

To: Dr. John Simon and the Strategic Planning Committee
From: The Executive Board of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Council (GSASC)
Subject: Recommendations for Improving Graduate Student Welfare and Achievement

Dear Dr. Simon and members of the Strategic Planning Committee,

We thank you for this opportunity to share our thoughts with the Strategic Planning Committee. As the University moves forward with this initiative, we hope you will keep the needs of graduate students from the School of Arts and Sciences in mind. In particular, we have detailed below a number of changes that could substantially enhance graduate students' general welfare, academic achievement, and career development. Before reviewing these specific changes, we wish to highlight two overarching suggestions.

In speaking with fellow graduate students the single most important issue, and frustration, that emerges concerns **mentoring**. Far too many graduate students feel isolated and stymied by a lack of faculty advising, which undermines the quality of their training, slows their time to completion, and reduces their career prospects. In some departments students cannot finish the course-work stage of their program in a timely manner because there are insufficient graduate-level course offerings. Graduate students are eager to start publishing during their time at UVA but find it difficult to do so when it takes months for their faculty advisors to return edits on drafts. Many advisors also do not seem to see it as their responsibility to help their students prepare for the job market. We have made some suggestions below but would strongly urge the implementation of a survey of best-practices in graduate student mentoring across the University. GSASC would be glad to help design and implement this survey; it would help to identify what the best advisors do for their graduate students. Once such practices have been identified we need senior-level administrators to advocate for us by reminding faculty of their responsibilities and incentivizing good behavior.

This leads to the second point we would like to highlight: **GSASC is here to help**. We are gratified that you invited us to contribute our thoughts to the Strategic Planning initiative. As the elected, representative body charged with promoting the interests of Arts and Sciences graduate students, GSASC creates a mechanism for representation that could be tapped for committees like yours and the BOV. It is wonderful that leadership bodies such as yours include undergraduate representation and graduate students from the professional schools. However, graduate students from the School of Arts and Sciences have a unique perspective and unique concerns, in large part because of their responsibilities as teaching assistants and because of the much longer amount of time they spend at UVA. We therefore encourage University leaders to include GSASC representation more often.

With those two big-picture issues in mind, we hope you will consider the following, more specific proposals as you move forward with Strategic Planning. We thank you for your consideration and look forward to speaking with you in the future about these important issues.

Sincerely,

The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Council Executive Board

Proposals to Improve Graduate Students' Quality of Life

When graduate students have a high quality of life it promotes retention and time-to-completion. Additionally, when current graduate students speak enthusiastically about their experience at UVa it helps recruit the best applicants. In many respects, graduate students have a wonderful experience at UVa and in Charlottesville. However, we have repeatedly heard complains in the following issue-areas that we believe could be addressed.

1. Secure Funding and Waive Tuition Increases for Advanced Graduate Students

Graduate Students who entered the University before last year's financial restructuring are very concerned about their funding in the later years of their degree. The evaporation of the dissertation-year fellowships has been particularly upsetting. We have been told that the money from those fellowships was devolved to individual departments to use on graduate student funding. However, we are concerned that there is nothing stopping departments from using these resources in other ways, leaving students in their 6th year and later without the funding needed to complete their degree. Additionally, by dismantling the dissertation-year fellowships the University has denied us a means of demonstrating our value on the job market. When students are awarded dissertation fellowships by their University it signals that their work has garnered substantial inter-disciplinary respect, which is something graduate students can add to their CVs and use to demonstrate their worth. We therefore support the creation of even non-monetary awards to fill this void.

Recent news of a tuition increase for graduate students is also generating deep concerns. While the Dean's office has assured us that most departments will be given sufficient funding to pay for their students' tuition, as before, there is a lack of oversight with regard to the allocation of graduate funding by individual departments. This is especially alarming for students who were not admitted with five years of guaranteed funding. Graduate students who entered UVa under the previous tuition structure should have a right to complete their degrees without being subjected to the drastically different terms of a new tuition model, since the enforcement of these new terms would likely prove detrimental to their ability to complete their degrees. We therefore urge the University to waive these tuition increases for all graduate students who entered prior to their implementation.

Lastly, there are two practices that we propose would encourage graduate students to secure external funding. First, the University should reward students who are awarded external funding by extending their UVa funding. As it currently stands in many departments, if a student has been guaranteed four years of funding through the University, but is able to acquire outside funding in their third year, they do not automatically get an extension of their UVa funding. This discourages students from seeking external funding during their first 4-5 years and encourages them to wait until their later years to seek external funding opportunities. The funding system should be restructured such that University funding is guaranteed for a set number of years, but does not have to be administered consecutively. This would allow students who are able to get outside funding in their first few years to extend their University funding to later years. Second, it would be easier for students to identify relevant external funding sources if each department

was required to keep an updated list of available fellowships in their subject, along with their due dates and any other pertinent notes that might help graduate students get these grants. If this is not a responsibility that falls under the purview of the DGS, perhaps it could be a separate position allocated to a different faculty member.

2. Create a University Parental Leave Policy and Greater On-Grounds Support

Because of their age and the duration of a PhD program many graduate students become parents, or would like to become parents, during their time at UVa. Unfortunately, according to a recent GSASC survey, many graduate students perceive UVa to be an inhospitable place for parenting. The majority of graduate students surveyed report that their departments are not very supportive of graduate students with families. The majority of respondents also do not know what accommodations, if any, they can reasonably request because there is no standard policy regarding graduate students who become parents. In the absence of a University-wide policy many graduate students are forced to negotiate parental leave rights directly with their advisors, advisors who may be hostile to graduate students who choose to get pregnant or adopt during their graduate training. For this and related reasons, 93% of our survey's respondents said it would be helpful to have a University-wide policy in place regarding graduate student parental leave. We have lobbied and will continue to lobby the University to adopt a set of minimum standards. At a minimum, students who become parents should be entitled to unpaid leave without punishment and extensions on academic work (comprehensive exams, term papers, expectations for time-to-completion).

Both the University and graduate students who become parents have an interest in ensuring that parenting does not unnecessarily lengthen time-to-completion. There are two relatively easy things that can be implemented to make it easier for students with young children to continue their graduate studies. First, on-grounds breast-feeding spaces would allow female graduate students with babies to work on-grounds as needed. Second, we have received complaints about the scheduling of graduate seminars after 5pm. Students with young children often find it particularly difficult to secure evening childcare. Scheduling classes after 5pm often makes it impossible for graduate students with children to take those classes, thereby delaying their progress through coursework. More ambitiously, the creation of affordable child-care options on-grounds would substantially ease the difficulty of parenting while in graduate school and benefit faculty with young children as well and even undergraduates who may want to make extra money as baby-sitters. The creation of an on-grounds center with some trained supervisors and some undergraduate baby-sitters would be welcome by many University communities.

3. Preserve Graduate Student Housing – Esp. for Students with Families and International Students – and Work Space

We are concerned that in the past few years housing for graduate students has diminished. Currently the Range is the only on-Grounds option reserved for graduate students. This is especially problematic for international students and students with families. International students are often unfamiliar with US housing options and find it much easier to transition to UVa if they can begin in University housing. Trying to reserve housing from abroad is extremely difficult and risky, especially when international students are not fluent in transactional English.

At the very least it would be helpful to reserve a small number of rooms for first-year international graduate students in one of the housing complexes near grounds. This would give international graduate students a year to find potential roommates and reasonable off-grounds apartments. Students with families will be significantly compromised if their housing is terminated. They cannot live on the Range since rooms there are single-occupancy and most of the off-grounds options near campus are designed for single students or groups of friends. Preserving an enclave of family housing for graduate students as well as undergraduates with families serves an important function.

Additionally, most graduate students do not have offices and are not given access to faculty-printing facilities. Therefore, all departments should have a dedicated graduate student lounge with copier and printer capabilities. This will cut down on time lost having to go to Alderman or Brown libraries to print and copy materials. Moreover, teaching assistants should not have to pay out-of-pocket expenses to print and copy materials for their classes. If there is not room for each department to have its own graduate lounge an effort should be made to create a shared lab for neighboring departments.

Proposals to Improve Graduate Students' Career Planning and Professional Development

Graduate students are motivated and eager to get the best jobs possible, but are often frustrated by the lack of mentoring within their departments and especially the lack of support for students seeking careers outside of the R1 universe. Additionally, it is rare for graduate students to meet or collaborate with others who are not in their own departments, which represents a lost networking opportunity. The following proposals are aimed at improving the resources available for graduate students to identify and achieve desirable careers, as well as fostering an interdisciplinary student network.

4. Encourage Publishing via Targeted Faculty Mentoring

Given the shape of the academic job market, graduate students realize the benefits of having publication in hand by the time we graduate. However, the vast majority of us have not published independent work before and we need faculty guidance. In some disciplines it is quite normal for graduate students to co-author work with their faculty advisors, but in some departments – especially in those where faculty engage in more qualitative research – co-authorship is quite rare. We would therefore encourage the University to remind faculty that it is their responsibility to mentor graduate students in publishing. In departments where graduate students often serve as research assistants for their advisors, this means giving students the intellectual space to publish their own work. In other departments, where co-authorship is less the norm, this may mean offering concrete inducements for faculty to co-author with their graduate students. Perhaps co-authorship could be included as a component of teaching or service requirements for faculty advancement.

5. Encourage Greater Graduate Student Collaboration through Creation of Pan-GSAS Cohorts and a Graduate Student Research Database

A frequent frustration felt by graduate students is a sense of isolation, both within their departments and university-wide. We have three suggestions to combat this sense of isolation. First, we recommend that steps be taken to frame each incoming class of graduate students as a single cohort. Creating greater cohort cohesion would improve the social wellbeing for many graduate students as well as facilitate networking and even graduate student co-authorship. Currently, it is rare for graduate students from different departments to practice proposal presentations or form dissertation writing groups. If each incoming graduate student class were treated as a cohort from their first days at UVa, more opportunities would be provided for developing a graduate student network for this type of interdisciplinary support. We therefore suggest that there be a more robust, GSAS-wide orientation for incoming graduate students with social as well as professional development programming. Thereafter, perhaps an extension of the GSAS website could be a place to promote collaborative initiatives and events, where graduate students can contact each other to form cross-disciplinary working groups.

Second, we encourage the creation of a searchable database for graduate students to list their research interests and skills. This would make it easier for graduate students to identify possible collaborators and co-authors from among their own ranks. Perhaps this database could be operated in conjunction with the new Open Grounds initiative.

Third, we advocate better methods of information distribution for graduate students. At this time, the majority of events or opportunities that are promoted to all graduate students are publicized through GSASC, via our department representatives, or through individual department's Directors of Graduate Study. Although this is sometimes an effective method for information distribution, there are many initiatives and programs of which graduate students are not aware. Programs such as the Science, Humanities, & Arts Network of Technological Initiatives (SHANTI), the University Committee on Sustainability, and the Open Grounds Initiative are ideal opportunities to foster graduate student participation and cross-discipline collaboration. We encourage the University to organize class-wide networking events that are promoted to all of GSAS, and promote cross-disciplinary events in a more centralized way. One solution would be to allow organizations to submit opportunities to GSAS, possibly through the recently redesigned GSAS website, which would then be emailed to the entire GSAS community.

6. Encourage Graduate Students to Take Teaching Seriously, but Discourage First Year Teaching Assistantships

In too many departments graduate students are explicitly told that undergraduate teaching should be their last priority. This is a mistaken approach to graduate student training for several reasons. First, it underprepares graduate students for their careers. If graduate students are not taught how to teach, and discouraged from taking their teaching responsibilities seriously, they do not know how to lead a course when they are expected to do so as assistant professors. Second, being a good teacher is an important asset on the job market. Whether you are applying at R1 universities or liberal arts colleges in today's competitive job market being a good teacher is a great asset. Rather than minimize the importance of teaching, the University should encourage departments to train their students how to teach as well as how to conduct research. We have a few suggestions of how this could be accomplished. First, give departments funds to hire one advanced graduate student a year to lead a pedagogical seminar for newer graduate students.

Second, departments should also be encouraged to have their students participate in the Teaching Resource Center's Tomorrow's Professors Today program. Third, perhaps scholars at the Curry School could develop a summer lecture series for GSAS students on best practices in pedagogy for college-age students. Fourth, faculty should be reminded of their responsibility to mentor their teaching assistants. Many teaching assistants receive absolutely no guidance from their faculty in how to lead a discussion section and are never observed by faculty while doing so. Faculty must be reminded that part of their job is not just to lecture but also to oversee their TAs.

Despite our strong conviction that teaching matters as part of graduate student training, we also feel strongly that graduate students should not be expected to serve as teaching assistants in their first year. The first year should be spent learning the discipline and adjusting to the role of a graduate student. It is unreasonable to expect first year graduate students, with no pedagogical training and little understanding of their discipline, to be responsible for 60-80 undergraduates a semester. When the first year can be spent fully committed to learning the discipline and research principles, it makes it substantially easier to incorporate other responsibilities, such as teaching, in the second and subsequent years.

7. Invest in Alternative-Career Planning and Create a Professional Development Certificate Program

Many graduate students we have surveyed are interested in non-academic jobs but are unable to seek out advice on how to get those jobs within their own department. Faculty are often stubbornly committed to the belief that all PhD students desire jobs at R1 Universities, but this is simply out-of-line with reality. And in today's competitive job market it is irresponsible to tell graduate students they should not consider alternative career paths. We suggest three initial steps, culminating with the creation of a new professional development program, which would help students access information about, and become strong contenders for, non-academic jobs.

First, encourage individual departments to identify non-academic careers suitable for people with their degree and educate graduate students about these options. This task could be incorporated into the DGS' job description or allocated to a different faculty member as a separate position of career planning advisor. Second, departments should be evaluated not just on the number of graduate students placed at R1 universities but also at excellent liberal arts colleges, think tanks, corporations, and government bureaus. Recognition that there are many good uses of a PhD by the University leadership would hopefully influence departmental perspectives and make it possible for graduate students to speak more openly about their career ambitions. Third, we are extremely happy that Melissa Hurst was hired to fill the opening of Director of Graduate Career Services and she has done a terrific job providing information and programming for graduate students. We hope she is given staff and institutional support to meet the demand for information about careers in academia as well as corporate, governmental, and other sectors. There is also increasing interest in international jobs. A robust career services department would help UVa's graduate students excel in a range of fields, which can only enhance the University's reputation.

Therefore, we request that a formal program be developed for graduate student career preparation, similar to the format of the Teaching Resource Center's Tomorrow's Professors Today (TPT) program. We believe a graduate student professional development program is the

logical expansion of the services currently offered by the Graduate Career Services office. Currently, the Director of Graduate Career Services organizes grant writing workshops, career panels, CV and resume assistance, and many other useful and constructive skill- and knowledge-building events for graduate students. We propose that these current offerings be expanded, and form the basis of the new professional development program. In the same way the TPT program is built around a checklist of requirements, overseen by a program advisor, this new program would provide similar structure and guidance to its participants. Graduate students who complete the program would be awarded a certificate and a letter certifying their successful completion of the program to add to their future job search materials.

The TPT program is designed to facilitate the transition from graduate student to academic professional; the new program will be its counterpart, helping graduate students better prepare for all aspects of a professional career, not limited to academia.

Proposals to Improve Graduate Students' Training

The most important questions to grapple with is how we can enhance the quality of graduate students' education. Many factors contribute to the quality of graduate student training, and the following proposals mainly focus on incentivizing faculty to provide the best training possible to their graduate students.

8. Increase Course Offerings and Availability

We have received some complaints that in some departments there are not enough graduate-level courses offered to fill demand, slowing students' time-to-completion. One suggestion would be to encourage departments to offer summer courses for graduate students to help them complete their program more quickly. Additionally, students also report that they are discouraged from taking courses outside their own department. With the increasing interdisciplinary nature of research, departments should not limit the number of outside credits students can earn, especially when classes outside of their department may be more pertinent to their research agenda and long-term career goals.

9. Survey Departments on Best Practices re: Mentoring as the Basis for an Advising Code of Conduct

As we mentioned above, perhaps the single-greatest problem facing graduate students is the unevenness of faculty mentoring. Too many students struggle to get the attention of their faculty advisors; in some departments graduate students do not even have a primary advisor until they select a dissertation chair. Certain departments rotate new graduate students through all available advisors, encouraging out-of-area skill-building and awareness of all current department research endeavors, while in other departments, any time spent away from your primary research is considered a waste of time. In some departments the entire faculty participates when graduate students conduct practice job talks; in other departments practice job talks are organized by the students themselves and rarely include a single faculty member. Faculty often put their responsibilities to their undergraduate and newer graduate students over their responsibilities to

advanced graduate students because of the fixed deadlines for students in courses versus the much more fluid time-frame of an ABD student's education. It can take months to get edits back on dissertation drafts or even schedule a time when your committee can meet together. When faculty take sabbaticals they sometimes become impossible to reach, even though graduate students' ability to complete their degree requires regular feedback by their advisors. It would be help graduate students advocate for themselves if there was more unity and transparency regarding advisors' responsibilities to their students. Furthermore, if it were a policy of the University that graduate student feedback was solicited during the tenure process, it would emphasize to faculty the importance of providing adequate and consistent mentoring to their graduate advisees.

For these reasons we strongly urge the development of a survey to identify best-practices in mentoring across the University and the creation of an advising code-of-conduct that makes clear the faculty's mentoring responsibilities to graduate advisees. Based on the code-of-conduct that develops from this survey effort, we request that the University provide training opportunities to both current and incoming faculty on the best practices for meeting their responsibilities and providing successful mentoring to advisees.

10. Review Departmental Culture and Facilitate Horizontal Mobility

Some departments exhibit a culture of intra-faculty hostility and rivalry that undermines graduate student learning. In these departments graduate students are treated as belonging to a single faculty member's clan, which becomes especially problematic when an advisor chooses to leave UVa or fails to adequately mentor his/her graduate students. In these departments, it is difficult for graduate students to find new advisors either because no one wants to work with a graduate student from an opposing clan or because it is considered disloyal to seek out advice from more than one faculty member. In these environments, if an advisor fails in their mentoring duties there may be no other option for a graduate student but to leave their program altogether.

We believe that when students are dissuaded from seeking advice from faculty other than their primary advisors, it undermines their professional development. For this reason we request a formal policy to allow for horizontal mobility of graduate students within their departments. If a faculty advisor leaves the University, or fails in their mentoring responsibility, graduate students should have the option to transition to a new faculty advisor. Finding a new faculty advisor within the department would be the responsibility of the graduate student, but University leaders should encourage faculty to allow for collective mentoring and discourage the intellectual in-fighting described above. With the standardization of graduate student support under the new financial restructuring, horizontal mobility is feasible. This new policy has the potential to increase graduate student retention and create a more supportive department culture.

We also encourage the implementation of surveys or other tools to assess department culture from graduate students' perspectives and to identify means of improving this culture. Bringing this variation in departmental culture to light would on its own be a strong first step towards improving the atmosphere in the more inhospitable departments. GSASC is excited to collaborate with University administrators in conducting these surveys and publicizing their results.