Executive Board Membership
The GSS Executive Board consists of five elected graduate students and the Executive Director as a non-voting member. This year, three Executive Board members were elected in the March 2021 election, one Board member was elected at the March 2021 Semi-Annual General Meeting and one Board member was elected by Graduate Representative Council in April 2021.

The 2021-22 GSS Board of Directors:

- Chair: **David Foster**
- Director of Communications: **Nicole Kent**
- Director of Finance: **Ryan Khan**
- Director of Services: **Adair Ng**
- Director of Student Affairs: **Nahid Safari**

The Executive Board is guided by the purposes of the GSS as stated in our Constitution and Bylaws.

The GSS’ purposes are:

- **a)** To represent the interests of the membership in a democratic manner in matters pertaining to education and the welfare of graduate students;
- **b)** 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;
- **c)** To promote cultural, intellectual and recreational activities among the members; and
- **d)** To promote the academic and social welfare of its members through the provision of services.
Introduction

COVID-19 Context
The 2021-22 GSS Board of Directors took office in April 2021, amid the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. As global travel has been disrupted by the pandemic, the current Board is the first in memory to include members located outside of Canada. All Board meetings and business have been conducted virtually and the Board has never met in-person as a group. This posed unique challenges (e.g., having documents signed) but also allowed us to experiment with use of technology and methods of online engagement.

Many of the issues facing the Board have been related to the pandemic, such as deciding whether the GSS should host in-person events and advocating for adequate health and safety measures during the University's return to in-person classes. At its inaugural meeting on April 7, 2021, the Board passed a motion affirming that no GSS meetings or events would be held in person, as was determined by the previous Board on August 4, 2020. Later in the summer as BC entered Step 3 of the provincial Restart Plan, Board members felt that the option to resume in-person events with public health measures in place should be provided to the Graduate Representative Council. On July 20, 2021, GRC voted to allow in-person events with social distancing, capacity limits and an indoor mask requirement. However, the moratorium on in-person GSS meetings has been continued. While the GSS is now allowed to hold in-person events, none have taken place to date.

The Board has heard concerns from medically vulnerable students and international students, in particular, regarding accessibility and accommodations during the return to in-person classes. A concerted campaign that included the GSS, other BC student societies and university faculty associations and staff unions resulted in the BC government approving a requirement for university students, faculty and staff to declare their vaccination status and undergo regular rapid testing if unvaccinated. BC’s vaccination campaign has resulted in over 95% of students, faculty and staff at UVic being fully vaccinated and no reported COVID-19 outbreaks on campus to date.

The GSS continues to advocate for classroom accommodation when requested by students with disabilities and international students who have not been able to move to Canada. To that end, the Board has participated in the Access4All campaign led by the UVic Society for Students with Disabilities.

External Issues
In addition to advocacy related to COVID-19, the Board has been active in graduate student advocacy and representation both on and off campus. Board members have participated in the hiring process for the new UVic Vice-President Academic and Provost, in particular our Director of Communications who has spent many hours on the hiring committee. The GSS Chair worked with the Victoria Regional Transit Commission to ensure the GSS was represented on the new Student Transit Advisory Committee. The Chair has also participated in conversations on shared provincial advocacy for graduate student funding and resources as part of the Graduate Student Societies of BC Executive Committee, which includes representation from UVic, UBC, SFU and UNBC.

With the return of many students to campus in September, lack of affordable or available housing in the Victoria area reached an unprecedented crisis point. This was compounded by the pandemic which delayed students returning to campus due to travel restrictions and uncertainty over which programs would be available online, as well as reluctance of homeowners to share their living space. The Board
heard clearly from students that advocacy for more on-campus and off-campus housing is a priority. The University has also expressed a strong interest in working with students’ societies to lobby municipalities and the provincial government to increase housing supply.

Internal Issues

One of the first issues the Board had to address was a significant increase in the cost of the Extended Health and Dental Plan passed on to the GSS from our insurance provider. The Board worked with the health plan broker to prepare three options for referendum of the GSS membership on June 9 to 11: a reduction in coverage with no fee increase; a fee increase with no reduction in coverage; and a smaller fee increase with slightly reduced coverage. The Board held a town hall meeting to answer students’ questions and concerns about the referendum questions. The result was a voter turnout of 9% (significantly higher than the minimum threshold of 5%) and 75% voted in favour of increasing fees and maintaining coverage. For next year, the Board plans to revert to the normal schedule of Health and Dental plan referenda being held concurrently with GSS elections in March.

The Board has faced internal problems related to financial accountability since taking office. In early summer, the GSS lost our long-time contracted bookkeeper without warning or a contingency plan in place, due to lack of communication by the bookkeeper. This caused the GSS to fall more than six months behind in approving our financial statements. At the same time, the GSS experienced payroll issues related to the previous bookkeeper, where some Board members as well as staff were being paid incorrectly or not at all.

By July 2021, the Board had moved forward with hiring a new bookkeeper, who began in August. Due to the problems with payroll, the Board prioritized securing a bookkeeper with payroll expertise, and the financial issues have now been partially addressed. The backlog of financial statements resulted in the annual GSS audit falling behind schedule, thus the Annual General Meeting had to be postponed from October 26 to November 23 in order present the GSS’ audited financial statements to members.

Another operational issue has been the GSS’ current lack of staff capacity combined with increased demands for services such as individual advocacy and administrative support for the Health and Dental Plan related to the pandemic. Since 2019, the GSS has transitioned from having two managers and around 20 staff to one manager and three part-time staff. In August 2020, the GSS’ long-time Executive Director departed, and the GSS was without any full-time staff until the new Executive Director started in November. This resulted in a backlog of work that has not been completely caught up, along with the demand for new work such as referendum proposals on use of the Grad House restaurant space.

In July 2021, the Board began the process of bringing back a second manager position. The hiring process was drawn out in part due to the need to focus on bookkeeping and payroll issues in August and September. However, the Board has finally completed hiring of a new Operations and Services Manager and looks forward to introducing them to the GSS membership.
Strategic Goals
In its 2021-22 Strategic Plan adopted on July 28, 2021, the GSS Board identified the following areas of focus to achieve our goals:

1. Advance Advocacy Campaigns
2. Improve Internal Governance Structures and Representation
3. Increase Community Engagement
4. Enhance Visibility and Communications
5. Develop Internal Organizational Resources
6. COVID-19 Business Recovery

Advocacy Campaigns

Priority 1: RA Legal Status as University Employees
In 2012, the GSS began to advocate for graduate students employed as grant-funded research assistants (GFRAs). Under university policy, these students are not recognized as UVic employees, but only as employees of the individual faculty member who holds the grant. Some GFRAs have experienced problems such as not being paid for their work or being paid incorrectly. These employment issues led the GSS to seek legal advice in 2013 on GFRAs’ employment status. From 2016 to 2017, the GSS lobbied the UVic administration to change policy so that GFRAs would be recognized as UVic employees, but these efforts were not successful. As GFRAs continue to report employment-related problems, the Board will continue to advocate for a change in status of GFRAs to employees of the University.

Progress to Date
- Received an updated legal opinion on status of GFRAs from legal counsel.
- Consulted with CUPE 4163 to understand their position on GFRAs’ status.
- Re-initiated a working group on GFRAs’ status through the GRC Student Affairs Committee.

Priority 2: Compensation for Students on Time-Intensive University Committees
Student representation on UVic committees provides an important avenue for consultation and ensures that the best interests of students are considered in important policy and operational decisions. However, participation in the more time-intensive committees, such as search and hiring committees, awards adjudication and appeal committees is challenging for many students due to the required time commitments. Student representatives are the only members on these committees who are not compensated for their time, as University faculty, staff and administrators incorporate committee duties into their working hours. The Board will work with UVic to develop a university policy that would recognize students’ work on time-intensive committees through provision of a stipend.

Progress to Date
- Developed a workplan for a Work Study student to conduct supporting research and analysis.
- Initiated a working group through the GRC Student Affairs Committee.
Priority 3: Elimination of International Student MSP
In January 2020, the BC government eliminated Medical Services Plan (MSP) premiums for nearly all residents. However, MSP premiums were retained for international post-secondary students, who actually saw an increase in cost from $37.50 to $75 per month. The GSS requested that the Ministry of Health eliminate MSP for international students but without success. The Board will continue to campaign for the elimination of international student MSP in collaboration with other student societies.

Progress to Date
• Created a petition to the BC Legislature calling for elimination of international student MSP.
• Collected signatures on the MSP petition during UVic orientation events and GSS office hours.
• Shared the MSP petition with other students’ societies who have also collected signatures.
• Collaborated with CUPE 4163 to hold outdoor tabling events in November to collect more signatures on the MSP petition.

Governance and Representation
Priority 1: Policy and Governance Improvements
The GSS has begun the transition from its former policy governance model, where one committee was responsible for all policy development, to a new model where policies are divided into the categories of governance and operations with the appropriate development, implementation and approval authorities assigned to each policy. The significant outstanding work is revision of old policies to meet the criteria of the new framework.

Progress to Date
• Developed an overarching Policy on Policies and Procedures which was approved by GRC.
• Committee terms of reference revisions to reflect the new policy framework approved by GRC.
• Interim procedures developed to assign appropriate development, approval and implementation authorities to existing policies pending their revision.

Priority 2: GRC Structure and Elections
Two significant concerns have been raised regarding GRC structure and elections. Since the GSS does not conduct GRC elections, which are typically held by UVic staff, there has been a lack of GSS oversight of the integrity and security of GRC elections. Additionally, the GRC structure of one representative per academic unit, regardless of size, results in large faculties and departments being under-represented, while even discontinued programs receive a seat so long as at least one student remains in the program. The GSS will consult members and develop bylaw amendments to increase GRC membership and make seat allocation more proportional, along with a referendum proposal to create funds for a GSS elections office that could conduct GRC elections.

Progress to Date
• Initiated a working group through the Bylaw and Policy Committee.
• Recommended a bylaw amendment to the November 2021 AGM that would enable limited oversight of GRC elections by the GSS Electoral Officer.
Community Engagement

Priority 1: Student Wellness
Graduate school can often be stressful, isolating and overwhelming to students, who must balance the demands of schoolwork, research, teaching and other employment to supplement their incomes. The additional mental, emotional and financial toll of the COVID-19 pandemic has further impacted graduate student well-being. The GSS aims to provide a variety of events and services to enhance the overall wellness of its members, as well as advocating for increased student supports and services from UVic.

Progress to Date
- Held monthly meetings between GSS Board and the UVic Student Wellness Centre.

Visibility and Communications

Priority 1: Increase Contact Between Board and Society Membership
Prior to the pandemic, the GSS’s communication strategy relied on in-person interactions focused on events and services located in the Grad Centre. Since moving online in 2020, there has been a sharp decrease in member engagement, especially in contact between the Board and general membership. The GSS will examine the successes and failures of online engagement over the last 18 months and provide more opportunities for all graduate students to meet their representatives.

Progress to Date
- Held a town hall meeting in June on the Extended Health and Dental Plan referendum.
- Participated in online and in-person Graduate Student Orientation.
- Board and staff members delivered 30 department orientation presentations in September.
- Board and staff participated in UVic’s in-person Info Fair on campus.
- Hosted online social events with UVic Global Community for international students.

Resource Development

Priority 1: Human Resource Development
With the service changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the GSS transitioned from having around 20 employees to only four employees, of which one is full-time. The loss of the second manager position along with an increase in some areas of work such as individual student advocacy resulted in a higher workload for the Executive Director. The GSS has recognized a need to increase staffing levels in order to provide the required level of operations and services to effectively support the membership.

Progress to Date
- Completed hiring of a second manager position.
- Posted for 200 hours of Work Study and developed projects for Work Study students.

Priority 2: Repurpose Student Advocate Fund
The Student Advocate Fund was established by a GSS fee referendum in Spring 2019. The original intent was to use the fund to hire a full-time staff person to support students in individual advocacy regarding issues with university policies and procedures, e.g., in complaints, appeals, hearings or judicial reviews. However, the staff position was not created because undergraduates voted against contributing to the
fund, resulting in much less funding. The Student Advocate Fund’s current Terms of Reference envision the fund being used to cover costs of individual advocacy for students on a case-by-case basis. In practice, very few student cases result in the type of intervention that would require allocation of funds under the Terms of Reference. As a result, no expenditures from the fund occurred for two years. To ensure the fund is used to benefit students, the GSS has committed to revising the Terms of Reference so the fund can be allocated to systemic advocacy, information, education and referrals.

Progress to Date

- Draft of revised Student Advocate Fund Terms of Reference forwarded to the Finance Committee for consideration by a working group.

Priority 3: Revenue Strategic Plan

The GSS has been described as a medium-sized organization with the budget of a small organization. Compared to most Canadian graduate student societies, the GSS collects significantly less in membership fees. In order to provide the level of governance, operations and service provision that our members expect, the GSS will explore strategies for revenue creation such as new student fees or external funding via grants from other organizations.

Progress to Date

- This project is awaiting further research and development.

COVID-19 Business Recovery

Priority 1: Create and Implement Hybrid Service Delivery Model

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all GSS services were provided remotely from April 2020 to September 2021. With the return of many graduate students to in-person classes and activities, the GSS has begun the return to in-person delivery of some services while continuing to deliver all services online. The GSS will work toward a full return to in-person services (with continued online options) after April 2022.

Progress to Date

- Implementation of COVID-19 protocols for limited in-person service delivery after consultation with Board and staff.
- Resumption of in-person Health and Dental and UPASS opt-ins and opt-outs.

Priority 2: Determine Use of Restaurant Space

The GSS traditionally operated a restaurant and café in the Halpern Centre, which has been closed since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Prior to its closure, the GSS Restaurant Fund was running significant annual losses subsidized through transfers from the Operating Fund, a use not in keeping with the Operating Fund’s original purpose. The GSS plans to move forward by developing financial estimates for alternative use of the restaurant space and asking students via referendum whether they would like to pay the costs required to resume operation of a restaurant or convert the space to a venue for studying, meetings and GSS work. The referendum will be held in March 2022 to guide a reopening of the space in 2022-23.

Progress to Date

- This project is awaiting further research and development.