

**Arkansas State University Student Government Structure and Funding:
The Graduate Student Perspective**

Submitted by:

The Arkansas State University Graduate Student Council

On Behalf of:

Current and Future Arkansas State University Graduate Students

January 21, 2009

Authors:

Nathan Gastineau

GSC, President

MS Candidate, Department of Mathematics and Statistics

Andrew J. Peck

GSC, Graduate School Representative

PhD Candidate, Environmental Sciences Program

Erin Macchia

GSC, Vice President External Affairs

PhD Candidate, Environmental Sciences Program

Introduction

Historically, the Graduate Student Council (GSC) at Arkansas State University has functioned sporadically and with little impact on campus life. A common, but unsubstantiated, explanation lies in the transient nature and varied scheduling demands placed upon this contingent of the student body. However, in 2004 the GSC successfully petitioned administration to grant tuition waivers to Doctoral Students and Candidates. In 2006, the GSC was identified as a constituency group in the Shared Governance of ASU-Jonesboro along with the Student Government Association, Staff Senate, Faculty Senate, Dean's Council, and Chairs Council. Most recently, the GSC petitioned for tuition waivers associated with Graduate Assistant Positions at the Master's level, pending appropriate funding levels, orchestrated the first Graduate Student Scholars Day, and successfully disputed a disproportionate tuition increase (7.5% for graduate students, 6.0% for undergraduates) to match the proposed undergraduate increase. At the same time, graduate enrollment has increased from 10% to 15% of the total enrollment at ASU-Jonesboro and a minimum of four new graduate programs have been approved by the Graduate Council, with several more currently being developed and/or considered. The Graduate Student Council functions as both an effective voice for the often underrepresented graduate students as well as an active partner in the continuous improvement of the ASU-Jonesboro Campus. However, the current membership of the Graduate Student Council ardently believes the continued effectiveness of this organization is undermined by an overall lack of support.

The ASU Graduate Student

The graduate student at ASU is mired in both personal and institutional growth and transition unlike any other constituency group on campus. Many graduate students assume one of a variety of competitive graduate assistantship positions while pursuing their academic goals. For some this may mean acting as a teaching assistant for an undergraduate and/or graduate level lab course while enrolled in courses of their own. For others, a research assistantship requires a student to hire and manage undergraduate technicians while ensuring the timely, and successful, completion of a significant research effort. Some graduate students collaborate with faculty to actively search for external grant opportunities, while still others work in campus offices with responsibilities relating to the academic life of both undergraduate and graduate students alike. In sum, the graduate student at ASU exists in dual roles, assuming both student and teacher/professional responsibilities in tandem. This duality is an inherent component of the graduate student experience and a quality that, consequently, makes the continued success of the GSC and graduate student body we represent nearly impossible under the current student government structure.

Current ASU Student Government Structure and Funding: A Design for Future Failure

The current student government structure fails to provide an adequate forum to address issues faced by graduate students. For example, the current student government structure recognizes the GSC as a "registered student organization (RSO)," and as such the GSC must compete for resources as any other student organization, with the exception of SGA. These resources are only available by petitioning SGA and Action Fund, both of which are run largely, if not exclusively, by undergraduates. The

propensity for impropriety and/or blatantly unethical situations arises when any graduate student must ask for resources from an undergraduate who is a current or former student, technician, or other subordinate. The act of asking that particular undergraduate student for resources undermines the authority of the graduate student in the classroom, laboratory, etc. and ultimately compromises the academic and professional integrity of the classroom, research effort and/or university office.

Second, because SGA is dominated by undergraduates, the focus of financial and university office resources are given to undergraduate issues. Inherently, undergraduates have little direct knowledge of the concerns, nor perspective, important to graduate students. Therefore, any graduate student concerns must be identified and explained to SGA in order to initiate action, as the GSC is unable to provide the financial or technical resources necessary to take direct action. This inefficiency increases the likelihood for miscommunication and/or misrepresentation. Graduate students should be able to speak directly to their representative body, the GSC, and should have confidence that their issues can be addressed with the same resources and attention as undergraduate concerns are addressed by SGA. It is not only unfair to ask undergraduates to carry the flag of graduate students, but is equally unfair to expect them to do so in a manner which is consistent with the expectations and abilities of graduate students.

Third, the Shared Governance Process of ASU clearly identifies SGA and GSC as two separate entities, which allows for equitable representation on designated committees and joint representation on high level search committees (e.g. Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs). This structure should be translated to the student government structure in order to create a functional, student managed equivalent. The current student government organization structure is not viable for the current or future student demographic and requires a significant overhaul in order to truly incorporate the graduate student voice while reducing inefficiencies, miscommunication, frustration, and perceived animosity.

The current student government funding structure also fails to support the dynamic needs of the graduate student body. Currently, the GSC has no mechanism for financial support other than Action Fund. This is not ideal and exemplifies the inappropriate and potentially unethical situations mentioned above. In addition, funding allotments are not distributed to graduate student organizations in proportion to the graduate student contribution. Graduate students represent 15% of the student body, which equates to roughly \$69,000 of the funds generated via the Student Activity Fee. Currently, the GSC receives no direct, lump sum allocation from this fund; nor any other fund for that matter. This promulgates significant missed opportunities for both graduate students and ASU while perpetuating the inconsistent nature of the GSC.

Because GSC does not receive any dedicated funding, we are unable to host graduate student orientation sessions at the beginning of each semester. This does not allow an opportunity to pass along necessary information to ensure new graduate student success, highlight research and teaching ethics and responsibilities, or introduce the existence and purpose of the Graduate School and the GSC. The lack of funding also means that opportunities are not available for successful students to present professional work or research results to a local audience through a science café, public seminar series,

or research symposia. Finally, the lack of funding significantly reduces the professional development of graduate students as funds to support attendance of professional workshops or meetings are limited, lacking, or allotted to other registered student organizations through Action Fund for functions such as tailgating.

One of the arguments against sufficiently funding the GSC is the assertion that graduate students are a more transient population than undergraduates, and this transient nature does not allow for continuity. While the 2-3 year average attendance for Master's programs supports this claim, the ever-increasing number of doctoral programs at ASU, which range in attendance from 3-5 years, changes this dynamic. The GSC Executive Board, representatives, and our constituency, believe the current student government and funding structures are inappropriate to meet current demands. In the past 16 months, the GSC has made significant strides toward improving the graduate student experience and has earned the privilege to present our concerns, discuss alternatives, and work toward a more functional structure and funding scheme. As GSC is a solution-oriented organization, the remainder of this paper will outline and evaluate how other institutions have addressed these same issues and propose potential alternatives to the current system which will improve the equity and functionality of ASU student government.

University Comparison Survey Efforts: Methods

In an attempt to gain a broad understanding of student government structures and funding options, results from two survey efforts are presented. The Office of Student Affairs (OSA) implemented the first investigation and surveyed 15 institutions for the existence of graduate student organizations, associated funding, and activities. Their survey effort was completed via verbal or electronic communication. The second effort was undertaken by members of the GSC and utilized institutional members of the National Association of Graduate - Professional Students (NAGPS, www.nagps.org) along with other regional institutions not evaluated by the Office of Student Affairs. The GSC effort was conducted via review of internet-based resources only. Student enrollment data were collected from "Common Data Sets" or institutional "Fact Books" available online, as well as student organization status. Due to discrepancies likely attributable to confusion between Graduate Councils and separate (and largely dissimilar) Graduate Student Councils, the GSC also re-evaluated the initial Student Affairs institutions using the GSC methodology.

University Comparison Survey Efforts: Results

Of the 28 schools evaluated in this survey effort, the average total enrollment was 15,537 students with 16.84% of the population being listed as graduate students. The smallest school explored was Midwestern State University with 6,093 total students, 5.78% of which were graduate students (Appendix 1). The largest institution evaluated was Florida International University (FIU) with 38,614 total students, 16.14% of which were listed as graduate students. Of these 28 schools, five were in the Sun Belt Conference and included FIU, University of Louisiana at Monroe (ULM), University of Louisiana at Lafayette, University of North Texas, and Arkansas State University.

The current status of the Arkansas State University is that a graduate student organization exists but lacks funding. The results of this survey show that 19 of 28 schools evaluated have active graduate student organizations, and 18 of the 19 graduate student organizations receive funding. The lone institution which does not fund its graduate organization is ASU. Within the Sun Belt Conference, 4 of 5 institutions have a graduate student organization; ULM does not have an organization. Of the 5 Sunbelt Conference institutions evaluated, Arkansas State University is the only one which does not fund an existing graduate student organization.

Information regarding the source and amount of funding were generally unspecified, but those institutions reporting such information were highly variable. Of the 7 institutions reporting a funding source, all reported student activity fees as the primary source of funding. Three schools (FIU, Hunter College, and Bowling Green State University) reported the annual operating budget of the graduate organization and these amounts ranged from \$40,000 to \$120,000 per academic year. Though funding levels varied, the allocation of these funds was consistent and included travel awards, on-campus research symposia, and workshops. Some graduate organizations provided competitive funds dedicated to thesis or dissertation printing, research grants, and student/faculty awards.

Proposed Alternatives: Student Government Structure

Much like the Shared Governance Process at ASU, Bowling Green State University (BGSU) has representatives from each student group, both undergraduate and graduate, that sit on the various committees that govern the university. The Academic Charter of BGSU establishes both an Undergraduate Student Government Association and a Graduate Student Organization that work parallel to each other in addressing and resolving issues on campus, but each is responsible for their own budgets and goals. Bowling Green has established a formal mechanism of communication by creating a joint committee comprised of leadership from both student organizations. This structure recognizes the differences between the two student constituencies but has implemented a formalized mechanism for equitable discussion and collaboration. Furthermore, Bowling Green State University has established a Student Budget Committee that is composed of 10 student-led organizations whose purpose is to allocate funds generated from fees. Unlike the Action Fund Committee at ASU, the Student Budget Committee at BGSU must include both graduate and undergraduate students as part of its mandate. ASU should strive to establish a joint student government committee that will promote the flow of ideas between SGA and GSC, while at the same time recognizing that each group has distinct needs and aspirations.

The GSC believes a model could be adopted and implemented at ASU that recognizes the distinct differences of the two constituencies, but also provides an opportunity for collaboration. A joint commission, comprised of the executive officers from the GSC and SGA, would fill a significant void in the current student government structure. The role of this committee would be similar in stature to the recently discussed Shared Governance Oversight Committee but would oversee student government. This would create an effective forum for the discussion of graduate and undergraduate concerns and a formal venue to determine appropriate student government action. Further, the existence of this joint commission would reduce inefficiencies and perceived animosities between the student groups.

Regardless of the organization of a new student government, a feature of any new model must be the creation of a collaborative mechanism which fosters accountability and camaraderie among both student government entities.

Proposed Alternatives: GSC Funding

Based on ASU's most recent enrollment statistics, there are 11,490 total students. At 1,729, graduate students comprise approximately 15% of the total student body. The Student Activity Fee is \$20 per Fall and Spring semester for any student, undergraduate or graduate, enrolled in 3 or more credit hours. This fund is expected to yield nearly \$460,000 for AY 2008-2009 and includes the contribution by graduate students of approximately \$69,000. The Graduate Student Council would like to propose the following stepwise funding solution to establish a proper operation budget in three years after implementation. While the actual dollar amounts in this proposal will change over time with enrollment, the overall percentages will remain the same. The GSC acknowledges there are events and services of common interest to both undergraduate and graduate students and recognize this commonality in the following funding proposal (Table 1).

In Year 1, the GSC requests 20% of the total graduate student contribution of the Student Activity Fee, to fund an annual Graduate Student Scholars Day, a fall graduate student orientation, general infrastructure and supplies (campus office space, computer, printing costs, communications, etc.) and membership dues to NAGPS. For Year 2, the GSC requests 40% of the total graduate student contribution to the Student Activity Fee to fund a spring graduate student orientation and attendance expenses for GSC members to attend the Annual Conference of the NAGPS, in addition to Year 1 expenditures. In Year 3, the funding process of the Graduate Student Council would be complete, as presented in this proposal, with the GSC requesting 60% of the total graduate student contribution to the Student Activity Fee. This money would establish a Graduate Student Action Fund in addition to all events and programs in Year 1 and Year 2. This GSC Action Fund will provide dedicated resources to graduate students for professional development purposes such as attending conferences, professional meetings and workshops, purchasing research or productivity equipment, and provide resources for manuscript or thesis publication. Through the 40% of graduate student fees which would remain in the Student Activity Fund, the GSC would be able to cosponsor events common to both student levels to with SGA and the Student Activities Board. The mechanism to determine these joint events would occur in the proposed joint student government committee.

Table 1. Proposed stepwise funding for the Graduate Student Council based on cost. All amounts assume current revenues remain consistent through the phase in period, but would be subject to change based on total university enrollment and graduate student enrollment.

Year of Implementation	Value of Student Activity Fund*	Graduate Student Contribution*	GSC Operating Budget*	% of Grad Activity Fees	Value of Remaining Student Activity Fund*	Remaining Grad Student Contribution to Activity Fund*
1	\$460,000.00	\$69,000.00	\$13,800.00	20%	\$446,200.000	\$55,200.00
2	\$460,000.00	\$69,000.00	\$27,600.00	40%	\$432,400.000	\$41,400.00
3	\$460,000.00	\$69,000.00	\$41,400.00	60%	\$418,600.000	\$27,600.00

* Subject to change based on total and graduate student enrollment.

Conclusion

Shared Governance, the governing policies of ASU-Jonesboro, acknowledges fundamental differences between graduate and undergraduate students by allotting separate seats representing these student groups on committees. However, this distinction has not translated into the day-to-day operations of the university, resulting in confusion and frustration among undergraduate and graduate student organizations and various echelons of campus administration. The Graduate Student Council seeks to initiate a constructive dialogue with the various constituency groups on campus. The goal of this discussion is to define the Graduate Student Council, and the students we represent, as an integral member of the campus community and a viable constituency group as established in the Faculty Handbook. The GSC further seeks to achieve recognition by formally establishing the GSC as a constituency group equal in stature to SGA, Faculty Senate, Staff Senate, Deans Council, and the Chairs Council at all levels of the ASU-Jonesboro Campus. In order to achieve this distinction and maintain viability, we propose a revised student government structure and funding scheme, similar to other institutions, capable of addressing the identified drawbacks of the current student government structure.

Appendix 1. Results of the Graduate Student Organization and Funding Institutional Survey

Institution	Total Enrollment	FTE	% Grad Students*	Grad FTE	Grad Org	Funding
Midwestern State University	6,093		5.78%		No	No
University of Louisiana @ Lafayette	16,303		8.45%		Yes	Yes
Bowling Green State University	20,228	18,612	9.15%	1,703	Yes	Yes
University of LA @ Monroe	8,576		10.00%		No	No
East Tennessee State University	12,736	10,770	10.93%	1,392	Yes	Yes
Lamar University	13,469		11.14%		No	No
Georgia Southern University	16,841		11.70%		Yes	Yes
Michigan Technological University	6,751		13.50%		Yes	Yes
St. Louis University	12,309	10,766	13.90%	1,501	Yes	Yes
Kent State University	34,056	24,444	14.18%	4,829	Yes	Yes
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga	9,807		14.30%		Yes	Yes
University of Central Arkansas	12,959		14.86%		No	No
Iowa State University	26,160	24,880	14.94%	3,907	Yes	Yes
Arkansas State University	11,490	9,099	15.05%	1,729	Yes	No
Valdosta State University	11,490		15.51%		No	No
Missouri State University	19,348		15.98%		Yes	Yes
Florida International University	38,614	24,637	16.14%	6,231	Yes	Yes
Western Carolina University	9,056		17.00%		Yes	Yes
University of West Georgia	10,677		17.10%		No	No
Tarleton State University	8,923		18.05%		No	No
Texas A&M Corpus Christi	9,007		19.50%		Yes	Yes
University of North Texas	34,673		19.80%		Yes	Yes
West Texas A&M	7,502		22.00%		No	No
University of South Alabama	13,778		22.40%		Yes	Yes
Southern Illinois University-Carbondale	20,983		22.80%		Yes	Yes
University of Arkansas at Little Rock	11,965		23.10%		Yes	Yes
Texas A&M Kingsville	6,547		23.40%		No	No
Hunter College	20,844	11,309	24.59%	5,126	Yes	Yes

Bold = Sun Belt Conference

* Calculated using headcount enrollment data (graduate enrollment/total enrollment)

Appendix 1. (continued)

Institution	Grad Org	Funding	Use	Source	Other
Midwestern State University	No	No			
University of Louisiana @ Lafayette	Yes	Yes	Travel, Research, Social		
Bowling Green State University	Yes	Yes	Travel, Conferences, Workshops	Fees	\$40,000.00
University of LA @Monroe	No	No		Unknown	
East Tennessee State University	Yes	Yes	Travel, Speakers	Fees	
Lamar University	No	No			
Georgia Southern University	Yes	Yes	Travel, Research, Symposium	Fees	
Michigan Technological University	Yes	Yes	Symposium, Speakers, Travel	Unknown	
St. Louis University	Yes	Yes	Travel, Symposium Speakers, Workshops, Social Events, Travel	SGA/Fees	
Kent State University	Yes	Yes			
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga	Yes	Yes	Travel, Awards, Symposium	Unknown	
University of Central Arkansas	No	No			
Iowa State University	Yes	Yes	Travel, Speakers	Fees	
Arkansas State University	Yes	No			
Valdosta State University	No	No			
Missouri State University	Yes	Yes	Symposium, Speakers, Social Travel, Research, Social, Thesis	Unknown Fees	\$120,500.00
Florida International University	Yes	Yes	Travel, GSA Events	Fees	
Western Carolina University	Yes	Yes			
University of West Georgia	No	No			
Tarleton State University	No	No			
Texas A&M Corpus Christi	Yes	Yes	Symposium, Events	Unknown	
University of North Texas	Yes	Yes	Symposium, Speakers, Travel	Unknown	
West Texas A&M	No	No			
University of South Alabama	Yes	Yes		Unknown	
Southern Illinois University- Carbondale	Yes	Yes	Symposium, Speakers, Social	Unknown	
University of Arkansas at Little Rock	Yes	Yes	Research Forum, Travel	Unknown	
Texas A&M Kingsville	No	No			\$11.15 / AY/ graduate student
Hunter College	Yes	Yes	Research, travel, organizations	Fees	

Bold = Sun Belt Conference

* Calculated using headcount enrollment data (graduate enrollment/total enrollment)