

Graduate Student Services Office 2014-15

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. This report summarizes our activities supporting these goals during the 2014-15 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 70 events this year. The majority of events and activities were offered during: (1) orientation weeks taking place a week before and during the first few weeks of each semester; (2) our now traditional major fall event of GLC Open House; and (3) [Graduate Education Week](#). These events ranged from informal gatherings such as welcome back socials and the Thanksgiving and spring break luncheons; to informational and professional development events such as tours to unique labs and spaces on campus, salary negotiation, and dining etiquette; to personal development workshops, such as how to make ends meet and how to navigate stress and uncertainty in graduate school. This year we added two recurring weekly services: financial aid advising provided by the VT financial aid office, and a dissertation writing support group facilitated by GSSO staff.

During the [GLC Open House](#) (held each year in mid-fall to showcase the offerings of the Graduate Life Center and promote graduate education), we held our usual [semi-annual photo and art contest](#), shared and discussed the results and implications of the Graduate Student Climate Survey conducted in 2013, and offered building tours every half an hour. As a new program this year, we organized a graduate student show-and-tell that featured:

- psychology students from the Cognition, Affect and Psychophysiology lab
- human development students from the children's emotions lab
- computer animation demonstrations and digital sculpting by students in the Institute for Creativity, Arts and Technology (ICAT)
- data visualization by statistics students who offer consulting through [LISA](#)
- ice cream making with liquid nitrogen by a chemistry student
- physical fitness testing and assessment advice by human nutrition, food and exercise students
- bacteria showcase under microscope by an animal and poultry science student,
- presentation of music translated into senses beyond sound by an ICAT student
- public speaking skills demonstration by communication students
- plant propagation demonstration by horticulture students
- local soils display by a crop and soil environmental sciences student

Graduate Education Week is held annually during the last full week of March to highlight the importance of graduate education; increase the university community's awareness of the contributions graduate students make to the teaching, research and service missions of the university; and enhance the graduate student experience through professional development programs and celebratory events. Graduate Education Week 2015 in numbers:

- 19 events; 8 co-sponsored by other campus organizations
- 99 entries by 44 students in the art and photo contest
- 1500+ participants
- 24 students recognized at the awards banquet, receiving \$14,500 in awards

In addition to above, the Graduate School partnered with many different departments and local businesses to bring events to the GLC for graduate students. Historic Blacksburg tours, tax workshops for international students, Affordable Care Act information sessions, and tours of the Center for the Arts building are just a couple of examples.

The Cook Counseling Center, the Writing Center, the Laboratory for Interdisciplinary Statistical Analysis, Career Services, and 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 2014-2015 academic year, 189 participants attended their workshops in the GLC (up from 133 last year), five offered in the fall semester and four offered in the spring. Their weekly walk-in advising sessions also remain popular, with 54 students taking advantage of this. Their LinkedIn photo shoot during Graduate Education Week attracted 60 participants.

Weekly walk-in services in the GLC:

- Career Services advising: Wednesdays 2:00-5:00pm, GLC lobby
- Cook Counseling: Thursdays and Fridays 1:00-5:00pm, Green Room
- Financial aid advising: Tuesdays 3:30-5:00, Room A (pilot program in fall 2014)
- GLC Café: 3:30-5:00 every Thursday, Reading Room
- Immigration advising: MWF 1:00-5:00pm, TTh 9:00am-12:00pm, 120 GLC
- Statistical consulting by LISA: Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays 10:00am-12:00pm, Room A
- Writing assistance: Thursdays 5:00-8:00pm, Room A

The three GLC Fellows (jointly supervised and paid by the Graduate School and Residence Life) organized 21 events during fall and spring for the graduate student population:

Fall Semester:

- Campus Tour – Aug 24
- Game Night – Sep 25
- GLC Movie Night – Sep 26
- GLC Movie Night – Oct 16
- Joe's Trees (pumpkin patch) Trip – Oct 25
- Halloween Carnival – Oct 30
- Funding Your Graduate School Experience – Nov 12
- Grad Cosmic Bowling Night – Nov 14
- GLC Movie Night – Nov 20
- Healthy You: An Exclusive Event for International Students – Dec 4
- Hot Chocolate Study Break – Dec 12
- VT PAWS – Dec 15

Spring Semester:

- Welcome Back Social – Feb 6
- Spread Some Love (Valentine's Day card-making) – Feb 11, 12, 13
- GLC Movie Night- Feb 18
- GLC Movie Night – Mar 4
- Jell-o with the Fellows – Mar 17

- Game Night –Mar 23
- Tie Dye and Tacos – Apr 17
- GLC Movie Night – Apr 23
- Lemonade Study Break –May 6

The GLC Fellows also organized several events for residents only, including bi-weekly dinners, study breaks, and a bowling night.

Immigration services and trends

Two full-time and one part-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.

In summer 2014 and October 2014 two of our long-time immigration advisors retired. Tina Lapel, immigration advisor and SEVIS compliance coordinator, ensured that immigration services remained accessible while a new immigration advisor was hired and a part-time advisor was undergoing immigration training. As of January 2015, the International Graduate Student Services (IGSS) office is fully staffed again, although securing SEVIS access authorization for our new additions took some additional time.

There was a small increase (1.2%) in our total international graduate student enrollment again in 2014-15, but a greater increase (~8%) is expected for 2015-16:

Blacksburg	Fall 2009	Fall 2010	Fall 2011	Fall 2012	Fall 2013	Fall 2014	Fall 2015
International enrollment	1,644	1,664	1,614	1,695	1,738	1759	1898

Our international admissions for fall 2015 has increased significantly compared to previous years. This year we have taken the first steps toward accepting supporting documents (immigration and financial information) electronically, with hopes that for the 2016-17 admission cycle applicants will have an online interface as part of their admission application to enter and upload all immigration and financial information and documents.

Blacksburg	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Int'l admissions	963	749 (22% ↓)	825 (10% ↑)	885 (7% ↑)	945 (7% ↑)	1135 (20% ↑)	1521 (34% ↑)
Immigration forms issued	511	436 (15% ↓)	424 (3% ↓)	465 (9% ↑)	481 (3% ↑)	467 (3% ↓)	631 (35% ↑)
New int'l student enrollment		323	327 (1% ↑)	395 (20% ↑)	377 (5% ↓)	389 (3% ↑)	544 (40% ↑)

Due to the anticipated increase in new international student enrollment, we instituted a new, streamlined process for international student check-in, requiring that students register for designated time slots during a three-week period. This increased predictability of daily workload for our immigration advisors, and greatly reduced wait time for students.

Top countries represented among our new students continue to be China (169, down from 178 last year), India (201, up from 128), Iran (24, down from 26), South Korea (21, up from 18) and Germany (15, down from 20). Our new students hail from 44 different countries, while our entire international graduate student population represents 90 countries.

Co-op applications increased by 24% compared to last year, possibly due to a change in co-op procedures for 2014-15 that significantly reduced the cost of participation in the program:

	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
Co-op participants	140	146	123	149 (21% ↑)	138 (8% ↓)	172 (24% ↑)

Mostly international students from 25 departments participated in the co-op program; 79 of them were master's students and 93 were doctoral. The co-op program continues to be most popular among ECE, CSA, ME and ISE students.

A new immigration advisor, Anam Pasha, joined our ranks in January 2015. Matt Grice, senior admissions and academic progress advisor has been in training since July 2014 as a part-time immigration advisor as well.

Process improvements:

- Continued to update in-house immigration forms to remove redundant or unnecessary information fields, use more user-friendly language and layout, update content to mirror workflow logic.
- Set up all letters for students as mail merge - easier to create, print and track what has been done.
- Re-designed new international student check-in:
 - Set up 520 15-minute appointment slots between Aug 3-21 and required students to sign up in advance; this made workload more predictable and significantly reduced wait time for students.
 - Completed SEVIS registration as part of check-in for new students; this will allow students to apply for and receive SSNs quicker, and will help the payroll office as well.
 - Pre-printed check-in cards and employment confirmation letters for students.
- Introduced [eShipGlobal](#) as the portal for international express shipping to remove IGSS from the role of collecting shipping costs. Through this method students make their own shipping arrangements with a third party and IGSS staff prepares shipment once arrangements are confirmed online.
- Updated standards for processing F-1/J-1 extension requests.
- Worked with admissions and academic progress to design new interface where international applicants may upload their immigration and financial documents as part of the admission application process. In preparation for this change, during this cycle all immigration and financial documents from applicants were scanned and moved into workflow by document manager.
- Introduced immigration case processing log to track number and types of cases received by IGSS, along with case-processing status and responsible DSO. In spring 2015 the two full-time and one part-time advisors received 562 requests for optional practical training or academic training (151); co-op (130); form extensions (167); OPT STEM or CAP-GAP extensions (74); changes of academic level (23); forms for dependents (12); and miscellaneous requests (5). This processing log allows us to better track request status, improve workload distribution, and evaluate efficiency of our procedures and processes.

Assistantships, fellowships and scholarships

The Graduate School provided 190 (up from 150 last year) 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, in conjunction with our fiscal management office, also manages the following university scholarship and fellowship programs:

- Alex Taylor Breaux Fund for International Study
- David & Lillian Francis Scholarship
- Ellen Wade Graduate Studies Fellowship
- George & Hester Aker Fellowship
- James Powell Fellowship
- Janet Lowe Cameron Scholarship
- Jean Allen Philips Scholarship
- Patricia K and John N. Edwards Scholarship
- William Preston Society Fellowship

External fellowships and scholarships managed by our office include:

- Chinese Scholarship Council
- Fulbright scholarship
- GEM Consortium fellowships
- National Physical Science Consortium Fellowship
- National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowships
- Southern Regional Education Board fellowships
- Vietnam Education Foundation scholarships (sponsored by US government)
- Vietnam International Education Foundation scholarships (sponsored by Vietnamese government)

Assistantship and fellowship management in numbers:

- More than 320 tuition awards and funding entered each semester (up from 250 last year)
- 190 assistantship contracts and personnel appointments
- More than 50 employment eligibility verifications (I-9) for new graduate student employees
- 36 university fellowship/scholarship disbursements; 7 external fellowship disbursements

Our office continues to serve as the main point of contact for departments about assistantship and tuition remission questions and problems. We coordinate the resolution of problems with the Bursar's Office, Human Resources, the Controller's Office, and hiring departments, and offer training sessions as well as individual assistance to departmental staff. Multiple reports help us ensure university-wide compliance with assistantship and tuition remission policies and procedures:

- Tuition over-award report – run weekly to identify multiple awards for a single student

- Assistantship eligibility report – run first daily and then weekly to identify assistantship eligibility compliance based on enrollment and GPA
- Out-of-state fee waiver eligibility

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, or designee, was present at all investigative board and judicial panel hearings. She also provided guidance to all parties, including referrers, accused students, and student officers of the GHS, regarding procedural questions.

Cases by numbers:

- 17 case referrals (down from 19 in 2013-14)
- 18 students (down from 32 last year)
- 16 plagiarism charges, 1 cheating referral
- 14 cases (82%) resolved through [Facilitated Discussion](#)
- 15 students found guilty; case against 2 students dismissed for lack of sufficient evidence to prove the charges
- Penalties included GHS probation and additional educational and/or disciplinary actions
- Referral received from seven colleges and involved 11 departments or programs

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](#). This year we assisted in the formation of the Over-30 graduate student organization to support our non-traditional-age student population, and helped launch the Hokie Parents Support Group.

Director's Service

The director of graduate student services, Monika Gibson, represented the Graduate School on the following committees and task forces in 2014-15:

- OpenCon student scholarship selection process with University Libraries
- University Council on International Affairs
- Graduate assistantship contracts implementation team
- 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 (concluded in Jan 2015)
- BOV candidate selection committee
- Personal Touch Catering assistant director selection committee
- Immigration advisor selection committee – chair

- Executive Assistant to VP and Dean of Graduate School selection committee
- Assessment and data management coordinator selection committee
- Director of Cranwell International Center selection – stakeholder group member
- Director of Student Centers and Activities selection – stakeholder group member
- Inclusive GLC working group – chair

Other service and achievements:

- Served as a mentor for the Women’s Leadership and Mentoring Program
- Served as a senior fellow for the Honors Residential College
- Selected graduate students for invitation to President’s Box for home football games
- Provided orientation to MPH students on Graduate Honor System and participation in graduate community
- Served as Principle Designated School Official for Graduate School and from Jan 2015 for Cranwell International Center
- Managed SEVIS school recertification process for Virginia Tech (Graduate School, Cranwell International Center and National Capital Region campuses); successfully approved in Dec 2014
- Hired digital media content manager
- Served on ethics panels for GTA training workshop
- Participated in Aspirations Symposium