Semi-Annual Update to the Membership on the Operations and Services of the GSS

Report made: November 23, 2021
Reporting on: April-September 2021
From: Kyla Turner, Executive Director

Overview
The GSS has had several very significant transitions throughout the last 18 months. The first of these was the closure of our Food and Beverages Services and a work-from-home order for front office staff in March 2020 due to the pandemic. The second was the Executive Director transition in August 2020, which resulted in a three month period at the beginning of the 2020-21 academic year where there was no management staff at the GSS. Due to the extent of work required to see the organization through these transitions, the 2020-21 Executive Board charged the 2021-22 Executive Board with planning and implementing the GSS’s COVID-19 recovery. As of March 31, 2021, the 2020-21 GSS Executive Board felt that the impacts of COVID-19 could extend throughout the September-December 2021 semester and had planned for a re-opening of services in January 2022.

As we are all aware now, despite the vaccination roll-out, COVID-19 continues to create barriers for our operations and has made recovery planning a challenge. Due to a high rate of staff and board who have been deemed clinically extremely vulnerable, the GSS has taken a very cautious approach to our recovery planning by limiting our indoor, in-person events, requesting members who are able to access services virtually continue to do so, and by pausing planning on the re-opening of the Food and Beverage Services until such time as we developed the internal capacities related to staffing and a better knowledge of the impacts of the pandemic on food and beverage services.

Throughout this reporting period, uptake on GSS services remains strong despite our limitations. Staff have continued to provide services as outlined below and participate in creative planning around how to engage our members under the current circumstances. The status of our service provision is outlined below. Staff have also continued assisting members with advocacy concerns for issues as diverse as research supervision, funding, employment discrimination, housing availability and affordability, mental health, and domestic violence. We continue to be a resource for all graduate students across UVic to come to for systems navigation, peer support, governance and leadership capacity building, and we look forward to returning to being a gathering place for our members soon. You have all been dearly missed at Halpern Centre!

Health and Dental Plan
The GSS provides Extended Health and Dental coverage as part of our obligations under the University Act, which requires all BC universities to ensure that their students have comprehensive health and dental insurance for the duration of their studies. For more information on the Extended Health and Dental service, including coverage rates, please check out our website here and the semi-annual health and dental update as part of the AGM reports.

Before this reporting period, COVID-19 prompted one significant change to this service. In Summer 2020, the GSS voted on a referendum to include all full-time students in 3.0 units or more automatically
in our insurance coverage. Prior to that, only full-time, on campus students were assessed. This has shifted the administration of this plan from opting in students who are part-time/off-campus to ensure a high level of coverage across our membership, to opting out students who have coverage through an alternative source. The most common sources of alternative coverage are through one’s employment, spouse, or parent.

During the reporting period, the following opt-ins/outs were processed by staff:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Opt In</th>
<th>Opt Out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May-August</td>
<td>16 students, 7 dependents</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September-December*</td>
<td>17 students, 220 dependents</td>
<td>1009</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These numbers were last updated October 19, 2021.

**UPASS Package**

The GSS has a contract with UVic, UVSS, and BC Transit to offer a universal bus pass program for all GSS members registered in any on-campus courses. The UPASS package includes several on-campus services: the UPASS, Athletics and Recreation Services (ATRS), and the GSS fee. Students who meet specific criteria set by our contract with BC Transit may opt in or out of this service package. Find more information about the UPASS package [on our website here](#).

Before this reporting period, COVID-19 changed the administration of this service in several ways.

1. A greater number of students were registered as off-campus, resulting in more people needing to opt-in
2. The University Of Victoria granted us special permission for the 2020-21 academic year only to opt students into only the UPASS service, and not the full UPASS package.

Since September 2021, most students have returned to campus, decreasing opt-ins. The University also began enforcing the agreement that states students cannot opt-in to partial on-campus services. Therefore, the ATRS fee has been included in all September 2021 opt-ins. Some members have expressed concerns about the ATRS fee. GSS has addressed these to UVic leadership, but have been told that the fee is mandatory for all on-campus students or students opting in to the on-campus services package. We will continue to advocate for better access to athletics and recreation services for those paying the fee and for more affordable tuition and fees for all our members.

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<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September-December*</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**GSS Grants**

The GSS collects and distributed funds for several grants/bursaries around campus. There are three grants/bursaries that are administered by Student Awards and Financial Aid (SAFA) and one that is
administered by the GSS. The Conference Travel Grant, Distance Travel Grant, and Student-Parent Child Care Bursary are administered through SAFA, who reports to the GSS annually at fiscal year end (March.) The Department Grant is an internally administered GSS grant that funds the development and support for department-specific graduate student associations, academic or social projects and activities. For further information on the Department Grant, please see our website here.

During this reporting period, no department grants were distributed. Grants are more frequently distributed September-March and we expect a return in uptake.

As this is the first Executive Director report in this format for our General Membership meetings, I did want to note that despite the myriad of challenges to organization social or academic projects/activities in the 2020-21 year, four departments did still apply for and receive GSS Department Grant funding in March 2021. Congratulations and thank you to the departments of French, Political Science, History, and English for your work in engaging your students in new and creative ways last year!

Modo Car Sharing Service
The GSS maintains a group membership with Modo Car Sharing Service. Modo typically has “member-owners” purchase a $500 share in the co-op, which is refunded when closing your membership. Those who join through the GSS do not need to purchase a share in the co-op, but rather pay a one-time non-refundable fee of $25, which provides you with access for as long as you are a registered graduate student and are using the service. Up to 25 GSS members can join our Modo group plan.

As of September 2021, all available Modo slots have been filled. GSS staff have contacted all previous plan members to ensure that as many students have access to this service as possible.

Food and Beverage Services
The GSS operates a full-service restaurant, the Grad House, and a coffee shop, Side Project Café. Both services offer members an inviting study and dining space. Side Project maintains a library of board games that members are encouraged to enjoy. The Grad House hosts events such as trivia nights, dungeons and dragons nights, and many other GSS events.

Due to the pandemic, the Food and Beverages Services at the GSS were closed as of March 2020. They have not re-opened since. A presentation regarding some of the challenges and barriers to re-opening was made at the October 26, 2021 Graduate Representative Council Meeting. We look forward to engaging with our members and gathering feedback to help us revise and revitalize our services in the near future to make sure GSS can offer relevant, accessible, engaging, and cost-effective services for all current and future members!

Room Bookings
The GSS offers the use of our board rooms for free for graduate students for graduate student activities (e.g. study/meeting space, thesis defense, etc.). There is a small charge for graduate students booking for private events (e.g. parties, tutoring services, etc.) and for non-graduate students to book this space.

Catering may be offered through the GSS Food and Beverage Services. No alcohol is permitted in these spaces due to liquor licensing requirements.

No room bookings have occurred during this reporting period due to COVID-19 restrictions. No catering services were offered due to the closure of the Food and Beverage Services.
Advocacy Support
The GSS staff frequently support the Executive Board in achieving the goals outlined in the Annual Plan. Staff have arranged the following supports for these external to the Executive Board work:

1. Planning standing events for the GSS upon re-opening, such as Wednesday Coffee, Thesis Writing Group, Crafty Fridays
2. Meet with UVic leadership regarding housing advocacy joint efforts and strategies to remove the bylaws in Oak Bay disallowing secondary suites.
3. Create standing meeting with Student Wellness Centre to discuss student access to medical care

Student Cases
GSS staff are frequently an important point of contact for our members in reaching out for support, referrals, and advocacy. Without disclosing information that could link to specific members, staff have provided case management, referrals, and support to members in resolving concerns around:

1. Graduate supervision (approximately 10 cases)
2. Program delivery during COVID (approximately 5 cases)
3. Program leaves of absence (approximately 5 cases)
4. Affordable housing (approximately 15 cases)
5. Homelessness (approximately 10 cases)
6. Food insecurity (approximately 5 cases)
7. Mental health crises (approximately 20 cases)
8. Discrimination, harassment, and violence around the university (approximately 5 cases)
9. Domestic violence and sexual assault (approximately 5 cases)

During the reporting period of March-September 2021. These cases do not include those also referred to the Executive Board.

Due to COVID-19 moving program delivery online, many of the cases that the GSS staff dealt with in this reporting period occurred outside of BC or Canada. This resulted in the staff needing to develop referral networks for the issues above across the globe. The amount of support network development required to continue to support our members throughout their time at UVic.

Staffing
The GSS typically maintains an office staff of two full-time managers and 4 part-time unionized positions. For several years, the Events Coordinator and Office/Communications and Outreach Coordinator positions have been held by one member of staff. We therefore have a staff of five in the office or 3.6 FTEs (full-time equivalents).

The GSS has previously maintained a larger staff to run our food and beverages services. Most Food and Beverage employees were laid off in March 2020. No rehires have been made to date.

During this reporting period, Mindy Jiang left her role as the Health and Dental Coordinator to attend her own graduate program. We wish Mindy all the best and thank her for her service and dedication to members throughout much of the COVID-19 pandemic. Mindy increased our contacts with social services across Vancouver Island and single-handed developed a referral network for students in distress to access telehealth supports. Thank you, Mindy, for all you did for the GSS.
We also happily welcomed Glenda Beecham as the new Health and Dental Coordinator in July. Glenda has hit the ground running in her new position and brings a fresh set of eyes to addressing post-pandemic challenges to offering affordable insurance options to our members.

After this reporting period but a success requiring particular consideration for this report, the GSS also promoted Neil Barney to the Operations and Services Manager position. The GSS has been without a second manager position since March 2020 due to the closure of our food and beverages services and a prior reclassification of the second management position as the Restaurant Manager. Neil has been our Office/Communications and Outreach Coordinator and Events Coordinator for many years and has strong ties with our membership and across UVic. We are happy to see Neil continue to work with members to keep our services relevant and engaging for members and for him to continue to develop professionally with the GSS. Congratulations, Neil, and we are excited to see where your innovation and leadership will take the GSS!

Considerations for the next reporting period
The top priorities for the Executive Director in terms of operations, services, and personnel management for the next six months will be:

1. In-person service recovery – as we are still returning to a full compliment of staff, the GSS will be planning in earnest how to invite members back into our spaces as is safe.
2. Health and Dental insurance renewal negotiations – our broker was able to significantly bargain down the increased cost of our health and dental insurance for this academic year. However as per request of the members after the last health and dental fee referendum, we will look to engage our broker in examining alternative insurers to find the best possible plan for our membership.
3. Budgeting – as we look into the types of in-person services we can offer, we will need to revise our budget to ensure that we appropriately fund those services that our membership votes on.

Conclusion
The GSS is coming out of a period of many significant transitions. However, we are now in a position to pivot to service recovery and revitalization. I am optimistic that the GSS can bring back services that have been much beloved, utilized, and supported by members, as well as creating new pathways forward to focus on the following principles:

1. GSS services should be first and foremost by members, for members
2. GSS services should also be accessible, affordable, and relevant to members
3. GSS should offer employment opportunities to members that can offer flexibility, decent wages, and decent work.

I would like to see the GSS work towards finding opportunities to provide our members with work opportunities that meet not only the above, but also offer relevant experience in non-profit leadership, student support, and community engagement in order to provide professional development as well as a paycheck.