Executive Report

There has been a growing need on campus for greater interconnectivity and improved cooperation between the various Graduate and Professional (G&P) schools and student bodies. In an effort to mitigate this problem, last year the Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS) organized and launched the Graduate and Professional Student Forum. This student-run event was established as a platform to bring together student leaders from each graduate and professional school with the goals of identifying common issues across schools, developing lines of communication, generating ideas and solutions, and developing a student leadership network.

In its second edition this year, the central theme of the 2013 Forum was “Integrating and Unifying Yale”. Over 35 select G&P student leaders attended the half-daylong event for an open and inclusive discussion on a participant-generated agenda that included topics such as communication, integration and advocacy. A highlight of 2013 Forum was a keynote address and an engaging roundtable conversation with President-elect Peter Salovey and University Secretary and Vice-President for Student Life Kim Goff-Crews at the end of the session.

The day begun with a break out session aimed at identifying and prioritizing issues of interest across the student body. Not surprisingly this Forum revealed a widespread consensus among the diverse student body, identifying four areas of critical interest (arbitrary order):

i. Health – insufficient dental and eye coverage, overstretched mental health resources, underdeveloped outreach and wellness education.

ii. Housing – increasing rent prices, impact of upcoming renovations to G&P dormitories, limited Yale-owned alternatives to dormitories, poor Yale shuttle coverage of neighborhoods like Westville and Wooster Square

iii. Physical Resources – no building access outside own school, inadequate library and gym hours, poor room reservation systems, limited study and meeting space.

iv. Integration – shortage of neutral spaces that foster interactions across schools, limited number of campus wide events, poor lines of communication among student bodies and with administration, lack of a centralized calendar.
These issues were then addressed in a series of solution-oriented workshops and activities. A diverse range of ideas, which varied both in scope and time needed for implementation, were generated for each focus area. Below is a list of ideas that reached consensus among the group for having high potential efficacy and strong support among G&P students.

As a way to tackle the current burden on Mental Health clinical resources, participants agreed on the need to bolster outreach and education programs aimed at managing stress and recurring wellness issues. The groups also identified the potential benefit of training of student volunteers to act as peer counselors in their departments, an idea previously embraced as a solution during GPSS’s meeting with the Corporation.

It was also suggested that the university implement a University Wide Housing Committee to discuss problems such as rising rent, the impact of upcoming renovations to dorms and the need to expand alternative housing options. With the construction two new dorms for undergraduates, G&Ps are looking for a comprehensive plan as their enrollment grows as well.

The need for more space and better access to existing facilities has been a recurring high priority topic in previous conversations and the 2013 Forum was not an exception. To mitigate some these problems, participants strongly advocated for improved gym and library hours (especially during weekends), for universal key access to graduate and professional student spaces and for the creation of a centralized physical space registry and booking system. While foreseeing some of the logistical challenges posed by these initiatives, student leaders remained confident that reciprocity across the graduate and professional schools would guarantee the success of these proposals.

During these solution-oriented workshops, there was a widespread consensus that Yale needs more campus wide activities aimed at fostering interactions between students. A prominent idea was to revamp the intramural (IM) system to draw larger crowds while also encouraging school spirit and sense of community. Yale College has developed a robust IM system through the Tyng Cup, which pits each of the colleges against one another across over 20 sports, and a similar setup for graduate and professional students would have a tremendous impact. There was also widespread support for the creation of a graduate and professional field day or festival that includes performances, food and party amusements. The lack of a singular event aimed at all G&P students was seen as a hurdle to promoting cross-school unity. Furthermore, Forum participants proposed expansion of GPSS events such as planned excursions outside of Yale, or dinners that bring people together from across the University.

Recognizing that the graduate and professional student community is highly fragmented, a group of participants proposed the development of digital student life hub. This customizable, online platform would act as a centralized source of information and a go-to place for students. The site would nucleate student resources, streamline publicity and the dissemination of information, list student organizations from the various schools and host a classifieds section among many other features. This idea was extremely well
received and a committee with members from across the graduate and professional schools was readily formed to draft and implement this initiative. This committee has been meeting regularly since the Forum was held with the goal of presenting University Secretary and Vice-President for Student Life Kim Goff-Crews with a draft proposal by the beginning of the 2013 Fall semester.

In addition, the 2013 Forum also addressed the need for a Student Center at Yale as a means to physically integrate the Yale community. Through a group discussion, the participants explored the desired characteristics and amenities of this place as well as its value to the community. This conversation was in line with a major collaborative initiative launched this year by the GPSS, the Graduate Student Assembly (GSA) and the Yale College Council launched to advocate for the need of a Student Center at Yale. Forum participants unanimously agreed on the need for such a place at Yale, and saw it as a crucial pillar towards building an integrated community on campus. This shared space between graduates and undergraduates would become a hub for student life at Yale by providing centralized university resources, meeting and study rooms, multipurpose spaces, multiple dining options and house student groups.

The day culminated with a short address by President-elect Peter Salovey, who touched on the vision for his presidency as well as his days as president of GPSS. This was followed by a roundtable conversation with President-elect Salovey and University Secretary and Vice-President for Student Life Kim Goff-Crews. At this roundtable discussion, students had an unparalleled opportunity to share with President-elect Salovey and Secretary Goff-Crews the topics, ideas and concerns discussed throughout the day.

This highly successful event not only fostered camaraderie and communication among student leaders but also promoted collaborations and initiatives across the various G&P schools. This short conference reinforced the need for stronger formal collaborations and informal interactions among different student groups. Prior to GPSS forming the forum in 2012, Yale lacked a time when key administrators and student leaders from all G&P schools were in the same room. In addition, it highlighted key areas of concern to be tackled at the student government as well as the administrative level. More importantly, the 2013 Forum provided a venue for student leaders to identify possible solutions and to develop concrete initiatives that bring the graduate and professional community closer together.