

GSA Newsletter

Community Service at UC Merced: A Graduate Student Perspective

Shayna Bennett | sbennett3@]
President



If you have seen *The Wizard of Oz*, you may remember a scene where Dorothy's dog Toto tugs open a curtain and reveals the wizard of Oz is not actually a wizard, but an old man. Toto's curiosity led him to take a chance and as a result the Tin Man, Scarecrow, and Lion became the rulers of the Emerald City.

Being part of the Graduate Student Association for the last two years was like opening the curtain to meet with wizard. I saw firsthand how our university is run. I had a voice on committees like Graduate Council and the Police Advisory Board alongside those of faculty, staff, and administrators. I met Chancellor Munoz and President Drake. Most of the administrators and staff I encountered wanted graduate student opinions and were interested in collaboration on critical issues.

Despite the opportunity for graduate student voice in campus committees and student government, participation is low. Only a few graduate students on our campus choose to "look behind the curtain" and I understand why. Our involvement in non-research related activities is not encouraged and rarely supported.

As an undergraduate, involvement in the campus community was encouraged. Being involved helped prepare us for what was next – in our case graduate school. As a graduate student, things are different. Our time belongs to our faculty advisor, or PI, or instructor of record. We become "the research assistant" or "the teaching assistant" and get pushed into narrow, predefined roles built from the belief that sole focus on research will make us successful after graduate school.

The truth is, research is only a part of life after graduate school. Whether we go on to work at a national lab, in

industry, or stay in academia as a faculty member or postdoc, leadership and mentorship skills matter. Employers care about our work in the community and someday being on a committee like CAPRA may be the thing that makes my application stand out. These skills come through time, practice, and persistent involvement. Yet both years I have been on the GSA, fellow officers have told me they felt the need to hide their participation from their advisors. What kind of community do we live in where we need to hide our involvement in experiences that improve our marketability?

I came to graduate school to learn and grow, not just as a researcher but as a leader and mentor. For me, being involved in the campus community is important and has offered the most unbelievable opportunities. As we move forward into 2021, I want to see the campus community recognize how important it is to support graduate students in leadership positions. I want to see faculty encourage their students to take on leadership roles. I want to see funding set aside to support graduate students on committees. Most of all, I want more graduate students to know they have the right to pull back the curtain and explore everything the university has to offer. Wouldn't you agree?

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* = Involvement Opportunity (also highlighted in the text)

The International Student Experience: How Do We Make It Better?

Ritwika VPS (Ritu) [ritwika@]
International Affairs Officer



I have been a graduate student at UC Merced for six years now. As much as I have loved my time here, there is no way to sugarcoat the fact that being an international student is difficult.

International students have far fewer funding options available to them and even when they are part of programs that can provide invaluable experience as a researcher – such as the NRT Training Programs – they are ineligible for funding through those programs due to citizenship restrictions.

International students are routinely forced to spend enormous amounts of time and energy sorting out the labyrinth that is the US Immigration system. They have to educate themselves about the ins and outs of Optional Practical Training for employment in the United States after graduation and often have to go through one or more visa renewals during their program. International students also have to constantly be on edge about the next potential xenophobic policy the United States government may implement, and this restlessness and anxiety is best summarized by Carmen Falcon and Mehmet Doğan, who are international scholars in the UC system: “The time and energy drained by the precariousness of immigration status and constantly changing political landscapes impacts science, research and the well-being of international scholars”.

International students face unique mental health struggles and there simply aren't enough practitioners who can offer adequate support because they lack understanding about the international student experience.

International students routinely have to justify their presence in this country and have to contend with unpleasant experiences rooted in racism and xenophobia.

And the list goes on.

These issues are exacerbated by the fact that international students are often made to believe it is best to keep their

heads down and work towards their degrees without complaint, because this is not home. The problem with this rhetoric is that there are disproportionately fewer international student voices that help shape policy. It is easy to not prioritize pressing issues when those most affected remain silent about their plights. And while this does not justify how little things have improved for international students over the years, it is imperative that we make ourselves harder to ignore.

The President of the GSA talks about community service from a graduate student perspective in her article in this newsletter. I want to highlight the things mentioned in that article in the context of the international student experience. There are a number of opportunities at and beyond UC Merced to get involved in matters that will make a positive difference to your experience as a graduate student and an international graduate student. These include being involved in graduate student clubs, working with the GSA and/or the union, doing advocacy work related to a cause that matters to you, doing outreach in the community, etc. I urge you to take a good look at these opportunities and to put your heart into something that matters to you. It will enrich our community and your experience at UC Merced while also paving the way for a better future for all of us.

INVOLVEMENT OPPORTUNITY:
Join the New Basic Needs Committee!
Zunaira Iqbal [ziqbal2@]
External Vice President



Exciting news! The GSA has created a new committee that focuses on advocating for the basic needs of UC Merced's graduate students. Basic needs include food and housing security, mental health needs, proper transportation, safety, and more. So far, conversations have been happening with TAPS regarding resolving issues with UC Merced's CatTracks. If you are interested in being a part of this committee or have any questions and/or suggestions, please reach out to Zunaira Iqbal at ziqbal2@ucmerced.edu.

Meet the GSA over Coffee!

Saturday, March 13th



ASIP
9-11am

Coffee Bandits
2-4pm

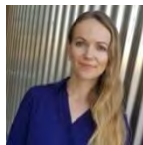
**INVOLVEMENT OPPORTUNITY:
Graduate Student Rights &
Responsibilities Committee Forming**
Karla Seijas [[kseijas@](mailto:kseijas@ucmerced.edu)]
Solidarity Officer



This semester a review of the Graduate Student Rights & Responsibilities document will be conducted. A committee of graduate students will be formed to focus on updating the document which will be implemented for years to come. The duties of the committee include: meeting 1-3 times per month (March-May), review of document drafts, suggestions of new language for the document and ensuring the voices of graduate students across all UC Merced graduate programs are represented in the document.

If you are a current UC Merced graduate student and are interested in being a part of the committee, please contact Karla Seijas, GSA Solidarity Officer at kseijas@ucmerced.edu.

**Creating A More Inclusive And Support
Graduate School Experience**
Larisa Gavrilova [[lgavrilova@](mailto:lgavrilova@ucmerced.edu)]
Climate, Diversity and Equity Officer



ADDRESSING RACISM IN THE ACADEMY. We continue to take meaningful action in our commitment to confront institutional racism. To this end, we have planned two events for Spring 21 that provide a safe and educational space for graduate students to learn more about standing up against racial prejudice and dismantling systemic racism.

Improving Workplace Climate: Responding to Harassment will be led by Dr. Asmeret Asefaw Berhe. This interactive workshop will describe academic practices and institutional structures that allow for racism—and associated harassment and discrimination—to persist and discuss actions graduate students can take to protect and support targets of racial discrimination and promote equality and social justice in their professional community. The event will be held on March 29th (Monday) 12:30-1:45 pm. Zoom link will be emailed close to the day of the event.

Introduction to anti-racist pedagogy workshop will be led by Dr. Eileen Camfield, who has extensive expertise in

anti-racist pedagogy. The goal of this workshop is to provide an introduction to anti-racist pedagogy and discuss strategies to implement anti-racist pedagogy in the classroom. The event is scheduled as part of Spring'21 Institute for Evidence-Based Teaching Practices and will be held on May 3rd (Monday) 2:00-3:15 pm and May 4th (Tuesday) 5:00-6:15 pm (choose one date to attend). All students are welcome to join!

INVOLVEMENT OPPORTUNITY: IMPROVING ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH CARE. One of our goals has been to improve access to mental health among grad students. To that end, we have formed a Graduate Student Mental Health and Well-Being Subcommittee to help with this important initiative. The goal of the group is to create a survey that assesses needs related to mental health services among students and most importantly, gathers feedback from the telehealth services system that was put in place during COVID. The survey will allow us to have data on graduate students needs and experiences related to mental health services that we can present to the university stakeholders.

If you would like to join the subcommittee, please contact Larisa Gavrilova.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT. In helping graduate students to keep up with professional development during the pandemic, we have partnered with UC Merced CETL to offer Spring 21 Institute for Evidence-Based Teaching Practices. The institute includes 75-minute sessions which integrate research and pedagogical theory on student learning and provide strategies for best practices, discussions, and hands-on practice to support your teaching development. The workshop series are led by our own Larisa Gavrilova (GSA Climate, Diversity, & Equity Officer) and Taylor Fugere (GSA Academic Affairs Officer) who have been working closely with CETL as Graduate Teaching Fellows. The workshop series have become increasingly popular attracting over 100 graduate students. To register and save your seat, click: [Institute on Evidence-Based Practices](#).

INVOLVEMENT OPPORTUNITIES:

UCM Advocacy & Merced Politics, Involvement & Community

Betsabel Chicana [bchicanaromero @]
Legislative Affairs Officer



Join UC Merced's Advocacy Committee! UC Merced started an advocacy committee to join our sister campuses. For the first time ever, we started a team to join University of California Graduate and Professional Council (UGCPC) to review and advocate for graduate and professional students to the UC Regents and in state and federal legislatures. We have an agenda that would require your involvement till April 23rd, with most of the writing work due March 17th. Please contact me ASAP.

How Bring Pressing Issues to Our Local Government?

If you would like to partake into more local matters you can [attend council meetings listed here](#) and posted live on [Facebook](#). You can help by filling out surveys most important for you which are listed days before the meetings. [Here are the latest survey results for the most recent townhall meetings.](#)

Join the Merced Connect App and Stay in Touch with your Community

What can the Merced Connect app do for you? Well, you can learn how to form a Neighborhood Watch group, report a pothole, request graffiti removal, sign up to volunteer, and so much more. Simply put, it is an easy way to access your local government. [For more information and to download the app visit here.](#)

GSA Bylaw Revisions

The GSA would like your feedback on its new version for the proposed bylaws between now and March 15th. The Delegate Assembly will be voting on the proposed bylaws at its next meeting on March 16th.

GSA Spring Election Timeline

March 8th – Nomination Period Opens

March 29th – Nomination Acceptance Opens

April 5th – Voting Begins

April 9th – Voting Ends

April 12th – Results Announced

NOTICE: A Recreation & Athletics Facility Fee Referendum will be up for vote on the GSA Spring Election Ballot:

- **Supports:** Aquatics Center, Recreation Field, Bobcat Field, Outdoor Basketball and Tennis Courts
- **Provides:** Access to the above facilities without additional fee.
- **Fees:** \$55 per Fall and Spring semester, \$25 for summer with increases starting 2024
- Failure to pass will mean students need to pay a membership to access facilities.

Implementing Virtual Social Events for the First Time

Jordan Collignon [jcollignon@]
Internal Communications Officer



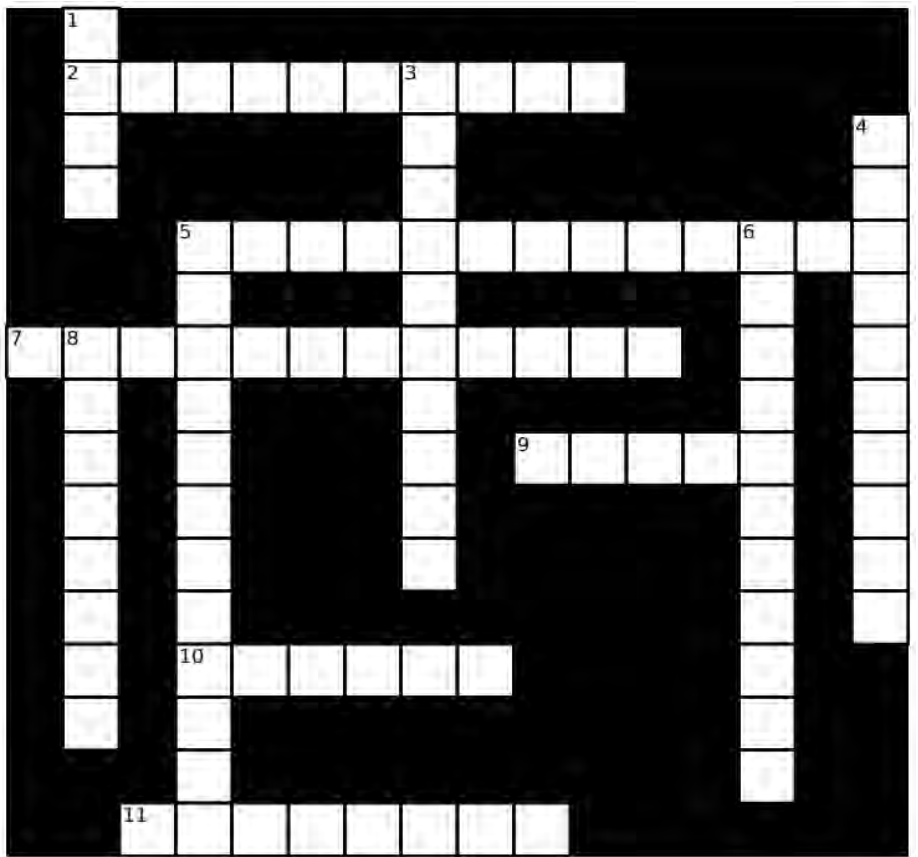
After the pandemic led to a shutdown of all in-person events and the rise of virtual infrastructure, the GSA has worked hard during the fall and spring semesters to host social events aimed at maintaining a positive community among the graduate student population. More than 700 graduate students are registered at UC Merced this year, most of which have completely virtual interactions with their colleagues off-site. Last semester was the GSA's first real test to see if hosting events and gatherings in a virtual setting would be feasible. To prepare for such a test, several officers planned and implemented some ideas aimed at fostering community or to offer a space for learning new things then distributed them throughout the semester. Because of the participation of the graduate student community as well as the efforts of the hosts to plan each event, this system has worked better than expected. By moving to a virtual setting, not only did we strive to maintain social interaction in the graduate community, but also created opportunities for graduate students to meet those colleagues that would otherwise be difficult—or even impossible—to meet in-person. Furthermore, these environments truly challenged us to see what was possible to transition to a virtual setting and others where only a virtual setting was possible, and we found ways to make the best out of them all.

Thank you to everyone who participated so far, and we hope each of you will continue to participate in events we are making available during the spring!

Down

1. One of two establishments to meet the GSA over coffee on Sat., March 13th. (4 letters)
3. A Recreation & Athletics Facility Fee _____ will be up for vote on the GSA Spring Election Ballot.
4. This committee advocates for issues such as food and housing security, email Zunaira to join! (2 Words)
5. This website (sans .org) provides information on city council meeting times and minutes.
6. The major theme of this Spring 2021 GSA Newsletter.
8. The Institute on _____-Based Practices is a professional workshop series integrating research and pedagogical theory.

There are no spaces in crossword answers.



Send your completed crossword puzzle to gsa@ucmerced.edu to be entered into a Raffle!



Across

2. This officer is looking for a committee to review the Graduate Student Rights & Responsibilities document, email Karla to join! (Title)
5. One of two establishments to meet the GSA over coffee on Sat., March 13th. (13 letters, 2 Words)
7. The Graduate Student _____ and Well-Being committee is working on a survey to address mental health services in general and amidst the pandemic, email Larisa to join! (2 Words)
9. The GSA Spring Election voting begins on the first week in this month.
10. Dr. Berhe's and Dr. Camfield will each host workshops to address this issue in the academy.
11. This committee will review state & federal legislature, and advocate on behalf of graduate and professional students,

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Next General Meetings!



April 7th
May 5th

4-5pm PST on Zoom

