. Graduate Council wants to make a flowchart to make it clear who students should contact regarding a variety of issues and outline consequences if faculty do not do what they're supposed to do. The Faculty Senate does not want the latter in the final document and has suggested they do not want the document to be very detailed.
 - If the Faculty Senate gets what it wants, an alternative proposal would be to develop a separate FAQ page that will answer questions about who to contact and offer the additional details there. This page can be added to Grad Div's website. If that's not possible, we will add this info to our own website.
- Graduate Course Catalog
 - It is difficult for students to find departmental requirements toward degree. Undergraduate students have a catalog where they can access course requirements along the way in their major, but there is no equivalent for graduate course and program requirements, so a proposal for the next cohort is to push for the development of a course catalog for graduate students. Shayna spoke with Erin Webb who is considering this addition.
 - It was also noted that UC Merced pays for two catalogs but only uses one. If that's the case, then we already have the physical resources to get started. We just need enough people to work on this task; very little effort has been made in the past.
- Reevaluating the travel awards
 - In each travel award cycle, two students from each school receive up to \$400. This year, many students could only use parts of that funding; conferences were being cancelled or postponed and virtual conferences were far cheaper.
 - In a couple years, the Gallo school will be incorporated in UC Merced. Since our policy only considers the current three schools, we will soon have to update our policy anyways to accommodate the Gallo school.
 - A proposal was to consider having a budget constraint for each school. For each cycle, allot at most \$800 per school, and select students at random from each school to be funded the amount requested until the \$800 threshold is attained. The budget constraint will replace the two-student limit per school, allowing multiple students from each school to be funded as long as the total amount awarded doesn't exceed \$800. This will ensure that the funding we have allotted toward travel awards is being used effectively.

- Housing issues
 - UC Merced has partnered with contractors to include new student housing. It was stated that the university will create a partnership if the contractor agrees to charge no more than 50% of a student's salary for rent. Since rent burden is considered any amount about 30%, this threshold is not acceptable.
 - Jordan has been put in contact with a representative from the Merced Fair Housing Coalition and will reach out to set up a meeting with GSA officers to discuss the issue in detail. Jordan will also reach out to ASUCM to talk about how students can address student housing and how the university should be more transparent about the new units being built.
 - You will find out quickly that since undergraduate students comprise the bulk of the student population, admin will listen to them far more than grad students.
 - Affordable housing is also something that faculty want to address. Faculty also worked with the GSA to prevent the privatization of the Early Childhood Education Center. Having the support of the faculty on the same issues will help us gain a lot of traction moving forward.
- Utility Stipends
 - A form was circulated to graduate students a few weeks ago to urge the university to provide stipends to graduate students who saw rising utility costs because of working from home during the pandemic.
 - This would be something that the new cohort can continue pursuing. Please reach out to Ritu if you have any questions about this support effort.
- Other things to know
 - The workload can get very heavy during the fall and spring semesters. Make sure to plan things as early as possible before you get super busy with research, TA, etc. Try thinking about three things to focus on as a team each semester.
 - Start planning student events early so that their costs can be incorporated into the budget. It can take lots of time to finalize the GSA budget; ultimately the DA will have to approve the initial budget in the fall semester.
 - Unlike other student governments, working in the GSA is entirely voluntary.
 - Faculty may discourage you from getting involved in the GSA, but keep in mind that the skills you learn from working in student organizations are skills you can use later in life post-graduation. These skills are seldom learned through doing research in your program. As Shayna mentioned, her public speaking skills have vastly improved since joining the GSA and has enjoyed every minute of her work as both the Treasurer and as President these past couple years.

Meeting adjourned at 4:30pm.

New Executive Council meetings will be scheduled soon.