

GSA Council 19 January 2015
GSA Board 2014-2015 Strategic Work Plan: Update

Dear GSA Council,

As continuing members will recall, **the GSA Council received the GSA Board 2014-2015 Strategic Work Plan (SWP) at its meeting of June 16, 2014.** GSA Council then received an **update concerning the GSA's progress thus far in pursuing the strategic goals outlined in the SWP. I now offer you a second update.** While a final update will follow in April, I encourage you to ask questions about the status of SWP goals at any time.

As a reminder, the SWP is available online for your review at <http://www.gsa.ualberta.ca/03SWP.aspx>. It was prepared by me along with the GSA Vice-Presidents to direct our efforts and identify areas where we can work with others in the University community. The current SWP builds upon the 2013-2014 SWP, which ensures continuity in terms of strategic goals, planning, and advocacy.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The FGSR professional development working groups continue to meet, and the GSA remains active in those groups, with Vice-President Academic Colin More and Vice-President External Susan Cake leading the team on professional development issues. **In February, the GSA will host a professional development event where interested graduate students will be able to connect and network with a range of working professionals in government, industry, and the non-profit sector.** The entire team of DEOs is working closely and collaboratively on the planning of this event and we are very excited to be hosting it.

SERVICES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Vice-President Student Services Megha Bajaj and Vice-President Labour Monty Bal continue to work on the issue of **Permanent Residence (PR) application assistance at the U of A.** As you may recall, they met with Vice-President (International) Britta Baron in August to discuss the issue. From that meeting, we learned that **the proposal for PR application assistance includes initial consultations regarding under which PR stream to apply, group sessions about PR application, and the ability to have an immigration consultant review a PR application before it is submitted.** The application assistance services are proposed to be **available at a subsidized, pay-per-use cost.** The proposal is currently under review by the U of A legal counsel and we plan to meet again in January to review its status. Furthermore, **the GSA Board met with Britta Baron and Doug Weir (Executive Director, Student Programming and Services, UAI) in the fall to discuss services for international students more broadly.** We will continue to engage in this important dialogue and meet with UAI about PR as the proposal evolves.

DEPARTMENT LIAISON INITIATIVE (DLI) AND DEPARTMENTAL GSAs

In August, the GSA moved forward with the next stage of the Departmental Liaison Initiative (DLI). Vice-President Student Services Megha Bajaj and I sent letters to a number of departmental GSAs, **asking for the opportunity to come to their departments, and speak with graduate students about their concerns and priorities.** We have had the opportunity to meet with one department, and are working to contact and arrange meetings with others. **It is our goal to have meetings with every departmental GSA on campus, to hear directly from graduate students, and to strengthen the connection between graduate students and the GSA.** We have also **ramped up our work with respect to departmental GSAs,** as you have heard at past Council meetings. We are **working with Student Group Services to streamline the registration process for departmental GSAs** and will continue to move forward on this issue.

GSA INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ADVOCACY

As you know, Vice-President External Susan Cake and I are close to **finalizing the creation of the new provincial advocacy group with the three other Alberta CARI GSAs.** We have regular teleconference meetings with the representatives of these other groups and are in the process of identifying our common advocacy goals. Additionally, we continue to work with the GU15 graduate student group. In the fall, Vice-President Student Services Megha Bajaj attended a meeting of the Conference Board of Canada and Vice-President Academic Colin More attended a meeting of the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies. The dialogues engaged in at both of these venues were fascinating and enlightening and they offered forums for information sharing that we found very valuable.

MENTAL HEALTH

Vice-President Labour Monty Bal continues to be an active participant in an array of discussions on mental health that are happening on campus and this is a priority for the GSA. As he reported to you in Council, **the University is planning several major initiatives with respect to mental health and Monty will ensure that the graduate student voice is present in those initiatives.** Council will be regularly updated on the GSA's engagement with this issue.

SUSTAINED AND ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT IN PSE TUITION, FEES, AND FUNDING DISCUSSIONS

Vice-President External Susan Cake has been representing graduate students across Alberta on a **number of committees organized by the Alberta Ministry of Innovation and Advanced Education.** As part of this work, Susan has reached out to the other Alberta CARI GSAs to receive input and examples to take back to the committees, and meets with representatives from the Council of Alberta Undergraduate Students (CAUS) and the Alberta Student Executive Council (ASEC) to **ensure that student voices are consistently represented at the table.** As you heard when the **Provost and Vice-President Academic and the Vice-President Finance and Administration presented to Council, tuition will be increasing by Alberta CPI (2.2%) in the coming year.** The GSA will remain engaged in all discussions related to tuition, market modifiers, and mandatory non-instructional fees.

PRAYER AND MEDITATION SPACE

As Council has heard, we are working with various stakeholders to **renovate the designated HUB mall space into a Prayer and Meditation Space to accommodate students of all religions.** We have had numerous meetings related to this issue and know the **design and estimated cost.** Next we will focus on funding discussions.

PAW CENTRE

I would like to again remind Councillors that the Physical Activity and Wellness (PAW) Centre (and the Graduate Student Lounge) are now open! As Vice-President Student Services Megha Bajaj has reported to Council previously, the grand opening is slated for March 2015. The GSA is excited about the Graduate Student Lounge that is now open in the PAW Centre for graduate student drop-in use, graduate student group bookings, and for social engagement events hosted by the GSA. We hope to be able to arrange for some tours of the Lounge space for interested graduate student groups who may want to book the space for events, meetings, etc. I also want to draw to Councillors' attention that graduate students will begin to see the PAW Centre fee on their tuition and fee assessments starting in January 2015.

LONG-TERM HEALTH OF THE ORGANIZATION

As continuing Councillors will know, and new Councillors will come to know, **the GSA has undergone a complete rebuild since 2010 and is in its final stages.** I am happy to report that **the GSA's organizational health is excellent.** The Financial Team (ED Ellen Schoeck (team leader), Director of Operations Heather Hogg, Financial Manager Dorte Sheikh, and Accountant Shirley Ball) have been hard at work preparing the 2015-2016 GSA Budget and Five-Year Rolling Plan. I am happy to report that we will be presenting a balanced budget to Council in February. Councillors will remember that following on Council approval, **we signed a new five-year agreement with Studentcare to act as the broker and administrator of the GSA Health and Dental Plan.** Signing a five-year agreement allows both the GSA and Studentcare to focus our time on supporting and improving the GSA Health and Dental Plan for graduate students. As well, **our five-year photocopier lease, which has been discussed many times in Council, expires in March.** We have been working hard to **secure as many quotes as possible** while we consider our options for replacing the photocopiers, and I am pleased to report that **whichever option we choose, we will be saving money compared to our current lease.**

As the GSA continues to evolve, **Executive Director Ellen Schoeck and her management team have reassessed our staffing needs** to ensure optimal support for the initiatives outlined in the Board SWP (for example, we created a position that will focus (in part) on **graduate student group support**). **The GSA brought in two external consultants over the summer to review our human resources (particularly the collective agreement that governs GSA staff) and communications.** Over the winter we had an external IT professional review our IT operations and an external consultant is now reviewing our governance and business operations. **We feel the GSA is at a stage in its evolution as an organization where such reviews are beneficial as we move forward with new**

initiatives. We continue to work on the comprehensive review and restructuring of GSA Bylaw and Policy that began in 2010 (joining bylaw and policy together is a top priority), with the most recent changes being those approved by Council in December. A major rehaul of bylaw and policy with respect to GSA elections remains ongoing. Our lawyers have reviewed portions of our bylaws and policies and agree that they consist of decades of accretion of repetitive (and sometimes conflicting) statements and are in need of review.

The next four months at the U of A will prove to be interesting, with the new President on campus and a search underway for a new Provost. We are positive that despite the changes in University administration, we will be able to complete several of the outstanding objectives in the GSA Board 2014-2015 Strategic Work Plan. I look forward to reporting these successes to you in our final report on the SWP in April.

Sincerely,



Nathan Andrews, GSA President 2014-2015