Startup and Standard Operating Procedure (SSOP) for a Departmental Graduate Student Association
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Introduction

As our university grows, graduate students' involvement in the institution becomes increasingly essential. Formation of student associations at the departmental level can provide a more formal avenue to help students voice concerns and interests regarding actions by the university by acting as a liaison between the departmental faculty/administration and the graduate students. The body also provides an excellent opportunity for information exchange between the ASUN Graduate Student Assembly (GSA) and departments. Equally important is the role group can play in fostering a sense of community among graduate students within a department. This document is intended to provide some guidance on the startup and operation of new departmental graduate student associations within the college of engineering. It provides some recommendations regarding the organization and structure of operating this kind of group in hopes to make the process easier for new groups to navigate.

Startup of a New Group

Establish your group as an RSO

There are a few steps in starting up departmental graduate student association. Please note that the suggested procedure comes from our experience in establishing the Civil Engineering Graduate Students Association (CIVE-GSA) in February of 2018. Generally, you will want to recruit the appropriate people to register your group as an RSO. First, you must identify and connect with a faculty member within your department that can act as your advisor for setting up the group as a registered student organization (RSO). It is great if this person has a

higher role in the department because they may also be able to help promote the group to new graduate students. For instance, in the Civil Engineering Department, the graduate chair (Dr. Yusong Li) acts as the advisor of CIVE-GSA. The second big step in getting things started by recruiting a minimum of three graduate students that can work as leaders in the group and a total of five. In CIVE-GSA, the student leading roles are President, Primary Programmer and Treasurer.

Is establishing the core leadership, the most important step is to start with close friends who are motivated enough to take on the leading roles. After you have an advisor and a team of at least three motivated fellow students, you can work with the faculty advisor to make it so all newly admitted graduate students to the department would be members of the group. By the time you are recruiting members, the leadership will need to develop a constitution and finalize getting the group registered as an RSO which requires the student leaders to attend a two-hour seminar that is presented by the Student Involvement. An example constitution is provided in the appendix of this document. More information about starting an RSO can be found at the following links:

https://involved.unl.edu/organizations/start

https://involved.unl.edu/organizations/resources

Who should you try to get involved?

Many departments often have sub-disciplines within a degree. For example, civil engineering has specializations in Environmental, Water Resources, Geotechnical, Transportation and Structural Engineering. For your group to better represent your department, it is recommended to try to recruit at least one student from each subdiscipline to be involved with leadership. This can help aid in communicating information to those parts of the department because the representative might be able to share the word of events occurring by word of mouth and in general, these groups of students seem to be better connected. It might help to see if your advisor can assist in facilitating these connections since you may not know the other students or their respective advisors.

In addition to having these representatives, it is important to have at least one representative present that is active in the ASUN GSA. This person can help act as liaison to

communicate anything that is going on at the university-wide level (i.e., important issues occurring, the feedback they are reaching out for, events occurring, etc.). Moreover, students can voice concerns to the departmental reps that can then take them to the ASUN GSA to be heard.

Operations

Once you get your group up and running, it's time to get some stuff done. There are some good practices that can help in operating your group. It is entirely up to you and your team on what direction you want to go and how much energy/time you are willing to invest. Our group will meet on a bi-weekly basis to discuss ongoing work and to plan. We highly recommend designating a person to keep meeting minutes of every meeting that can be shared with the active group member and used as a guide in keeping track of progress. Also setting up a webpage for your group on the department page and an @UNL email account for your group makes it look more professional. To establish a webpage and email account, our faculty advisor (Dr. Yusong Li), the coordinator of our department's website committee (Dr. Xu Li) and the department's digital communications associate (Keith McGuffey) helped a lot in implementing what we had in mind. You can find the CIVE-GSA website and email here:

https://engineering.unl.edu/civil/civil-gsa/

civegsa@unl.edu

More information about setting up a website and @UNL email for your group can be found in the link below:

https://involved.unl.edu/organizations/website_email

Initially attracting support from the department's decision makers might be a challenge, mainly because of the rational skepticism about having such a group at departmental level. Therefore, to prove your group's potentials and capabilities, you have to start from scratch by little and simple steps, aiming for short-term missions with subjects that can be important for graduate students, but forgotten in your department. For instance, the civil engineering department dedicates an annual budget for a graduate picnic. Our group took the responsibility of the annual departmental picnic and we developed the social event further to be more inclusive and fun which was a very successful experience that "put us on the map". In this social, we

brought graduate students and faculty from all the departments sub-disciplines together, having a lot of fun with interactive games such as Charades, Just Dance, etc. We got to meet new people within the department that helped us in recruiting more grad students to our group.

Then, we started to identify what we can do as graduate students to improve the quality of our department. At the beginning of the group's first meetings, it is important to determine what objectives the group wants to accomplish over time (primarily during that semester, but also perhaps over the next few years). For instance, we thought improving the website quality of department, and student visibility on the website would be a very manageable task with very tangible results for short- and long-term. Improving the quality of the graduate section of CIVE website, updating the graduate students' online profiles and directory, working with faculty to update their web pages, establishing the graduate students' alumni section, and video introduction of faculty to put on the website were among the tasks that we've done so far. In addition to this, we wanted to work with the department faculty to make the new graduate student orientation more interactive. As a part of facilitating the orientation for new graduate students, we held a student panel of current graduate students to help share good practices and lessons learned in their time here to help improve their experience. Moreover, we designed and printed a constant template for graduate students' nameplates with their specialization logo to install outside their offices. This was missing in our department, and we thought such a small task could help improve graduate students' visibility within the department's office.

Another important step for us was to be active on social media. Therefore, we appointed a member as the social media coordinator. We used our @UNL email to establish all these accounts for future students. Currently, we have active accounts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn. The contents that we put on these platforms are decided upon in our bi-weekly meetings, that range from our meeting discussions to highlighting our alumni's current status. The links to our social media accounts are as follows:

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/CIVEGSA/

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/civegsa/

Twitter: https://twitter.com/CIVEGSA

LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/company/civegsa/

As Grace Hopper once said, "It's easier to ask forgiveness than it is to get permission". Therefore, if you take initiative to try novel ideas at your department and get results, you can then present those to the department leadership which will demonstrate the group's value and potential for future endeavors. The sky's the limit on things you can do. Just look at your organization's purpose and try to develop objectives that strive towards achieving that purpose. Here is a list of suggested activities/objectives:

1. Host a social event for all graduate students within the department
2. Host a panel for new student orientation to have students help share their experiences/life hacks to help manage graduate school
3. Work to help improve the department's website
4. Contact the Nebraska Alumni Association to get information about your department's graduate alumni
5. Help host workshops on: "methods to be a better researcher and/or TA" and "professional development"
6. Coordinate with other departmental GSAs at the college/university level.

Please always feel free to contact CIVE-GSA members if you needed any more information. Let's all work together in taking steps to improve graduate education at the University of Nebraska.

<center>**CONSTITUTION FOR CIVE-GSA**</center>

<center>(Civil Engineering Graduate Student Association)</center>

<center>**ARTICLE 1**</center>

<center>Name</center>

The name of this organization shall be Civil Engineering Graduate Student Association (CIVE-GSA).

<center>**ARTICLE 2**</center>

<center>Purpose</center>

The purpose of CIVE-GSA shall be:

I.   Serve as a liaison between civil engineering graduate students in the department administration – department chair or graduate committee – or faculty by advocating for students' interests and perspectives.

II.   Act as a medium for information exchange between the ASUN Graduate Student Assembly (ASUN-GSA) and graduate students in the civil engineering department.

III.   Connect graduate students across the department to help foster a broader sense of community through social activities, outreach projects, and community service.

<center>**ARTICLE 3**</center>

<center>Members</center>

Membership. All enrolled civil engineering graduate students can be members of the CIVE-GSA.

Dues. It is suggested that the CIVE-GSA does not have requirements for dues.

Non-student participation. A student organization shall consist of at least five currently enrolled student members. Non-students will be allowed to participate in any student organization activity, but will not be a voting member, or an elected or appointed officer of said organization.

A non-student is someone who is not currently enrolled at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for the fall or spring semester.

Non-discrimination clause. This organization does not discriminate in the selection of members or appointments when discrimination is defined as denying individuals membership or appointment on the basis of gender, age, disability, genetic information, race, color, religion, pregnancy, marital status, veteran's status, national or ethnic origin, gender identity or expression, place of residence, political affiliation, or sexual orientation.

ARTICLE 4
Officers

Officers and Duties. The CIVE-GSA officers shall include representatives from each graduate Civil Engineering disciplines, ASUN-GSA representatives, Civil Engineering Leadership Council representatives, and representatives from the Civil engineering Lincoln and Omaha Campuses. At least three officers shall have the responsibility of the President, Primary Programmer (Vice-president), and Treasurer as follows

President Duties. The President shall preside over all CIVE-GSA and meetings and consult regularly with the faculty advisor. The President shall formulate and continually update a list of goals and keep of a list of contact information for all the CIVE-GSA members.

Primary Programmer (Vice President) Duties. The Primary Programmer (Vice President) shall work with the president and the executive committee to plan events of the association members. The Primary Programmer (Vice President) shall preside in the absence of the President and oversee association.

Treasurer Duties. The Treasurer shall collect and disperse all funds, report regularly on CIVE-GSA's financial state to the president and develop an annual budget.

ARTICLE 5

Officer Selection

Qualifications. Any Civil Engineering graduate student from Omaha or Lincoln Campuses can serve as officers, in addition to ASUN-GSA representatives and Civil Engineering Leadership Council representatives

Nominations. Nominations shall be collected by the president working with graduate students and faculty at the beginning of each academic year. Members may nominate themselves or others.

Vacancies. All vacancies shall be filled by the out-going officers using the nominated graduate students. If the office of President becomes vacant, the primary programmer (Vice President) shall become President for the remainder of the term.

Removal from Office. An officer may be removed from office by a four-fifth vote of present members, provided the President notify the membership at least three days before the vote.

All RSOs must be categorized as a Fall or Spring Organization with ASUN and Student Involvement. CIVE-GSA officers must take office on one of the following dates: On the first day classes commence fall semester (Fall Organization), the first day classes commence spring semester (Winter Organization), or the second Tuesday of April (Spring Organization). All paperwork will be filed at those times to remain in compliance.

ARTICLE 6

Meetings

Meetings of the officers or the members shall be at the call of the president or officers. At least one meeting shall be held after the selection of the new officers each year.

ARTICLE 7
Advisors

Advisors. This organization shall have one Primary Advisor, which must be a regular Academic/Administrative or Managerial/Professional faculty/staff member of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and may have any number of Secondary Advisors, which may be regular Academic/Administrative, Managerial/Professional, or Office/Service staff members or Graduate Assistants of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

All advisors shall be a part of the department of Civil Engineering at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

ARTICLE 8
Finance

CIVE-GSA shall operate according to the rules and guidelines of a non-profit entity. No part of CIVE-GSA's net earnings will inure to the benefit of individuals. CIVE-GSA must establish that it will not be organized or operated for the benefit of private interests, such as the creator or the creator's family, shareholders of the organization, other designated individuals, or persons controlled directly or indirectly by such private interests. CIVE-GSA shall be authorized and empowered to pay reasonable compensation for services rendered and to make payments and distributions in furtherance of the purpose set forth in this document. CIVE-GSA will not, as a substantial part of its activities, attempt to influence legislation (unless it elects to come under the provisions allowing certain lobbying expenditures) or participate to any extent in a political campaign for or against any candidate for public office. Notwithstanding any other provision of this constitution CIVE-GSA shall not carry on any other activities not permitted to be carried on by an organization exempt Federal Income Tax under Section 501 of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 (or corresponding provision of any future United States Internal Revenue laws). Organizational monies will be handled by Student Organizational Financial Services, regardless of source.

ARTICLE 9
Process for Dissolution

Upon the dissolution of CIVE-GSA the officers and advisors shall after paying or making provisions for the payment of all liabilities of CIVE-GSA, dispose of all the assets of CIVE-GSA exclusively for charitable, educational, religious, or scientific purpose as shall at the time qualify as an exempt organization. Under section 501C of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 (or corresponding provision of any future United States Internal Revenue Law), as the officers and advisors shall determine. Any such assets not disposed of shall be disposed of by the Office of Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, exclusively for such purposes to such organization(s), as determined by the Office of Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs.

ARTICLE 10
Parliamentary Authority

The rules contained in the current edition of *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* shall govern CIVE-GSA in all cases to which they are applicable and in which they are not inconsistent with the Constitution and any special rules of order CIVE-GSA may adopt.

ARTICLE 11
Amendments

This Constitution may be amended by a two-thirds of the present officer vote. All amendments must be approved by ASUN.

ARTICLE 12
Effective Date

This Constitution shall go into effect January 31, 2018

ARTICLE 16

President's Signature: Hamzeh Haghshenas -Fatmehsari

Vice President's Signature: Rami Ziara

Treasurer's Signature: Matthew Thompson