

Graduate Student Association History

In January of 2021 graduate student Michelle “Michy” Loo conceived the idea of founding the Graduate Student Association (GSA) in response to the University of South Alabama’s approach to bringing graduate students back to campus in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. As students sought to make their concerns about returning to campus mid-pandemic known, it quickly became apparent that the Student Government Association (SGA) was ill-equipped to handle concerns unique to graduate students. Information about other official channels for seeking recourse was murky at best. The situation reflected a general lack of emphasis on graduate students’ well-being at South.

Michy took it upon herself to fill each of those gaps by creating GSA, aided at first by Stephanie Garay, a fellow grad student with whom she had worked closely in their shared duties as Graduate Assistants. After researching the practices of institutions similar to South and holding meetings with other members of the graduate body to determine priorities and decide what form the organization should take, they drafted a basic constitution. They based their early recruitment efforts on the simple message that has long driven similar efforts in the business world: “divided we beg, united we bargain.” GSA promised that not only would it listen to student voices, it would raise those voices in front of the authority figures who controlled the University’s policies. An initial priorities survey by Michy and Stephanie revealed that graduate student workers and international students in particular felt that their time and efforts weren’t respected, leaving them overworked and under-supported, to the detriment of their physical/mental health. Student support offices overwhelmingly focused on undergrads, and foundational university policies were obscure. Student worker stipends had not risen with the cost of living for 10 years, most departments didn’t give their student workers health insurance, and graduate housing was minimal or non-existent. Lack of community and networking across departments did nothing to help the situation.

The founders envisioned GSA as a graduate equivalent to SGA. As a governing body, GSA would have the influence, visibility, and resources to truly make a difference. However, discovering the proper channels and processes to make this dream a reality proved difficult, and requests for assistance did not originally receive support. Circumstances forced GSA to begin life as essentially another student club, with Stephanie’s fiancé Dr. Dimitrios Damopoulos as its Faculty Advisor. This reality diminished GSA’s ability to deliver the improvements it promised to work towards, but the organization existing at all was a foundation to build on. The situation also necessitated the immediate creation of specific officer roles to meet the requirements for new student organizations. Officers were required to be graduate students themselves (also a condition of membership in the organization) so that they would accurately understand the graduate experience and have motivation to work in grad students’ best interest. Because of the nature of GSA’s mission, and because of the already high time commitment involved in pursuing a graduate education, few volunteers came forward for officer positions. Suffice it to say GSA’s establishment had not gone unnoticed by faculty members who made their presence felt. Volunteers came entirely from Michy and Stephanie’s friend group within their own college. The original officers were:

- President: Michy Loo
- Vice President: Stephanie Garay
- Treasurer: Ryan Keller
- Secretary: Jessica Hultquist.

Because the organization began in the middle of a global pandemic, early meetings and events took place entirely on Zoom. The first took place on April 7, 2021.

Stephanie stepped down as Vice President on September 24th, 2021. She handed the role off to Erick Romero, who designed GSA’s first logo. At the same time the organization created the new position of Communications Officer to handle interactions with its growing member list, instating David Woolverton as the inaugural holder of that position.

David would succeed Erick as Vice President after the latter's graduation the following summer, at which point the role of Communications Officer merged with the role of Secretary, and both duties were taken over by Sean Stalley.

Throughout 2021, GSA concentrated on growing its contact list, creating a Canvas site to disseminate information, and establishing a name for itself through social events and hosting professional development workshops with other departments. The first in-person social gathering happened November 18th at Satori Coffee House. In December of 2021 the officers also compiled data demonstrating the disproportionality of graduate student worker stipends to the cost of living in Mobile, and used that data to write their first report to the Graduate Council and the Dean of the Graduate School, Dr. Harold Pardue, requesting an increase in stipends across the University. While change didn't come right away, GSA had at last taken practical steps towards its true goals. The officers called a follow-up meeting with Dr. Pardue on May 17, 2022, where they not only discussed potential barriers to stipend increases but also requested and received a voting position for GSA on the Graduate Council and a dedicated GSA jagmail account. Attempts at reviving GSA's student government ambitions did not yet succeed.

GSA's first meeting with Jo Bonner, then newly selected University President, occurred June 14, 2022, at GSA's insistence. No notable developments followed. Sadly, Dr. Damopoulos would leave the University shortly before the meeting with President Bonner. Dr. Angie O'Neal, who had already had constructive contact with GSA while actively conducting her own efforts to gather feedback from students as part of an internship with the Graduate School, took over as academic advisor.

The first true elections took place at the start of the Fall 2022 semester. In preparation, David drafted an expanded version of the constitution to better define officer roles, account for roles created after the original constitution's composition, and address issues the officers had encountered along the way. Additions included cementing the President's role as GSA's representative on the Graduate Council, barring faculty and staff at the University of South Alabama from holding officer positions in case conflicts of interests arose, and creating the position of International Communications Officer to ensure GSA duly, accurately represented the needs of South's international community. Most of the sitting officers did not run for re-election because they expected to graduate soon or had accepted full time positions that reduced their availability. By now GSA had gained more recognition, making it possible to find candidates representing a wider variety of colleges. The first elected body of officers was:

- President: David Woolverton
- Vice President: Mikayla Cain
- Communications Officer: Evan Butlig
- International Communications Officer: Xiaoyan "Sabrina" Liu
- Treasurer: Sunita Subedi Patel

Interestingly, newly elected Treasurer Sunita said in her first officers meeting that she and a friend of hers had also been considering starting an organization similar to GSA when they learned of Michy and Stephanie's efforts, which shows how deeply the need was felt across campus.

Shortly after the election, GSA member Phillip Williams reached out to the officers with a proposal to create a Council of Representatives made up of members from each department across campus who could interact with grad students on a more personal level for the purpose of voting and needs assessment, bring the requests of individual departments before GSA, and also report GSA's activities back to the student body. Phillip modeled his proposal on the existing SGA Senate, in keeping with the original intent for the organization. The officers enthusiastically accepted the idea and David again updated GSA's constitution (with input from the remaining officers) to provide guidelines for Representatives. The existing group of officers became the Executive Branch; Representatives were defined as still officers but having secondary authority. The officers also decided to allow staff (but not faculty) to hold officer positions both for the sake of practicality and to mirror SGA's practices. A special election took place to fill the positions; the inaugural council began meeting in January 2023.

The first Graduate Council meeting to include GSA's President as a voting member took place on October 24th, 2022. One of the Graduate Council members to most support GSA's presence was Dr. Tres Stefurak, who replaced Dr. O'Neal as Faculty Advisor when she accepted a position at another university the previous week. At the meeting David mentioned GSA's original purpose of becoming a graduate equivalent to SGA. The idea met with support from Graduate Council members, who suggested reaching out to Dr. Michael Mitchell, Vice President of Student Affairs. David did so immediately. The next day Dr. Mitchell began working with Dr. Pardue and a colleague of theirs at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (who already had a student government structure of the type GSA desired). Even so, a great deal of time would pass before any significant updates took place.

David would spend one semester as President before stepping down due to time constraints, but would remain an active member. His last act as President was opening GSA's bank account at USA Federal Credit Union in December 2022. Mikayla and Evan took over the roles of President and Vice President respectively, and Phillip became the Communications Officer. Mikayla's presidency was characterized by heightened efforts to build the organization's engagement with the student body through increased activity, and the addition of officer roles to address the growing workload as the organization expanded its reach. The necessary changes to the constitution were headed this time by Evan. Most notably, Hayley Delcher became the first Director of Media, overseeing the GSA Facebook group and Instagram page that came into existence early in February 2023. At Phillip's suggestion, they also launched the *GSA Gazette*, a monthly newsletter intended to update members on GSA's activities, publicize events, and build a sense of recognition for grad students by featuring a Student Spotlight that would honor selected students' accomplishments.

GSA acquired a physical location in a corner of the Marx Library Graduate Lounge on April 11th, 2023, thanks to Beth Shepherd, USA's Instruction Coordinator Librarian and fellow graduate student, who carried GSA's inquiries about potential office space to the Director of Libraries after scoping out suitable options. GSA was particularly interested in a space in Marx Library not only because it was a neutral location not tied to a specific college, but also because the presence of the Graduate Lounge and other research/study facilities made it a highly frequented location for GSA's target audience.

Evan succeeded Mikayla as president in the summer of 2023. That same semester Evan began pressing for updates on GSA's transition into a graduate student government, as no new developments had occurred on that project in the nine months since the idea went before the Graduate Council. Evan's inquiries resulted in a Zoom meeting with Dr. Pardue and Dr. Mitchell on July 19, 2023. At the meeting, Dr. Pardue and Dr. Mitchell made known that they had established a preliminary list of services a graduate student government could be approved to offer, and had gained the support of South's College of Nursing, who boasted roughly 75% of South's graduate population held great influence with university leadership at the time. GSA's officers first became aware of Dr. Pardue and Dr. Mitchell using the name Graduate Student Government Association (GSGA) for their efforts at this time and would apply the name themselves in future discussions. The doctors advised Evan, David, and Samantha (GSA's Vice President), who attended the meeting on GSA's behalf, that the next step would be establishing a less tentative list of services and coming up with a first year's budget to present as a proposal to the Provost, who would need to approve the restructuring. The possibility of offering telehealth services, especially for mental health, and GSGA taking over the Graduate Student Activities Enrichment Program and its revenue sources from Dr. Pardue came up as particularly promising opportunities.

- President: Evan Butlig
- Vice President: Samantha Chaney
- Communications Officer: Snehal Adekar
- Treasurer: Domiyana McKinney
- Secretary: Mariah Moore
- Director of Media: Julia Kristman
- Director of Wellness: Chelsie Carpenter

Evan carried this encouraging information to Dr. Stefurak, who advised him to begin mobilizing GSA's other officers to research both the practices of South's current SGA and those of other graduate student governments. Thus began a campaign of messaging and meeting with South's SGA and influential faculty members to get a better idea of what services grad students already had at their disposal, how those were funded, how to administer them, and how they might be extended in more productive directions. The officers also canvassed the constitutions of other universities' graduate SGAs to refine their understanding of how graduate SGAs differ from undergraduate SGAs and how GSA's then current structure would need to change.

At the Fall 2023 Graduate Council meeting, The Graduate Student Association presented a proposed budget for the GSGA of \$89,300 to be sourced from a nominal student fee (\$1 per credit hour) and transfer of funds from other entities such as the SGA. Benefits to students would include travel/research support, professional development, programming, sponsoring student groups, stipends for the executive board, telehealth mental counseling, and an Ombudsperson. The College of Nursing expressed concerns regarding the value to online students. The MPA program expressed concern for hybrid organizations that may lose support. An opt-out option was proposed. However, the consensus was that one could not opt out of a governing body. The Council tabled the discussion.