

## **UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA GRADUATE STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION (GSA) BOARD STRATEGIC WORK PLAN: 2015-2016**

The GSA sees this as a living document, shifting directions as needed as the provincial budget, the federal government's post-secondary education strategy, and the University of Alberta landscape all unfold and change. It is developed by both the previous and current teams of Directly-Elected Officers and provides a planning document for this year and into the future.

**VISION:** The GSA envisions an engaging environment that is supportive, healthy, accessible, and inclusive. This empowers graduate students to be agents of change in all endeavours, academic and otherwise, during their time here and beyond. The GSA believes that a healthy organization is nurtured through effective relationships with various stakeholders<sup>1</sup> and constituent groups of the academy.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, an organization that evolves over time must be prepared to take steps at critical junctures that may or may not be endorsed by all of its stakeholders.

### **MISSION:**

- **Advocate for comprehensive, timely, and excellent supports for all graduate students as provided by both the University and government.**
- **Negotiate a Collective Agreement that equitably supports graduate students who are employed by the University, and ensure compliance with the Collective Agreement.**
- **Foster student engagement.**
- **Support the academic endeavours of graduate students.**

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<sup>1</sup> Stakeholders are defined in this document as individuals, groups, and offices that can affect or are directly affected by the GSA and its initiatives.

<sup>2</sup> Constituent groups of the academy are defined in this document as faculty, graduate students, undergraduate students, and non-academic staff – all of which are represented on General Faculties Council – for our internal purposes within the GSA, the Post Doctoral Fellows' Association is also viewed as a group empowered to "communicate with the U of A on all issues of general importance to the Postdoctoral Fellow Community" (Memorandum of Understanding between the Post Doctoral Fellows' Association and the U of A).

1. REPUTATION AND LONG-TERM HEALTH OF THE GSA	3
2. INTERFACE AND ADVOCATE WITH UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE AND GOVERNMENT	3
3. TUITION, FEES, AND FUNDING	4
4. SUPPORTS FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS	5
5. STUDENT EXPERIENCE	5
6. SERVICES AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	6
7. HOUSING	6
8. APPENDIX: EXTENDED MISSION STATEMENT AND STRATEGIC GOALS	7

STRATEGIC GOALS/FOCUS	STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES
<b>1. REPUTATION AND LONG-TERM HEALTH OF THE GSA</b>	
<p>Ensure that the GSA maintains an <b>excellent reputation over time</b>.</p> <p><b>Aim for the U of A GSA to be the best managed</b> in Canada.</p>	<p>Maintain a <b>culture of respect and tolerance</b> in the GSA office and in all dealings with the University community, and ensure excellence over time:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All Directly-Elected Officers, management, and staff of the GSA will <b>maintain a high level of professionalism</b>.</li> <li>• Ongoing commitment to <b>the process of strategic planning</b>, regular follow through on goals and tasks, and regular reporting to GSA Council.</li> <li>• <b>Proactive search for talent (eg Directly-Elected Officers, committee members)</b> will be ongoing. Develop strategies and supports in collaboration with outgoing and incoming Directly-Elected Officers. Continue to regularly review Directly-Elected Officer portfolios, workloads, and responsibilities.</li> <li>• <b>Enhance the public face of the GSA</b> through engagement activities and the utilization of social media.</li> <li>• <b>Survey the graduate student population</b> on issues of importance.</li> </ul> <p>Retain a commitment to <b>vigilance in maintaining excellence</b> in the administration of the GSA:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Work closely with the Executive Director and her management team</b> to ensure <b>viable staffing infrastructure to support both our corporate responsibilities</b> (eg staff Collective Agreement, insurance, audit, budget planning, fiscal prudence) <b>and the need for cross-training and succession planning</b>.</li> </ul>
<b>2. INTERFACE AND ADVOCATE WITH UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE AND GOVERNMENT</b>	
<p>Intensive, integrated <b>advocacy for and representation of</b> graduate student issues. Advocate for the Government of Alberta to provide <b>predictable and sustainable funding</b>.</p>	<p><b>Maintain relationships</b> with various stakeholders and <b>engage with University Administration and the provincial government</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocacy requires <b>strong relationships with our partner associations – the Students’ Union, the Academic Staff Association, the Post Doctoral Fellows’ Association, and the Non-Academic Staff Association</b>. It is key to reinforce these relationships, especially with the Students’ Union, and identify shared priorities in building a common vision of post-secondary education.</li> <li>• <b>Create strong and collaborative relationships with the incoming President and Provost</b>. Maintain relationships with the <b>Deputy Provost, Vice-Presidents, members of the Board of Governors, Governance, Senate, Alumni Association, service providers, and other key partners (such as Faculty Deans)</b>.</li> <li>• Continue to work with the University (including the Office of the Provost and the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research) on <b>education, compliance, and dispute resolution</b> associated with the Collective Agreement governing Academically Employed Graduate Students.</li> <li>• <b>Lobby the provincial government</b> through the Alberta Graduate Provincial Advocacy Council to provide <b>predictable and sustainable funding that can uphold a high standard of accessible, world-class education in this province</b>, and on other issues of importance to graduate students. Maintain an overall strong <b>advocacy presence</b>.</li> </ul>

STRATEGIC GOALS/FOCUS	STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES
<p><b>3. TUITION, FEES, AND FUNDING</b></p>	<p><b>Engage and advocate meaningfully</b> on issues of graduate student tuition and fees:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The GSA supports tuition increases directly tied to the Alberta Consumer Price Index</b>, and opposes across-the-board graduate student tuition increases and increases to the international student tuition differential beyond that.</li> <li>• <b>The GSA opposes the introduction of new market modifiers</b> that are not part of an agreed upon regulatory framework and meaningful consultation.</li> <li>• <b>The GSA opposes the introduction of new Mandatory Non-Instructional Fees or increases to any existing Mandatory Non-Instructional Fees beyond the Alberta Consumer Price Index</b> that do not result from an agreed upon regulatory framework and meaningful consultation.</li> </ul> <p><b>Teaching Assistantship and Research Assistantship funding and access to other forms of funding are vital for graduate student success</b> and enrich the U of A campus community as a whole:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negotiate for <b>increased Teaching Assistantship and Research Assistantship funding</b> in Collective Agreement negotiations.</li> <li>• Advocate to <b>ensure the fair and equitable distribution of funding that supports the excellence of currently enrolled graduate students</b> and support structures that <b>facilitate the recruitment of top-tier graduate students</b>.</li> <li>• Advocate for the <b>opening of existing scholarships, awards, and bursaries to international graduate student applicants</b>.</li> <li>• <b>Negotiate for increases to the Graduate Student Support Fund</b> to support GSA Professional Development Awards, Child Care Grants, Emergency Bursaries, and Recognition Awards.</li> </ul>
<p><b>4. SUPPORTS FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS</b></p> <p>Advocate for a strong FGSR.</p> <p>Advocate on issues associated with graduate student supervision.</p>	<p><b>Support a strong Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research and maintain a strong graduate student voice in any proposed reforms</b> to graduate studies or the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage vigorously with the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research and other groups (such as Faculty Deans with respect to the implementation of a ‘responsibility centered management’ budget model) to <b>develop quality measures and an ambitious vision of graduate education</b> at the U of A.</li> <li>• Advocate for <b>graduate student representation on the Graduate Enrolment and Funding Advisory Committee</b>.</li> </ul> <p><b>Quality graduate student supervision is instrumental to graduate students’ success</b> and should be an institutional priority:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The GSA will <b>continue to participate vigorously in all discussions with respect to supervision</b>. This will involve ongoing collaboration with individual faculties, the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, and Administration in <b>pursuit of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and</b></li> </ul>

STRATEGIC GOALS/FOCUS	STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES
<p>Ensure that <b>top quality supports and infrastructure are in place</b> with respect to graduate students.</p> <p>Strive for an <b>equitable and welcoming campus community</b>.</p>	<p><b>Research’s current supervision initiatives.</b></p> <p>As new graduate students (particularly international students) join the U of A, <b>the right supports and infrastructure must be in place before admission:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to lobby both the University and government for <b>assistance and support for international graduate students who are seeking Canadian Permanent Residence</b>.</li> <li>• Work with University of Alberta International and the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research to create a <b>welcoming and supportive environment for international graduate students</b>.</li> <li>• Finalize plans for <b>consistently accessible and suitable multi-faith prayer and meditation space for all students</b>.</li> </ul> <p><b>A campus where all students feel encouraged to learn and participate actively</b> in campus life enriches the University:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to work closely with other constituency groups and stakeholders in pursuit of a campus free from discrimination and bullying.</li> </ul>
<b>5. STUDENT EXPERIENCE</b>	
<p>Continue to deliver the <b>Departmental Liaison Initiative</b>.</p> <p>Maintain a focus on <b>orientation, social engagement, and social spaces</b>.</p>	<p>Delivery of the <b>Department Liaison Initiative:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Department Liaison Initiative focuses on <b>seven key points:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Compliance with the <i>Post-Secondary Learning Act</i> (eg election of a Departmental Councillor).</li> <li>○ Risk assessment and reduction related to graduate student groups affiliated with the GSA.</li> <li>○ Education about and compliance with the Collective Agreement (the GSA is committed to providing information sessions and hardcopy and electronic briefings to graduate students and departments).</li> <li>○ Tailoring GSA department orientations to the needs of departments and graduate students.</li> <li>○ Representation on Faculty Councils.</li> <li>○ Linking established departmental GSAs with new ones.</li> <li>○ Linking with the “proactive search” for graduate student talent as per the GSA Nominating Committee’s terms of reference.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>Engage meaningfully and effectively</b> with graduate students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Proactively</b> plan fall and winter term GSA orientations for all departments (coordinated with the Department Liaison Initiative) and connect/collaborate with respect to <b>International Centre Orientations</b>. Partner with the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research with respect to <b>universal orientations for new graduate students</b> in September and January.</li> <li>• <b>Further enhance opportunities for social interaction and networking</b> for and amongst graduate students (eg social engagement and professional development events).</li> <li>• Explore the programming of <b>social engagement activities in the PAW graduate student lounge</b> and maintain <b>meaningful participation in the</b></li> </ul>

STRATEGIC GOALS/FOCUS	STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES
	<p><b>PAW Strategic Operating Committee.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss the use of former GSA offices with Facilities and Operations and <b>lobby for other space in the North Power Plant to be used by graduate students and others for the purpose of collaborating, sharing ideas and meeting informally.</b> Continue collaboration with the Students' Union, Facilities and Operations and other potential partners (<i>eg</i> the Alumni Association) for a renovated Dewey's/North Power Plant within the framework of Memorandums of Understanding related to the former GSA offices.</li> <li>• Continue work on <b>graduate student groups and departmental GSAs.</b> Review the Memorandum of Understanding with the Office of the Dean of Students. <b>Collaborate with Student Group Services to develop goals and strategies</b> for Graduate Student Group support and interaction.</li> </ul>
<b>6. SERVICES AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT</b>	
<p><b>Health and wellness, professional development, and GSA services.</b></p>	<p><b>Ensure robust services are in place</b> for graduate students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participate in campus-wide <b>ongoing health and wellness initiatives</b>, including maintaining the satellite psychologist in Triffo Hall and <b>leveraging resources to improve other health and wellness services.</b></li> <li>• The GSA will <b>continue to advocate for increased and diversified professional development opportunities</b> in recognition of the diverse career paths of graduate students.</li> <li>• <b>Continue to subsidize Writing Resources Centre courses and Career and Placement Services, which receive excellent reviews from graduate students.</b> Lobby to augment services such as the courses and one-on-one support offered by the Writing Resources Centre for international students.</li> <li>• <b>Regularly review, monitor, and negotiate all GSA services</b> to ensure that students are getting the highest value possible.</li> </ul>
<b>7. HOUSING</b>	
<p>Focus on <b>graduate student housing.</b></p>	<p>Maintain a focus on issues and initiatives relating to <b>graduate student residences</b> and <b>ensure that meaningful consultation</b> with the University on housing issues is achieved:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Advocate for quality graduate student housing</b>, and for the continued implementation of flexible and transparent residence rental contracts.</li> <li>• <b>Improve housing opportunities, maintenance, and services for graduate students living in University residences.</b></li> <li>• <b>Continue to build strong relationships with graduate students who reside in University residences and their representative organizations. Work with them to address concerns</b> and ensure that Administration hears grievances and pursues resolutions promptly.</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX: EXTENDED MISSION STATEMENT AND STRATEGIC GOALS

### MISSION:

- **The GSA is a vigilant voice for stewardship of the graduate student experience** with regard to funding, housing, and services. As graduate enrolment, and international graduate enrolment, increases **we believe key infrastructure pieces must be in place before new graduate students register. Attention must be paid to the career opportunities and professional development of graduate students who plan to enter either the academy or pursue careers outside academia. We advocate for “sustainable funding”**: that, through strategic investments and reallocation of central funding, **all graduate students who are otherwise without funding will have access to enriching graduate student employment** to the benefit of the graduate student and the University.
- We **ensure that employed graduate students are fairly compensated for their work**, while also working to safeguard that such work does not place graduate students at a disadvantage during their studies. We ensure that employed graduate students’ work environments are safe, free from harassment, discrimination and bullying, and foster a culture of workplace wellness.
- **The GSA defines engagement as intellectual, personal and professional involvements that are enriching, rewarding, milestones in maturity, and marked by learning, testing, personal development, success, and sometimes failure.** The GSA believes student engagement occurs from the time an individual asks for information about applying for graduate studies through the end-point of convocation, flowing through to alumni engagement. **We support continuing student engagement** through involvement in governance, networks anchored in residence life, professional development, networking opportunities, and opportunities for the development of “soft”/management skills, and in social settings where friendships and research collaboration can occur.
- The GSA **supports and encourages an empowering environment for graduate students to thrive in their various academic, professional programs, and research endeavours.** This entails creating avenues for graduate students to present their research to the larger academic community in and out of the U of A, ensuring a good relationship between graduate students and their supervisor(s), rewarding deserving students for excellence in teaching, research, and leadership, and encouraging the continued progress of professional development programs for graduate students.

### REPUTATION AND LONG-TERM HEALTH OF THE GSA

As reflected in GSA Policy, the GSA Nominating Committee “leads an annual initiative each October called the Early Call for Talent and Training. During this “Early Call” any graduate student interested in running for elected office is invited to a get-to-know dinner and is encouraged to participate in a series of training sessions on such topics as University governance, GSA 101, budget and audit basics, collective bargaining, major GSA services, and more ... these sessions provide a basic set of information that the GSA sees as essential for the effective leadership of its corporation and for the carrying out of its fiduciary duties.”

The GSA aims to **optimize workloads for Directly-Elected Officers.** The GSA will also continue to realign the most **optimal division of labour** between Directly-Elected Officers and management/staff so Directly-Elected Officers are well supported in a graduate student-led and professionally managed environment where, over the past five years, all of the Directly-Elected Officers have been successful in their academic programs while holding office.

In 2014-2015 the GSA brought in **external consultants to review our safety protocols and procedures, staff collective agreement, communications strategies, and IT operations.** The GSA is at a stage in its evolution as an organization where such reviews are beneficial as we move forward with new initiatives. The GSA will also continue to move forward on 2010 recommendations of the GSA consultant, *eg itemize areas that need review with respect to the continuous improvement of infrastructure, and continue to meet goals for bylaw and policy review.*

**The GSA will negotiate the GSA's business relationship with the Students' Union** with respect to the PAW food service area and continue to approach the process with a no-risk stance, while remaining open to revenue generation.

#### **INTERFACE AND ADVOCATE WITH UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE AND GOVERNMENT**

The GSA Board revived constituency meetings with the Post Doctoral Fellows' Association, the Academic Staff Association, the Non-Academic Staff Association, and the Students' Union in 2012. The GSA will continue to meet regularly with the **Provost, the Dean of Students, Deputy Provost, and the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research** and establish regular meetings with other key partners.

#### **TUITION, FEES, AND FUNDING**

Post-secondary education plays an important role in any prosperous society, and the Government of Alberta should be investing in post-secondary education to ensure a positive socio-economic future for the province. **The Government of Alberta should consider new forms of revenue generation that are reliable; both in the short-term, to ensure predictable revenue from which to establish a balanced annual budget that is not dependent on funding cuts, and in the long-term, to ensure that the Government of Alberta can continue to support high quality and accessible post-secondary education.**

The GSA is **committed to working with the Office of the Provost and the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research to educate** graduate coordinators and the professoriate about the Collective Agreement.

**Following the dissolution of the Alberta Graduate Council in 2013, the GSA and partner provincial GSAs worked diligently to establish the Alberta Graduate Provincial Advocacy Council** and ensured it had well-developed bylaws and financial reporting structures that would enable it to remain functional and effective over time. **The GSA will continue to advocate consistently and effectively for graduate student interests to the Government of Alberta through this new group** and meet with representatives from other provincial GSAs. In 2013-2014, the GSA greatly enhanced its external lobbying and advocacy presence at the provincial and national levels. In 2015-2016 the GSA will maintain its external presence and aim to **attend the Western Deans conference, various local political events, Canadian Association for Graduate Studies, and any other advocacy and lobbying opportunities that may arise. The GSA will also participate in GU15 (which has become an effective venue for information exchange on critical issues).**

In developing its position on graduate market modifiers, Mandatory Non-Instructional Fees, and graduate student tuition increases, the GSA Board will consult with GSA Council and the broader graduate student community. **The GSA believes that there should be sustainable public funding to support excellence at the University of Alberta. To that end, we do not think that an increase to tuition and fees is a solution to the challenges this institution faces. The GSA will lobby for affordable graduate student tuition and fees.**

The GSA will strive to **make certain that any new quality measures, funding models, and any graduate student management plans do not disproportionately favour some faculties or departments over others in future resource allocation** and that graduate students are involved in reform discussions at the department, faculty, and university levels.

Key members of the U of A, including Board of Governors Chair Doug Goss, have noted that graduate students are the lifeblood of the institution. We want to see this statement translated into **increased funding attached to Teaching Assistantship and Research Assistantship appointments.** The GSA will continue to lobby for **increased funds for GSA Professional Development Awards and Emergency Bursaries**, as well as **increased funding for graduate students with children in the form of GSA Child Care Grants.**

**Access to more scholarships, bursaries, and other funding opportunities for international graduate students (administered through the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research) is a key priority** of the GSA. International graduate students face off-campus work restrictions and have to compete with domestic students for on campus jobs. Most major awards are not open to international graduate student applicants.



## **SUPPORTS FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS**

**The GSA sees the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research as a key partner in the delivery of quality graduate education and just treatment of graduate students.** A robust Faculty – one with adequate resources to execute its mandate— links closely with our own organizational efficacy. The GSA will advocate for increased resources for the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research and continue to foster a **collaborative working relationship with the Faculty.**

As stated in a 2014 report on graduate student supervision at the U of A, “high quality supervision and mentorship is central to an institution committed to seeing their graduate students flourish in their careers and in the contributions they make to the public good.”<sup>3</sup> The GSA will advocate for several of the recommendations made in this report.

## **STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

The GSA will continue to work to **actively engage with graduate students** (eg through the Department Liaison Initiative, departmental orientations, social and professional development events, and education on the Collective Agreement).

## **SERVICES AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

The GSA will maintain its involvement with Administration, Students’ Union, and the Office of the Dean of Students on **issues and initiatives related to improving health and wellness on campus.** The GSA applauds the recent mental health review on campus and the decision to establish a satellite office for counselling in Triffo Hall for graduate student use. The GSA will continue to work with the Dean of Students’ Office, collaborating in the implementation stage to improve health and wellness services and tackle the associated challenges that sometimes act as a barrier to graduate student success.

The GSA will **work closely with the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, Career and Placement Services, the Office of Advancement, and the Alumni Association to develop a new mentorship program and participating vigorously and collaboratively in the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research initiatives to establish the best professional development programs in Canada.**

As current agreements with service providers expire (eg TD Insurance Meloche Monnex), **the GSA will undertake focused reviews before renewal.**

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<sup>3</sup> N. Krogman, 2014. *The Quality of Graduate Student and Post-Doctoral Supervision at the University of Alberta*, p. 34.