



October 13, 2017

Dear GSA Council Colleagues,

As many of you will remember, my team and I began the development of the 2017-2018 Board Strategic Work Plan (SWP) in May 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 will also be provided to GSA Council in January and, before the end of our term of office, in April. I welcome the chance to discuss these updates with you on October 23 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, I have been continuing conversations with both parties about this key issue. We believe that such a review would constitute the first step in investigating the feasibility of the creation of minimum funding packages for graduate students, something of great importance because, for many graduate students, a lack of funding is a barrier to their academic success.
- Key goals from the Vice-President Labour's portfolio included negotiating for increased compensation for graduate student assistants in the Collective Agreement and ensuring the GSA's compliance with Bill 7. In July and August, the GSA hosted two Bill 7 Town Halls to discuss changes to labour legislation with attendees. The GSA Labour Relations Committee also met over the summer to start developing the GSA's initial Opening Position for bargaining with the University's Board of Governors (all current graduate student assistants will be asked to vote on the elements that will be included in the Opening Position before it is submitted). Sasha also hosted a Pre-Bargaining Town Hall on September 26, 2017 and eight graduate students attended; the GSA Negotiating Committee will discuss the feedback and suggestions received during this Town Hall as they develop the GSA's Opening Position.
- 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 Executive Director and Board Chair attended the GSA Board in September to provide updates on usage and their audited financial statements. In general, they continue to see an increase in usage. The GSA also collected donations for the Campus Food Bank at our fall engagement event on October 12.
- Our SWP outlines that we will "provide events throughout the academic year to support social engagement and reduce stress amongst graduate students." Starting in September, the DEOs continue to host a series of Coffee Breaks. These are informal events to get students out of their labs and offices to interact with other graduate students from across campus. The next Coffee Break is on October 27. Additionally, the GSA hosted its fall engagement event on October 12. This was a great opportunity to engage with graduate students and to provide them with a break from their studies in an informal and fun setting.
- Nursing students completing their practicum at Michener Park approached the Vice-President External and the Vice-President Student Services over the summer to communicate that residents continue to struggle with lengthy commute



times to campus through public transit. The GSA is continuing conversations with these Nursing students to develop a survey to learn about the transit usage of graduate students living in Michener Park. Moving forward, Masoud and Royle will be able to utilize the data collected in conversations with University administration to advocate for the establishment of a shuttle between Michener Park and the University.

- The SWP outlines that we will support workshops and services that assist graduate students with academic progress and professional development opportunities. Beginning in September, the GSA started sponsoring mini 20-minute writing sessions offered by the Student Success Centre to assist graduate students with the writing process. This new resource is open to all graduate students. Firouz, as the GSA VP Academic, has also been working with the FGSR and graduate students to gather feedback on available programs, including the Graduate Student Internship Program (GSIP) and the mentorship program. As part of this work, he has invited program coordinators from the FGSR to the October GSA Council to gather more feedback from students about these professional development opportunities.
- We had included in our SWP that we would discuss, with the FGSR, the possibility of revising FGSR policies concerning course-related examinations, including the ability to retake examinations and amend transcripts accordingly. After researching exam policies at other universities, we determined that this approach is likely not feasible, as we have not been able to find another university that allows graduate students to re-take exams. Firouz will continue to examine other ways to increase flexibility and improve communications with respect to course-related examinations and assignments in the interests of promoting enhanced mental wellness and career outcomes for graduate students. Firouz has also been working closely with the FGSR to improve communications regarding international graduate student involvement in the Graduate Student Internship Program.
- Ab-GPAC (the provincial advocacy group of which we are a member) issued an open letter reaffirming its stance on advocating for the inclusion of international student tuition fees in the province's Tuition Fees Regulation. The open letter can be viewed [here](#). We anticipate that the Government of Alberta, following on its recent review, will soon be announcing its decisions regarding post-secondary tuition and funding.
- Sasha continues to participate in meetings to discuss the expansion of mental wellness resources at the U of A and the Homeless Student Campus Project Team to review current services that are available to homeless students and creating awareness about this issue in order to brainstorm potential short-term and medium-term solutions. On September 20, Sasha also hosted a GSA booth at the ACCESS Open Minds launch event. ACCESS is a national research and evaluation network that marks a major Canadian innovation in youth mental health service design, delivery, evaluation, and research.

Sincerely,

Babak Soltannia, 2017-2018 GSA President