



Graduate Students' Association

University of Alberta

The 2019-2020 team of GSA Directly-Elected Officers (DEOs) developed the GSA Board Strategic Work Plan (SWP) from May to June 2019 and presented the finalized Plan to GSA Council in July 2019. The complete SWP is available on the [GSA website](#).

Below is the final update concerning the DEOs' progress in pursuing some of the major goals outlined in the 2019-2020 SWP. As this document is intended as a comprehensive narrative of the 2019-2020 strategic efforts of the GSA DEOs, it includes some reiteration of the updates provided to GSA Council in [October 2019](#) and [January 2020](#).

COVID-19

In response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the GSA is working to keep graduate students informed about University directives as well as changing practices and procedures in the face of the growing need for social distancing measures. This includes regular updates via the GSA newsletter as well as a number of special bulletins which carry, among others, updates on the GSA Health and Dental Plan (with particular regard to the travel coverage), FGSR academic policies, and Edmonton Transit System service changes. President Fahed Elian participates in daily conference calls on the situation along with prominent members of University administration and Andrew Sharman, Vice-President (Facilities and Operations) who heads the crisis response team.

In accordance with the University's travel directives, the GSA ceased the disbursement of GSA Academic Travel Grants for events requiring travel, but continued to offer funding for events offered online. Additionally, the GSA has responded to rising graduate student need for financial support in the face of social distancing measures or quarantine procedures by providing additional funds via the GSA Emergency Bursary, per the approval of Vice-President Student Services Chantal Labonté. An amount of \$8,900 has been disbursed through this avenue at the time of print.

The bulk of GSA services have continued to be offered remotely, via both email and virtual meetings, following the closure of the GSA office in Triffo Hall on 17 March 2020, which occurred in accordance with University directives. Weekly Reboot Your Writing sessions offered in partnership with the Academic Success Centre also continued to be offered, remotely. The Campus Food Bank, which receives a grant from the GSA (increased for the 2020-2021 fiscal year), has similarly continued to operate to meet the growing needs of its users, many of whom are international graduate students.

Furthermore, Dr. Brooke Milne (Vice-Provost and Dean of Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR)) invited the GSA to participate in a special vodcast to answer some of the most pressing concerns of graduate students. President Fahed Elian and Vice-President Academic Dylan Ashley participated, and the vodcast was launched on 31 March 2020. It can be found [HERE](#).

With respect to the Spring/Summer 2020 terms, the GSA has participated in a number of discussions based on the temporary elimination of certain Mandatory Non-Instructional Fees (MNIFS) associated with services that students are unable to access. At the time of print, the University has agreed that students will not be assessed the Athletics and Recreation fee, the PAW Centre fee, or the Spring 2020 U-Pass fee. Further updates are forthcoming.

As responses to COVID-19, and the associated effects of those responses, remain ever evolving, discussions are ongoing in this area.



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Improving Student-Supervisor Relationships

GSA DEOs have expended significant effort in this area. Work over the past several months has focused on meetings with Dr. Milne, whose ongoing goal is to improve overall FGSR policies and procedures. Dr. Milne has, after extensive consultation with the GSA, developed mechanisms that will help to guide graduate student-supervisor relationships and provide feedback on a student's academic progress throughout their graduate program. These mechanisms are now slated for final approval in Fall 2020 and expected implementation in Winter 2021, following a pilot program in several departments (currently, no delays are expected in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic). Vice-President Academic Dylan Ashley, alongside President Fahed Elian, advocated extensively for the creation of these mechanisms at various levels of University governance. Furthermore, Vice-President Student Services Chantal Labonté and Vice-President Academic Dylan Ashley gave a presentation on the importance of exemplary graduate student supervision at the Student Advisors' Conference on 5 March 2020.

Continued advocacy has also yielded the FGSR development of a supervisory college proposal, membership of which is required for faculty who wish to supervise graduate students. Members of this college would undergo training and be penalized for supervisory infractions. Formal discussions of this proposal began in January 2020 in FGSR Council. Various DEOs also participate regularly in other projects aimed at improving the quality of graduate student supervision – as an example, Vice-President Academic Dylan Ashley and Vice-President Student Services Chantal Labonté will both be featured in an upcoming FGSR podcast series on effective supervision.

Michener Park Closure

Work addressing the closure of this major graduate student residence has focused on advocacy for support for students, a bulk of whom are international students and/or students who parent. This past year has seen the creation of the Michener Park Transition Advisory Committee (MPTAC) with the support of Vice-President External Marc Waddingham, who is co-chair of this committee. The mandate of MPTAC has focused on connecting Michener Park residents with community and University resources.

Tuition and Funding

This major strategic priority of the 2019-2020 year has resulted in countless updates to GSA Council and GSA members, in particular since the release of the provincial budget and its immediate and significant impact on the budget of the University. Across the province, graduate students will see significant tuition fee increases, often up to the maximum 7% allowed by government. While continuing domestic course-based students at the U of A will see a 7% increase, advocacy spearheaded by President Fahed Elian has resulted in an agreement wherein continuing domestic thesis-based students will have a rebate applied to the 7% increase, such that the actual increase paid by them will be 2.67% (tuition rates for continuing international course-based and thesis-based students having been set earlier at 4% and 2.67% (after application of the same rebate provided for continuing domestic thesis-based students), respectively). Initial discussions proposed a 7% increase across the board. The University will also set aside an additional 15% of these increases for financial support for graduate students.

Labour, Collective Agreement, and Health and Safety Matters

The Vice-President Labour, Shanawaz Mohammad, in collaboration with the GSA Labour Relations Committee (GSA LRC), continued the negotiation for the 2018-2020 Collective Agreement for Academically-Employed Graduate Students (AEGSs) over the summer and early fall of 2019. This agreement was ratified by AEGSs in October 2019 and by the University Board of Governors in December 2019.

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Work has now commenced for the negotiation of the next Collective Agreement for AEGSs, with a digital town hall having taken place on 19 March 2020. Feedback from AEGSs concerning what they want the GSA to bargain for is also being solicited via other electronic means. Next, the GSA LRC will draft the GSA's bargaining mandate using this information and AEGSs will then vote on this mandate before it is submitted to the University as the GSA's Opening Position to commence bargaining. After 1 May 2020, this work will be led by incoming Vice-President Labour Umesh

Nimmathi. Additionally, this year the GSA has retained legal counsel that specializes in labour law and union matters for assistance with negotiations.

The Vice-President Labour Shanawaz Mohammad also continues his advocacy work around the development of mandatory health and safety training for employment supervisors (including those supervising graduate students) on campus. He also has worked directly with graduate students to address reported issues of safety and security for students more broadly on campus. More specifically, the Vice-President Labour and the Vice-President Student Services Chantal Labonté have consulted with key stakeholders on the implementation of standards relating to psychological health and safety legislation, under which the University is expected to operate as of 1 July 2020.

GSA Health and Dental Plan

With the 2014-2020 agreement with Studentcare expiring on 31 August 2020, the GSA initiated a lengthy Request for Proposals process by soliciting proposals from a number of student health and dental plan administrators. President Fahed Elian and Vice-President Student Services Chantal Labonté (with further assistance from Vice-President Academic Dylan Ashley) reviewed these proposals and conducted interviews before ultimately recommending that the GSA Board continue the relationship with Studentcare. The GSA has now commenced negotiations with Studentcare for a new agreement, which is expected to include additional sponsorship funds from Studentcare. This process is expected to be finalized in April 2020.

Support for Students Impacted by PS 752 Tragedy

The unexpected tragedy of PS 752 warranted particular attention in January. Alongside University President, David Turpin; Edmonton Mayor, Don Iveson; Alberta Premier, Jason Kenney; and Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, President Fahed Elian attended the University's Memorial Service on 12 January 2020 and expressed his condolences. Also in attendance were close friends and families of the victims and other prominent members of the community.

Later discussions with Dean of Students, Dr. André Costopoulos, among others, were focused on providing ongoing support to graduate students impacted by the loss personally as well as academically. The GSA advocated to Heather McPherson, Member of Parliament, as well as to Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland, for special consideration for international students whose visa applications and study permits were impacted by this tragedy. The GSA further contributed to these efforts via special disbursement of GSA Emergency Bursaries for those impacted. A plaque memorializing the lives of the graduate students lost in the tragedy has also been designed and will be displayed in the GSA lounge at the main entrance of Triffo Hall.

Support for Indigenous Students

The GSA's work to support Indigenous graduate students took two forms: firstly, with the support of Andrew Sharman, Vice-President (Facilities and Operations), a temporary space in HUB Mall has been identified for the Indigenous Graduate Students' Association (IGSA), allowing them to establish a home office until more permanent arrangements can be made. This physical space will empower the IGSA to fulfil their mandate and continue their operations on a long-term basis.

Secondly, extensive consultation with the IGSA as well as Dr. Florence Glanfield, Vice-Provost (Indigenous Programming and Research), led to the pilot phase of the Supporting Aboriginal Graduate Enhancement (SAGE) program, which kicked off in January 2020. FGSR has provided office space for the program in Triffo Hall and has hired a graduate student under the Collective Agreement as the graduate coordinator for SAGE.

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Lastly, in order to better equip the GSA to continue the work of supporting Indigenous students, DEOs and members of the GSA staff underwent Indigenous cultural competency training. This training was provided by the Ben Calf Robe Society.

Other Key Projects

Other key projects undertaken by the DEOs in the 2019-2020 year (not including regular advising and assistance provided to numerous individual graduate students throughout the year) include, but are not limited to:

Ongoing work associated with the Suicide Prevention Framework project, with a particular focus on developing a Toolkit to facilitate grieving and coping with off- and on-campus deaths;

- Extensive ongoing work to support graduate students who parent in collaboration with the Office of the Dean of Students. Among others, these efforts resulted in the hosting of a Halloween event for small children, and most significantly, the creation of an infant and child care/feeding space in Triffo Hall;
- New partnerships with the Alumni Association and the Community Social Work Team to create the graduate student specific Collective Tea Time, intended to give graduate students the opportunity to make social connections. This program was briefly suspended in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic but is resuming, virtually, on 17 April 2020;
- Continued involvement with the Alberta Graduate Provincial Advocacy Council (ab-GPAC) as it ramps up its work as an advocacy/lobbying organization for graduate students across the province, as well as participation in meetings of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, allowing the GSA to engage in advocacy at the federal level;
- The Charter of Student Rights, spearheaded by the Students' Union (SU) for the benefit of all undergraduate and graduate students. The GSA proposed the addition of a section dedicated to graduate students which, while noting all the other rights listed apply equally to undergraduate and graduate students, also focuses on the specific rights and responsibilities of AEGSS, given their unique position as students, researchers, and employees of the University. The final document will be presented to the General Faculties Council (GFC) on 20 April 2020 for approval;
- Further development of institutional framework and mechanisms within ab-GPAC, with a particular emphasis on updated on-boarding procedures and government relations training, as well as the establishment of closer ties with partner GSAs. This work was spearheaded by Vice-President External Marc Waddingham as Vice-Chair of ab-GPAC, and President Fahed Elian as a Director of ab-GPAC;
- Significant provincial advocacy work for the betterment of the graduate student experience, facilitated via the organization of and attendance at a number of demonstrations and protests, such as the "Students Not Silent" march, which urged the government to make budgetary considerations for Alberta post-secondary institutions and their students, and the "Red for Ed" march on behalf of teachers and other public sector employees whose work was impacted by the provincial budget. Upcoming elements of this ongoing advocacy work include: an open letter penned by ab-GPAC, Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS), and Alberta Students' Executive Council (ASEC), urging the provincial government to suspend the implementation of the performance-based funding framework for post-secondary institutions in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a province-wide advertisement campaign, details of which are forthcoming;
- Further advocacy efforts at the provincial and federal levels has focused on the development of an immigration stream tailored to International students whose research and expertise benefit the local economy. These efforts have yielded a number of positive discussions with government stakeholders and we look forward to offering future updates in this vein.

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