



# Proposal for a Graduate Student Center

## Graduate Student use of Lerner 6

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Columbia University  
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Presented by the  
**Graduate Student Advisory Council (GSAC)**  
and  
Kira von Ostenfeld  
GSAC Communications Coordinator



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## Introduction

Columbia University is renowned not only for the quality of its undergraduate curriculum, but also for its tradition as one of the country's great institutions for graduate and professional training. Doctoral students in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (GSAS) alone make up 3,700 of Columbia's community, and reflect the size and diversity of the Graduate School, one of the largest private graduate schools in the country. These students attend degree programs in 26 departments within GSAS and 18 intramural programs that link GSAS with the Graduate Schools of Architecture and Urban Planning, Arts, Business, Engineering and Applied Science, Law, Medical Sciences, Public Health, and Social Work. The contribution that graduate students make in their research while at the university is immeasurable, and has contributed to making Columbia's graduate programs renowned throughout the world.

Columbia has been responsive to the needs of its students (especially in the last decade) and great strides have been made to improve both students' academic experience and quality of life. The undergraduate community in particular has been transformed in recent years as the administration has committed more than \$150 million to projects like the ongoing renovation of Butler Library, the building of a new residence hall on Broadway, and the completion of the state-of-the-art student center Lerner Hall.

Certainly many of these projects have also improved the quality of life for Columbia's graduate student community. However, it is clear that the administration's "Expansion and Enhancement" initiative has focused its attention primarily on the undergraduate community. Even back in 1998, the University's Five Year Report was committed in its "goal of enhancing the quality of student life on campus, to ensure that it too will be worthy of Columbia's famed intellectual experience and of the outstanding undergraduates we are attracting." However, given the significant number of graduate students on campus, the fact that many graduate students spend, on average, five years on campus in pursuit of their degrees, and that graduate students make a significant contribution to the prestige, and financial resources of the University through their research, it seems a reasonable request that the administration should devote more of its energy and efforts towards enhancing the quality of life for the graduate student community.

The lack of graduate student space on the Morningside Campus is one of the many concerns of graduate students. In April 2000, a proposal was put together by the Graduate Student Advisory Council (GSAC) for a Graduate Student Center. That same year suggestions began to be made by graduate students that they be allowed to use space on the as yet undeveloped sixth floor of Alfred Lerner Hall. As a result of these requests, 301 Philosophy underwent a renovation and was allocated for graduate student use. 301 Philosophy is the only room designated as Graduate Student Space on the Morningside Campus.

In the past several years, GSAC has committed itself to working with the administration in its efforts to address the needs of graduate students and improve the resources available to them. In these efforts, GSAC has continually been impressed with the responsiveness of the administration and its willingness to make much-needed improvements in graduate life. In this spirit of increased cooperation and understanding between graduate students and Columbia University, GSAC proposes to explore with the administration the creation of a Graduate Student Center on the sixth floor of Albert Lerner Hall.

Our research indicates that such a facility would become an important aspect of student life here at Columbia, as comparable centers created at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania, have greatly improved the quality of life, and have created a sense of community, for their graduate students at their respective institutions. (Please see **Appendix 1** on graduate student facilities at other Ivy institutions.) The University must find the resources necessary to create its own graduate student center, as such a facility would be an important part of the developing campaign to raise the quality of life for all of Columbia's students. Overall, the proposed Center would be an important new way to continue Columbia's long tradition of making the quest for knowledge not just a "practical pursuit" but also a complete experience in the life of its students. Dean Pinkham echoed these beliefs in his recent Annual Report for the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, dated February 2003:

*"In many departments we lag behind our peers in the availability of space for graduate students (office space, meeting space). We also lack adequate communal space for graduate students. Lerner Hall, while originally conceived as a center for all students, now functions as a center for undergraduates. For Lerner to work for graduate students, a free-standing Graduate Student Center would have to be created inside it. A detailed plan for such a center was prepared by the Graduate Student Advisory Council several years ago, but little progress has been made."*

As such, GSAC, as the representative body for Columbia's graduate students, propose that we have access to the small space available on the sixth floor of Lerner. Each graduate student pays \$16 to Lerner a semester, yet this space is obviously devoted to undergraduates and provides little for graduate students. By making the sixth floor of Lerner available to graduate students, they would feel that the money they pay is going to a facility that provides a specific space for them and allows them to take advantage of what Lerner was intended to be – "Columbia's student center."

## The Need for a Graduate Student Center

The graduate community on the Morningside Heights campus is a large and remarkably diverse group of students. In terms of sheer numbers, the graduate student population dominates the total student body at Columbia. Indeed the graduate-to-undergraduate ratio at Columbia is one of the largest in the country. It is precisely because the graduate student community is so large and diverse that it has traditionally suffered from the lack of a sense of community. As a result, graduate students may suffer from social and intellectual isolation, due to lack of opportunities to interact with their colleagues or peers across disciplinary boundaries.

According to statistics from the Provost's Office of Planning and Institutional Research, in 2002, 807 new students enrolled in the various programs within GSAS. The number of new graduate students enrolled at Columbia currently total close to 3,700. When they arrive on campus these new students confront the same issues that affect the quality of life of all of Columbia's graduate students: Where can I study, talk, and relax with fellow students? How can I make contacts with students outside my own department? Where are the resources to orient me and help me find my way? Where are the resources that will support my educational experience and training? How do I begin to feel at home in an institution as large as Columbia, in a city as vast as New York?

These quality-of-life questions and the lack of a sense of community among graduate students in general, are perennial problems for a number of reasons. These reasons include the following:

- Graduate education by its nature is fragmented among dozens of different departments and schools. Although Morningside is a relatively compact and centralized campus, graduate students typically cluster in their respective departmental buildings or among the dozens of specialized libraries. There are relatively few opportunities for graduate students from different departments to interact with each other in a "neutral" space.
- On such a densely-populated campus, quiet study areas are difficult to find, and graduate students often seek remote areas in libraries, or simply stay home – increasing their isolation from other students. In addition, because space is at a premium, graduate-student organizations have trouble finding places to meet. In several departments, graduate students do not even have access to private space to meet with the undergraduate students they teach/assist.
- While the campus is centralized, information that graduate students need is not. Students have long voiced the concern that they spend too much of their time going from office to office on campus in search of resources or answers to questions. An area for centralized information for graduate students does not exist at present.

- Columbia is a "commuter campus" for many of its graduate students. Many live far away from campus, and more advanced students often come to Morningside only once or twice a week. When on campus, many of these commuter graduate students do not stay on campus longer than necessary because they feel there are few comfortable or convenient places in which to spend time on campus.
- Despite the fact that some graduate students do not feel welcome on campus, it is a given that all graduate student will spend on average 5 years in the quest for their degrees. The lack of interaction and support among graduate students can only adversely affect the quality of intellectual and social life of a graduate student.
- Undergraduates dominate the Morningside campus and many graduate students find it hard to find a place on campus that they can call their own. In addition, most graduate students already interact with undergraduates through teaching, yet cannot find a place on campus where they can relax or work without encountering their students. Graduate students needs differ from those of undergraduates, and graduates students would like their own dedicated space on campus.

There is also a more immediate concern. The only space for graduate humanities students in the library, namely the Butler carrels, will be off line for a year starting in September of 2004. These students will need other places on campus to fill their needs, and a Graduate Student center would go along way in filling this upcoming void.

## GSAC Survey of Graduate Student Opinion

During one week in mid September 2001, GSAC polled graduate student via its website, GradWeb, on the need for a graduate student center. The results were overwhelmingly positive. 579 students from 50 different disciplines (mostly within GSAS) responded the following:

- 92% saw the need for a centrally located graduate student center
- 82% said they would make use of such a facility often

The respondents were asked to give an indication of what amenities they would use:

- 90% student lounge
- 89% bulletin boards for centralizing information
- 87% computer/internet facilities
- 85% quiet study area
- 82% multimedia center for teaching workshops
- 73% conference/meeting rooms
- 70% cinema (or a screen to watch movies on)
- 66% cafe
- 62% student organization offices
- 59% lockers
- 47% TV room
- 40% kitchen

GSAC's most recent Quality of Life Survey, conducted during the 2002-2003 academic year and tabulated during the 2003-2004 year, echoed these desires for a centralized location for graduate students, to both relax and meet other students, but also a place where they could find the resources and information necessary to make their experiences here at Columbia more positive and productive.

## The Inadequacies of Philosophy 301

*The major problem that graduate students face is that there is no centralized space for graduate student activities.*

The current campus space dedicated to the graduate students, 301 Philosophy Hall, does not meet the needs of the graduate student community. Some graduate students describe the space as elegant but cold, too large for intimate group meetings and quiet studying, or offering too few resources to make a visit worthwhile. Philosophy 301 is also an inadequate space to accommodate graduate students needs for the following reasons:

- It's not well-equipped for computer users; it lacks easily accessible power outlets, and has limited internet access (students need wireless cards in order to access the internet).
- There is no copier available for general student use.
- It's too cavernous for meetings, workshops, and smaller events.
- It provides no private place for graduate students to hold meetings or study sessions.
- It will be unable to accommodate those students who are about to be left without space on campus while Butler library undergoes carrel renovations.
- In addition, 301 Philosophy is booked on a regular basis for conferences, concerts, and talks; not all of which are directly intended or devoted to a graduate student audience, so is not a “dedicated” graduate student space.
- But most importantly, 301 Philosophy is locked at 7pm every evening, and after-hours and weekend access to Philosophy Hall is impossible.

One large room cannot accommodate all of graduate student needs. The 6th floor of Lerner could create a more suitable, comfortable, and useful space on campus for graduate students.

## Vision for the Proposed Graduate Student Center

The mission of the proposed Graduate Student Center is to facilitate interaction among graduate students and to bolster a sense of community that transcends departmental/disciplinary boundaries. By providing a centralized campus space where graduate students could meet, converse, study, relax, and access student-related resources, the University would significantly improve the quality of life for a major portion of Columbia’s student body. Among the fundamental goals of the proposed facility are the following:

- To serve as the center of graduate life on campus.

- To foster interaction, both intellectual and social, among students from different schools and programs, as well as interaction between students and faculty.
- To provide a nexus for the many graduate student groups on campus by offering office and/or meeting spaces.
- To offer programming that would involve graduate students, particularly programs which would help with our goals in becoming better teachers. Workshops to help students with dissertation writing, creating deserving grant proposals, presenting papers, or forums where graduate students could come to discuss their experiences as students would be just some of the many programs we envision such a center providing.
- To enhance the vibrancy of graduate student life at Columbia University.

In addition to the goals listed above, the facility would embody Columbia University's renewed commitment to its graduate students. The space would indicate to prospective students the strength of Columbia's commitment, and it would symbolize to continuing students the importance the University places in the quality of their overall educational experience.

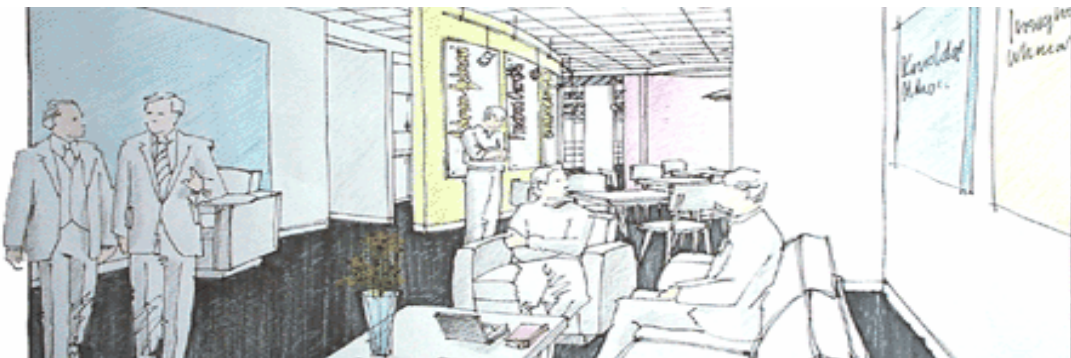
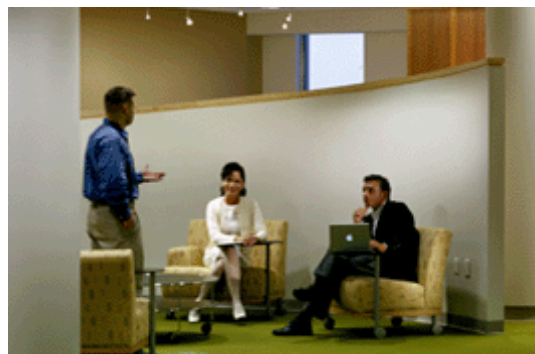
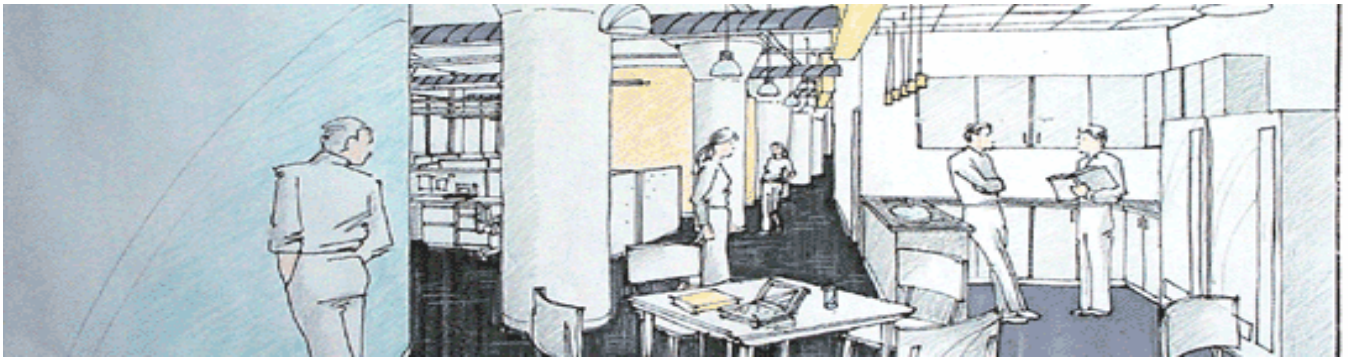
As the mission of the University states, Columbia "is committed to preserving the quest for knowledge as more than simply a practical pursuit." Graduate training at Columbia is certainly not simply about achieving the end result of acquiring a job, for the University recognizes that the quest for knowledge is an entire experience in itself. Graduate students need a place in which they can both socialize and exchange ideas with their peers, but also improve their teaching and professional skills in an environment outside the classroom. We hope that the Graduate Student Center will also provide a place where we could conduct teaching workshops, and be a place where Teaching Assistants and Instructors could come together and discuss issues, concerns or provide insights and support to their peers.

## Potential Physical Layout for the Proposed Center

To be a successful Graduate Student Center, the proposed project should consider carefully the physical layout of space. The Center must be a place that will appeal to the varied needs of the graduate student community. More to the point, it should be a place that students will want to use. The Center should be centrally located and easy for graduate students to access. Moreover it should offer room for graduate students to meet, interact, hold events, study, eat, and relax. If the physical layout takes into consideration all these needs, the new Center will succeed in its mission to broaden interactions among graduate students and to strengthen and enhance a sense of community. Lerner 6 fits all of these needs. With all these points in mind, the proposed Center on Lerner 6 would be composed ideally of the following individual spaces:

- A large central room for gatherings. This multi-purpose room will be the heart of the new Center. It should contain comfortable chairs, couches, coffee tables, a bulletin board, etc. (~1800sq. ft)
- Some quiet study areas, including carrel/study rooms, similar to the ones in Lehman library (~700sq ft.)
- A couple of small offices with desks and chairs to accommodate GSAC offices, Craig Knobles and student groups. (~400sq ft)
- Two conference rooms for meetings and study groups furnished with AV equipment. These would be a place where teaching and professional workshops could be conducted. (~1200sq ft.)
- Some workstations equipped with internet access and printers. (~400sq ft.)

Altogether, the total space for the proposed Center should contain approximately 5000 sq. ft. of usable space. We realize the limited space available both on this campus and in Lerner, and as such, are aware of the restricted possibilities of what can be created in this space. We believe the above options are reasonable and feasible and are eager to enter into dialogue with the administration to make this proposal a reality. Lerner still needs to live up to its purpose as a “student center.” By allowing graduate students to create a space for themselves in Lerner, it would not only help the graduate community, but would foster a greater sense of community between graduate and undergraduates as both groups could take advantage of what Lerner has to offer.



## Appendix 1 - Peer Institutions with Graduate Student Centers

At the 1999 National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Conference, administrators from three peer institutions (Harvard, Yale, and Cornell) gave a joint presentation on the success that graduate centers have had in serving their student communities and improving the university as a whole. All three institutions have model centers that have become highly valued additions to the fabric of the graduate student communities. Indeed, on the issue of graduate student community and interaction, major universities across the country are increasingly listening and responding to the needs of their graduate student populations. The following pages contain relevant information about graduate centers at peer institutions that can be used as comparison for our proposal.

### Graduate Student Centers and Facilities at Selected Universities

Cornell

**Name of center:** The Big Red Barn

**How it is staffed:** Full-time staff, headed by a director.

**Population served:** Graduate and professional students (approx. 5,150 total).

**Facilities:** Provides space for meetings, receptions, parties, etc. Is equipped with a high-quality stereo-system for events, as well as a grand piano. Offers a popular lunch service every weekday. Other amenities include an Internet terminal and mailboxes for students. Runs events every Thursday and Friday afternoon, alternate Wednesday and Thursday evenings, and first Fridays.

**Hours:** M-F 8am-10pm. Serves lunch until 2pm.

**Size:** Not available.

**Web site:** [http://www.gradschool.cornell.edu/grad/student life/GradCenter.html](http://www.gradschool.cornell.edu/grad/student%20life/GradCenter.html)

Harvard

**Name of center:** Dudley House (Lehman Hall)

**How it is staffed:** One house master, one co-master, one house administrator, and two assistants. Also, approximately 25 graduate student Dudley Fellows who do programming. Also, approximately 5 graduate Dudley Tutors responsible for various aspects of the undergraduate community.

**Population served:** GSAS students (approx. 3200) and faculty, and a small group of undergraduates.

**Facilities:** Houses administrative and business offices, Associate Dean for Student Affairs office, Graduate Student Council (GSC) office, GSC computer/printing facilities, meeting spaces for student organizations and activities, student lounge, library. Has a main dining room (GSAS dorm students eat supper here through a meal plan), a smaller dining room, 2 large function rooms, one small meeting room, and offices for various administrators and Dudley Fellows. Hosts student-faculty lunches, discussions groups, language tables at lunch and dinner, dinner speakers, art exhibits, a concert series, ski trips and other outings. Has intramural athletic teams, musical groups, a literary magazine,

and public service organizations. Also sponsors about 30 student organizations. Has a student-run cafe (Cafe Gato Rojo). Has a movie series. Game room. Lockers and bulletin boards.

**Hours:** House M-F 9am-11pm, Sat noon-8pm, Sunday noon-11pm. Library and GSC printers M-Thurs 9am-11pm, Fri 9am-8pm, Sat noon-8pm, Sun noon-11pm. House office hours M-F 9am-5pm.

**Size:** Not available.

**Web site:** [www.fas.harvard.edu/~dudley/](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~dudley/)

## Princeton

**Name of center:** Princeton has its own Graduate College, on a separate campus a half-mile away from the main campus.

**How it is staffed:** A full-time director (the Residential Life Coordinator) and nine part-time students.

**Population served:** Graduate Students(1,750 total, 430 of whom are residents at the College).

**Facilities:** Provides a dining hall for all Graduate Students, a mulierem, computer room, laundry rooms. Social spaces include the D-Bar, a coffee house, the Dark Gallery, the Van Dyke Library, Social Lounges, three TV rooms, and two common rooms.

Recreational facilities include basketball and volleyball courts, a music room, sewing room, pool room, and exercise room.

**Hours:** The Graduate College is a residential group of buildings, operating around the clock.

**Size:** Not available.

**Web site:** [www.princeton.edu/~gradcol/](http://www.princeton.edu/~gradcol/)

**Additional comments:** The monthly High Table is a venerated tradition at the College where Graduate Students and faculty dine together.

## Yale

**Name of center:** MacDougal Graduate Student Center (123 Hall of Graduate Studies).

**How it is staffed:** Three full-time staff members (a director, an administrative assistant, and a professional development consultant); also about a dozen graduate "fellows" who create and coordinate programs at the center; a small office of career services (3 staff members); and an office of teaching preparation and development (1 staff member).

**Population served:** Students (5,500 total, 2,300 graduate), postdoctoral fellows, faculty, and staff.

**Facilities:** Offers services, programs, and information resources as well as an informal place to relax. Has a career center and a teacher training center. Has a resource library for fellowships, careers, and teaching. Has a student-run cafe (the Blue Dog Cafe). Lockers available. Hosts happy hours in its Common Room. Shows movies every Friday and Saturday night. Offers intellectual and cultural events, and sponsors outings like picnics. Also sponsors events for graduate women, students of color, and international students. Graduate student organizations are welcome to use rooms at Center.

**Hours:** M-F 9am-11pm; Sat-Sun 11am-11pm. Center Office open M-F 9am-5pm.

**Size:** 13,000 sq. ft. on two levels.

**Additional comments:** Space devoted solely to student affairs/ services space (does not compete with classroom/administrative space). In addition Yale is currently making improvements to center. The gift of an alumnus, the MacDougal Center was dedicated on October 1997 in renovated space in the Hall of Graduate Studies.

**Web site:** [www.yale.edu/macdougal/](http://www.yale.edu/macdougal/)

University of Pennsylvania

In 2001, the university accepted a proposal made by GAPSAs (the Graduate and Professional Student Assembly) and GSAC (the Graduate Student Association Council) to provide a graduate student space on campus. GAPSAs and GSAC successfully demonstrated to the administration a need to provide such a facility: over 92% of the 1,500 students polled reported the need for a graduate center, and a similar number indicated they would use the facility often.

**Name of center:** Graduate Student Center (GSC).

**How it is staffed:** Two full-time staff members (a director, an administrative assistant, and a professional development consultant); three part-time staff, also about a dozen graduate "fellows" who create and coordinate programs at the center, staff the café and information desk.

**Population served:** Students (3,500 graduate).

**Facilities:** Offers services, programs, and information resources as well as an informal place to relax. The center provides free coffee and tea throughout the day to students, has a large lounge, rooms to hold meetings, study groups and student events. The Center also programs events specifically for graduate students, such as lectures by esteemed faculty, movies, foreign language classes, recreational outing and cultural trips. The Center distributes weekly emails to students of its events.

**Hours:** M-TR 9am-10pm; F 9am-6pm, Sat-Sun 12-9pm.

**Size:** 8,000 sq. ft. on three levels.