One year ago, our very first Speaker of the Graduate Student Congress, Alex Marino, stood on a stage very much like this one and promised that the GSC would build a New Community. I think one look around this room tonight will confirm that we have done just that. This community that we have built is bigger than almost anyone thought it would be. As I stated earlier, the GSC has doubled in size with our newly elected Representatives. Early on in the quest to create the GSC, folks were told that there was really no point. That grad students didn’t care about shared governance; we were all too busy being grad students, and didn’t have the time for service. After all, if you have time for extracurriculars, you aren’t spending enough time on your research, right? They were told that even if you could find people willing to serve, that the graduate student body as a whole wouldn’t care enough to vote them in. Well, one year might be a fluke, but I think we can honestly say after two years that we see a pattern emerging. Graduate professional students DO care about shared governance. They DO care enough to serve and they DO care enough to vote. The perfect example of why those who say it cannot be done should not interrupt those doing it.

So we have built that New Community that Alex promised. What now? Well, part of building our new community was figuring out how we fit into the larger communities of which we are inextricably a part. We had to determine our place within the Associated Student Government community, and at times, we had to agitate for our rightful place within that community. We had to determine our place within the larger campus community. Where are we needed? How can we best serve? How can we make sure that every single graduate student knows our name? How can we ensure that faculty, staff, and administrators know that we are here as a resource for them as well?

I am happy to stand here tonight and tell you that work is largely done. We are recognized and accepted as a coequal branch of the Associated Student
Government. From our turnout at the Graduate Professional Student Appreciation Week lunches this spring, I think it’s safe to say that grad students know we are here. For better or worse, and one errant bus, the administration certainly knows we are here. The work that remains on this front is in showing how the GSC can be a resource for the entire campus community, not just graduate students. In so doing, we not only help the greater community, but amplify the voice of graduate students in the process.

We had many goals last year in addition to creating this community. I will be the first to say that we did not make as much progress on those goals as we would have liked, but we did have some successes. Through GSC representation on the committee for student health care, we were able to negotiate a student health plan that is both more comprehensive than any of our previous plans and has lower premiums. This lower cost allowed the university to increase the subsidy for graduate assistants from 60 to 67%. One of the goals that we set last year was to host the regional conference for the National Association for Graduate Professional Students. Not only did we host that conference, but we have four members of our GSC on the regional board as a result, amplifying #razorgrad voices beyond this campus to a national stage.

Despite those tangible accomplishments, there is much work to be done here in this coming year. There are many facets of the graduate student experience at the University of Arkansas on which we can improve. In saying that, I do not mean that things here are bad. Things here are in fact relatively good. We need only look a few hours up the road to Columbia to see what happens when things go bad; to see what happens when an administration is completely disconnected from their graduate student body. In the last few years, some graduate students there have lost tuition waivers, they have lost graduate student housing, affordable on-campus childcare, and (temporarily) lost their student health plan subsidy. So yes, things here at the U of A are pretty good in comparison. But that does not mean that we do not have legitimate concerns that need to be addressed.

After all, the University of Arkansas does not want to be good. Our previous and current Chancellors did not set “good” as their goal. In any case, “good is the enemy of great.” And we strive to be a great university. It is still our goal to be a top 50 research university by 2021. It is still our goal to increase the number of classes with fewer than 20 students. It is still our goal to increase the number of graduate programs ranked in the top 20 of their respective fields. These are not the goals of a good university, but of a great university. And we know that our
graduate and professional students will be critical to the success of those goals. Our own goals will not only improve the graduate student experience here at the university, but enable the university as a whole to reach new heights. If last year was a year of organization and determination, this will be the year of research and dissemination. Our goals fall into three categories: financial, infrastructure, and graduate student well-being.

For financial issues, the single biggest determinant of graduate financial well-being is the stipend. The university did recently raise the floor for stipends to $9000 for a 50% appointment. And while we recognize that the true value of an assistantship must include the tuition waiver and insurance subsidy, which raises the value of that stipend, at the end of the day, it is that monthly paycheck that determines whether or not we can afford to be graduate students. Though GAs are considered part time, and a 50% appointment requires “only” twenty hours of work each week, we know that being a graduate assistant is a full time job. Because being a GA also requires a minimum number of academic credit hours, in addition to performing original research not tied to particular classes. By the time that those academic responsibilities are added in, it is well over a full time job, paid at part time wages. My assistantship should not be one of three jobs that I hold to make ends meet. This is even more critical for our international peers, who by the terms of visa requirements CANNOT work additional jobs. Likewise, international students are more likely to bring their spouse or partner as well as children, which means that their financial need is even greater. We have committed this body to compiling the research necessary to benchmark GA salaries here against our SEC and academic peer institutions, as well as to research alternate funding methods to increase those salaries and produce a white paper for distribution to administrative partners and constituents.

Make no mistake; I realize that to stand here and complain about my stipend is actually a privilege when the majority of our graduate students do not receive any funding at all. We must find ways to increase the funding lines for GA positions if we wish to remain nationally competitive as an academic institution.

As mentioned, part of our responsibilities as graduate professional students is to conduct original research. Additionally, we have to disseminate that research. This necessitates various trips to either conduct research or present that research to academic and professional conferences in our respective fields. We are fortunate and very appreciative that our Graduate School provides funding for
one of those trips per academic year. But we feel that we need additional, alternate sources of funding. Many of us are invited or accepted to multiple conferences each year or have to make the choice between a research trip and a conference, or even between archives on opposite sides of the country or globe. We in the Graduate Student Congress believe that with the proper logistics, transparency, and oversight, that we can be that additional source of funding. Part of this process will be to determine additional sources of funding for GSC that we can use to fund these grants. By the end of this academic year, we will have those logistics worked out and we will outline the infrastructure for awarding travel grants to graduate professional students.

Speaking of infrastructure, in order to conduct that research and in order to perform the outside duties required of our teaching assignments, graduate students need adequate research and office space. We have GAs holding office hours in coffee shops. While this is a workable solution in most cases, we want to be available and accessible to our students. A coffee shop is certainly accessible, but in some cases too much so. The students we most need to reach are those that are struggling, whether academically or personally. That, in and of itself, is difficult enough as it is. But how many of those students are going to want to have that difficult conversation in public, where anyone walking by can hear that they failed a test, or are barely passing the class, or that a family member is terminally ill and they don’t know what to do? By the end of this year, we will have compiled the research necessary to benchmark office and research space here against our SEC and academic peer institutions, as well as to research alternate officing strategies and produce a white paper for distribution to administrative partners and constituents.

Similarly, we all know that parking is an issue on this campus. This year, Transit and Parking issued approximately double the number of parking passes for which we have spots. We will continue to advocate for grad specific parking solutions.

Another infrastructure need is housing. We need affordable accessible dedicated graduate student housing. Like many of our other goals our aim this year is to prepare and present the research to our administrative partners and constituents.

The Chancellor has set a goal of adding 2000 more graduate students over the next four years. What will that even look like? Where will they live? Where will they work? Where will they park? How prepared are we, institutionally, to add five hundred additional graduate students every year? Those 500 new graduate
students will require a commensurate number of new tenure/tenure track faculty AND staff to support them. As the student body continues to grow, our infrastructure must grow along with it. We in the Graduate Student Congress stand willing and ask to be a part of that planning process as we prepare for this tremendous growth.

In terms of graduate student well-being, we will continue to research and advocate for parental leave as well as affordable, accessible on-campus quality childcare and expanded mental health services for all students. Many of our graduate professional students have families, and we cannot ask them to choose between their graduate responsibilities and those families.

The Graduate Student Congress always has, and always will stand for equality for all. As you may have read in The Traveler, we conducted the very first e-meeting in ASG history earlier this month in order to pass resolutions in support of Fayetteville Ordinance 5781 as well as urging all students and other citizens to exercise their right to vote and make their voices heard. We felt that this was a necessary process so that we could advocate for graduate students to have the same protections in the wider community that they enjoy while on campus.

Equality is only one of our focal points for advocacy this year. We added a new position: the Director of Legislative Affairs and Advocacy. We will create a higher education legislative platform and one-page leave-behinds for each major area that we can present to constituency and legislators, as well as on post to our website. We plan to hold a legislative advocacy day in Little Rock to talk to state legislators and impress upon them the importance of graduate education, not only to the university, but to the state economy as well. Additionally, we will be reaching out to our peers within the University of Arkansas system to build a coalition of Grad Students across the state, with the goal of creating a state summit.

In addition to reaching out across the state, we will be reaching across campus to partner with as many graduate organizations as we can. We realize that while we are a part of ASG, we represent every graduate and professional student on this campus, with the exception of the Law School. Part of our mission is to be a resource for other graduate student organizations and we intend to uphold that mission by co-hosting or sponsoring events with other graduate groups in order to continue building our community.
We will also be working with our peers across Associated Student Government to support organizational goals. The executive branch, Tanner, Morgan, Meera, and Ray have put together an ambitious platform, and we stand ready to assist in any way as they move forward with those goals. Among their initiatives is the creation of a Campus Closet, so that students of all classifications and from all majors can have access to appropriate clothing for interviews, conferences, and other events that necessitate business dress. Also, they are seeking to create the UACares fund, to serve as emergency funding for students who experience unexpected financial crises. Additionally, we seek to create a campus creed to unify the campus and let everyone here in our community, as well as the wider world, know what it means to be a Razorback.

So those are our major goals this year. Now you know why we wanted those extra seats so badly...we will also have Representatives working on many other ventures throughout this year: grad student hunger, veterans affairs, carpool incentives, amending the transit routes to mesh with the new later parking hours, sustainability...the list literally goes on and on. It will be a lot of work. It will be a lot of fun. We will build an even stronger community in sharing that work among the forty-one elected Representatives and anyone else who shows up to lend a hand.

We realize that this year will be a lot of legwork and research and meetings. We recognize that there are no magic wands to produce unlimited funds or unlimited office, housing, or parking space. We will have to be diligent, and we will have to be creative to come up with workable solutions. We also realize that while we have one-year goals spelling out what we will accomplish by April, many of these are long-term goals and that we may not be around to see them to fruition. But if I may paraphrase the old Greek proverb, “A community grows great when old grad students plant trees in whose shade they know they will never sit.” The forty-one Representatives here tonight may never sit in the shade of a living wage, or plentiful travel funding. We may never sit in the shade of dedicated affordable graduate housing or on-campus child care. But we will plant those trees. And we will tend our orchards as long as it is our time to do so. And then we will pass them on to those who come after us, knowing that others will continue that work and that many will benefit from what we have built here. So I thank each and every one of you for signing up for this adventure. I cannot wait to see what we build together. Thank you, now let’s eat some cake.