

University of Victoria Graduate Students' Society

2015-16 STRATEGIC PLAN: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Approved by GSS Graduate Representative Council August 4, 2015



Introduction

This executive summary sets to guide the Graduate Students Society Executive Board with a vision and direction for the upcoming year. The document helps clarify the specific desired outcomes of the Executive Board's goals and strategies to fulfill its mandate. The Board establishes here a set of detailed projects and measurable desired outcomes to enable the GSS to track developments in advancing its members' interests as part of a broader strategic plan.

The contents of this document are:

1. A brief background section that outlines the consultation process used to formulate this summary and the context out of which these issues arose.
2. The strategic goals that the Executive hopes to achieve this year and the accompanying required actions.
3. Priority areas of particular interest to the Graduate Representative Council who are encouraged to strike ad-hoc committees to investigate on how best to and proceed on these particular issues.

The GSS executive plans to focus on these main goals during the 2015-2016 academic year in conjunction to any campaigns or matters as they arise concerning graduate students and their wellbeing.

The strategic plan was conceived with the overall purposes of the GSS in mind which are:

- to represent the interests of the membership in a democratic manner in matters pertaining to education and the welfare of graduate students.
- to promote the principle and practice of graduate student representation at all levels of decision making at the University of Victoria and on all agencies or other bodies which deliberate on the affairs of graduate students;
- to promote cultural, intellectual and recreational activities among the members.
- to promote the academic and social welfare of its members through the provision of services.

Background

Consultation Process

The Executive Board consulted with its stakeholders to collect input on moving forward on important issues concerning graduate students. The following section highlights notable discussions that informed significant portions of the strategic plan.

Meeting with the Dean of Graduate Studies Dr. David Capson was instrumental for keeping the Board informed on upcoming projects at the Faculty of Graduate Studies. His updates included the status of renewing the Student- Supervisory policy more graduate involvement in the governance at the Faculty of Graduate Studies, and clarifying how graduate funding is determined.

The building renovation received extensive feedback from the wider membership, staff, and by consulting records of the development of the project to its current stage. In particular, the strategic

plan takes into consideration past feasibility studies, decisions from the special 2014 AGM, and professional consultation for the overall design process.

Proposals for policy revisions and reviewing the GRC structure resulted from consultation with the outgoing Graduate Representative Council (GRC). Many of the strategic goals set to improve Council are modeled to respond to graduate student feedback they provided in a detailed confidential questionnaire about their experience serving as representatives..

The GSS staff and outgoing Board were also consulted to maintain and foster institutional memory and regarding areas that work well and those that could use further improvement. Staff feedback provided valuable information on how their roles help further the purposes of the GSS and where the GSS can still strengthen the workplace means to meet the needs of the Society. Their input and concerns have help shape the design for functional improvement of the proposed restaurant renovations. Former executive members provided detailed reports on issues arising from the past year. Their input helped advise the current Board's proposals to meet its continued commitment to enhance GRC participation and engagement.

Current Context

The challenges facing graduate students at the University of Victoria include lack of funding, access to adequate study space, and ensuring support systems exist to help graduate students succeed while at UVic.

In the past, students have sometimes been given incorrect information regarding their funding and its eligibility for renewal. This has led to issues around students completing their degrees, as they lack funds to pay tuition. The Dean of Graduate Studies has been working on standardizing funding letters to ensure utmost clarity to students. One of the other issues that has been noted is the lack of a Supervisor-Student Supervisory policy. The Dean is committed to examining materials that currently exist and revising them into full bodied policies that ensure students are meeting with their advisors and receiving adequate support during their time at the university.

Internally, the challenges have largely been around graduate student engagement and ensuring that the largest number of graduate student voices are heard. There are a number of things that must be done this year in order to meet previous mandates and expectations, including the referendum on the restaurant renovation. One of the main challenges in the past has been meeting quorum at our GRC meetings and getting members involved and working on projects as they relate to grad council. Other challenges include reaching out to members, as the landscape of communication continually changes.

Strategic Goals

Restaurant Renovation

In order to make better use of the restaurant and David Clode room space for staff and our members, the GSS has discussed a restaurant renovation, using the accumulated capital in the GSS capital fund. The GSS has worked with an architectural firm to develop multiple renovation options, however the quote provided by facilities management for the renovation is greater than anticipated, surpassing the funds available in the GSS capital fund, thus possible renovations may require borrowing. The GSS has previously obtained a mandate to move forward on the renovation, however borrowing funds requires an additional referendum. We therefore need to communicate the renovation options to our members and hold a vote.

Next Steps:

- Launching a communications strategy around the renovation.
- Holding information sessions, and a potential panel discussion at a special general meeting to cover both the pros and cons of each renovation option

This will lead to an eventual resolution of a referendum vote on the matter.

Graduate Representative Council Engagement

Currently the GSS Graduate Representative Council (GRC) lacks sufficient engagement from all of its departmental members. This presents challenges in many areas of GSS governance as GRC meetings have been inefficient, with attendance being so low that quorum was often not met, preventing the GRC from moving forward on many strategic goals in the 2014-2015 academic year. Through conversations with former GRC representatives it became obvious that GRC representatives do not fully understand their role in GSS governance or do not feel confident in their ability to contribute to this process, despite orientation training and material that was provided, possibly due to a lack of familiarity with Robert's Rules of Order by which GRC meetings abide. Further, GRC structure did not previously *require* GRC representatives to participate in sub-committees or task forces, decreasing the role each GRC member played in the yearly progression. We believe decisions made at the March 2015 Semi-Annual General Meeting (SAGM) should make meeting quorum and requiring sub-committee participation easier, while increasing the number and variety of sub-committees and task forces may increase GRC representative participation.

Next Steps:

- Developing a GRC intake form that captures the information about departmental representative interests and skills relevant to their GRC participation. This form will outline committee responsibilities and their monthly time commitment so that representatives can choose activities in which they are both interested and fully able to commit to.
- Change the GRC meetings to a room that is more conducive to active conversation from all members.
- Update the GSS website so that GRC members can find information relevant to their role more easily.

- Create an information letter for Graduate Secretaries that outlines the role that GRC members play and how the role has changed.
- Overhaul GRC training, to provide a clearer orientation to the role and make representatives more aware of their duties and responsibilities.
- Increase sub-committee and ad-hoc committee presence.

This is an ongoing project that will likely continue into following executive terms. Ideally, the GRC will become a fully sustainable and productive council over time. By setting up the framework now, we can work towards better engagement and participation from members.

GSS Communication Strategy

The Executive wants to increase awareness of the GSS social activities, progress on strategic goals, as well as other important information to graduate students. Additionally, we want to increase overall traffic to the Halpern Center for Graduate Students, such that the space is being utilized effectively, while also increasing traffic to the restaurant.

Next Steps:

- Changing the format of the weekly e-mail newsletter to something more viewer friendly.
- Increase GSS social media presence via active Twitter and Instagram accounts.
- Increase information provided in the GSS handbook that relates more to the graduate student experience.

As an ongoing project with the GSS, this will lead to increased project awareness which will ultimately lead to increased member engagement.

Board of Governors Seat for Graduate Student

As it stands, there are only two seats designated for students on the University of Victoria Board of Governors (BOG). Neither of these seats is earmarked for graduate students, and both have been filled by undergraduate students in past years. As UVic is now beginning to market itself as a research intensive university, it is an optimal time to ensure one of the student seats on BOG is allocated to a graduate student representative.

Next Steps:

- Preparing a briefing to be sent to the University that details what we want and why.
- Submitting this letter to the University for consideration.
- Meeting with University administrators for follow up.
- Holding the election alongside the Senate elections in the spring of 2016.

By petitioning for a BOG seat, we will be able to ensure that all areas of graduate student interests are represented.

Priorities Proposed for Grad Council Consideration

Fee Referenda

The GSS currently provides funding to a variety of groups on campus (ex. Food bank, CFUV, University 101). This funding is taken from the GSS operating budget, which in turn decreases the amount of money the GSS can spend on other activities or projects. The executive board would like to determine whether this funding is still a priority for our members, and if so, whether they would support a separate fee, dedicated to the specific groups involved, which would then increase the GSS operating budget.

Next Steps:

- Adverting the fee referenda.
- Posting information that outlines how the fee referenda would work, and what the vote will cover on both the website and at the Grad House.
- Actually preparing the questions and soliciting feedback on the questions to ensure clarity.
- Eventually holding the referenda in tandem with the renovation question in the fall.

Research Assistants' Legal Status

It is in the opinion of the Board that the current UVic employment policy for Research Assistants (RA) leaves students vulnerable to experience unfair work relations because they are not considered University employees. This leaves RAs with no clear avenue for support from the University should the need arise. The Executive advocates for the University to review and revise Human Resources policy to recognize and protect RAs supervised by faculty who are currently classified as the current employer.

Next Steps:

- Establish a task force to analyze and determine the precise legal status of Research Assistants and prepare debriefs on the issue.
- Mandate the task force to develop proposed policy changes and present them for Grad Council approval.
- Drafting a coordinated campaign strategy that takes into account past efforts to determine the key decision makers to lobby.
- Delegating relevant stakeholders to implement the campaign strategy.

BC Graduate Scholarship

Currently, British Columbia is one of the only provinces in Canada without a provincial graduate scholarship program. Working alongside other Graduate Student Societies across the province we hope that headway can be made to petition the provincial government to permanently allocate some of its budget toward this program.

Next Steps:

- Review the current status of this campaign and prepare a briefing for GRC.
- Establish a GRC task force for the creation of a BC scholarship program.
- This group will examine and update the proposal.
- Develop a communications strategy to build public support, including key messages, media releases and presentations on budgets.

- Submit the proposal to the Minister of Advanced Education.

By working with other societies to petition the Minister and government, we can provide a solid proposal that allows for greater funding access for graduate students in BC.

Student Supervisory Relationship Policy

The Dean of Graduate Studies, David Capson, has decided that one of his priorities this coming year is to re-evaluate and further develop the Student – Supervisory Relationship policy. As it stands, the current policy is rarely enforced, and at best, acts as a guideline rather than a hard or fast rule. He aims to change that to create a document that supervisors and departments are accountable for. He has assured us that graduate students will be involved and have voice when this policy is changed, but it would be beneficial for GRC members to explore options on what a document may look like, before we are asked for input.

Next Steps:

- Establish a taskforce to work on this issue.
- Review the current status of this policy document, looking for both positive and negative aspects.
- Research what other university student-supervisor policy looks like.
- Formulate a list of what students would like to see in this new policy
- Take our concerns to the Dean of Graduate Studies.