Danielle Schoffman is always on the go — between completing homework, writing her dissertation proposal, working in a lab and maintaining a social life.

And, as if she weren't busy enough, the second-year doctoral student in the Arnold School of Public Health has taken on the Graduate Student Association (GSA), trying to bridge the gap between the colleges and schools. Schoffman says she wouldn’t devote time to something if she wasn’t passionate about it.

“I love what I’m studying and I really enjoy my graduate assistant position,” she says. “I find that intellectually stimulating, but I’ve found that GSA is a different set of skills, and it gives me this whole area of opportunities that I’ve never had access to. It feels like it’s worth making the time to do it.”

For Schoffman, a California native, her entire Carolina experience has been about intentionally getting out of comfort zones.

“I came to push myself and expose myself to different ways of thinking, different family histories than I grew up with,” she says. “And GSA has really catalyzed that.”

In her role as president, she’s building connections and fostering collaboration. That’s why she joined GSA during her first year of graduate school; she hoped to meet people from other programs.

“It’s still a challenge in graduate school to help people understand the value of doing something beyond their program because everyone is so strapped for time,” she says. “But I really believe if we can foster a sense of community among graduate students and get people engaged in this entire university, not only will we have more access to the resources, we can learn from each other.”

So far, Schoffman has found the university to be receptive. In her meetings with deans and department chairs, she says the administration wants to foster the graduate student community. The Graduate School, for example, has deepened its ties with the association to advocate for graduate students, says Jessica Elfenbein, senior associate dean of the school.

The association is moving toward a stronger role in the university, according to both Schoffman and Elfenbein. In the last election, for example, seven candidates ran for the vice president position, which typically only had one or two candidates.

“It's not the same 10 people coming to meetings. Things are changing and people are getting excited about GSA,” Schoffman says.

Although her duties as president require about 15 to 20 hours a week, she says it’s worth it. Graduate school may be busy, but life is only going to get busier.

“Graduate school is a very busy time. It’s also a very unique time when you can make connections like this that you’ll never have again,” she says. “Whenever I wonder if I’m too busy to do something now, I just remind myself that it’s probably not going to get much better. There’s no time like now.”