



# Graduate Students' Association

## University of Alberta

### 2020-2021 GSA Board Strategic Work Plan (SWP) 19 October 2020 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](#).

As with last year, 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.

Updates will be provided to GSA Council in October, January, and April; this document is the first of these three updates. 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

- In pursuit of its goal to foster a culture of equity, diversity, and inclusion among its members, the GSA will—with the leadership of the President—establish a new GSA Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee (GSA EDIC). The President has overseen the development of draft terms of reference for the committee and is currently consulting with various stakeholders on their content. The proposal to establish the GSA EDIC is expected to be brought before GSA Council for voting in November 2020. In this vein, the GSA is seeking to develop a collection of resources tailored to the unique needs of Indigenous graduate students and Black graduate students, respectively;
- The VP Student Services has continued 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;
- 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, as well as vacancy postings on the GSA Labour Relations Committee (GSA LRC). Since May 2020, six editions of this newsletter have been circulated;



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- The GSA website, with guidance from the President, has been undergoing a review and update process, with an upcoming complete redesign expected to launch in November 2020. These efforts seek to improve communication and provide clarity and accessibility for graduate students and all other visitors of the GSA website;
- In pursuit of increased engagement, as suggested by the President and VP Student Services, the student executive team will be featured in a number of social media and communications initiatives in the Fall term, including but not limited to, vlogs and social media “takeovers”;
- Under the leadership of the President, dedicated pandemic-related sections were added to the GSA newsletter and the GSA website to help keep graduate students informed;
- The student executive team has also placed significant value on the cultivation of existing relationships with other University stakeholder associations. These include each student executive’s relationship and collaboration with their respective counterpart at the Students’ Union (SU); the President’s relationship and collaboration with the Non-Academic Staff Association (NASA), the Association of Academic Staff of University of Alberta (AASUA), and the Post-Doctoral Fellows’ Association (PDFA); and the VP External’s relationship and collaboration with the Alumni Association, which includes membership on Alumni Council;
- In an effort to construct relationships with other Canadian student associations, the President and VP External attended the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) “Digital Foundations” virtual conference in May 2020, as observers; and
- The VP Student Services has been participating in the negotiations process for the next U-Pass agreement, to ensure graduate students’ access to affordable transit.

## **Theme: Support**

- In response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, and under the leadership of the student executive team, an additional \$100,000 of GSA funding was redirected to the 2020-2021 fiscal year, with a significant portion allotted for the GSA Emergency Bursary. A sum of \$250,000 has also been directed to the Student Financial Services office for the support of the University’s Supplementary Bursary for graduate students.. Furthermore, the GSA office shifted all its operations to remote delivery so that (among others) front desk support and grants and bursaries, could continue to be accessed by graduate students. The student executive team undertook advocacy efforts that resulted in a decrease in the Athletics and Recreation fee, temporary suspension of the PAW Centre fee, alternatives to the U-Pass program following its temporary suspension, and an additional retroactive opt-out period for the GSA Health and Dental Plan for the use of international students not able to travel to Canada;
- In further response to the global pandemic, the GSA’s finances are continuing to be managed prudently, under the supervision of the President, and enrolment numbers and their subsequent impact on the GSA budget are being closely monitored, should the need arise for a re-evaluation of the annual budget;
- The President worked to support and assist the Black Graduate Students’ Association with their recent advocacy work to connect and make direct calls to action to central administration and the Office of the University President’s. The initiative was a success with numerous commitments made by senior

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officials to better address issues of inequality and discrimination on campus, and the GSA appreciates the invitation to support this important endeavour.

- With the guidance of the student executive team, [a slate of virtual events](#) has been launched to replace 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 lunch and learn series. The Fall 2020 Orientation event was rebranded as the Graduate Student Orientation, an eClass course that offered new and returning graduate students the chance to win an iPad;
- Under the supervision of the VP Student Services grants and bursaries have been disbursed to GSA members in the following amounts: \$264,000 in the form of Child Care Grants (CCGs), \$15,000 in the form of Academic Travel Grants (ATGs), \$98,000 in the form of Emergency Bursaries (EBs), and \$550 in the form of Graduate Student Group Grants (GSGGs), totalling \$377,550. Also in this vein, the GSA has launched the Indigenous Graduate Student Award, to be granted annually following adjudication by First Peoples' House, and a new GSA recognition award;
- 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;
- GSA Health and Dental Plan coverage was enhanced, with no added costs for graduate students, such that: coverage for major restorative dental services has increased from 0% to 30% per Plan member per policy year; coverage for vision care has increased from \$150 to \$200 per Plan member per every two policy years; an annual drug maximum of \$10,000 for drugs covered under the Alberta Health formulary and \$3,000 for drugs which require the Special Authorization or Drug Exception process, has been implemented; and, eligibility criteria for claims under the Psychology/Counselling benefit have been expanded to include additional designations of Master's in Social Work and/or Registered Clinical Social Worker;
- The Graduate Student Assistance Program (GSAP), under the purview of the VP Student Services, supported graduate students through approximately 480 new cases opened between September 2019 and June 2020. This number aligns with the growing trend of GSA members accessing this program since the inception of the GSAP program in 2008;
- Michener Park residence closed, as planned, in July 2020. This was preceded by months of extensive work on the part of the VP External to connect graduate student residents to resources and support during their move-out and securing of alternate residences;
- The VP Labour has frequently met 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. Meetings with graduate students are expected to continue and increase in the Fall and Winter academic terms; and
- In fulfilling the 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).

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## Theme: Advocate

- To lay the foundation for graduate student advocacy in the coming year, the student executive team dedicated much of the Spring/Summer 2020 term to establishing new and cultivating existing relationships with members of University Administration. These included, among others, President and Vice-Chancellor Bill Flanagan; Provost and Vice-President (Academic) Steve Dew; Vice-Provost and Dean of Students André Costopoulos; Vice-President (Facilities & Operations) Andrew Sharman; Interim Vice-President (Research and Innovation) Walter Dixon; Interim Vice-President (University Relations) Catherine Swindlehurst; Vice-President (Finance & Administration) Gitta Kulczycki; Vice-Provost and Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR) Dean Brooke Milne; Chancellor Peggy Garrity; as well as the Board of Governors (BoG) which underwent significant changes to its membership in recent months;
- The President has dedicated significant time to advocating for the betterment of the graduate student experience and, in this vein, serves as the sole graduate student representative on the [Academic Restructuring Working Group \(ARWG\)](#), the primary body tasked with fulfilling the vision of the “[University of Alberta for Tomorrow](#)” project to change the structure of the University in order to respond to budgetary challenges and focus resources on academic activities. The President’s efforts included an invitation to Steve Dew, Provost and Vice-President (Academic), to connect with graduate students by attending the August 2020 meeting of GSA Council to provide information and respond to questions regarding the academic restructuring. The GSA also hosted a town hall for graduate students on 29 September 2020;
- The President served on the University President Installation Committee, the work of which culminated in the installation of University President, Bill Flanagan, on 16 September 2020;
- 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 its “[Alberta 2030](#)” initiative. 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
- As well as serving on the FGSR Council and the General Faculties Council (GFC), the VP Academic chairs both the GSA FGSR Council Caucus (comprised of up to 25 graduate student representatives) and the GSA GFC Caucus (comprised of 14 graduate student representatives). This work involves the provision of important context and information to graduate student representatives so that the University governance process can benefit from a diverse range of graduate student voices, as is reflective of the graduate student body. The VP Labour also serves on the FGSR Council Caucus and plays an important role to that end.
- The President and VP Academic have begun a new advocacy route investigating avenues to connect graduate students to internships in the local start-up/entrepreneurial community. While still an early stage project, meetings with the Graduate Student Internship Program Office, the Interim Vice-President (Research & Innovation) Walter Dixon and AVP Innovation Deborah James, Alumni Council’s Venture Mentoring Service, and Edmonton Innovation Authority Board member Ashlyn Bernier, have already taken place with foundational conversations positive that the GSA will have a role to play in these various projects.

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- The President and VP Academic continue to work with Dean Brooke Milne of 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 update on the SWP will be brought forward to GSA Council in January 2021.