



# Graduate Students' Association

## University of Alberta

### 2020-2021 GSA Board Strategic Work Plan (SWP) 19 April 2021 Update to GSA Council

Each spring the GSA Directly-Elected Officers (hereafter referred to, informally, as the student executive team) work with the GSA Board to produce a Strategic Work Plan (SWP). The SWP is the document that steers and prioritizes the work and initiatives of the GSA, and is subject to revision as opportunities arise, shifting directions as needed. The SWP reflects the GSA's vision and mission to advocate for all graduate students to the University of Alberta and the Alberta Government for a safe, supportive, respectful, accessible, and inclusive community that fosters the multi-faceted roles played by graduate students.

This year, in order to develop a set of strategic priorities that reflect the changing needs of graduate students, the student executive team invited graduate students to participate in a town hall event on 22 May 2020 and circulated a feedback survey to graduate students during the period of 14-29 May 2020. These consultation initiatives yielded a significant amount of feedback and helped shape the [2020-2021 GSA Board Strategic Work Plan](#).

The priorities for this year have been grouped into three categories: connect, support, and advocate. The student executive team will continue to engage in ongoing conversation with the GSA Board and GSA Council, and other GSA standing committees, concerning the pursuit of the goals outlined in the SWP. The first update on the work relating to the 2020-2021 SWP was brought to GSA Council in October and, as such, GSA Council members may benefit from reviewing the [October 2020](#) and [January 2021](#) updates prior to reading the April 2021 update, which is the final update to Council for the 2020-2021 year.

A selection of ongoing work and new initiatives pursued and undertaken by the 2020-2021 student executive team (GSA President, Marc Waddingham, GSA VP Academic, Sachiketha Reddy, GSA VP External, Anas Fassih, GSA VP Labour, Umesh Nimmathi, and GSA VP Student Services, Sridhar Parasharamatham), in accordance with the 2020-2021 SWP, have been organized thematically and can be found below.

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#### Theme: Connect

- Academically-Employed Graduate Students (AEGSs), for whom the GSA serves as a union under the leadership of the VP Labour, are recipients of the "AEGS Newsletter" which provides, among others, updates on the currently-ongoing **ratification process for the next Graduate Student Assistantship Collective Agreement and proposal for the collection of a union due**, as well as vacancy postings on the GSA Labour Relations Committee (GSA LRC). Since May 2020, sixteen communiqués have been circulated in this vein;
- The creation the new **GSA Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee (GSA EDIC)**, which is expected to commence its work in April 2021;
- The student executive team have continued to participate in informal gatherings of students' associations under the U15 Group of Canadian Research Universities, in order to continue developing relationships with other Canadian student associations and to discuss issues facing graduate students across the country. Similar work has continued within the University community, where the student



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executive team have been engaged in strengthening relationship with an array of University stakeholders and associations, in particular the Students' Union (SU), among others;

- Led by the VP External, development and distribution of a survey to collect feedback on graduate students' housing experiences, to better inform advocacy in this vein;
- In an effort to engage with this year's slate of student governance representatives, the GSA hosted its 2021 Volunteer Appreciation Event on 12 March 2021 with the help of Edmonton's own Rapid Fire Theatre; and
- The VP Student Services continues building relationships with University units, in particular the Community Social Work Team (CSWT) and is a member of the Days of Action (DOA) Committee which seeks to increase awareness on a number of fronts related to mental wellbeing. These initiatives, which include the significant addition of Graduate-Specific Collective Tea Times, are supported by the GSA in terms of programming and communication.

### Theme: Support

- Further to the previous updates provided to GSA Council, the GSA—under the leadership of the student executive team—continues to respond to the unique and turbulent circumstances brought on by the **COVID-19 pandemic**. Recent work includes continued advocacy for the removal of barriers to learning remotely, at General Faculties Council (GFC), its associated Academic Planning Committee (GFC APC), and meetings with Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR) Dean, the Provost, and the President, respectively; and continued prudent management of the GSA's finances, under the supervision of the President, to ensure financial health and organizational longevity even in the case of low enrolment in Fall 2021;
- The U-Pass program and the Graduate Student Assistance Program (GSAP), each of which provide essential services to graduate students, were brought for the consideration of the graduate student body via referendum in the 2021 GSA General Election. This followed extensive work on the part of the VP Student Services, who joined other Edmonton-area student associations in negotiations for the U-Pass, and who continued liaising with the University with regards to the GSAP. Both referenda passed and so both programs will continue to be offered. Results can be found on [the GSA website](#);
- Under the supervision of the VP Student Services grants and bursaries have been disbursed to GSA members in the following amounts: \$389,000 in the form of Child Care Grants (CCGs), \$26,650 in the form of Academic Travel Grants (ATGs), \$417,776 in the form of Emergency Bursaries (EBs), and \$7,411 in the form of Graduate Student Group Grants (GSGGs), totalling approximately \$840,000 funds disbursed since May 2020;
- In developing new supports for graduate students who parent, the GSA has signed an agreement alongside the Students' Union (SU) with Kids & Company child care. This pilot will improve access to off-campus childcare for graduate students;
- Advocacy for additional internship opportunities and entrepreneurship training for graduate students continues via representation at the University of Alberta Innovation Network (UAIN). The President serves in this capacity;

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- The VP Labour has continued to meet one-on-one with graduate students to offer individualized support and guidance regarding the Graduate Student Assistantship Collective Agreement. The President and the VP Academic have also met with a number of graduate students one-on-one, to advise them on topics relevant to their respective portfolios;
- In fulfilling the GSA's mandate to serve as the union for AEGSs, and in addition to leading the negotiation process for the next Graduate Student Assistantship Collective Agreement, the VP Labour has cultivated province-wide relationships as part of a series of labour roundtables facilitated by the Alberta Graduate Provincial Advocacy Council (ab-GPAC). The VP Labour and the GSA Labour Relations Committee (GSA LRC) continue to be involved in the process of establishing the collection of a union due to support the GSA's work as a labour union with respect to potential job actions, etc.

## Theme: Advocate

- The student executive team has continued representation of and advocacy for the unique needs of graduate students during the planning and implementation of "University of Alberta for Tomorrow." In addition to previously-reported outreach and collaboration efforts, the President has continued advocating for measures to lessen the impact of tuition increases planned annually until 2023 on graduate students. The student executive team have also urged graduate students to be mindful of non-academic staff cuts within their individual departments to better inform advocacy in this vein;
- Advocacy also continues at the provincial level, where the President and VP External (as members of the **Alberta Graduate Provincial Advocacy Council (ab-GPAC)** Board of Directors) have continued discussions with the Ministry of Advanced Education. Graduate student representation has persisted throughout the consultation process for the government's Alberta 2030 initiative. The student executive team has also been involved in supporting the Public Interest Alberta (PIA) campaign against post-secondary education budget cuts;
- Having identified adequate and affordable housing as cause for concern for many graduate students, the VP External has dedicated significant time to strengthening relationships with the Associate Vice-President (Ancillary Services) to ensure graduate student consultation remains a major priority in future residence projects;
- The President, alongside his counterpart at the Students' Union (SU), released a statement in opposition to severe and unacceptable proposed tuition increases for a number of graduate programs. This letter has gained media attention, earning broad coverage for this important issue. Consultations with affected departments are ongoing, as is coordinating with the SU to express opposition; and
- The President and VP Academic continue to work with Dean Brooke Milne of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR) to further and support the Graduate Supervisory Excellence Initiative. The current program implements mandatory reporting structures for supervisors of graduate students at the beginning of their studies, in addition to an annual report to monitor the progress of graduate students in their programs. We applaud FGSR for their efforts and successful start to the project, and plan to continue offering our support and input as it matures towards its second stage.

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The 2020-2021 student executive team will continue to work on these initiatives, among others, until the conclusion of their respective terms on 30 April 2021. Efforts to advance ongoing and new strategic priorities will be spearheaded by the 2021-2022 student executive team effective 1 May 2021.

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