

GSA Council 10 January 2014
GSA Board's 2013-2014 Strategic Work Plan: Update

Dear GSA Council,

As continuing members may recall, **the GSA Council received the GSA Board's 2013-2014 Strategic Work Plan at its May 13, 2013 meeting.** The SWP (which is available online for your review at http://www.gsa.ualberta.ca/en/~media/gsa/SWP/GSA_Strategic_Plan_2013-2014_Final_Version_for_General_Distribution.pdf) was prepared by me, along with my fellow Directly-Elected Officers and GSA management, to direct our efforts and identify areas where we can work with others in the University community. It was also **prepared in consultation with the 2012-2013 team of Directly-Elected Officers, a process which ensures continuity for the GSA in terms of strategic goals, planning, and advocacy.**

As you know, **the Board's 2013-2014 SWP provides us at the GSA with a planning document for this year, a critical time in the University's history** related to the provincial budget and its effects on the University and the graduate student community. As you have heard in Council, 2013 was an extremely busy year for the GSA as we pursued not only the strategic goals identified in the Board's SWP, but also **participated actively in several important national conferences and advocacy opportunities and effectively lobbied University administration on issues such as proposed increases in the International Differential Fee (IDF).**

At the September 2013 meeting of GSA Council, I offered **an update concerning the GSA's progress thus far in pursuing the strategic goals outlined in the GSA Board's 2013-2014 SWP** and promised to update you again on our progress in the new year. Below you will find my second report to you on the Board's SWP.

THE PROVINCIAL BUDGET AND POTENTIAL INCREASES TO TUITION AND FEES

The issue of potential increases to graduate student tuition and fees (as well as the potential introduction of new market modifiers) in the wake of the 2013 provincial budget **continues to be at the forefront of the GSA's priorities.** The GSA **held nine forums over the summer to hear from the graduate student population and to formulate a stance on the U of A's proposals for across the board tuition increases, market modifiers and MNIFs. We heard from graduate students in every Faculty with a graduate program and this aided in the development of the GSA's position on tuition, fees, and MNIFs.** We have widely shared this position with government, the University, and the broader public (the statement can be found at

<http://www.gsa.ualberta.ca/GSA%20News/2013/November/tuition.aspx>). In November, when we heard (on very short notice) of a **proposal to increase the IDF**, we organized a second forum to hear directly from graduate students who would be affected by the proposed increase. We are very grateful for all the thoughtful feedback we received from graduate students on this critical issue. **The GSA released a statement regarding proposed increases to the IDF and effectively lobbied University administration and members of the Board Finance and Property Committee to amend the proposed IDF increase from 5% to 1% for international graduate students.** The exception is MBA students, who will see a 5% IDF increase in 2014-2015, along with undergraduate international students. **While the GSA supported the amendment, we remain opposed to the 5% IDF increase for undergraduates and MBA students and recognize that proposed increases to tuition, fees, and MNIFs are likely to recur next year.** We have also had fruitful discussions with Dean Shirvani of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, Acting Provost Ferguson-Pell, Vice-President Advancement O'Neil Outar, and President Samarasekera on **the need to improve funding opportunities for international graduate students. We are optimistic that the University will take substantial steps to address this challenge in the coming year.**

As you heard in the November meeting of Council from Dean K Mummery, **the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation is also developing a proposal to increase the Athletics and Recreation fee paid by graduate and undergraduate students.** We also closely monitoring this issue and **will keep Council informed of all developments.**

To further help keep you informed, **the GSA launched a Budget Media Tracker in March of 2013** (available on the GSA website at <http://www.gsa.ualberta.ca/11ProvincialBudget.aspx>). **We update the Media Tracker daily and share news stories and other updates related to the provincial and University budgets and other issues affecting post-secondary education.** Since March, there have been over 1475 views of this section of the GSA website (over 1000 unique visitors from Edmonton, Calgary, Lethbridge, Ottawa, Winnipeg, and Vancouver).

Finally, as I reported to you in September, the GSA continues to work with the recently formed **coalition of constituencies with AAS:UA, NASA, SU, and PDFA** to address funding concerns on campus and the effect the provincial cuts will have on the graduate post-secondary experience. We also continue to regularly meet with the Ministry and University administration on these issues and **you will be updated regularly on all developments.**

PRAYER AND MEDITATION SPACE

We are committed to lobbying for **consistently accessible and suitable prayer and meditation space for religious groups on campus** and I am pleased to report that, due to the efforts of the Vice-President

Student Life, Hasin Haroon, **we continue to make progress in our pursuit of this strategic goal and are engaged in examining both short- and long-term solutions to this pressing need.** Hasin and I have met with the President, Dean of Students, Vice-President (Facilities and Operations), UAI, and the University Architect on this issue, as well as garnering support from the SU (with whom we are closely working on this issue) and researching the issue of campus prayer and meditation space across Canadian post-secondary institutions. We have also met with members of the University's Interfaith Chaplains Association on the matter. **Discussions persist and Council will receive updates.**

INDIRECT COSTS OF RESEARCH

An important issue that has emerged in connection to provincial cuts to post-secondary institutions and the University's budgetary response is that of indirect costs of research. **Indirect costs, which are overhead costs incurred incidentally to research, average around 51% of the total direct costs of research undertaken at the University of Alberta. Despite explicit University policy that requires indirect costs to be recovered from funding sources, current practice at the University of Alberta is to not fully recover these funds.** The GSA, under the leadership of the Vice-President Labour, has extensively researched this issue and is engaged in ongoing discussions with the University's Vice-President (Research) on the matter. **We strongly believe that the U of A must resolve the matter of indirect research costs, which deprive the institution of millions of dollars every year and will continue to be engaged with this issue.**

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Vice-Presidents Academic and Student Services, Colin More and Megha Bajaj and I are **working closely with FGSR and other stakeholders (including the Alumni Association) on the development of professional development initiatives for graduate students.** FGSR recently formed two **Professional Development working groups, one composed of internal U of A stakeholders and the other of external community stakeholders,** to move this initiative forward. I serve on both working groups with Vice-President Bajaj and Vice-President More and the GSA will remain an active participant in this process. The GSA regards the creation of enhanced professional development opportunities for graduate students as a crucial priority and you will be updated throughout the remainder of our terms on this issue.

PERMANENT RESIDENCY APPLICATION ASSISTANCE

The GSA has **prepared a whitepaper for the purposes of lobbying government to create an invigorated Alberta Immigrant Nominee Program** that will provide more graduate students with the chance to attain permanent residency **and are in the process of sharing it with other offices, such as UAI.** We will continue to lobby for this and update Council on our progress. We are also engaged in discussions surrounding offering more on-campus assistance to students applying for permanent residency, such as access to affordable legal advice.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

The Vice-President Labour, Monty Bal, along with the GSA's Labour Professional, have met with several students to discuss labour issues and Monty will be leading the upcoming **negotiations for the Collective Agreement governing Academically-Employed Graduate Students** as this is a negotiating year. The GSA's Opening Position was developed by the GSA Labour Relations Committee and the GSA Negotiating Committee and submitted to the University in October. Monty will update Council regularly on the process of collective bargaining. **Information sheets about the CA have also been prepared and circulated widely to graduate students in order to bolster awareness and understanding of the Agreement.**

DEPARTMENT LIAISON INITIATIVE (DLI)

As I reported to you in September, in the summer of 2013 the GSA, under the direction of the Vice-Presidents Student Services and Student Life, Megha Bajaj and Hasin Haroon, launched the DLI. Through DLI efforts, over **20 vacant departmental seats on Council were filled** and **the GSA has now visited 34 departments across campus to provide orientations and connect with graduate students.**

GSA INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ADVOCACY

In addition to our on-campus advocacy work on behalf of graduate students, the GSA has been involved in several important provincial and national advocacy opportunities. In November alone I attended **the annual symposium of the Royal Society of Canada (RSC), the Skills and Post-Secondary Education Summit hosted by the Conference Board of Canada (CBoC), and the Canadian Association of Graduate Studies (CAGS) conference** while the Vice-President Student Life, Hasin Haroon, attended **the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations conference.** We also continue to participate in Public Interest Alberta's Task Force on Post-Secondary Education, which includes other key campus and provincial stakeholders such as NASA, CAUS, and CAFA. **These represent important opportunities for the GSA to discuss the concerns and needs of U of A graduate students with stakeholders and decision-makers from across Canada.** GSA representatives have also attended other key events, such as the most recent meeting of the Alberta Conference Board, and **we are working with our partner GSAs in Calgary, Lethbridge, and Athabasca to found a new provincial graduate students' advocacy group.**

Over the past several months **the GSA has responded to an array of issues (including proposed increases in the IDF and the funding cuts to the Canadian Circumpolar Institute) through the release of statements to all graduate students and the media.** All these statements are available on the GSA's website at <http://www.gsa.ualberta.ca/> and I encourage you to read them.

MENTAL HEALTH AND OTHER SERVICES

Led by the Vice-President Academic, Colin More, our participation in the administration's ongoing

mental health review has resulted in an initiative on the part of Associate Dean of Students Robin Everall to establish a **dedicated graduate student counseling space in Triffo Hall**. This space is now **open to graduate students as a satellite office of the University's Mental Health Centre**. The **psychologist stationed there, Becky Ponting, will be introduced to you all at the January meeting of Council**. Additionally, the Vice-President Student Services, **Megha Bajaj, has worked closely with the administrators of the Graduate Student Assistance Program (GSAP) to extend access to their services** (a broad range of wellness, lifestyle, and counseling services) to the partners and dependents of graduate students. Finally, **the GSA has also worked with FGSR and the Office of the Registrar on a special registration status, which will allow graduate students on approved leaves to have access to services such as U-Pass, health and wellness services, and University libraries**. We are very pleased that this initiative has been completed as it is directly-related to **our ongoing efforts, in partnership with other campus stakeholders, to bolster mental health and graduate student well-being at the U of A**.

THE GSA'S LONG-TERM HEALTH

The ongoing, targeted hard work of the GSA staff, management, and financial team has ensured **that the GSA is developing into an organization that will remain strong into the future**. The Audited Financial Statements, which were shared with Council in July, and the quarterly financial statements presented in October are **a powerful indication of the health of the GSA**. An ongoing and thorough review of GSA Bylaws and Policy are also an important component of this work. **The GSA continues to grow as an organization with a solid and transparent financial and governance structure**. At recent conferences attended by GSA representatives much **discussion focused on funding, mental health, graduate supervision, and professional development**. I am pleased to report that **the GSA's and U of A's initiatives in these areas are setting a model for other Canadian institutions**. Likewise, the GSA's service partners have strongly commended the professionalism and effectiveness of our organization. **The GSA Office also recently obtained a silver level Green Certification from the Office of Sustainability in recognition of our commitment to sustainable office practices**.

ON-CAMPUS HOUSING, RENT INCREASES, AND LEASE AGREEMENTS

The Vice-President Student Life, Hasin Haroon, has been engaging regularly with University administration on **a series of important issues related to graduate student housing** and will continue to work for graduate students' interests in this area. **I am happy to report that the University has agreed to create a policy permitting flexible leases for graduate students (after they have been in their programs for one year) who are graduating shortly, leaving Edmonton temporarily for academic reasons (placements, research/data collection, etc) or on an approved medical leave**. We expect the policy to be in place by April of this year. **Hasin has been lobbying for this since the beginning of his term and this is a success for the GSA**. Residence Services has also agreed to change their policies

surrounding students who have graduated to allow them a grace period to remain in their University residences between graduating and moving to new housing.

MOVING FORWARD

Your GSA Directly-Elected Officers will continue to work hard in pursuit of the goals outlined in the GSA Board's 2013-2014 SWP. For the remainder of our terms we will continue our advocacy efforts with both government and administration. We have enjoyed **a strong and collaborative working relationship with FGSR** and will continue to build up and strengthen this affiliation. The GSA Directly-Elected Officers, in particular the Vice-President Student Services, continue to work on the **development and construction of the PAW Centre**. A number of other key issues, including the **development of University policy surrounding academic bullying** and the next stage of the Department Liaison Initiative (meeting with the Dean of Students and Student Group Services to discuss a new MOU and a constitution template for departmental GSAs) remain on the list of upcoming projects for the GSA.

Sincerely,



Brent Epperson, GSA President 2013-2014