



The Graduate Students' Association Board Strategic Work Plan 2022-2023

Connect Support Advocate



Our Vision and Mission

To advocate for all graduate students to the University of Alberta and all levels of government in pursuit of a safe, supportive, respectful, accessible, and inclusive community that fosters the multi-faceted roles played by graduate students.

The GSA and the University of Alberta reside on Treaty 6 territory and the homeland of the Métis. This territory is a traditional gathering place for diverse Indigenous peoples including the Cree, Blackfoot, Métis, Nakota Sioux, Iroquois, Dene, Ojibway, Saulteaux, Anishinaabe, Inuit, and many others whose histories, languages, and cultures continue to influence our vibrant community. In acknowledging this traditional territory and its significance for the Indigenous peoples who lived and continue to live upon it, we recognize its longer history that reaches beyond colonization and the establishment of European colonies and recognize the GSA's ongoing collective responsibility in working with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) peoples and what that means for the work of the GSA as it aims to practice the principles of being Good Relations with FNMI peoples, Nations, communities, and lands.

2022-2023 Graduate Students' Association Executives



Graduate students elect GSA leaders each February. Here are the 2022-2023 GSA Directly-Elected Officers (from left to right): Vice-President Academic, Bishoi Aziz; Vice-President External, Janmejay Rao; President, Anas Fassih; Vice-President Labour, Hiren Kaklotar; and Vice-President Student Services, Monisha Vinod.

The Graduate Students' Association

The GSA, as established by the *Post-Secondary Learning Act*, represents graduate students at the University of Alberta and provides a wealth of services to its members to enrich the graduate student experience. A separate corporate entity, the GSA is a collegial organization which co-exists alongside the University of Alberta to fully empower, represent, and advocate for graduate students. Concurrently, the GSA is the provincially-designated labour union for the Academically-Employed Graduate Students (AEGSs), thus bestowing it with a dual set of responsibilities and obligations.





Who is a Graduate Student?

A graduate student is an emerging colleague who contributes to their field of study in pursuit of an advanced degree through collaborative work with the professoriate in research, teaching, and the cultivation of University learning environments. These contributions are accomplished through, among others: extensive coursework and the development of capstone projects, theses, or dissertations (in pursuit of which graduate students are charged tuition and fees); academic employment (for which graduate students are paid); the co-creation and writing of scholarly work; contribution to the securing of academic funding; participation in the academic community via presentations, conferences, and other engagement initiatives; as well as economic contributions in the form of innovation and entrepreneurship.

The multi-faceted role of the graduate student is to take place in an environment of mutual respect and fairness—one aimed at developing skills and knowledge with lifelong benefits. This role therefore merits appropriate remuneration for labour in service of the enhancement of the institution.

What is the GSA Board's Strategic Work Plan?

The GSA Board's Strategic Work Plan is the document that steers and prioritizes the work and initiatives of the GSA in accordance with the tenets of the graduate student experience. The GSA sees this plan as a living document, shifting focus and direction as the landscape changes within the University community and beyond, often at the provincial and federal levels. It is developed annually following extensive consultation with the graduate student community and with reference to the Strategic Work Plans of previous GSA Boards, and as such provides a planning document for this and future years.

The groups and issues identified within this year's Strategic Work Plan are neither the sole areas worthy of attention, nor free from the simultaneous influence of multiple sociopolitical forces. While this document necessitates simplicity in identifying priorities and aspirations, in practice the work to be undertaken by the GSA Board in the upcoming year hinges upon an understanding of intersectionality.

What Are Our Responsibilities?

The GSA provides a wealth of benefits and services to its members that both enrich the graduate student experience and forge connections between graduate students.

At its core, the GSA is an organization by and for graduate students, and is endowed with the ability to help cultivate a thriving and resilient graduate student community. In this vein, the GSA will continue to create opportunities for graduate student awareness of and engagement with the GSA and its services by:

- ◆ Ensuring the GSA remains responsive, effective, and efficient through regular reviews of services and solicitation of feedback from members,
- ◆ Evaluating and strengthening communication methods to broaden engagement with our members,
- ◆ Offering orientation and information sessions on key issues,
- ◆ Offering engagement and recognition events in an in-person format, where at all possible, and
- ◆ Working to connect with, and support departmental graduate student groups and other graduate student groups.

To serve as effective advocates of the graduate student body, the GSA will continue to cultivate a culture of engagement with graduate students, graduate student units, and institutional units that serve graduate students.

Did you know?

The GSA has:

- ▶ graduate student lounges at Triffo Hall
- ▶ rooms available for booking
- ▶ several fun events per year

The GSA places great value on its countless relationships with stakeholders. It will thus continue to foster collaborative and collegial relationships with:

- ◆ The Government of Alberta, particularly the Ministry of Advanced Education (working collaboratively with the Alberta Graduate Provincial Advocacy Council), as well as the City of Edmonton and the Government of Canada,
- ◆ Members of senior University administration, many of whom have been invaluable allies in advancing the goals of the GSA,
- ◆ Community groups and non-governmental organizations whose goals align with those of the GSA, and
- ◆ Other campus stakeholder constituency associations such as the Students' Union, the Association of Academic Staff of the University of Alberta, the Postdoctoral Fellows' Association, the Non-Academic Staff Association, and the Alumni Association, as well as student groups and other campus organizations.



What Groups Are Our Focus?

As an international graduate student, the GSA gave me an opportunity to get involved with the community, and work on my professional development and public speaking skills.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

International students at the University of Alberta often experience unique challenges resulting from their unique cultural backgrounds, language proficiency, barriers to community connectedness, and financial obstacles. *The GSA will:*

- ◆ Continue to advocate for new initiatives and programs that specifically support international graduate students.
- ◆ Work on above initiatives that may, among others, take the form of dedicated immigration streams for international students—whose cultural and economic contributions to our region only serve to enrich.

STUDENTS WHO PARENT

The GSA is committed to advocating for the significant portion of graduate students who parent, as they face unique barriers in accessing post-secondary education. The GSA will continue its work on:

- ◆ Sustaining its partnership with Kids & Company.
- ◆ Promoting the private parents' room in Triffo Hall.
- ◆ The ongoing provision of GSA Child Care Grants and advocacy for more funding in this area.

Did you know?

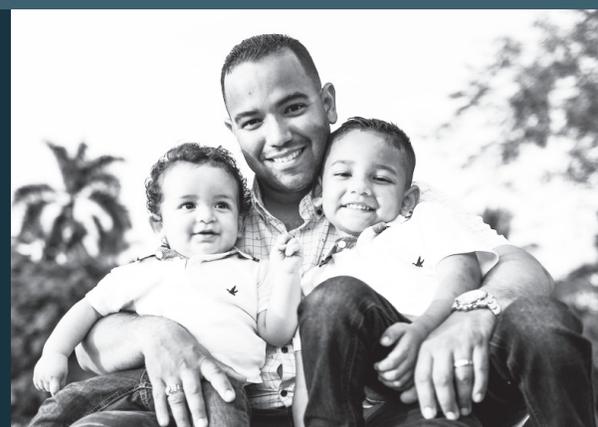
The GSA has:

- ▶ Orientation resources specific to graduate students (we also participate in 45-50 departmental orientations annually)
- ▶ a weekly newsletter, website, and social media profiles that highlight events and ways to get involved

INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

In an effort to give the recognition due to the Indigenous peoples upon whose land the GSA and the University reside, *the GSA will:*

- ◆ Continue to work to advance the objectives of Truth and Reconciliation by advocating for new initiatives and uphold existing initiatives that specifically support Indigenous graduate students.
- ◆ Work closely with groups such as the Indigenous Graduate Student's Association, First Peoples' House, and the office of Indigenous Programming and Research.



What Groups Are Our Focus?

All graduate students are entitled to a safe and respectful study and work environment characterized by positive supervisory relationships and free from harassment, discrimination, and bullying.

MARGINALIZED GROUPS, INCLUDING THOSE WHO IDENTIFY AS DISABLED OR DIVERSELY ABLED; MEMBERS OF THE LGBTQPIANU+ COMMUNITY; AND/OR RACIALIZED COMMUNITIES

As graduate students represent a broad range of lived experiences, many of the dimensions that shape these experiences have historically been neglected by the framers of our societies and institutions. *The GSA is:*

- ◆ Committed to magnifying the voices of equity-deserving groups.
- ◆ Working both to deconstruct the systemic barriers the GSA perpetuates internally, as well as advocating in this vein to the University and government (this work is aided by the GSA Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee).
- ◆ Focused on ongoing initiatives to build partnerships with various groups and advocate for technology bursaries as an accessibility issue.

Did you know?

The GSA offers:

- ▶ Emergency Bursaries
- ▶ Child Care Grants
- ▶ Academic Travel Grants

What Issues Are Priorities?

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Despite recognition of the diversity of the graduate student population, the current offerings of official University residences are limited in terms of pricing and/or consideration for families. *The GSA seeks:*

- ◆ To provide support to graduate students who experience vulnerability in their housing situation.



What Issues Are Priorities?

A lack of stable funding and unpredictable increases in educational and other costs can cause significant strain on graduate students' health and wellness and can inhibit academic progress.

The biggest difference the GSA has made for me are the mental health resources.

FAIR TUITION AND ACCESSIBLE EDUCATION

Increasing tuition costs are caused at an initial level by provincial budgetary considerations, and subsequently by budgeting prerogatives of the University. *The GSA will continue to:*

- ◆ Advocate for fair tuition and broadly accessible post-secondary education at the University of Alberta, but also—in tandem with its partner associations—for the same across the province.
- ◆ Spearhead the goal of establishing an institutional minimum for doctoral-level funding packages in pursuit of accessible post-secondary education.
- ◆ Ensure affordable access to Edmonton and Edmonton-area public transit.
- ◆ Negotiate for increases in the University's approximately-million dollar annual contribution to the GSA grants, awards, and bursaries.

Did you know?

The GSA offers:

- ▶ Graduate Student Group Grants
- ▶ Recognition Awards
- ▶ Health and Dental Plan

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Mental health is inextricably tied to physical health as well as a myriad of social factors. In recognition of this complexity, *the GSA will continue to:*

- ◆ Work to increase accessibility to professional mental health and/or medical services. International students merit particular attention here due to their lack of familiarity with the Canadian healthcare system.
- ◆ Advocate for government and University services which strengthen mental resilience, and services for financially vulnerable graduate students. Part of this effort is represented by the work of negotiating with service providers to offer health coverage that remains affordable but comprehensive, as well as increasing the GSA's annual financial support for the Campus Food Bank.



What Issues Are Priorities?

The GSA believes that graduate students should be provided with professional development opportunities that are essential for future career success.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Graduates of masters and doctoral programs at the University of Alberta are leaders and innovators of the economic market within Edmonton, across Alberta, and beyond. *It follows that the GSA:*

- ◆ Considers it crucial to provide graduate students with the opportunity to connect with and participate in the labour market in ways that will strengthen their future prospects.
- ◆ Expects that further initiatives in this vein will complement the existing internship and professional development opportunities available to graduate students.

CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

As members of a society defined not only by political and cultural boundaries, *the GSA is:*

- ◆ Committed to pursuing work that prioritizes environmental stewardship and sustainability as a practice in research, in work, and in life.

Did you know?

The GSA:

- ▶ meets regularly with the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research and the Dean of Students
- ▶ is a member of the provincial advocacy group the Alberta Graduate Provincial Advocacy Council

NATIONAL PRIORITIES

Advocacy to the federal government was previously hindered by the absence of a Canadian alliance of graduate student associations. With the recent establishment of such a network, *the GSA will:*

- ◆ Participate in joint efforts to advocate for increased Tri-Council funding for graduate studies, and for dedicated immigration streams for international graduate students.



What Issues Are Priorities?

*In its role as a union,
the GSA champions,
advances, and
protects the rights
of its members as
workers.*

SAFETY AND DIGNITY

Graduate students are entitled to conducting their work and studies in spaces which are free from harassment and abuse, and which foster world-level researchers and leaders as befits this world-level institution. *The GSA will* continue to spotlight this necessity. This work is expected to manifest as—among other things:

- ◆ Continued advocacy for the betterment of student-supervisor relationships (working closely with the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research on the implementation of recently approved policies around quality supervision).
- ◆ Pursuit of improvements in the physical accessibility of work, research, and study spaces.
- ◆ Continued advocacy for the preservation of high quality graduate-level programs.
- ◆ Tangible work to prevent and respond to sexual violence (in partnership with the Students' Union and the Sexual Violence Prevention Coordinator).

Did you know?

The GSA:

- ▶ has seats on the Board of Governors, the General Faculties Council, and their sub-committees
- ▶ works individually with students to help them

LABOUR

With regards to its role as the union for AEGSs, *the GSA will*:

- ◆ Continue the work of bolstering its bargaining position. This may manifest as, among others, the continued growth of a robust stewardship network, and that of the dedicated labour fund which member dues augment.
- ◆ Work to ensure that AEGSs are protected by legislated occupational health and safety standards.
- ◆ Seek to ensure campus-wide compliance with the provisions of the Graduate Student Assistantship Collective Agreement by connecting with graduate students as well as the institutional units who serve these students.



ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Circumstances are shifting rapidly in Alberta and specifically within the University. Structurally, changes have occurred at the discretion of the provincial government and the University administration. Meanwhile in a broader sense, public health and economic ripple effects have altered the needs of the graduate student body. In response to this changing landscape, *the GSA will:*

- ♦ Continue diligently advocating for the voice of graduate students and striving to protect the interests of this diverse population.
- ♦ Remain committed to ongoing review of its own internal structure and to making changes where warranted to ensure it is operating to the fullest extent of its capacity.



Events:

The GSA will offer a mixed slate of virtual and in-person events in the 2022-2023 year; these include Fall and Winter orientation opportunities, GSA information sessions which are offered for the benefit of graduate students, and regular social events. Additionally, the GSA General Election takes place annually in February-March.



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