

GSAP and U-Pass Continuation – Upcoming Referenda

Sent on behalf of Sridhar Parasharamatham, GSA VP Student Services

Dear fellow graduate students,

As you are likely aware, as a graduate student, **you have the opportunity to speak on not one, but two essential GSA services in 2021.** During the course of the 2021 GSA General Election, there will be two referenda questions put before graduate students: one about the [Graduate Student Assistance Program \(GSAP\)](#) and another about the [U-Pass program](#). These “Yes” or “No” questions ask graduate students to vote on the continuation of each respective program under a specific set of conditions (cost, term of agreement, etc.) as outlined by each question. These services were both originally established by referendum and their continuation is dependent on the outcome of these current votes. You can learn more about the referenda process [here](#).

Voting “Yes” on either of the two referenda means that you support the continuation of the programs under the negotiated terms, including (for example) the fee associated with that service and the length of the agreement. In contrast, voting “No” on either of the two referenda means that you do not support the continuation of the programs and/or disagree with some aspect of the terms of the negotiated agreement and would mean **the discontinuation of that program, likely effective Fall 2021** until, if possible, additional negotiations can be undertaken.

Graduate Student Assistance Program (GSAP):

The GSAP was established by a referendum in 2009. GSAP provides many essential services to graduate students, including (but not limited to), confidential counselling services, legal and financial consultations, health promotion programs, E-learning opportunities, and career counselling. The cost of this program paid by graduate students has not changed for many years but increased usage since 2009 has resulted in cost increases. In order for the program to continue to be offered, graduate students must vote on the new cost. More information about the GSAP can be found [here](#).

Universal Transit Pass program (U-Pass):

Over the last year, the GSA has been working intensively to negotiate the best possible U-Pass Agreement renewal on your behalf. Due to budget constraints, the University of Alberta has ended its subsidization of the program (note, students at the U of A have always paid a reduced cost for the U-Pass compared to other Edmonton-based post-secondary students at institutions which did not subsidize the cost). Factoring out the University’s subsidy, myself and leaders from the SU, NAIT, Norquest, and MacEwan student associations have been able to negotiate the terms of a new agreement that would take effect when the current U-Pass agreement expires on 31 August 2021. Under this new agreement, the cost of the U-Pass would be set at \$180/term (the amount currently paid by other Edmonton-based post-secondary students, whose institutions did not provide a subsidy), with no further increases for the period 2021-2025 and no other major changes to the current agreement beyond the addition of expanded opt-out provisions for some and extended service to the Edmonton International Airport and the municipality of Beaumont. If you would like more background information, a brief history of the U-Pass program is available [here](#).

It is very important to note that, as soon as the U-Pass program is reinstated (based on the easing of COVID restrictions and guidance with respect to transit use), **all other reduced fare options that the transit providers temporarily permitted post-secondary students to access will no longer be accessible** by university students (whether undergraduate or graduate).

In closing, let me stress that **the GSAP and U-Pass programs continue to provide excellent value for the cost** in terms of providing vital health and wellness (including mental health) services to graduate students and in providing reduced cost transit access to all. For example, the cost to see a counsellor can be upwards of \$80 per appointment and the GSA Health and Dental Plan may only reimburse 80% of that cost (or \$64), versus the one-time GSAP fee of \$21.80 to access multiple appointments with a counsellor at no additional cost for a year. With respect to the cost savings associated with the U-Pass, a monthly bus pass costs roughly \$400 for 4 months while the U-Pass costs \$180.00.

When you receive the referenda voting notice and ballot from the GSA Chief Returning Officer on 23 February 2021, I strongly encourage you to continue support for the GSAP and U-Pass programs by voting “Yes” so that the programs may continue to be provided after September 2021.

Sincerely,

Sridhar Parasharamatham
Vice-President Student Services 2020-2021