



January 12, 2018

Dear GSA Council Colleagues,

As many of you may remember, my team and I began the development of the 2017-2018 GSA Board Strategic Work Plan (SWP) in May of 2017 and we presented the finalized plan to GSA Council in July. The complete SWP is available for your review on the GSA website at <http://www.gsa.ualberta.ca/SWP.aspx>.

Below is an update concerning the GSA's progress in pursuing the strategic goals outlined in the SWP. Updates were provided to GSA Council in October and a final update will be provided before the end of our term of office, in April. I welcome the chance to discuss these updates with you on January 22 and also encourage you to ask questions about the status of the SWP goals at any time throughout the year.

Highlights from our progress include:

- One of our main team goals was to advocate for the University to launch a review of the current state of graduate student funding on campus. After submitting a proposal to the Provost and the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR) concerning this, the Dean of FGSR created and circulated a survey to University departments to gather more information about their current graduate student funding practices. In my continued conversations with the Dean of FGSR, she indicated that discussions regarding minimum funding with the Associate Deans in faculties went well, and that faculties will continue to explore this proposal and collect data. We will continue to advocate that further review be embarked on as a precursor to potential discussions about the creation of guaranteed minimum funding packages.
- The Government of Alberta announced on November 30 that the Alberta tuition freeze for domestic students will continue for its fourth year and has committed up to \$17 million in backfill funding to 20 of the province's public post-secondary institutions, this year. Additionally, all existing mandatory non-instructional fees will also continue to be frozen at all 26 post-secondary institutions and no new fees can be introduced or implemented in 2018-19. The Alberta Graduate Provincial Advocacy Council (ab-GPAC) issued a statement in response to this announcement, highlighting concerns regarding the lack of regulation of international student tuition and fees and potential impacts on institutional quality. The full statement can be found [here](#). The U of A GSA, as outlined in our SWP, will continue to advocate that any increases to international graduate student tuition should be included in the same regulatory framework that applies to domestic students (which is currently tied to CPI).
- The 2017-2018 SWP noted that the GSA would present to the Board Human Resources and Compensation Committee (BHRCC), on the need for higher assistantship rates. At the end of November, Sasha and I attended a BHRCC meeting, where Sasha illustrated the link between mental health and funding and highlighted other barriers that graduate students experience.
- In the interest of promoting enhanced opportunities for academic success (which links to mental wellness), Firouz has researched exam deferral practices at other universities and has initiated conversations with FGSR regarding the U of A's exam deferral processes for graduate students. He is also participating in a series of new committees and projects, including a new committee focused on revitalizing the Council of Student Affairs (COSA), planning the U of A Joint Board of Governors/General Faculties Council/Senate Summit at the end of January, and is engaged in conversations regarding learning outcomes on campus. Finally, Firouz and I advocated for the extension of the period of time in which the FGSR could allocate the funds from a grant provided by the government of Alberta for professional development (which funds



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programs such as the Graduate Student Internship Program (GSIP)). The Government of Alberta approved the extension of the timeline for this grant.

- Key goals from Sasha's portfolio include negotiating for increased compensation for graduate student assistants via the current collective bargaining process and ensuring the GSA's compliance with *Bill 7*. As noted in the last SWP update to GSA Council, Sasha hosted a Pre-Bargaining Town Hall on September 26, 2017 and eight graduate students attended. Following this Town Hall, the GSA Negotiating Committee (GSA NC) and the GSA Labour Relations Committee discussed the feedback and suggestions received and then developed a series of collective bargaining priorities and goals. Academically-employed graduate students were then asked to vote electronically on these priorities. The GSA NC included these approved priorities in the Opening Position that was sent to the University at the beginning of November. As chair of the GSA NC, Sasha will continue to provide academically-employed graduate students with bargaining updates as they develop.
- Masoud and Royle continued to consult with Nursing students completing their practicums at Michener Park on their work to develop a survey to learn about the transit usage of graduate students living in Michener Park. The survey has been finalized and circulated to residents. The survey invites residents to track their transit usage for one month, starting in January 2018. Nursing students completing their practicums will collect and analyze the survey data.
- Sasha initiated and worked in collaboration with FGSR to provide "Managing Up" in fall 2017. This is a new professional development workshop series which works to identify and address the power imbalances that exist between graduate students and their supervisors. Four presentations covered the following topics: The Power Balance (Dr. Andre Costopolous, Dean of Students), Effective Meetings and the Art of Asking (Dr. Brent Epperson, Graduate Ombudsperson), Developing Self-Expectations and Clarify of Responsibilities in Graduate School (Megan Beggs, PhD Student in Physiology), and Getting the Most Out of Your Graduate School Learning Experience (Dr. Kevin Haggerty, Sociology Professor).
- The Residence Joint Oversight Committee convened in November. Masoud is serving as the GSA's representative on this committee, which was established following the recommendations of the Residence Life Task Force, and which will focus on strategic planning for all residence matters and projects.
- The GSA VP Student Services has continued working to support the Campus Food Bank in its mission to ensure the delivery of food for students in need, and their families. The Campus Food Bank is working to track how many students use their service. In general, they continue to see that a significant percentage of their users are graduate students. In November, I joined Royle in celebrating the Campus Food Bank's 25th Anniversary by volunteering for their November Noodles event. The GSA also collected donations for the Campus Food Bank for the holidays.
- The Student Success Centre 20-minute graduate student writing sessions that the GSA started sponsoring in the fall have been successful and these sessions will continue in the winter term. Additionally, the Student Success Centre is working on developing their second annual Winter Thesis-Writers' Retreat. The GSA's subsidy to the Student Success Centre also supports this program.

Sincerely,

Babak Soltannia, 2017-2018 GSA President