



# Graduate Students' Association

## University of Alberta

### 2020-2021 GSA Board Strategic Work Plan (SWP) 18 January 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 update](#) prior to reading the January 2021 update. The next and final update will be provided to GSA Council in April 2021.

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

- Following consultation and discussion with a number of graduate students in addition to prominent University stakeholders, the GSA has—with the leadership of the President—established a **new GSA Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee (GSA EDIC)**. The work of the GSA EDIC is expected to commence by March 2021;
- 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 **negotiation process for the next Graduate Student Assistantship Collective Agreement**, its upcoming series of town halls on this topic in February 2021, as well as vacancy postings on the GSA Labour Relations Committee (GSA LRC). Since May 2020, nine editions of this newsletter have been circulated;
- The GSA website, with guidance from the President, has been undergoing a review and update process, with an upcoming complete redesign to launch in the Winter 2021 term. These efforts seek to improve



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communication and provide clarity and accessibility for graduate students and all other visitors of the GSA website;

- The student executive team has also placed significant value on the cultivation of existing relationships with an array of University stakeholders and associations, in particular the Students' Union (SU), among others;
- In order to continue developing relationships with other Canadian student associations and to discuss issues facing graduate students across the country, the President, VP Academic, VP External, and VP Student Services attended a number of sessions as part of the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (CAGS) Virtual Symposia in November 2020. The student executive team have also been participating in informal gatherings of students' associations under the U15 Group of Canadian Research Universities, and hope to shift these gatherings into a more formal medium for the purpose of leveraging federal advocacy; 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 October 2020 update 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:
  - The issuing of an open letter, in partnership with the International Students' Association and the SU, penned by the President to University President Bill Flanagan, urging him to consider making mandatory the provision of asynchronous learning for all courses, among other asks,
  - The President and VP Student Services have pursued discussions with Studentcare, the provider of the GSA Health and Dental Plan, to clarify the limits of coverage for graduate students residing in other Canadian provinces/territories, and to offer special exemptions for international students to allow students residing outside of Canada to opt out with more ease, as well as opt out retroactively in July 2021,
  - As of December 2020, continued budgetary considerations for financial support for graduate student, through the GSA Emergency Bursary and the University's Supplementary Bursary, to the amount of \$200,000 (in addition to the approximately \$100,000 additional funds for the former, and \$250,000 for the latter which were committed earlier in the 2020-2021 fiscal year),
  - Fully remote operations on the part of the GSA office, including all meetings and governing processes, and (most recently) the 2021 GSA Recognition Awards nominations and upcoming adjudications,

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- Advocacy for alternatives to the U-Pass during this program's temporary suspension over the Winter 2021 term, 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 Winter 2021.
- The VP Student Services has continued to participate in the **negotiations process for the next U-Pass agreement**, to ensure graduate students' access to affordable transit. This process will culminate in a 2021 GSA Referendum on the continuation of the U-Pass program.
- With the guidance of the student executive team, a slate of virtual events replaced the calendar of in-person events originally planned for Fall 2020. These include, among others, now-virtual Info Sessions, a number of virtual game nights, and a brunch and learn series, all of which are expected to continue in Winter 2021. The Winter 2021 Orientation (as with the Fall 2020 Orientation) was rebranded as the Graduate Student Orientation, an eClass course that offered new and returning graduate students the chance to win a \$100 gift card;
- Under the supervision of the VP Student Services grants and bursaries have been disbursed to GSA members in the following amounts: Under the supervision of the VP Student Services grants and bursaries have been disbursed to GSA members in the following amounts: \$345,000 in the form of Child Care Grants (CCGs), \$20,241 in the form of Academic Travel Grants (ATGs), \$331,529 in the form of Emergency Bursaries (EBs), and \$2,600 in the form of Graduate Student Group Grants (GSGGs), totalling \$699,370;
- In accordance with the portfolio of the VP Student Services and VP Academic, support continues for campus units such as the Campus Food Bank, the Career Centre, and the Academic Success Centre;
- In developing new supports for graduate students who parent, the GSA is currently working alongside the Students' Union (SU) on a pilot daycare program for the children of students who parent, facilitated through Kids & Company child care. Details on this pilot are forthcoming, and program launch is expected to take place in Fall 2021;
- Advocacy for additional internship opportunities for graduate students, which has included relationship-building and collaboration with the Graduate Student Internship Program (GSIP). In this vein, and following conversations with the office of the Vice-President (Research and Innovation), the GSA now holds a seat on the University of Alberta Innovation Network (UAIN), which coordinates a number of internships for graduate students. The President serves in this capacity;
- The VP Student Services has been involved in discussions regarding **the future Graduate Student Assistance Program (GSAP)**, which has seen a continued increase in usage since 2008 and will see a marginal increase in cost as a result. In 2021, the question of the continuation of the GSAP will be brought to GSA members for a vote during the associated 2021 GSA Referendum;
- 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

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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. Meetings with graduate students are expected to continue through the Winter term;

- The GSA expressed its support of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) healthcare workers' wildcat strike in October 2020, through a [letter penned by the VP Labour](#); and
- In fulfilling the GSA's mandate to serve as the union for AEGSSs, 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) are also currently involved in the process of researching and setting up a fund to support the GSA's work as a labour union with respect to potential job actions, etc.

### Theme: Advocate

- The President served as the sole graduate student representative on the **Academic Restructuring Working Group (ARWG)**, the primary body tasked with developing models reflective of the vision of the "[University of Alberta for Tomorrow](#)". Mindful of the concerns of portions of the graduate student community in relation to this work, the President:
  - Extended an invitation to Steve Dew, Provost and Vice-President (Academic), to connect with graduate students by giving a presentation before GSA Council in August 2020, and again to Dr. Dew as well as Bill Flanagan, University President, to attend the October 2020 meeting of GSA Council and participate in a highly involved conversation on the topic of academic restructuring and service excellence,
  - Hosted two town halls for graduate students on this topic, in September and November 2020, as well as co-hosted a town hall alongside the Students' Union (SU),
  - Participated in a number of departmental town halls throughout November,
  - Worked to disseminate information from the UAlberta Student Collective, a group of graduate students advocating in opposition to provincial defunding of post-secondary education and restructuring initiatives, and
  - While having reservations over the shared service hub model for the new colleges and concerns that a decentralized leadership model might make it difficult to advance initiatives aimed at improving the student experience, particularly student-supervisory accountability and the creation of minimum funding packages, amongst others, voted at the Board of Governors (BoG), against a motion to amend a recommendation put forth by General Faculties Council (GFC) with respect to the leadership of the restructured institution (employing a college model) and spoke against the BoG's rejection of GFC's recommendation as not in alignment with the principles of collegial governance.



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In this same vein, the VP Academic has engaged in a number of discussions with the fourteen graduate students members of GSA General Faculties Council (GFC) Caucus, as Chair of this body;

- Having identified adequate and affordable housing as cause for concern for many graduate students, the VP External has dedicated significant time to building relationships with the Associate Vice-President (Ancillary Services) to ensure graduate student consultation remains a major priority in future residence projects;
- The President and VP External both serve on the **Alberta Graduate Provincial Advocacy Council (ab-GPAC)** Board of Directors and have contributed extensively to its ongoing work, which includes, but is not limited to, graduate student labour relations (both status quo and strategic priorities) as well as consultation with the Government of Alberta as part of the latter's "Alberta 2030" initiative. They also participated in the ab-GPAC Advocacy Week in November 2020, which consisted of meetings with a number of Members of the Legislative Assembly as well as Edmonton City Councillors to discuss graduate student priorities. While the President and VP External provide regular updates on this work, some additional updates issued by ab-GPAC can be found in the form of media releases. They also meet regularly with other Edmonton-based student associations through the Edmonton Student Alliance; 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, which is on schedule to complete its Phase 1 rollout for Winter 2021. 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.

The student executive team will continue to move these initiatives forward, as well as pursue other, new initiatives for the fulfilment of the goals outlined in the 2020-2021 SWP. The next and final update on the SWP will be brought forward to GSA Council in April 2021.

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