



# 2009 NAGPS Northeast Regional Conference Best Practices Articles

## **Articles compiled from:**

Boston University  
Brandeis University  
Carnegie Mellon University  
Harvard University  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Northeastern University  
Suffolk University  
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## **Activities**

Boston University  
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Boston University has a large and active graduate student body. Due to the size of the university, these students are spread throughout different schools. Many of these schools have student government organizations that advocate for them on policy issues and organize social, volunteer, and professional development activities. Below is a summary of some of these activities.

The Graduate Student Organization (GSO) represents students in the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences. Some of the most popular GSO social activities include pub nights at our campus bar (the BU Pub) and a large summer barbecue. The GSO has also organized professional development talks that focused on professional networking and resume writing. In addition to directly organizing events, the GSO recently began to co-sponsor events with other organizations on campus. By co-sponsoring an event, the GSO can help make the event possible (through financial assistance) and also raise awareness of the event. GSO co-sponsored events have covered a range of topics including: life in the CIA, African studies, East Asian studies, and balancing teaching and research at an academic institution.

The Student Association of Graduate Engineers (SAGE) is the organization that brings all of the graduate engineering students under one umbrella. SAGE organizes an Entrepreneurship Design Contest to inspire the engineering students to think about their research and projects as potential business opportunities. SAGE also promotes career development activities. This year SAGE started a consulting group, the Consulting Group of Graduate Engineers, which hosts speakers and firms from the industry. The main purpose of the consulting group is to educate and prepare the engineering graduate students for a successful transition to a career in consulting, and to get the students in contact with potential employers. Apart from these initiatives, SAGE hosts/funds a number of recreational activities, including pub nights, ski trips, intramural teams etc.

The Graduate Medical Sciences Student Organization (GMSSO) represents graduate students at the BU Medical Campus. The GMSSO organizes a fall and spring barbecue and, in the fall, the GMSSO holds a welcome back event. For the past two years, this event has been a Boston harbor boat cruise. In recent years, the GMSSO has organized a career fair for students and this year the GMSSO is hosting a CV writing workshop as well as a "You've got a PhD, now what?" seminar.

The Boston University Graduate Society (BUGS) is a new organization that was formed this year to plan and coordinate activities for all graduate students at BU. The organization is off to a great start; it hosted a large event with hundreds of BU students in the fall of 2008 and it co-hosted an even larger event with MIT in February 2009.

## **Community Engagement**

Tufts University: Arts, Sciences, and Engineering  
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The GSC coordinates and facilitates academic, social and community outreach events designed to bring together graduate students from a variety of departments and programs in our two schools. Some of our events are long-standing (like our Graduate Research Symposium and our 5K Run/Walk), but every year we also introduce and change some of our smaller events. It is really important to us that we present a diverse array of activities designed to ensure that we appeal to different groups of students – not everyone enjoys Pub time in Davis Square and similarly other students choose not to engage in some of our community outreach events. We also depend on our Graduate Student Organizations (GSOs) to add to our engagement efforts and, in an attempt to stay connected across our population, our General Meetings are designed to have representation from each department and each Graduate Student Organization.

*Academic.* This Spring we will host our 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Graduate Student Research Symposium. Early in the semester, graduate students are invited to submit abstracts for a 15-minute presentation that succinctly presents their recent research. One of the major attractions for this event is our stipulation that abstracts and presentations be made to ensure clarity for the broadest possible educated audience. It is a cordial competition in which the presenters are judged for cash prizes largely on their ability to convey that information to a group in which no one might share their specialty.

*Social.* Some of our social events are done in conjunction with the graduate school, some are done with other Tufts GSCs, and others are done only by the AS&E GSC. Our major events are our fall apple-picking trip and our spring end-of-year BBQ. Some of the departments and GSOs coordinate smaller group trips. In addition, we hold four Pub Nights per year (which usually attract 75 – 100 students). One of our goals for the coming year is to work on some social programming with graduate students from our other Tufts campuses. We also hope that our involvement with the newly-formed Boston Graduate Leadership Organization (BGLO) will continue to foster possibilities for social events (both for the GSC and our GSOs) with other universities in the area.

*Community Outreach.* Many students look to the GSC to provide a medium for community outreach. In the fall, we have traditionally led drives for food, clothing and toys and this year we took advantage of our pub night incentives in order to increase responsiveness to these campaigns. We normally offer free food and beverage incentives for the first 50 attendees to our pub nights and as participation grew, we began to couple those incentives to donations for our drives. Our biggest community outreach event, though, is our 5K; this year will be the 12<sup>th</sup> running of this Somerville-based race (which attracts many non-Tufts runners) and serves as a fundraiser for Project Hope and Respond, Inc. We look forward to working with BGLO in expanding our social outreach in the area, as well.

## **Faculty/Student Relations**

Harvard University: School of Public Health  
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Students at the Harvard School of Public Health have provided feedback to the student government that one less-favorable aspect of our school is the limited extent of student-faculty interaction. Outside of classes and advising, there are not many opportunities for students to meet different faculty members. Student government has tried to address this through a number of initiatives, and we are interested in promoting this issue further and learning about how other schools have successfully increased student-faculty interaction.

One of our initiatives which we are sure is common in many schools is the student-faculty lunch. Twice a semester, student government representatives reach out to faculty members in the various departments they represent and invite them to attend a luncheon with students. We take online sign-ups from students for these lunches and ask them to provide us with their fields of interest and the names of any faculty members they would like to meet. We have received mixed feedback from the faculty; some feel that it is an enjoyable opportunity to spend time with students outside the classroom, while others feel that it is an unstructured event with unclear objectives and outcomes.

Another venue for increasing student-faculty interaction is a weekly speaker lunch series organized by student government where students, faculty, and guests are invited to present a topic of their choice during the first half of their lunch hour and open the floor to discussion during the second half. One of the goals of this series is to provide an opportunity for interaction with students and faculty from different departments, and we are trying to increase faculty presence and participation at these events and make them more interactive.

In the past, student government has hosted First Thursday Teas and invited all faculty and students to attend. We found that attendance rates were extremely low on the faculty side and decided to allocate our resources elsewhere. We are currently interested in finding new ways for students to cross paths with our diverse and inspiring faculty, and to make this aspect of student life more frequent and more meaningful.

## **Faculty/Student Relations**

MIT

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Most advocacy efforts by graduate student governments strongly focus on the communal needs of the students by pushing for policy reform in housing, transportation, health care, and funding. While the importance of these issues cannot be overemphasized, an essential, and often neglected, aspect of the life of a graduate student is the delicate interaction with faculty in the form of graduate mentoring and advising.

Poor advising practices, inappropriate mechanisms for conflict resolution, and an overall sense of weak advisor-advisee relationships are issues that strongly damage the graduate student experience, and for many students are much more influential than the non-academic aspect of life. As such, it is the responsibility of a representative graduate government to create mechanisms to evaluate and address any deficiencies in this matter.

A study conducted by MIT<sup>1</sup> highlighted some of the unique challenges that graduate students face in their academic relationship:

1. Lack of options and flexibility – cannot change advisors, departments, or universities easily
2. Danger of “getting crosswise” with advisor or being caught in the crossfire of warring faculty
3. Double-edged sexual harassment liability
4. Used as cheap labor to support faculty projects or departmental teaching obligations
5. Difficulty in receiving appropriate credit for research and publications
6. Pressure to support own research through grants
7. Graduate instructors and advisers are traditionally given a great deal of slack in their relationship with students
8. Graduate schools have a tendency to operate separately from the rest of the university and be a “law unto themselves”
9. Lack of built-in or readily-available support system

These and many other factors underscore the importance, but also the challenging nature, of this problem. On the other hand, they provide a variety of options for graduate governments to advocate for positive change in a responsible and objective manner.

The Committee on Academics, Research, and Careers (ARC) of the MIT GSC has studied these issues for several years through the conduction of surveys to assess the overall quality of graduate mentoring and research ethics, and the construction of data-backed recommendations based on the studies. In working to implement proactive solutions to advising problems, the committee prepared a hand-out on the importance of graduate advising for the New Faculty Orientation Handbook<sup>2</sup>, as well as a hand-out for first year graduate students on “How to Find an Advisor”<sup>3</sup>. In addition, a summary of current practices was compiled in coordination with departmental administrators, and focus groups were formed to discuss the recommendations with department heads, faculty, and administrators.

The effectiveness of these measures has unfortunately been limited. We are currently evaluating the long-term impact of the 2004 study by additional surveying and comparisons with the doctoral exit surveys. In addition, we plan to establish a more aggressive advocacy approach to this issue by obtaining data about correlations between advising quality and a variety of factors such as tenure status, multiplicity of advisers, number of students in the group, etc. The short-term plan is to compile a list of new data-supported recommendations and pursue a more direct approach to advocacy, targeting specific weaknesses rather than limiting the discussion to focus groups and largely symbolic measures.

Though this is a work in progress and our conclusions are mixed, the importance of the subject is unquestionable, and we believe it should be one of the priorities of graduate governments nation-wide.

1. [http://web.mit.edu/gsc/www/committees/arc/docs/complaints\\_med.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/gsc/www/committees/arc/docs/complaints_med.pdf)
2. [http://web.mit.edu/gsc/www/programs/advising/pub/GSC\\_NewFacultyLetter.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/gsc/www/programs/advising/pub/GSC_NewFacultyLetter.pdf)
3. <http://web.mit.edu/gsc/www/programs/advising/pub/1st Year Grad Letter.pdf>

## **Health/Dental Care**

Brandeis University  
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Brandeis GSA decided to get more engaged with the administration on health insurance issues two years ago. We identified students from our 3 graduate schools -- several with health policy experience from Heller School of Social Policy -- and requested to meet with our insurance provider and other potential providers (at that time, the contract was up for renewal). As a result of very informed graduate student involvement, we changed providers, we changed coverage, and we saved money for graduate students.

Before going into the meetings with administrators, we collected information from students about their health care policy and how it did or didn't meet their needs, we did research on the different providers we met with, and we ended up asking some questions that resulted in "silence in the room" (in a good way!). One student had worked at an HMO in administration and challenged some of the assumptions about profit/loss that providers tried to present to us as de facto. In the two years since, we've requested (and been given) meeting time each spring to review health insurance issues. During the year we sponsor three workshops with Health Services (Navigating the American Health Care System; Surviving a Brandeis/Boston Winter: Is it a Cold or is it the Flu?; and a feedback session) in the spring. We also do one email each year asking students: What would you have like to have known (if you knew then what you know now). We get quite a bit of response and Health Services at Brandeis has used this information to reformat their web site as well as the information it provides.

## **Health/Dental Care**

Yale University  
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We have been working towards obtaining a subsidized dental care program for graduate and professional students at Yale. Our efforts are focused on lobbying the administration, as well as creating our own “Tooth Fairy Fund” to offset the cost of students’ emergency dental care. We received support for a dental plan from the governing body of Yale in the spring of 2008, after presenting them with data on dental plans offered at peer institutions. In the last year, we have successfully lobbied the administration to solicit proposed plans from a dental insurance company. Subsequently, representatives from the Senate have met with the Provost and Director of Compensations and Benefits to discuss these plans and their possible implementation.

We are hoping to see subsidized dental coverage offered within the next year; however, we may have to adjust expectations due to the current economic climate. Meanwhile, we have established a Dental Expense Fund to provide some relief to students who have incurred dental-related expenses because of the lack of a university dental insurance plan. As well as its immediate role in helping students, the Dental Expense Fund is designed to draw the administration’s attention to the demand on campus for dental care.

Lastly, we have been working to publish a general healthcare survey to gather information on what changes graduate and professional students would like to see in healthcare and what type of dental program they would like to see. Information gathered from this survey will be presented to the administration as further support for the implementation of a dental program. This is an issue the Yale Graduate and Professional Student Senate will continue working on in coming terms.

## Housing

MIT

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MIT's graduate residential system consists of five residence halls that are a unique mix of dormitory and apartment-style housing, two family housing apartment buildings, and live-in positions within the undergraduate living groups. One building provides housing exclusively for new students. The other buildings have a mix of new and continuing students, usually in a ratio of 2:3. All graduate housing is located within ten minutes' walking or biking distance of most classrooms and libraries. Housing assignments are generally made twice a year; at other times, housing assignments are made to people on a waiting list as space becomes available (<http://web.mit.edu/housing/grad/>).

For 2009-2010, single-person rents will range from \$662 to \$1478 per month. Family rents will range from \$1075 to \$1591 per month (<http://web.mit.edu/housing/grad/residences.html>). This represents a 3.5% increase over rents in 2008-2009, as compared to a 1-1.5% increase in off-campus rents in the Boston area over the same period.

The residential system has been designed to promote informal interactions between students, faculty and alumni. The residence halls, particularly the newer buildings, boast lounges, kitchens, study rooms, and large event spaces that promote student-student interactions. A variety of residential life programming provides more structured opportunities for interaction; this programming is organized by student house governments and faculty housemasters and is funded mainly through house funds, the GSC Funding Board, the Office of the Dean for Graduate Education, and the Division for Student Life. In addition, several dining programs, including a dining hall and adjoining pub in the newest graduate dorm, as well as a subsidized dining program organized by the GSC, bring together students, faculty, and alumni.

Slightly more than one third of MIT's 6200 graduate students live on campus, while the remaining students live off campus. MIT provides resources to help find affordable and convenient off-campus housing (<http://web.mit.edu/housing/och/index.html>). Also, the GSC developed the website Rent Monkey (<http://rentmonkey.mit.edu/>) which is a Craigslist-esque site that requires MIT certificates for access. The site allows students to search for off-campus housing that is posted by other MIT students.

Additionally, the GSC's Off-campus Subcommittee organizes activities for off-campus students, although the funds are lower than the funds available for on-campus graduate students on a per-person basis. Building a cohesive off-campus community has long been a challenge for the GSC and MIT, but the subcommittee is seeing sustained interest as it has been ramping up new programs in the past few years.

## **Lobbying the Administration/Advocacy**

Northeastern University  
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In light of the global economic crisis, major cutbacks have been spreading to all areas of student support. One recent event at Northeastern has well-demonstrated how the disconnect between the administration and student community can deteriorate the relationship, unless student leaders take action. The silent cancellation of the September Commencement Ceremony was quite a blow: what it meant to the community, and the ignominious way in which it was revealed to the students.

Each year many PhD candidates are convinced to delay their thesis defense until the end of the summer, so that one or two extra projects can be squeezed out of them before they leave the University. This year was no exception, and many PhD candidates agreed to the delay. Then, in February, the graduating students received an e-mail asking them to confirm their graduation plans. Every student, including the summer graduates, were offered only one box to check on the form: the May Commencement. Confused, many students called the registrar. Those who did were given the following explanation: "The September Commencement has been cancelled. The PhD candidates graduating this summer who plan to attend the May 2009 Ceremony will not be hooded, nor will they walk. Hooding, if desired, will take place at the May 2010 Ceremony for the summer 2009 graduates."

The fact that there was no community announcement, no discussion, no explanation, and no early warning was quite a shock to us. Many students had already invited their families to fly thousands of miles to witness their planned September hooding. A concerned PhD student came to a senate meeting of the Graduate and Professional Student Association (GPSA). After speaking with her and hosting a Q&A session with the graduate community, the GPSA President wrote a letter to the Vice Provost, Provost, Registrar, and University President. After a series of intense, passionate meetings, the Provost reversed part of the decision. The graduating PhD candidates would be hooded and honored in May, before they had earned it. It was an imperfect solution, but it satisfied the graduate community. Had the GPSA not fought so hard, Northeastern would have lost relationships it had been cultivating for over seven years. The fight was worth it, even though we never did get an explanation on the cancellation.

## **Lobbying the Administration/Advocacy**

Tufts University: Arts, Sciences, and Engineering  
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Our Graduate Student Council represents roughly 1500 graduate students in the College of Arts & Sciences and the School of Engineering; graduate students in our other 6 schools are represented by different student councils. Given that many of the policies that affect graduate student academics, professional development and student life are made on a school-by-school basis within the University, we work closely with the Dean of the Graduate School for Arts & Sciences and the Associate Dean for Graduate Education in the School of Engineering to address issues that affect us.

Although there is ongoing rapport between officers of the GSC and these Deans, over the past few years we have developed a monthly *Coffee Hour with the Deans* which gives the students an informal setting to keep everyone updated on the major developments and concerns in advancing graduate education and the graduate experience at Tufts. This year we have modified the format by making each monthly meeting dedicated to one major topic and this has proven successful in drawing the students most affected by particular topics. Some of these meeting themes were concerns coming into the academic year; for example, the always pertinent “Graduate Student Health Coverage”. Often, though, we take our cues from the GSC General Meetings and other topics that have been raised include “The Need to Identify a Graduate Student Ombudsman (to mediate Advisor/Advisee Relations)”, “Creating a Graduate Student Maternity/Paternity Policy” and “Parking Privileges for Graduate Students”. These have often been very informative discussions because they served to remind the administration of the need to include graduate students in upcoming ventures – especially when they are intended to address our needs; for example, placing graduate students on the *ad hoc* committee which will work on drafting a graduate student maternity/paternity policy. Just as often, however, the discussion ends in identifying the people in the Administration who should really be our contact in addressing issues. This led to our first attempt this year to have a larger *Meet More Deans Event*, in which the Deans who work specifically on the issues of student life were invited to an open forum (and social) for students to highlight major concerns that could be addressed in the near future.

As a means of ensuring that graduate students are factored into the decisions at the administrative level, we have been successful in lobbying for the placement of graduate students on a number of University Committees, ranging from the Budgets and Priorities Committee (which annually recommends budget priorities for the upcoming fiscal year) to the Educational Policy and Curricula Committees to the Committee for Student Life. This allows our students to voice opinions directly to members of the University administration, without relying solely on our Deans to be our advocates.

## **Lobbying the Administration/Advocacy**

Carnegie Mellon University  
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The External Affairs Committee of Carnegie Mellon University's Graduate Student Assembly (GSA) is the primary body for both lobbying governmental agencies (local, regional, national) on behalf of students as well as for serving as advocates for student needs within external organizations. A large portion of our work recently has been focused on gathering information from international students regarding their immigration experiences and authoring an immigration resolution that was recently presented during NAGPS' Legislative Action Days in Washington, DC. The resolution calls on the government to minimize barriers to academic study for international students in the United States using several specified mechanisms and to promote cross-cultural cooperation among those individuals who are already studying here. During Legislative Action Days the resolution was presented to several Representatives and Senators, and was well-received.

In addition to our lobbying efforts, we have also been working on gathering data regarding and taking initial steps to begin a student legal services program that would be administered by GSA and CMU. Initial surveys have indicated that students are interested in having access to reasonably-priced legal advice on issues ranging from traffic citations to landlord/tenant disagreements and even intellectual property rights. We are currently evaluating some of the available options for such a program in hopes that it could possibly be offered to students in the next year.

Outside of lobbying and advocacy, the committee also serves as the communication liaison between GSA and its constituents, and is responsible for our web site and other e-communications and a possible future newsletter.

## **Lobbying the Administration/Advocacy**

Harvard University: School of Public Health  
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The economic crisis we are experiencing has had an historical effect on nations, individuals, families, and institutions. On all these levels, it has provided obstacles and challenges against preserving prior levels of productivity and development. It has also provided an opportunity for re-evaluating the way things are done.

More than ever, efficiency and sustainability have become priorities, and innovative ways of mobilizing and utilizing resources are being called for. Within Harvard University, President Drew Faust has devoted time, attention, and human resources to addressing these issues, and has engaged the entire community in a new dialogue on adaptation and evolution.

Within each of the separate institutions at Harvard, the same issues are being addressed under the microscope with special attention to local structures and characteristics. At the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH), an especially unique situation has arisen due to the recent shift of administration from our former Dean Barry Bloom to our new Dean Julio Frenk. Dean Frenk has invited the HSPH community to take this opportunity to re-think the way we do things and to recommend new ways to make our institution more efficient.

HSPH Student Government is engaging in a series of meetings with the Dean, with Senior Management, with the student body, and with the numerous offices and committees under Student Services, including careers services, alumni affairs and educational policy. We realize that now is the time to make the student voice heard on a variety of issues that have been receiving special attention within the current economic context. These include the structure of student financial services at HSPH, the relationship of HSPH with other institutions and graduate schools in Harvard, the role of HSPH in the local community and the role of community service in our curriculum, as well as the inter-connectedness of the diverse interests and expertise within our school.

We have been working on forming a number recommendations consisting of concrete, specific, feasible steps that the new administration can take that do not require unrealistic amounts of resources but that provide ways to re-arrange the flow of resources both within HSPH as well as into and out of HSPH. Our primary focus has been human resources and innovative ways to provide better services by linking offices, administrators, and committees already in place in order to amplify the ability of each to implement change.

As our faculty members are being called on to provide recommendations to our nation's new administration on cost-effectiveness, social reform and healthcare reform, we are taking it upon ourselves to work with our own internal administration to achieve our common goal of optimizing our capabilities as a research, teaching, and public service institution.

## **Organizational Continuity**

Suffolk University  
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As graduate student advocates at a university in which a majority of the graduate programs are two years in length (full-time study), organizational continuity is a complicated challenge for Suffolk's Graduate Student Association (GSA). One of the main focuses of our organization this semester aside from our typical agenda has included creating and implementing ideas to maximize our association's sustainability. The goal of the current administration of the GSA is to prepare the club for the future by establishing new procedures, creating sustainable documents, and utilizing innovative resources.

The new procedures that we have established this year mainly consist of developing a new position on the board. This person, like the secretary, is responsible for collecting documents, but is solely responsible for storing these documents in a fashion which allows outsiders to understand procedures with minimal familiarity with the association. In other words, this person organizes all materials so that they are easily discoverable and understandable. For example, if I wanted to find a document regarding the Graduate Student Association's Reception in the spring semester of 2004, I would easily be able to find it in our system and also understand how this program was developed in years past. Simple steps such as labeling documents using self-explanatory language and arranging them into organized folders are especially stressed with this position.

Aside from creating this position, the Suffolk GSA has also been working to create documents that explain how our programs are run. This prevents new board members from having to "reinvent the wheel" every year or semester. For example, a future board member may want information about the Awards Brunch we sponsor every year in May, and desire to specifically learn more about the awards the faculty give to students in each graduate program. Documents that we have created explain in detail which faculty members typically give out the awards, what the criteria are for receiving them, and how to launch this process. Without these documents, new board members would have to learn and establish these procedures from square one. Creating documents also seems to be a simple step in organizational continuity, but it is often forgotten.

Due to the fact that Suffolk has been going through technological changes, the GSA has been struggling to find a reliable database to use to keep all information in an accessible place. Therefore, we have made considerable effort to remain open-minded to using new resources in order to continue to move forward. Currently, the board members share a Gmail account as a central e-mail. This account also allows us to share calendars and documents, and can also allow us to edit each other's work and provide feedback. Although using a portal which is outside our university is not ideal, the main point is to remain open-minded and utilize new resources to your advantage if necessary.

Overall, continuity will always be a problem in our university, but simple and easy changes have seemed to serve us best.

## **Organizational Continuity**

Brandeis University  
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At Brandeis, we have three different graduate schools and a majority of students are pursuing a one or two year master's degree and a few are enrolled in the longer PhD programs. Brandeis GSA is comprised of a Senate and an Executive Committee. Senators are chosen by the student body at large and EC members are voted by the Senate to hold their office for a period of one year.

This presents a significant challenge for us in terms of organizational continuity. The majority of Senators and EC members are master's students, so they are only with the GSA for a period of one to two years. Thus the current GSA executive committee will have to train the next group of students on organizational structure, processes, policies, procedures, etc.

Since we have several new members every year, to ensure a smooth transition, Brandeis GSA uses a multi-faceted approach. First, when electing Senators, we try to ensure that we are nominating master's students both in their first and second year of study and some PhD students who are able to serve for more than one year. We have certain positions on the Executive Committee that have a two-year term requiring PhD student representation.

We also organize an orientation for new Senators and EC members where we have a day-long session covering areas such as event planning, voting, and participation on university committees. During this orientation we have breakout sessions for specific positions where the existing members train the newly elected member on the specific details of the position. For example, the existing treasurer will be training the newly elected treasurer on the specifics of that position.

We also have a full time member of university administration supporting and advising the GSA on matters requiring interaction with the university and specific departments. Our advisor also attends meetings and serves as a go-to person with questions and concerns for the new senators and EC officers.

And lastly, we have a yearly activities spreadsheet highlighting the different responsibilities during the year. This spreadsheet is updated annually and made available to the newly-elected EC officers upon assuming their positions. Our constitution also provides extensive details and can be used as a reference when someone is unsure of the right steps and actions.

## **Organizational Continuity**

Northeastern University  
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In the summer of 2007, the Graduate and Professional Student Association (GPSA) was faced with a routine problem: like every previous year, the GPSA had a big summer "to do" list and zero student support. The Executive Board had been elected in March and had taken office in May. According to the constitution, each executive member heads a senate committee; however, the committees are made up of students who often get summer jobs and relocate hundreds of miles away.

Within a few weeks after elections, the summer term started and the GPSA Senators went on summer recess. For many this meant the end of their relationship with the GPSA, and for most it was out-of-sight, out-of-mind. The previous E-Board had left little in the form of guidance, and the administrative advisors had full-time "day jobs" that did not involve supporting the GPSA. Faced with this difficult situation, and an obsolete constitution, the 2007-2008 GPSA E-Board decided to extend the senate term from an April 30th to an August 31st end. This was voted into law at the end of the 2007-2008 term, to be activated with the 2008-2009 term. To keep the GPSA active and informed, the current system is an overlap. The E-Board holds office for one calendar year from May 1st and the senate holds office for one calendar year from September 1st. We believe this is a great solution, and should prove quite effective this year.

## Stipend Negotiations

MIT

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MIT GSC's stipend negotiations could be understood as a case of data-driven advocacy.

The Cost of Living Survey provides a basis of our understanding of the consumption behavior and cost of living of the MIT graduate student body. It had a huge sample size of 2232 graduate students. We based many of our stipend increase suggestions on the survey results; the most recent one was conducted in December, 2007.

The procedure we follow to obtain the cost of living increase of an average MIT graduate student is to use the cost of living results and the inflation numbers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Specifically, we have information about the students' consumption basket and the percentages that each surveyed student allocates to each consumption good type (e.g. housing, food, transportation). Based on these percentages, we look up the September-to-September inflation numbers for each of these consumption good types (e.g. we map "food and beverages" in the BLS data to the "food" component in the Cost of Living survey, and "transportation" to "transportation," etc.) for the Boston-Brockton-Nashua area from the BLS and weigh the inflation by the percentages that each of these good types represent in the graduate student's total expenditure. This method allows us to obtain the MIT graduate student-specific cost of living increase figure (and we have the numbers for both single students and married students).

A key point is that we place a strong value in consistency and establish the stipends suggestions methodology as a norm in our interaction with the administration.

In the face of this year's economic climate, we had to go a bit further than usual. We looked at specific cost factors that affect students more than other people in the general population. We then tried to make a specific argument to establish the case that deflationary trends in the overall prices should be considered critically. Some facts from the Cost of Living Survey Results is that "housing" makes up around half of the graduate student's expenditure (single and married), while "food" makes up just under 30% for both single and married students. The fact is that on-campus housing rents will be increasing by quite a bit, while off-campus housing even after the structural change in the economy in last September still exhibited inflation in the last few months of 2008 (similarly food costs for the Boston area saw inflation in the last few months of 2008). Additionally, the US Department of Agriculture is predicting that even if there will be a deflationary trend in the energy and fuel prices, food prices are likely to increase (the USDA prediction is 4% increase for food prices this year). The implication is that, with the two biggest components of the graduate student's consumption basket getting more expensive, we would see an increase in the cost of living and that the deflationary overall consumer price index is not likely to help graduate students a lot.

Besides the data-driven process, we found that relating to personal experiences and using more qualitative arguments could also help a lot. We also presented the fact that low levels of discretionary income put graduate students in a distinctly vulnerable

position, especially for international students (39.1% of the graduate student body at MIT), who are mostly prohibited by law from obtaining supplemental income beyond their RA/TA appointments.

Finally, because each department still retains some flexibility in choosing their actual stipends as long as their stipend values fall within a certain band, this year we decided to include the departmental representatives of the GSC to approach each department administration to make a case. The GSC provided data support, a small workshop and one-on-one trainings with the Housing and Community Affairs Committee Chair on negotiations with the administration, and allowed students to lobby their own departments' administrations on the stipends issue.

The MIT Newspaper "The Tech" reported on our efforts:

[http://tech.mit.edu/V129/N13/grad\\_student\\_stipend.html](http://tech.mit.edu/V129/N13/grad_student_stipend.html)

## **Unionization**

SUNY Stony Brook

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In December 2009, the research assistants of Stony Brook University voted to organize as a workers union under the wing of Communication Workers of America Local 1104, the same union in charge of teaching assistants. The Graduate Student Organization (GSO, the graduate student government) approved a resolution in favor of the unionization process with the vote of its departmental senators. The unionization of Research Assistants has been a long legal battle in the state of New York.

The relationship between the GSO and the Union has historically been close in Stony Brook. The GSO's purpose is to identify and protect the rights of graduate students, advance their interests, provide a forum for public debate, and promote graduate student participation in university affairs. That purpose can and has overlapped with the graduate students union since both organizations lobby with the state of New York and the university administration to improve conditions for graduate students, with the difference that GSO advocates for all graduate students whether they are employed or not, and the GSO is a labor-oriented organization with legal experience in contract bargaining and an established political action strategy.

The GSO research assistants' unionization process is still to be completed, since contract negotiations are being carried out as this article is being written, but some experiences can be extracted and should be considered by other graduate student organizations when unionization campaigns occur on their campuses in the future, which we will briefly share in this article.

The unionization process is a long, expensive and complicated legal process that needs commitment from graduate students. In our case CWA provided funds and staff for the campaign. Joining a union that has members in other areas of the economy (in our case communication workers) will require that graduate students are actively involved in making sure the structure of the union better serves the particular needs of graduate student employees, whose work philosophy, goals and requirements are different from most commercial and public sector jobs.

Graduate student governments can choose to support the union formation but also have the responsibility of overseeing that the union serves the interests of graduate students and the dues collected are used in an efficient manner to benefit graduate student employees.

Unions are labor-oriented organizations, not academic-oriented. This means that the union is a powerful tool for acquiring better contracts and improving working conditions (united we bargain, divided we beg), but the range of action on academic matters is limited at best.

Graduate Student Organizations whose constituents are planning to unionize should spend time and effort to understand all the legal aspects, limitations and responsibilities of joining a union, especially if the union has members from other

professional fields. If graduate students are not actively involved, the union could deviate from its true purpose and become just another bureaucratic office that runs with graduate employees' money.

## Websites as a Communications Medium

MIT

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Nowadays, an organization that serves a greater demographic requires a good website. A website is the ever-present receptionist, providing information and collecting questions. A well-designed website can diminish or eliminate the tedious tasks in a larger student organization, such as answering common questions, selling tickets, and collecting and collating survey data. At the same time, student governments have significant constraints on their budgets, so a professionally-designed, personalized site is probably out of the question. With quality and price in mind, I will briefly describe how the MIT GSC addresses this issue and the philosophy behind the decisions made.

The most important philosophy that we adopted was to get away from the model where the webmaster was the one person who knew how to operate the site and, hence, was the sole caretaker of the website. As a result, updates to our website would not be reliant on one individual, but can become a dynamic process involving more of the membership.

Currently, the MIT GSC website uses the Joomla! 1.5 framework, a free “Content Management System” that creates the skeletal structure of a website and allows you to add pages and link them to each other. The main benefits of this framework are:

- *Aesthetics/Accessibility*: Automatically gives a consistent look to the site. Changes to the content, while customizable, will inherit the same basic themes. Also, the site will, in general, be compliant with standards and will render correctly on most browsers.
- *Maintenance*: Adding and editing pages can be done through a word-processor-like interface. (The source code interface is available as well.) This essentially allows anyone to create and maintain content, regardless of technical skill. File management occurs in much the same way. All these interfaces are integrated into the site, removing the need for special programs.
- *Strategic Considerations*: The framework is very modular. To be more specific, the Joomla! community is very active and, as a result, there are thousands of extensions to the framework available. These extensions range from adding picture galleries and forums to event calendars and eCommerce add-ons. As a result, we can vastly enhance the functionality of the site without investing much time and effort.

These benefits greatly decrease the technical barriers to maintenance. As such, much of the management does not rely on the few tech-savvy individuals, but is accessible to more of the group, resulting in a much more dynamic site.

Now, even with the relatively intuitive Joomla! framework, there is a significant time investment to become acquainted with the interface, and I would never tout it as the premier website-building tool. In fact, before starting anything, one should assess the need and nature of your site. *Will it only need to be changed once a year? Do you want*

*polls, ticket sales, pictures, movies, etc. to show up on the site? Does your university have any special systems that you will want to patch into (i.e. calendars, credit cards, authentication)? **And most importantly:** How much time can your group put into making and maintaining it?* The answers to these questions may lead you down drastically different paths.