



Graduate Students' Association

University of Alberta

2021-2022 GSA Board Strategic Work Plan 18 October 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 townhall event on 17 May 2021 and circulated a feedback survey to graduate students during the period of 7-18 May 2021. These consultation initiatives yielded a significant amount of feedback and helped shape the 2021-2022 GSA Board Strategic Work Plan. The final document was approved by the GSA Board in late June and received by the GSA Council for information at their July meeting. It can now be viewed [on the GSA website](#).

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 2021-2022 student executive team (GSA President, Anas Fassih, GSA VP Academic, Kathy Haddadkar, GSA VP External, Mohd Tahsin Bin Mostafa, GSA VP Labour, Jessica Grenke, and GSA VP Student Services, Paresh Kumar), in accordance with the 2021-2022 SWP, can be found below.

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- Recognizing that the foundation of effective advocacy involves building new and sustaining existing relationships and ties to stakeholders, the student executive team dedicated much of the Spring/Summer 2021 term to connecting with members of University Administration. These included, among others, President and Vice-Chancellor Bill Flanagan; Provost and Vice-President (Academic) Steven Dew; Vice-Provost and Dean of Students André Costopoulos; Vice-President (External Relations), Elan MacDonald; Vice-President (Facilities & Operations), Andrew Sharman; Vice-President (Research and Innovation), Aminah Robinson Fayek; Vice-President (University Services & Finance), Todd Gilchrist; Vice-Provost and Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR) Dean Brooke Milne; Chancellor Peggy Garritty;
 - Similarly, the President is dedicated to bringing the graduate student perspective to University Administration through his work as the sole representative of the GSA on the Board of Governors (BoG) and a number of associated standing committees;
 - In the face of proposed exceptional tuition increases to a number of graduate programs, the GSA engaged in thorough consultation with graduate students and conveyed concerns to University Administration and the government (making a formal submission of concerns to the Ministry of Advanced Education). These concerns focused primarily on the abbreviated nature of the proposal process and the absence of adequate consultation with graduate students, particularly those in programs slated for increases, and were shared by our colleagues in the Students' Union (SU) as well as a number of pertinent student groups. This advocacy resulted in the government's decision to inform the University that it needed to do more consultation and to extend the deadline for submitting these proposals to allow for the in-depth consultation which the GSA believes is essential to the success of

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this process. In this vein, the GSA President invited Vice-President (Academic) and Provost, Steven Dew, to attend the 20 September 2021 meeting of GSA Council to inform graduate students of the context of these proposed increases and to answer questions;

- Joining the SU in calling on the University to take action against Ricardo Acuña in the face of a disclosure of misconduct on his part (full statement can be found [here](#));
- Participating in collaboration and discussion—in support of the initiative proposed by the Black Graduate Students' Association—with University External Relations regarding a dedicated scholarship for Black students;
- Awarding an external grant to the University of Alberta's Black, Indigenous, People of Colour Association in support of their establishment and programming;
- The President and VP Student Services are currently engaging in conversations surrounding the establishment of bursaries dedicated to support graduate students with the often-prohibitive cost of technologies essential to learning at the post-secondary level. Discussions are ongoing with the office of the Registrar and the office of the Dean of Students;
- The GSA Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee has decided to consult with the graduate student population on dimensions of EDI that they find most pressing, and what initiatives students would most benefit from in the short term. Work to develop a consultation survey in this regard is ongoing;
- Collaborating alongside the SU and University Administration in supporting the vaccine prize lottery, aimed at renewing the flagging vaccination rates in Edmonton and within the University community. Two graduate students received a tuition waiver, and 100 GSA swag prize packs were also awarded. Further to this, an education campaign will be rolling out soon to help the community make informed choices with regards to vaccination;
- The GSA office returned to offering in-person student services in Triffo Hall, while continuing Virtual Front Desk hours and virtual governance meetings to maintain a high standard of care with regards to public health, as well as accommodate the segment of graduate students unable to return to campus;
- In continuing its slate of virtual events and programming, this year the GSA is launching a series of peer panels to connect new graduate students with experienced ones and to fortify the graduate student community;
- The GSA Labour Relations Committee, with significant input from the VP Labour, has continued efforts to bolster the bargaining power of the Academically-Employed Graduate Students' union through the development of a stewardship network. The logistics of this network, including training, responsibilities, and recruitment, are part of the current priorities;
- The VP Labour has also initiated an engagement project to connect directly with student groups situated within departments or non-departmentalized units who employ graduate students, in order to strengthen connections with union members and empower them as workers;
- In addition to work on the steward network, the GSA began collecting dues from union members effective 1 September 2021, in accordance with the union membership's vote to collect dues and establish a dedicated labour fund to support union activities and strengthen the GSA's bargaining position; and

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- The VP Labour, recognizing the scope of union administration and organization, has engaged in a series of conversations concerning a possible service agreement with a third-party union organization to carry on this work;
- GSA student leadership has dedicated significant energy to the pursuit of positive, collaborative, and fruitful student-supervisor relationships over the past decade. This goal was mirrored by Dr. Brooke Milne (Vice-Provost and FGSR Dean), who began her tenure at the University of Alberta by launching a multi-faceted initiative aimed at standardizing expectations and rate of advancement through graduate programs. The President, along with the VP Academic, have worked with Dr. Milne to support this initiative and to ensure its successful passage through the governing process. After years of work, this initiative was approved by the General Faculties Council at their meeting of 20 September 2021 and will be recommended to the BoG for implementation in January 2022. The GSA will continue to work closely with FGSR on the implementation of these initiatives;
- The President and VP External attended the annual Alberta Graduate Provincial Advocacy Council (ab-GPAC) Board Retreat held on 6-8 August 2021, in continued work to strengthen alliance with other graduate student associations across the province, and to chart this year's course;
- In this vein, the GSA is currently engaging in lobbying support for a dedicated immigration stream for international students in Alberta, similar to what currently exists for international students in Ontario. A formal submission for the government's consideration has been submitted;
- The Graduate Student Societies of Canada, a national student association advocacy group, is in the process of formalizing after operating informally for the past year, with the President as a member and staunch supporter of a formal national coalition. Among other priorities, immigration support for international students has been identified as an area worthy of advocacy and the group is developing a submission to government to ask for increased Tri-Council funding and student loan subsidies, as financial barriers are a prominent barrier in education accessibility;
- The GSA President is also engaging in discussions with University Administration to encourage further recognition of graduate students as valuable to the University and its reputation, much in the way that undergraduate students are valued. This recognition would accompany subsequent recruitment efforts;
- The VP External continues to work to sustain and grow the GSA's close ties with Ancillary Services, and engages in frequent discussions about the need for new family-oriented student housing;
- The VP Student Services has dedicated significant time to the U-Pass this year: A new agreement to continue with the U-Pass until 2025 was signed in August 2021, and additionally, Edmonton Transit Service began rollout of the new touchless transit pass, Arc, which warranted additional discussion pertaining to distribution as well as functionality as this new system was launched;
- The GSA Health and Dental Plan received an upgrade at no additional cost to graduate students: coverage now includes Canadian Clinical Counsellors, effective 1 September 2021;
- With mental health being of utmost importance, arguably more than ever before, the GSA continues to advocate for additional supports and increasing accessibility to existing supports in conversations with the office of the Dean of Students, as well as those with the Alberta government. These conversations supplement ongoing work by the VP Student Services as a member of the Days of Action planning committee and the Mental Health Commission of Canada Standard Network; and

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- The student executive team has continued to prioritize its relationships with other University stakeholder associations. These include each student executive's relationship and collaboration with their respective counterpart at the SU; the President's relationship and collaboration with the Non-Academic Staff Association, the Association of Academic Staff of University of Alberta, and the Post-Doctoral Fellows' Association; and the VP External's relationship and collaboration with the Alumni Association, which includes membership on Alumni Council.

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 2021-2022 SWP. The next update on the SWP will be brought forward to GSA Council in January 2022.