



Graduate Students' Association

University of Alberta

The 2019-2020 team of GSA Directly-Elected Officers (DEOs) developed the GSA Board Strategic Work Plan (SWP) from May-June 2019 and presented the finalized Plan to GSA Council in July 2019. The complete SWP is available on the [GSA website](#).

Following a [previous update provided to GSA Council](#) in October 2019, below is the second update concerning the DEOs' progress in pursuing some of the major goals outlined in the 2019-2020 SWP. A final update will be provided to GSA Council in April. Key projects are as follows:

Improving Student-Supervisor Relationships

- President, Fahed Elian, established contact with the new Chair of the Board of Governors (BoG), Kate Chisholm, as well as other new members of BoG to discuss this strategic priority.
- The GSA circulated, in October 2019, a survey to graduate students which solicited feedback on the overall success and effectiveness of their relationship with their supervisors. A total of 68 responses were submitted, of which 59% indicated positive student-supervisor relationships, 28% indicated ambiguous, neutral, or mildly negative relationships, and 12% indicated generally negative relationships. The respondents in the last category described instances of bullying, harassment, and hostile work environments. Among all responses there was a general consensus that excellent student-supervisor relationships were driven purely by individuals and not regulated or fostered in any way by administration. These findings were shared in a presentation to the Board Human Resources and Compensation (BHRCC), as well as with various members of the BoG, and a detailed report on this survey was shared with Brooke Milne, Vice-Provost and Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR) in November 2019.
- At the 28 October 2019 meeting of GSA Council, B Milne informed members that she and her team had developed a Supervisor-Student Guideline document and a Progress Report Form intended to be regularly filled out by both graduate students and their supervisors. These two documents will function as tools to establish expectations for graduate students and supervisors to meet, and to give FGSR the ability to oversee and regulate the academic progress of students. These documents have since been presented for early consultation to FGSR Council and General Faculties Council (GFC), and have been well-received. They will be presented to several other governance bodies and a pilot project concerning their usage will begin in Law in the spring of 2020.
- F Elian and Vice-President Academic Dylan Ashley, attended the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (CAGS) conference in November. D Ashley presented on the importance of quality student-supervisor relationships to the mental health of graduate students. Comments during the presentation, as well as further conversations thereafter, revealed that other major Canadian institutions also grapple with these issues and there were fruitful discussions concerning ways to improve things.
- As noted, F Elian also presented on this topic to members of the BHRCC on 26 November 2019. Among others, he touched on possible outcomes of poor relationships and solutions for these relationships, including better training for supervisors and the development of accountability mechanisms, as well as the creation of policies and procedures based on those recently adopted by the University of Calgary. D Ashley, as well as Vice-President External Marc Waddingham, Vice-President Labour Shanawaz Mohammad, and Vice-President Student Services Chantal Labonté were also in attendance at the presentation and spoke to the importance of the issue.
- This topic was further raised at the Board Learning, Research, and Student Experience Committee (BLRSEC) where F Elian was joined by B Milne as well as Steve Dew, Provost and Vice-President (Academic) and Ray Muzyka, Chair of BHRCC. B Milne also presented on the forms developed by FGSR.
- As a reminder, the GSA's current key recommendations include that the supervisors should complete mandatory training before gaining the privilege of supervising, and that the University should create a mechanism by which this privilege can be suspended or revoked if there are issues with supervision. Advocacy on these points will continue.

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Michener Park Closure

- The Michener Park Transition Advisory Committee (MPTAC) has been struck and has commenced its work of identifying and developing support mechanisms to Michener Park residents as they prepare for the closure of the residence in 2020. M Waddingham initiated the creation of this committee and continues to serve on it.
- Additionally, F Elian remains engaged in conversations with officials from the City of Edmonton concerning the expansion of affordable housing resources in the city.

Tuition and Funding

- F Elian and M Waddingham met with the Minister of Advanced Education, Demetrios Nicolaidis, about the upcoming post-secondary education budget cuts and the GSA remains deeply concerned about the impact this budget will have on post-secondary accessibility and quality and continues to articulate this message to government, often jointly with the Alberta Graduate Provincial Advocacy Council (ab-GPAC).
- Likewise, the DEOs participated in the "Students Not Silent" march and protest at the Alberta Legislature. This event was organized by the Students' Union (SU),
- F Elian has pursued a number of discussions with Dave Turpin, University of Alberta President, Gitta Kulczycki, Vice-President (Finance and Administration), and S Dew, to raise concerns that the burden of absorbing the provincial budget cuts not be unduly imposed on graduate students. The University is working to mitigate cuts to their budget by eliminating infrastructure maintenance projects, applying budget contingency, and incremental tuition fee increases. With respect to tuition, thus far an increase on undergraduate tuition has been discussed by the Board of Governors (BoG) and, moving forward, F Elian will make sure that any potential tuition fee increases for graduate students are fully discussed and that appropriately fulsome rationales (that also detail commensurate increases in financial support) and risk assessments are provided for any proposed increases.
- F Elian and D Turpin, along with SU President Akanksha Bhatnagar, co-hosted the President's Holiday Reception to celebrate the life-changing opportunity that University of Alberta education provides students. The goal of this reception was to fundraise for financial aid for students.

Labour and Collective Agreement

- S Mohammad has continued advocating for individual graduate students regarding interpretation of and compliance with the Graduate Student Assistantship Collective Agreement (CA). In addition to responding to approximately 10 email conversations with graduate students per week, since the beginning of his term he has met with approximately 7-8 graduate students per month to assist with more complex issues.
- The 2018-2020 CA was ratified by academically-employed graduate students in October 2019, and by the BoG in December 2019.
- S Mohammad has developed a proposal to ensure the inclusion of elements that address, specifically, graduate student needs in provincially-mandated health and safety training that the University will be developing. This proposal was well-received by the Joint Workplace Health and Safety Committee (JWHSC). In the vein, he has also met with Victoria Ruetalo, FGSR Associate-Dean, as well as Wayne Patterson, Vice-Provost and Associate Vice-President (Human Resources), Michelle Strong, Faculty Relations Director, Wade King, Director of the Office of Safe Disclosure and Human Rights, and Philip Stack, Associate Vice-President (Risk Management Services).
- Work will begin shortly on the negotiation of the next CA.

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Other Key Projects

- C Labonté continues to participate in conversations related to supporting students who parent on campus, and the Office of the Dean of Students will be working on creating a policy over the next year to clarify supports for students who parent. The GSA is also working to establish a space for infant care and feeding within Triffo Hall as a support for graduate student parents and caregivers.
- D Ashley continues to meet with graduate students navigating academic issues and, where necessary, working with FGSR and other University administrative units to find solutions.
- Following the circulation of a request for proposals to known providers of student health and dental plans in order ensure the best combination of service and cost associated with the GSA Health and Dental Plan, the GSA received a number of proposals and C Labonté and D Ashley conducted interviews with a select number. At their 4 December 2019 meeting, the GSA Board (GSAB) voted to move forward with Studentcare as the provider for the GSA Health and Dental Plan, effective for a period to be determined following negotiations with Studentcare.
- F Elian continues to work with the Indigenous Graduate Students' Association (IGSA) concerning finding a permanent space for the organization. To this end, F Elian invited the IGSA to his next monthly meeting with Andrew Sharman Vice-President (Facilities and Operations) to explore space on campus that would accommodate the IGSA.
- F Elian has been working alongside the GSA office team to develop a series of marketing videos to help graduate students learn about the services and benefits the GSA provides to its members. These videos have now been completed and the first video is expected to be launched in January 2020.
- Following conversations with F Elian concerning the Supporting Aboriginal Graduate Enhancement (SAGE) program, a pilot project of will start in January. FGSR will provide office space and will hire a full time Graduate Student Assistantship as the graduate coordinator for SAGE.
- M Waddingham and F Elian finished a proposal regarding Permanent Residency for graduate students and will discuss it further with Minister J Copping, Labour and Immigration, and Minister D Nicolaides, Advanced Education. Additionally, along with other ab-GPAC members, they worked to develop two additional policy proposals concerning professional development and scholarships. Longstanding priorities for ab-GPAC, including funding for mental health supports and matters related to graduate tuition, likewise continued to be advanced.
- D Ashley and F Elian have worked on a section on graduate students' rights to be included in the Charter of Student Rights the Students' Union has developed. This document will go through the governance route for discussion and, ultimately, for approval.

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