

## Toronto School of Theology Graduate Students' Association Annual Report

The Toronto School of Theology Graduate Students' Association (TGSA) has a two prong mission, programing and development activities as one and as the other advocacy for students. While the goal is to provide balance in both those areas, some years one or the other seems to take up more time and planning. This year, while providing some wonderful programing for students, the bulk of TGSA's time seemed to be spent on advocating for students in one way or another.

That is not to say that we did not put on some wonderful and well attended programs. The annual welcome back BBQ and SHHRC/OGS workshop was well attended and provided a good way for students to ease back into life at TST after a summer away. In years past, TGSA has held separate social and professional development events, this year we decided to hold the two together in an effort to bring more people out to the events. We hosted events on conference proposals and presentations as well as on teaching and learning styles. They were not well attended by students but were well received by those who were able to come. The issue of how to create and host programing that is interesting and helpful for students at times that are convenient continues to be an ongoing discussion. One event that was very well attended was our annual student conference. This year's theme was "From Sovereignty to Service: Theology's Engagement with the Liberal Arts" with Dean Ginther from Saint Michael's giving the keynote address. We had a record number of paper submissions of high quality which speaks to the amazing work being done by our students. We also had a great number of students attend the conference. While we did have a few faculty members in attendance, it was a lower turn out than in years past. Our students greatly appreciate the support that the faculty of TST shows and their attendance is always most welcome at our conference. It should be also be noted that TST helped this year with funding the conference, allowing TGSA to have funds for other programing events. As always, TST's support is most welcome and we are most grateful for it.

A large amount of the board's time was spent advocating for our students in a number of areas. Our annual Christmas survey showed that a number of students were concerned about the cohort classes that the conjoint PhD students are required to take. There was a feeling that many students were not getting much out of the class academically, that they were struggling to find why the course was relevant to their academic area of study. This became a more pressing concern because the number of elective classes in the program is so small. Of concern to the board is that these concerns were dismissed as students just not understanding the process. It seems that perhaps more work needs to be done to explain the rational of the course and make it more relevant to students. Also of note from that survey is that students do value the cohort identity that is being formed in these classes which is a very positive result in the eyes of the board.

Students not in the "new"/conjoint PhD also expressed a great deal of concern over what they perceive to be a greater level of concern and resources being given to those in the conjoint program. While some of this is may be an issue of perception, and some may not be related to the conjoint program at all, students in years 4 and following did express concerns relating to the amount of time and effort their supervisors had for them, how long committees were taking for exams, in general the amount of faculty support seemed to be lower and more problematic for our returning students. It is hard to not point at least in part to the ever growing class sizes and

growing work load for faculty. This with a more rigorous timeline for the conjoint PhD, has left many non-Conjoint students worried about their time to completion.

Taking up a large amount of the board's time this year was the question of student life fees. As it stands now TST Graduate Students do not pay this University of Toronto set of fees. This means we do not have access to Hart House, athletics or many things funded by the Student Life office. Over the last two years the question has been put to students in various ways on if they would consider paying the fee, which is substantial. Students told the board over and over again that they did not see the value in the fees. This last year, a Town Hall was scheduled, by the Graduate Centre, to talk with the administrators involved in those services that our students do not pay for. Unfortunately, the event was not well attended by students. However, the information was distributed and again, students said, they did not see the value in the fee increase. The concern of the board however is that the Graduate Centre and the University of Toronto would like students to pay these fees. While a fee increase can only be approved by the student body, a large portion of the board felt that we were being pressured into trying to persuade the student body to vote in favor of the fee increase. The majority of the board came away feeling like the Graduate Centre was trying to be too involved in student affairs and that is an ongoing concern that will require more work this year.

That concern ultimately speaks of the overarching concern that students on and off the board had: What is the role of a TST student in the University of Toronto? This is a question that there seems to be no clear answer for yet, and will prove to be an ongoing point of discussion in the year to come.

While it may seem to some like the board of TGSA has done nothing but complain, it would be remiss of me not to thank the amazing faculty and staff at TST and the member schools. Each and every student here does as well as we do because of them. The nature of change and even just the nature of the academy can often make it sound like we do not appreciate the work you do for us; the board would like to make it very clear that we do. Many of the issues that the board took up this year stem from confusion and are so will be cleared up, hopefully soon. Personally I would like to say that even in the most contentious of meetings I knew that at the end (and start) of it all we, students, faculty, and staff, are all working of the good of the students at TST, and that is a wonderful place to be.

The TGSA board has almost completely turned over, which is a wonderful thing. It shows that we have students who are engaged and want to help shape TST for years to come. Allison Murray and the rest of the board will do amazing things this year, and I am very excited to see it start.

On a personal note, the last two years as president of first ADSA and now TGSA, I have gotten to know some wonderful people in ways I wouldn't have otherwise, I have gotten to better appreciate all the hard work that goes into TST and I thank you all for it.

On behalf of the Toronto School of Theology Graduate Students' Association, thank you for another great year.

Respectfully,

Rebecca Spellacy  
TGSA President, 2015-2016