



Graduate Students' Association

University of Alberta

2021-2022 GSA Board Strategic Work Plan 17 January 2022 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 GSA Council for information at their July meeting. It can 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 are provided to GSA Council in October, January, and April; this document is the second 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 harmony with the 2021-2022 SWP, can be found below.

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- Engaging in repeated consultation efforts with the graduate student body to gauge reactions to, and—later—experiences resulting from the Fall 2021 Return to Campus. This consultation was conducted primarily via two surveys and results were reviewed by the GSA Board and used to guide advocacy directions;
 - Securing a multi-year agreement with the University pertaining to their existing subsidization of the Graduate Student Assistance Program (GSAP), a commitment that will allow the GSA to continue offering this highly valued service to its members at an affordable rate. This agreement will guarantee the contribution of \$84,000 per year, starting with the 2022-2023 year, for a period of 3 years;
 - Supporting the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR) Student Supervisory Excellence suite of regulations and guidelines as academic units work to implement its changes in advance of the Fall 2022 term;
 - Working with the FGSR to reimagine how graduate funding packages can be improved so as to provide much needed financial stability for students. This project has been a priority at the GSA for several years and the University's restructuring to a college model now provides an opportunity to reassess graduate student funding on campus;



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- Relating to the continuing work of academic restructuring, the President served as a member of the Academic Leaders' Task Group (ALTG) which sought to evaluate the role of academic leaders (that is, professors with administrative contracts) given the reimagining of departments and faculties in the new college model of the University. The ALTG has finalized a report of its recommendations and it was recently reviewed by General Faculties Council (GFC);
- On behalf of the GSA, the President has also devoted significant efforts into advocating for the FGSR to remain a standalone faculty for graduate students and ensure that graduate students' services remain within said faculty. This includes preventing migration of services from the FGSR to other offices in the new college model and working with the Provost and Vice-President (Academic) to ensure that there is robust consultation with the GSA regarding any changes in the structure of FGSR;
- The President has been engaged in conversation with both the University President and the Provost and Vice-President (Academic) about tuition increases which the GSA opposes, while expressing an openness to discussing grandfathering a cohort of graduate students into the previously GSA-negotiated rebate (2019). The GSA will hear back from the Provost and Vice-President (Academic) in January 2022;
- Working alongside the Students' Union (SU) to hire a Sexual Violence Response Coordinator, a role that will contribute to achieving our goal of ensuring safety and wellness for all graduate students and other University community members. Recruitment is currently under way for this role;
- Also in this vein, the GSA recently signed a letter alongside the SU which outlined ten concrete demands from the University to better support survivors as well as create a preventative framework against sexual violence. This action [garnered media coverage](#). In further emphasis of this demand, undergraduate student representatives, GSA student leaders, and graduate student representatives staged a walk-out of the 29 November 2021 meeting of GFC in a call to action to University administration and the campus community more broadly;
- The President and VP Student Services are continuing to explore ways in which the GSA can formalize financial support to graduate students who face the often-prohibitive cost associated with technologies essential to learning at the post-secondary level. Discussions are ongoing with the Office of the Registrar, Office of Advancement, and the Office of the Dean of Students on the possibility of establishing a bursary program. Meetings are set up to discuss ways to fundraise for the program;
- The GSA Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee (GSA EDIC) circulated a consultation survey to help it identify upcoming initiatives. The committee aimed 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. The committee is now in the process of reviewing the survey feedback and determining next steps;
- The President and VP External participated in the Alberta Graduate Provincial Advocacy Council (ab-GPAC) Advocacy Week, an annual initiative during which ab-GPAC executives meet with members of the provincial government and the opposition to advance graduate student interests;
- In the same vein, the VP External and President met with 24 MLAs from the provincial government and opposition, including several high profile government officials, to discuss introducing a dedicated immigration stream for international students, reforming financial aid, and implementing funding for care-giver graduate students;

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- The GSA office continues to operate in a hybrid format where staff work in office as well as remotely in order to balance public health standards with the need to support graduate students in-person;
- Under the supervision of the President, the GSA Budget and Finance Committee (GSA BFC) is currently reviewing the GSA's investment policy to ensure it remains reflective of the organization's goals of assuming a low-risk stance and adhering to the principles of ethical investing;
- The GSA launched Surviving and Thriving in Grad School to in October 2021. This event series works to connect new graduate students with experienced ones. In addition to this, an end of term event was held in December 2021: the GSA presented a free and virtual improv comedy event featuring Edmonton's Rapid Fire Theatre and several door prizes for attendees;
- The VP Student Services and other GSA student executives are collaborating with Studentcare to solicit feedback from members on the GSA Health and Dental Plan, its associated fee, and coverage;
- Affordable student housing and housing for families continue to be a significant priority for the VP External. Among other efforts, the GSA VP External meets regularly with the Associate Vice-President (Campus Services) to further advocacy efforts and cultivate a foundation for future collaboration;
- Work to formalize the Graduate Student Societies of Canada, a national student advocacy group, is ongoing in collaboration and cooperation with other prominent graduate student leaders. Among other priorities, this group will prioritize advocating for immigration support for international students, and increased Tri-Council funding and student loan subsidies;
- Pertaining to the position of the GSA as the union for Academically-Employed Graduate Students (AEGS), the following pursuits have been undertaken:
 - The GSA Labour Relations Committee, with significant guidance and leadership from the VP Labour, has recruited and trained a number of faculty stewards as part of ongoing efforts to bolster the bargaining power of the union;
 - The GSA has now formalized its service agreement with the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC); a partnership which will strengthen the union and its bargaining position. This service agreement is funded by the newly established GSA Labour Union Fund;
 - The GSA Labour Union Fund—which is comprised of a seed fund of \$100,000 transferred from the GSA's 2019-2020 operating budget surplus, following a recommendation from the GSA BFC and the approval of GSA Council, and sustained by the collection of a 1% union due of the salary portion of stipends received by AEGS—will also strengthen the steward network and allow for more comprehensive communication strategies with the union members;
 - The VP Labour has launched an outreach effort to all recognized graduate student groups to raise awareness of AEGS rights. Presentations on the Collective Agreement rights and feedback sessions on union effectiveness were given to all interested student groups (25% of those contacted). Also in this vein, the VP Labour has led regular efforts to connect and share information with GSA unions at the University of Lethbridge and the University of Calgary;
 - The work summarized above is culminating in a stronger bargaining position as the negotiations for the GSA Collective Agreement commence. This process launched in the fall with two town halls and a survey circulated to all AEGSs to collect feedback on bargaining

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priorities. In December 2021, AEGSs voted in favour of the bargaining mandate, and the GSA Negotiating Team is now ready to submit their opening proposal to commence bargaining;

- The team is seeking to finalize an agreement before the termination of the existing agreement in August 2022; *and*
- The GSA executive team continue to cultivate and sustain productive relationships with prominent members of University administration and stakeholders which remains a high priority. The student executives therefore engage in regular meetings with University President, Bill Flanagan; Provost and Vice-President (Academic), Steve Dew; Vice-Provost and FGSR Dean, Brooke Milne; Chief Strategy Officer, Catherine Swindlehurst; and Dean of Students, André Costopoulos, among many others.

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 and final update on the SWP will be brought forward to GSA Council in April 2022.

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