

Graduate Student Services Office 2013-14

The Graduate Student Services Office (GSSO) is tasked with developing and managing programs and services that contribute to the personal and professional development of graduate students and foster an inclusive, diverse and engaged graduate community. Below is a summary of our activities toward this end in the 2013-14 academic year.

Programs and Services: Personal and Professional Development and Community Building

In addition to hosting the weekly GLC Café year-round, GSSO organized more than 50 events this year, with the majority offered during Welcome Week, in the first few weeks of each semester, as part of the GLC Open House, and during [Graduate Education Week](#). These events ranged from informal gatherings such as welcome back socials and the Big Cook Out; to informational and professional development events such as the LinkedIn lab, effective reading workshop, and salary negotiation; to personal development workshops, such as how to make ends meet and how to navigate stress and uncertainty in graduate school.

During the [GLC Open House](#) (held each year in mid-fall), we held our usual [semi-annual photo and art contest](#), and expanded programming to draw in graduate coordinators and service organizations on campus who cater to graduate students. A housing design contest for graduate students engaged close to 50 graduate students working in teams to generate ideas for an off-campus graduate living community with amenities that would suit graduate students and their families.

The three GLC Fellows (jointly supervised and paid by the Graduate School and Residence Life) organized 15 events for the graduate student population. Their programs included trips to local hot spots, such as Joe's Tree Farm and the Cascades, movie and game nights, and "Tacos and Tie-Dye," which was a very popular event that challenged students' creativity in decorating t-shirts and other clothing items. The fellows organized two GLC/Grad Student intramural teams, for soccer and softball respectively. Registration for the teams was advertised on the [GLC weekly listserv](#), and both teams filled up immediately. The fellows also held several community-building events specifically for the GLC residents, including bi-weekly dinners, pancake night, and grilled-cheese night.

The Graduate School partnered with many different departments and local businesses to bring events to the GLC for graduate students. Tax workshops for international students, health insurance information sessions, and a tour of the new Center for the Arts building are just a couple of examples. We have also partnered with the library to contribute to their Open Access Week events and expand their offerings to graduate students.

The Cook Counseling Center, the Writing Center, the Laboratory for Interdisciplinary Statistical Analysis, Career Services, and as of February 2014, the Financial Aid office offer weekly walk-in services specifically geared toward graduate students. One of the most successful of these collaborations is with Career Services. During the 2013-2014 academic year, 133 participants attended their workshops in the GLC. Their weekly walk-in advising sessions also remain popular, with 47 students taking advantage of this opportunity in the fall (up from 39 in 2012-13) and 44 in the spring (up from 19 in 2012-13).

Graduate Education Week 2014 in numbers:

- 22 events
- 109 entries in the art and photo contest
- 1500+ participants
- 9 co-sponsored events/activities

Immigration services and trends

Two full-time immigration specialists provide year-round immigration services, including advising, immigration forms, employment eligibility verification and documentation, and SEVIS compliance, to more than 1700 international graduate students enrolled in Blacksburg. Their goal is to help students obtain and maintain F-1 or J-1 visa status and make the most of the benefits these statuses provide.

There was a small increase (2.5%) in our total international graduate student enrollment this year:

	Fall 2009	Fall 2010	Fall 2011	Fall 2012	Fall 2013
Nonresident Alien	1,644	1,664	1,614	1,695	1,738

Our international admissions for fall 2014 has increased significantly compared to previous years. This year we have taken the first steps toward accepting supporting documents (immigration and financial information) electronically.

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Int'l admissions	963	749 (22%↓)	825 (10%↑)	885 (7%↑)	945 (7%↑)	1135 (20%↑)
Immigration forms issued	511	436 (15%↓)	424 (3%↓)	465 (9%↑)	481 (3%↑)	467(3%↓)
New int'l student arrival		323	327 (1%↑)	395 (20%↑)	377 (5%↓)	Too early to report

Top countries represented among our new students continue to be China (178, down from 191 last year), India (128, up from 110), Iran (26, up from 24), South Korea (18, down from 19) and Germany (20, up from 13). Our new students hail from 54 different countries, while our entire international graduate student population represents 90 countries.

Co-op applications were slightly down compared to last year:

	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
Co-op participants	140	146	123	149	138

Mostly international students from 27 departments participated in the co-op program. The opportunity is most popular among ECE (44), CSA (31) and ISE (17) students.

A new immigration advisor, Tina Lapel, joined our ranks and has taken over responsibilities for SEVIS compliance from Zelma Harris, who retired in July.

Process improvements:

- Our immigration advisors worked with Study Abroad office staff to review and streamline procedures for tracking inbound applications, admissions and immigration form issuance for international exchange students. The Study Abroad office is using a new software package that, while it serves their purposes nicely, complicates procedures on our end.

- New students' immigration eligibility documents are now managed through Workflow and saved in BDMS.
- All of our in-house immigration forms are being reviewed and revised. Revisions include removal of redundant or unnecessary information fields, more user-friendly language and layout, and content updates to mirror workflow. The following form revisions were completed this year, with more slated for 2014-15:
 - o Co-op application
 - o Optional Practical Training application
 - o Immigration Information Form for newly accepted students (formerly Financial Certification Form)
- Reduced-course-load approval procedures and tracking have been updated and are now digitized and shared within IGSS.
- Probation and dismissal letters and procedures have been updated with particular attention to international students and their needs and responsibilities regarding immigration regulations.
- Due to a change in the graduate co-op program (championed by the Graduate Student Assembly and approved by [University Council and the president on May 5, 2014](#)), procedures and online and print documentation related to the program had to be updated. Effective fall 2014, participation in the graduate co-operative education program requires 1 credit hour enrollment. Our office also worked with the Bursar's Office to ensure that students are billed correctly for this program.

Assistantships, fellowships and scholarships

The Graduate School provides more than 150 assistantships to departments under various programs, including the Interdisciplinary Graduate Education Program (IGEP), Dean's Diversity Assistantships (DDA), Cunningham doctoral scholar awards and more. The graduate student services office manages these assistantships, from negotiating contract details with academic departments that employ students under these assistantships, to issuing contracts, entering personnel appointments on Banner, awarding and funding associated tuition remissions, verifying employment eligibility for newly employed students, and managing communication between departments, students, and the Graduate School.

In addition to these, our office also manages university scholarship and fellowship programs (e.g. David & Lillian Francis Scholarship, George E. & Hester B Aker Fellowship, and Ellen W. Wade Graduate Studies Fellowship to name a few) and coordinates many fellowships provided by external agencies such as NSF, SREB, Vietnam Education Foundation, National Physical Science Consortium (NPSC), and GEM.

Assistantship and fellowship management in numbers:

- More than 250 tuition awards and funding entered each semester
- 167 assistantship contracts and personnel appointments
- More than 50 employment eligibility verifications (I-9) for new graduate student employees
- 21 external fellowship disbursements
- Over thirty exceptional appointments a semester approved for students who don't meet an assistantship eligibility criteria (low GPA or other)

Graduate Honor System

Our office provides administrative support and advice to the Graduate Honor System. We track cases from receipt to resolution, manage all correspondence, and advise referrers and accused students about their rights and responsibilities within the honor system. The advisor to the GHS, Monika Gibson, has to be

present at all investigative board and judicial panel hearings. She also provides guidance to all parties, including student officers of the GHS, regarding procedural questions.

The honor system received 19 case referrals that involved 32 students. Slightly more than half of the cases were resolved through [Facilitated Discussion](#), a simplified process in place since 2009 that empowers involved faculty and students and encourages dialogue about academic integrity. Of the 32 referred students 15 were accused of plagiarism, 12 of cheating, 4 of falsification and one of academic sabotage. The resolution of some cases is still pending at the time of this report, but in the cases that were finalized, 8 students were found not guilty (or the judicial panel didn't find sufficient evidence to prove the charge), and 14 students were found guilty and received GHS probation and additional educational or disciplinary penalties.

Support to Graduate Student Organizations

Graduate student organizations, or graduate students contemplating starting new student organizations, often contact our office for assistance. We provide event planning advice and guidance as well as occasional administrative support to the Graduate Student Assembly and Alpha Epsilon Lambda. We also assist students with the logistics of starting a new organization. Each year our office verifies membership eligibility for applicants to the two graduate honor societies at Virginia Tech, [Alpha Epsilon Lambda](#) and [Iota Delta Rho](#).

Director's Service

The director of graduate student services, Monika Gibson, represented the Graduate School on the following committees and task forces in 2013-14:

- Open Access Week planning committee in University Libraries
- University Council on International Affairs
- Graduate assistantship contracts steering committee -- co-chair with Melinda West, University Bursar
- GLC Advisory Board
- GLC Executive Board
- Graduate Student of the Year award selection committee – chair
- Task Force on Student Experience through Division of Student Affairs
- “100 days to graduation” exploratory committee through Alumni Association
- SEVIS batch processing exploratory committee through Cranwell International Center
- Graduate Honor System chief justice search committee – chair
- International Support Services associate director search committee
- BOV candidate selection committee
- Child care coordinator search committee
- Front desk receptionist search committee - chair

Other service:

- Served as a mentor for the Women's Leadership and Mentoring Program
- Served as a senior fellow for the Honors Residential College
- Consulted for honor code revisions for the DVM program
- Submitted a Parent Fund proposal to refurbish the GLC lobby – fully awarded

Professional development

- [“Awakening the digital imagination”](#) new media faculty seminar, Fall 2013
- Project management one-day workshop