History

The Neuroscience Graduate Students’ Association (NRSC GSA) was founded in June 2009 by two graduate students, Conny Lin and Vilte Barakauskas. The association organised two departmental socials in the inaugural year (2009/2010). In its second year (2010/2011), the NRSC GSA established an executive team to meet the expanded goals of building an academic and social support network for students.

Our Goals

The NRSC GSA is a committee of graduate students who are dedicated to improving the experience of graduate studies in neuroscience. We aim to connect students in the program and foster a collegial and supportive environment through organised academic and social events.

Who We Are

The executive team for 2010/2011 comprised of the following positions and individuals:

- President - Conny Lin
- VP Academic - Tamara Bodnar
- VP Communications - Shelly Fan
- VP Finance - Sherri Tran
- VP Social - Nadia Scott
- Alumni Network Coordinator - Carmen Chow
- Facebook Coordinator - Ricardo Bortolon
- First Year Class Representatives - Aqsa Malik, Ricardo Bortolon, Vivian Lam
- GSS/CFIS & GSS FoGs Representative - Conny Lin
- Mentorship Program Coordinator - Vivian Lam
- Pub Night Coordinator - Aqsa Malik
- NeuroSeminar Coordinator - Barak Caracheo
- Recreational Events Coordinators - Bryson Armstrong, Shan Shan Zhu
2010/2011 at a Glance

This past year, we undertook initiatives to foster a sense of community within the Neuroscience Graduate Program. In addition to organising bi-annual socials, we have started monthly Pub Nights and organised recreational events for students. We have partnered with NeuroSeminar to expand academic opportunities for graduate students. An Alumni Network has brought in past graduates as speakers for the Neuroscience Research Colloquia hosted at the Brain Research Centre. A mentorship program, student guidebook, and revamped website are set for a September 2011 launch.
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Finances & Administration

1.1 Budget

Socials comprise our primary expenditures. A breakdown of expenses from 2009/2010, 2010/2011 with projected costs for 2011/2012 are summarised in the table below:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welcome orientation and social</td>
<td>830.00</td>
<td>500.00</td>
<td>450.27</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1330.00</td>
<td>1000.00</td>
<td>920.55</td>
<td>1000.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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1.2 Departmental External Review

Organised by the College for Interdisciplinary Studies (CFIS), the neuroscience department underwent an external review by faculty members from the University of Toronto and McGill University in January 2011. Members of the NRSC GSA and PhD students met separately with the external review committee to discuss student concerns. Key issues raised were: limitations to funding opportunities and low student stipends (in comparison with living costs and graduate student stipends in similar programs at other Canadian universities). Students would also like an increase say in how the program is run. Additionally, students would like to see a reduction in the course requirements for the Master’s degree, making it equivalent to current PhD course requirements.

Academic Initiatives

2.1 NeuroSeminar

NeuroSeminar is an interactive, graduate student-run seminar series which allows graduate students and postdoctoral fellows to develop and improve their teaching and communication skills. Presenters give a 30-45 minute talk on their research or other topics of interest in the neuroscience field. This past year, NeuroSeminar has been used for speakers to practice for comprehensive exams, thesis defences, and conference presentations. A discussion follows the presentation and provides the opportunity for presenters to gain feedback from their peers. This year, NeuroSeminar ran from September to November (7 sessions) and January to March (9 sessions).
NeuroSeminar developed independently from the NRSC GSA and began collaborating with the NRSC GSA as of January 2011. Since then, the NRSC GSA has helped improve the seminar series’ communication strategy in reaching a broader audience and recruiting speakers.

2.2 Alumni Network

The Neuroscience Alumni Network seeks to connect current students with past graduates, act as a platform to maintain lasting collaborative relationships, and spark new relationships based on a commonly shared experience – obtaining a Neuroscience graduate degree at UBC.

Dr. Steve Vincent, Director of Neuroscience, has been supportive of this initiative and has used the opportunity to invite notable alumni to present as part of the Neuroscience Research Colloquia. Invited speakers have been well received and this past year, the following speakers have been hosted:

Dr. Oliver Prange, Carl Zeiss Ltd.
“New approaches to cellular imaging in Neuroscience”
November 26, 2010

Dr. Bruce Hope, National Institute for Health
“Neuronal ensembles in cocaine-induced learning behaviours”
March 11, 2011

Dr. Brian Kwon, Professor, University of British Columbia
“Translational approaches to spinal cord injury: Bedside to bench and back”
April 8, 2011

Future plans for the Alumni Network include improving its visibility and communication strategy. Recruitment to the network is ongoing and we have requested assistance from Liz Wong (Neuroscience secretary) and current labs as well as utilising Neurotree to track down past graduates. So far, eight past graduates have agreed to participate in the network.

2.3 Guidebook

One of the goals of the NRSC GSA is to promote and facilitate the academic education and research training of graduate students. To provide academic guidelines in a succinct and accessible manner, the NRSC GSA has spent the past year developing a guidebook which outlines expectations, important deadlines, and notable conferences specifically for students in the program. Incoming graduate students are targeted as the main audience, however students in senior years can also benefit from the guidelines proposed in the manual. Authored primarily by NRSC GSA executives, the guidebook is set to be completed and available on a new Neuroscience website in September 2011.
2.4  Mentoring Program

Beginning graduate studies may be a daunting task for students for many reasons: new school, new city, the need to build a new community. To facilitate the transition into the Neuroscience program, we have spent this past year establishing the Neuroscience Mentorship Program. This program pairs incoming students (mentees) with senior graduate students or postdoctoral fellows (mentors). We believe the program will provide academic and social support to new students who will have an individual to direct questions and guide them through his/her first year of graduate studies. Additionally, this program also offers mentoring opportunities for interested individuals in Neuroscience. It is also anticipated that the program will foster a sense of community and belonging within the department.

The 2010/2011 year has been spent developing and reviewing the mentor/mentee application form, mentoring agreement, and a code of conduct. Dr. Steve Vincent has also agreed to distribute certificates to recognise mentors who would contribute to the program. The program will launch in September 2011.

Social Initiatives

3.1  Socials

This year, the NRSA GSA hosted one social during the fall term and a summer BBQ on Jericho Beach in June. Both events were well attended and received positive feedback from students. The fall social was merged with an orientation for first year students and also involved the participation of faculty and (senior) students. Attendance by first year graduate students was high, suggesting that individuals are keen to meet and socialise with other members of the department. Such interactions are particularly important in forging a sense of identity and belonging especially when individuals work in facilities around and off-campus. For the first time, the NRSA GSA attempted to make the fall social a ‘green’ event, limiting the usage of disposable items in lieu of more sustainable choices.

Future social event planning will consider the possibility of hosting events at locations other than the Brain Research Centre and of encouraging greater student involvement, particularly from senior students and postdoctoral fellows.

3.2  Monthly Pub Nights

This past year, Pub Nights have been held on the third Friday of each month. Here, students gather at Mahoney’s and have the opportunity to share their experiences and discuss issues and topics with their peers in a friendly environment. Pub Nights can also be used as a networking
opportunity in that students can meet and interact with students outside of their lab and classroom setting.

### 3.3 Recreational Events

This program was developed in recognition of the importance of balancing social activities with graduate studies and research. The goals here are to:

- Introduce individuals, especially new students to UBC to recreational activities offered by UBC and the community
- Encourage participants to schedule time for recreation and to encourage thinking about one’s own health and wellness
- Provide a social venue for students to meet other individuals within the department outside their field of research/study
- Provide a meeting ground for networking opportunities across research disciplines

Activities are proposed at executive meetings and are organized by the Recreational Events Coordinator, who is also present at the actual event. This past year, students in the department have participated in indoor rock climbing, skiing, and skating.

### Communication Initiatives

#### 4.1 Website

An overhaul of the current Neuroscience website and a redesign project was proposed by the NRSC GSA in July 2010 to achieve the following objectives:

- **Welcome visitors and attract prospective students and PDFs.** By showcasing current research, events and achievements of students and faculty members, the website would showcase the program’s first-rate education and research, attracting prospective students and PDFs.
- **Enhance navigation and organisation.** The online layout is based on successful website designs from graduate programs at the University of Toronto, Stanford, and Boston University and combines visual aesthetics with ease-of-navigation. We believe a clean, clear and logical interface immediately gives a strong and positive first impression.
- **Provide crucial information for current graduate students.** The website would serve as the “go-to” information source for graduate students. Academic sources such as the student guidebook would be available on the website.
- **Foster a sense of community among members of the program.** Because of the interdisciplinary nature of neuroscience, students and faculty members come from diverse departments and research centers. By providing a virtual “home” online, the
website will serve as the anchor for other online multimedia forums to facilitate discussion between students and alumni.

In January 2011, Neuroscience graduate students were invited to view a preliminary version of the new website. Feedback was generally positive, and suggestions were collected and implemented. Screenshots from the developing website are shown below:

4.2 Facebook

This year, we have used a social media strategy to reach students. A Facebook page was created where NRSC GSA events are updated. We hope to continue utilizing social media in the future to better reach our constituents in a timely and relevant manner.