

University of Victoria Graduate Students' Society

## 2016-2017 Strategic Plan



*Prepared by the Executive Board and presented to Graduate Representative Council on July 19, 2016*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	<b>ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>3</b>
CONTEXT .....	3
PROCESS OF DEVELOPING THIS PLAN .....	4
<b>THE STRATEGIC PLAN</b> .....	<b>5</b>
WELL-BEING AND COMMUNITY .....	5
<i>Restaurant Renovation</i> .....	5
<i>Organizing activities to create community</i> .....	5
<i>Focusing on graduate student well-being</i> .....	5
ADVOCACY .....	6
<i>Sexualized Violence Policy</i> .....	6
<i>Office for Graduate Student Advocacy</i> .....	6
<i>Research Assistants' Legal Status</i> .....	6
<i>Advocating for a BC Graduate Scholarship</i> .....	7
VISIBILITY .....	7
<i>Goods and wares for good people to wear</i> .....	7
<i>Updating and modernizing GSS communications</i> .....	7
<i>Improving GSS communications</i> .....	7
GOVERNANCE .....	8
<i>GSS Electoral Policy and Bylaw updates</i> .....	8
<i>Faculty of Graduate Studies Elections</i> .....	8
<i>Formalizing donations and creation of an endowment</i> .....	8
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>10</b>

## INTRODUCTION

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This document outlines the priorities and goals of the 2016-2017 University of Victoria Graduate Students' Society (GSS). For each goal, specific strategies and outcomes are described, to enable the Executive Board to measure progress in advancing its members' interests. 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 (University of Victoria Graduate Students' Society, 2016).*

The GSS Executive Board has identified four key themes to guide the work of the 2016-2017 year: Well-being and Community; Advocacy; Visibility; and Governance and Policy. The focus on **well-being and community** arises out of recent work on graduate student mental health, and concerns about graduate student isolation. The **advocacy** focus emerges from a desire to improve the ongoing work of the GSS in assisting individual students. The GSS initiated improvements to our member communications in 2015, and has identified **visibility and access** of the GSS as a continued priority. Finally, changes to BC's Society Act (BC Registries and Online Services, 2016), to our own election procedures, as well as new graduate student seats on the Faculty of Graduate Studies Council result in a need for a review of our **governance and policy**.

The reader will find below:

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. A section of background resources.

## CONTEXT

Graduate students continue to face challenges related to funding, study space, and student support systems stretched to capacity. The dropping value of the Canadian dollar has intensified pressure on budgets to support resources such as library subscriptions and research supplies. The assignment of the third floor of Mearns Centre for Learning to a digital scholarship centre means the long term ambition to have graduate study space in this area will not be realized.

Despite these difficulties, significant progress has been made in areas that have long concerned the GSS: graduate student representation and supervisory relationship policy. Graduate student representation in university governance has been consistently improving since the GSS proposed changes to representation in 2008. As of May 2016, each of the 2008 goals has been met: The Faculty of Graduate Studies formally supported graduate student representation in department meetings in April (2009); Senate representation

increased from one to three dedicated graduate student seats in October, 2010 (Senate, University of Victoria 2009); One of the two student seats on the Board of Governors was dedicated for graduate students in March 2016 (University Secretary, 2016). Further, the Faculty of Graduate Studies initiated a four seat increase to elected graduate student seats on their council effective fall 2016.

The GSS has also been involved in the Faculty of Graduate Studies review of the supervisory relationship policy. The GSS believes the formalization and clarification of the policy will directly address and improve one of the key areas of stress for graduate students. The policy update is expected in the coming year.

Internally, the GSS successfully improved member engagement in the 2015-2016 year. A change to bylaws, training, and procedures resulted in active participation by graduate department representatives in all society committees, and improved attendance at council meetings. Success brought new challenges, with increasing resources needed to support the administration of busy and active committees.

The GSS anticipates 2016-2017 will be an active year on the provincial level. The passing of provincial legislation regarding university policies on sexual violence has ensured that sexual assault policy and education will be a key focus for both the GSS and the University this year. The provincial election in 2017 also provides an opportunity for the GSS to highlight the lack of a provincial scholarship program in BC for graduate students.

#### PROCESS OF DEVELOPING THIS PLAN

The Executive Board consulted with its stakeholders to assess important ongoing issues concerning graduate students. The following section will highlight key discussions that informed the Executive Board's development of the Strategic Plan.

The outgoing Executive Board produced a transition report outlining key successes, failures and ongoing projects from the 2015-2016 year. They also outlined potential projects the organization could tackle in the upcoming years. The Grad House restaurant renovation, Engagement of Graduate Representative Council members, clarification of Research Assistants' Legal Status and the establishment of a BC Graduate Scholarship were identified as key ongoing projects.

The Executive Board also met with the Dean of Graduate Studies, Dr. David Capson. His most recent accomplishments include the establishment of a new structure for the Faculty of Graduate Studies Council, including the addition of four voting seats for graduate students. The Faculty also continues to work on the student-supervisory policy. We discussed ways to work more effectively with the Faculty of Graduate Studies, and committed to semesterly meetings between the offices.

Graduate Representative Council representatives and the internal GSS committees were consulted to assess organizational strengths and weaknesses. Councillors provided information on the concerns of graduate students in their departments, as well as feedback on the new committee structures and engagement efforts.

Finally, GSS staff were consulted to maintain and foster institutional memory, and to assess areas requiring improvement. Specifically, staff provided important input on the capacity of the society, the changing roles of staff and Executive Board members as the GSS grows, and the technological gaps faced by the office.

## THE STRATEGIC PLAN

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### WELL-BEING AND COMMUNITY

#### Restaurant Renovation

Over the past four years, the GSS has developed a plan to upgrade the Grad House restaurant space. The renovation is intended to broaden the range of food options to better serve members throughout the day, and to establish useable study space in the David Clode Room. The GSS obtained a strong mandate to move forward on a renovation of the restaurant space in 2015. However, plans to renovate were halted in March 2016 when the GSS learned of an error in the project costing. Thus, in the coming year, plans for implementing the renovation must be revised and approved by the members before proceeding.

#### Next Steps:

- Develop a proposal for how and when to complete the renovation;
- Seek guidance on the proposal from Graduate Representative Council and update the proposal accordingly; and
- Seek approval of the revised renovation implementation plan at the October 2016 AGM.

#### Organizing activities to create community

Isolation is consistently identified as a concern by our members, due to limited opportunities to meet graduate students outside of one's lab or department. To build on the success of the well-established and popular Wednesday Coffee program, the GSS will organize several social activities throughout the year to initiate peer connections, build community, and promote graduate student wellness. Actions toward achieving this goal have already begun, and are intended to be ongoing, long-term efforts extending beyond the term of the current Executive Board.

#### Next steps:

- Increase social activities at Orientation;
- Set up graduate student intramural teams;
- Conduct ice breakers with Graduate Representative Council;
- Organize an awards night to recognize Teaching Assistants, exceptional Graduate Representative Council members, and contributors to the GSS community.

#### Focusing on graduate student well-being

The psychological, emotional and physical well-being of graduate students has been an ongoing priority and subject for training at the GSS (Schell, 2015). As an organization, the GSS strives to help students make their health and well-being a priority.

#### Next steps:

- Work with the University on the Mental Health Week initiative;
- Research and promote available wellness resources for graduate students.

## ADVOCACY

### Sexualized Violence Policy

In response to pressure from student societies and a mandate from the provincial government, the University has undertaken the development of a Sexualized Violence Policy and a review of related policies. Given the high profile nature of the issue, and the rapid and intensive policy development process, the Executive Board will be highly involved in the Sexual Violence Policy development.

#### Next steps:

- Represent graduate students on the Sexualized Violence Policy Working Group;
- Represent graduate students on the Sexualized Violence Policy Research and Consultation Subcommittee;
- Attend the Ending Violence Association BC Conferences on Sexualized Violence at Post-Secondary Institutions;
- Participate in all stages of Working Group policy consultation, and encourage broad participation from graduate students.

### Office for Graduate Student Advocacy

Currently, the office of the Ombudsperson provides independent and impartial advice on university policy and procedures to graduate students on many issues. Where a student needs an advocate in addition to these services, the GSS undertakes this role on a case-by-case basis. However, there is little formal training in place for those taking the lead on these matters, and there are limited resources to support this work. To address these gaps, the GSS will develop a proposal to establish an Office for Graduate Student Advocacy (OGSA).

The function of the OGSA will be to assist students who are navigating informal and formal decision making processes at the university. It will support students to effectively represent their own interests, and where appropriate, will attend formal or informal proceedings alongside a student involved in a dispute.

#### Next-Steps:

- Review past research on student advocacy models;
- Address any gaps in research;
- Delineate specific duties, roles, and purposes of the student advocate;
- Consult with university administration and other student unions;
- Develop a proposal for the establishment of the Office for Student Advocacy;
- Determine where the position will fit within university procedures.

### Research Assistants' Legal Status

The GSS continues to be concerned that the current University of Victoria employment policy for Research Assistants (RA) leaves students vulnerable to experience unfair work relations because they are not considered University employees. This leaves RAs (and their Faculty supervisors) with no clear avenue for support from the University should the need arise.

The Executive Board advocates for the University to review and revise the Human Resources policy to address this issue. This project is in progress. To date, the GSS has reviewed the policy and obtained a legal briefing (Cedar Law, 2013) on the case law related to Research Assistants employment status at other

universities, drafted briefs and raised the concern with the university administration (Chappel & Walters, 2014).

#### Next Steps:

- Strike a task force to broadly consult with stakeholders, such as Faculty Councils and the Faculty Association, about options for improving the policy;
- Draft proposed changes to policy for endorsement from stakeholder groups;
- Work with stakeholders to bring a joint proposal forward to the Board of Governors.

### Advocating for a BC Graduate Scholarship

With high tuition fees, housing rental costs far above the national average (Canada Mortgage and Housing Association, 2016), cuts to provincial post-secondary funding, and the failure of British Columbia to provide the provincial graduate scholarships available in other provinces, being a graduate student in BC is incredibly difficult. The GSS has identified the May 9, 2017 provincial election as an opportunity to make education – and the needs of graduate students – an election issue.

#### Next Steps:

- Advocate that Elections BC establish on-campus advanced voting opportunities;
- Promote the election (and how to vote) to graduate students;
- Work with allies to highlight and publicize the needs of graduate students – especially the need for a BC graduate student scholarship – in the months leading up to the election.

## VISIBILITY

### Goods and wares for good people to wear

In order to assist the GSS staff and Executive Board members in being identifiable and approachable, to aid in fostering pride and community among graduate students, and to promote the Grad House restaurant as a community space, the GSS seeks to increase the visibility of the society on campus.

#### Next steps:

- Obtain branded t-shirts for GSS staff and Executive Board;
- Make GSS merchandise available to students participating in the Welcome Weekend;
- Develop a product line of Grad House and GSS merchandise.

### Updating and modernizing GSS communications

In 2014, the communications of the GSS were identified as outmoded, inaccessible, and time consuming for staff. Continuing the work initiated in 2015-2016 Strategic Plan, the GSS will update its communications to connect and engage with the graduate student community.

#### Next steps:

- Complete the transformation of the GSS email bulletin to a modern format;
- Update the website towards a more modern and easy-to-use online platform;
- Develop a social media strategy.

### Improving GSS communications

Building on recent improvements to engagement in the Graduate Representative Council, in the 2016-2017 year, the GSS aims to improve communications with the broader membership about society activities. In order to build a stronger and more vibrant graduate community, specific communications tool will be developed to promote events and campus services.

Next steps:

- Create a new grad student handbook to assist new members in the transition to graduate studies;
- Work with the Services and Student Affairs committees to make communications plans for major GSS activities.

## GOVERNANCE

### GSS Electoral Policy and Bylaw updates

In the past year, questions arose about the interpretation of GSS election bylaws. Specifically, the lack of procedures for committee resignations, and the scope and definition of the “regular election” period need clarification. Additionally, recent elections have seen nearly all nominations take place on the floor of the Semi-Annual General Meeting. This gives rise to whether our current procedures reflect the best option for recruiting an Executive Board. Finally, recent changes to the Societies’ Act will dictate further changes to GSS Bylaws and the Policy Manual.

Next Steps:

- Ensure the Constitution and Bylaws comply with the recent changes to the BC Societies’ Act;
- Develop a resignation policy for GSS committees;
- Investigate new options for GSS Executive Board elections;
- Update GSS Bylaws to correct ‘loopholes’ identified by legal counsel;
- Complete work to update GSS Policy Manual sections related to GSS internal committees.

### Faculty of Graduate Studies Elections

The Faculty of Graduate Studies has recently changed the structure of its governing council, to include faculty member representatives from each academic unit as well as five graduate students (two master’s students, two doctoral students, and one representative from the GSS Executive Board). In order to ensure effective participation, the GSS will work to establish election procedures for an interim election (September-March) as well as the regular election (March-February). The GSS will also work to promote the new structure and ensure strong participation in the inaugural Faculty of Graduate Studies Council.

Next Steps:

- Provide input on the electoral process for the new graduate student seats to be elected “by and from” the graduate students to the Faculty of Graduate Studies Council;
- Work with the University Secretary and the Faculty of Graduate Studies to clarify the role of the GSS in the election process for graduate student representatives to the Faculty of Graduate Studies Council;
- Work with the Dean to publicise and promote the changes to the Faculty of Graduate Studies Council.

### Formalizing donations and creation of an endowment

Over the years the GSS has provided hundreds of thousands of dollars in support to graduate students. This support is provided in the form of travel grants, and childcare bursaries, and fundraising for the University emergency bursary program. In accordance with the *Income Tax Act*, all funds provided to individual students are donated to and administered by the University. With the exception of the childcare bursary, these contributions have been made directly to Student Awards and Financial Aid, or to the Faculty of Graduate



Studies. This means there has been no formal discussion or record of these donations with the University of Victoria Development Office, nor is there an effective investment strategy in place.

Currently, the GSS has a small endowment supporting childcare bursaries, and an inactive graduate student bursary endowment. In 2015, the membership voted to establish dedicated fees for travel grants, the food bank, CFUV and university 101, in order to replace contributions that were budgeted annually. This has affirmed these contributions as permanent, and has increased their stability. However, the GSS could benefit from a long-term strategy to build endowments to support these efforts, and graduate student bursaries.

#### Next steps

- Meet with the University development office to discuss options for endowments;
- In consultation with the Development Office, and fund administrators, establish protocols for distribution of new dedicated fees through the University of Victoria Foundation, to ensure there is formal recognition and management of these contributions over time;
- Develop a proposal for establishment of endowments and bring this proposal to the members for approval.

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