UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA GRADUATE STUDENTS' SOCIETY

EXECUTIVE BOARD

MEMBER REPORT TO GRADUATE REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL

From: Jason Stewart Walters, Director of Student Affairs

To: Graduate Representative Council

Date: 24 February 2014

26 NOVEMBER 2013 - 28 JANUARY 2014

INTRODUCTION

The primary duties of this position include serving as an advocate for and supporting the well-being of graduate students, external affairs, and Primary activities since the beginning of the 2013-2014 term are discussed below.

BILL C-35

Discussion:

Bill C-35 is a federal law intended to eliminate the problem of 'crooked consultants' in Canada. Unfortunately the way it was written, academic workers are currently considered to be affected by these rules as well. Universities across campus were required to send workers through a long training process, hire outside consultants or lawyers, or stop offering immigration help to students. Through my connections in the UVic international office, I learned that UVic decided to stop offering the service, which will have a huge impact on current and future students as well as likely affecting enrollment and the budget of the University.

Actions:

I immediately took the issue to the Board, which has been in total support of the cause to get the University to make some arrangements to still provide the service. I have discussed the issue with the Dean, and an Associate Dean and tried to setup a meeting with the AVP International, but have been unsuccessful thus far. However, as a result of Colleen Clement's connections with CFUV, both the AVP International and myself were interviewed for one of the ongoing programs and a blog post was also written. I have kept continuous contact with the International Office to
get updates on the issue from their perspective. In addition, I have been in discussions with the GSS at SFU and we are working toward communicating with an MP regarding this issue to try to push for change. I have also spoken with the UVic UVSS to partner on the issue. Depending on the results of our various activities, it may also be possible to involve the full force of the Association of British Columbia Schools.

Stacy Chappel has been working on the legal side of the issue and identified a lawyer that would be available to provide support for a reduced fee. The Board voted to move forward with a Legal Clinic Day for International Graduate Students following the Annual Pancake Breakfast. We also voted to have Stacy pursue a legal opinion to determine if we also fall under this ruling as GSS Staff and Board Members. If so, we can formally challenge the interpretation.

Update (26/11) - The University has agreed to take steps to remedy this situation. We received a letter from President Cassels that stated that the University will be training a few staff members to be able to provide this service. In the interim, a qualified consultant will be retained to hire the service. We expect action by mid-December. The Associate Vice President - International was invited to speak to the Board on 6/11 and provided this information along with some additional background regarding these services on campus and possible communication disconnects that may have resulted in delays.

The Legal Clinic Day was a success and we had quite a backlog of student interest, which is evidence for the need of the service for current graduate students. The legal opinion indicates that we are possibly subject to these rules, but a legal interpretation by the courts would be required. As such, I will continue to pursue this issue along with other student societies in BC to attempt to have this rule reversed, so that we are not at risk.

Update (24/2) – The GSS Board had meetings with the AVP – International and the UVic Executive last week. Reeta Tremblay and Andrew Marton both indicated that the IO staff person that is being trained (Tia Robertson) will complete her training by November of this year. Until then, a consultant in Vancouver has been identified to serve the needs of the international student body. The contract should be final by the end of this week.

RESEARCH ASSISTANTS

Discussion:

The status of Research Assistants on the UVic campus is not well understood by either the administration or the students. RAs are typically not considered employees of the University, but rather those of the professor, despite the fact that they are paid through the University. Issues have arisen for students lately such as not having the option for direct deposit even when away for research, liability and responsibility for employees’ rights, professors making financial promises and then withdrawing them, students receiving pay late or not at all, etc. In addition, even though even professors on campus are moving toward unionization, this has not been possible for RAs.

Actions:

Both Stacy and myself have been gathering information from students that have been impacted by these various issues. We have both met with the Dean and will continue to press for a formal
University policy with respect to RAs. In addition, Stacy has been seeking a legal opinion on the matter and the Board has been in support. I have also been discussing the issue with GSS groups at other Canadian universities and the issue is handled differently in other provinces. I am interested to gain the support of the Association of British Columbia Schools to get MLAs to support a BC-wide resolution on the matter.

Update (26/11) - We have some information regarding this matter that will be provided to the GRC that will not be discussed here by vote of the Board. However, I will mention that we will be having a meeting with Dean Capson on 22/11 to discuss the issue further and additional actions will be based on the 26/11 GRC meeting.

Update (28/1/2014) - We have met with UVic administration regarding the creation of a process for recourse for financial payment issues. We also discussed safety issues and those are currently covered through the University and procedures should be followed. We discussed creating a guide for new RAs with the location of pertinent information, as one currently does not exist. It does not look like the University will change their views on RAs as non-employees, despite all evidence to the contrary. We will continue to work on this issue.

Update (24/2) – Reeta Tremblay indicated last week that she has selected someone to work with David Capson to develop a comprehensive guide for RAs and improve processes. A new issue has been identified that RA money is being combined with TA money in payments, resulting in a much higher tax withdrawal, likely due to placement in a different bracket. It is unclear whether these incomes should be taxed differently. We will follow up on these issues.

DEPARTMENT FUNDING CUTS

Discussion:

Department funding cuts was one of the Action Plan items for this year. This has been a difficult topic to tackle. The University is following the instructions of the Provincial Government, as it always has with respect to enrollment and budget. This is likely to need to be worked through the Minister of Advanced Education and other MLAs.

Actions:

I hosted an action plan meeting, and we basically came to the above conclusions. I also spoke with the Dean to further my understanding of how money is distributed both through the FGS and for TAs. In addition, several of us attended a University Budget Meeting to hear about the plan going forward. As this is a provincial issue that affects the other universities, I am interested to work with the Association of British Columbia Schools to advance the budget priority of post-secondary education among the Provincial Government. From a UVic perspective, we will continue to try to be involved in decisions that will affect the quality of education that graduate students receive and their well-being on campus.

Update (26/11) - We will be meeting with AVP - Academic/Provost Trembley in the very near future and will discuss this issue and ask for any updates. As well, we have a meeting scheduled in December with the University administration in December and will continue to press for support.
I am planning to continue my work in coordination with other BC student societies to push the issue at the Provincial government level.

Update (28/1/2014) - Based on the Trembley Budget meeting of 12/12/14, it appears that no cuts will occur during 2014, but may be seen again in 2015. There are two new planning processes for future budgets and we have been offered a spot on the Enhanced Planning Advisory Committee.

Update (24/2) – Jamie Cassels indicated last week that the province is cutting funds by 17 million this year, but UVic has already accounted for those cuts and will not need to adjust the budget for next year. He did indicate that the University is in favor of the Provincial Government’s idea to remove the 2% tuition caps on the more professional academic programs, such as engineering in the future. Katrina has been elected to sit on the Enhanced Planning Advisory Committee, as I have a conflict during their meeting times.

COORDINATION WITH OTHER STUDENT UNIONS

Discussion:

As budget cuts and other issues have begun to impact students across the province, the universities have begun to organize to invoke power in numbers. This has led to the creation of the Association of British Columbia Schools, which is in the process of being registered as an official society. The Board is currently in the process of reviewing the final constitution and bylaws for a vote to recommend joining or not to our AGM.

In addition, UBC hosted the second Student Union Development Summit in recent years, which provided the opportunity to discuss lessons-learned and hear about what other student unions are doing across Canada.

Actions:

I attended the SUDS event and have had several conversations regarding the ABCS with other student unions. I am in favor of further collaboration and would like to promote it as an opportunity to learn from other organizations, as well as join together to resolve larger issues of common interest.

Update (26/11) - The Association of British Columbia Schools is still in the process of becoming a society. An AGM should be scheduled in the near future and I will attempt to attend and keep up with other meetings to track the progress.

Other coordination efforts outside of ABCS are continuing, as discussed under other specific activities in this report.

28/1/2014 - No new action. Some new activity will occur before next meeting.

24/2 The ABCs is now an official organization and has begun lobbying on behalf of BC Universities. They are participating in the upcoming Lobby Days in Victoria. I met with the Director of External Affairs for the GSS at SFU regarding plans to join ABCs, relations hips with the Provincial Government,
Strategic Planning, etc. We will be meeting with the UVic UVSS in March to discuss relations and common campaign collaboration, as well as their experiences in the ABCs.

GSS SUPPORT AND REPRESENTATION FOR DISTANCE STUDENTS

Discussion:

It is difficult to communicate and identify issues for distance students that are not on campus. It is important for us to find new and innovative ways to connect with these students, include them in University activities and decision-making, and extend relevant services to them.

Actions:

I have been exploring creative ways to connect with these students and obtain feedback regarding concerns and interests. We also exploring ways to provide more opportunities for involvement in the GSS. I am connected with the Graduate Students' Association at Athabasca University (online university) and I will continue my discussions with them to see how they function and if there are some technologies or other lessons that we can learn from them.

28/1/2014 - No New Action

28/2/2014 – No New Action

ADMINISTRATIVE TRANSCRIPT ISSUE

Discussion:

Last fall a student brought it to our attention that the program deadlines appear in the unofficial administrative transcript as registration holds. Despite the deadline dates, they appear to be active holds and to an outsider could be seen as ‘not in good standing’. Since it is common for us to apply for scholarships, fellowships, other degree programs, etc. initially using the unofficial transcripts, this may affect the chances of gaining the desired outcome. It also costs $10 per transcript to send an official transcript and those would need to be scanned in when it is necessary to upload a copy.

Actions:

I gave this information to AVP Student Affairs and he arranged that I meet with Records. I met with them on 29/11 and we discussed the issue. They agreed to modify the wording and/or location of the information to minimize any misunderstandings.
Update 24/2 – I spoke with Lauren Charlton last week and she said that they have been working on some fixes, but everything moves slowly.

MEETINGS ATTENDED

GSS MEETINGS

Exec Board Meeting (5/2, 19/2)
GSS Exec / UVic Exec (20/2)
GSS Social Events - Wednesday Coffees, Board Games Night (12/2)
GRC (N/A)

*See previous report for past meetings attended

EXTERNAL MEETINGS

Distance Education Members Committee (N/A)
Senate Committee on Academic Standards (17/2)
International Student Conference - Speaker (1/2)
Meetings With SFU GSS External Affairs (8/2)
Meeting w/Records re: Transcript Issue (N/A)
Ombudsperson Committee (N/A)
GSS Budget Planning Session (21/2)
Student Mental Health Implementation Committee (N/A)
IO Global Community Advisory Council (23/2)

*See previous report for past meetings attended

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