

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

Report made: March 19, 2024

Reporting on: October 2023-February 2024

From: Kyla Turner, Executive Director

## Overview

As with my last report, I'll start this one with a huge thanks to the volunteers, GRC reps, board members, and staff who have continued to grow the GSS's community back up this year. My thanks in particular to Neil Barney, Operations and Services Manager, Greg Gaube, Director of Communications, Mitch Nascimento, Director of Services, Maggie Lawton, Interim Director of Services, and Maddie Stinson, Front of House Coordinator for their hard work in creating intentional communities at the Grad House. Welcome back to all our regulars! Please see the Events Committee report for a list of events that have occurred during this reporting period.

The 2023-24 academic year has been, and will continue to be, one of great change for the GSS. As I noted in my last report, my intention since arriving at the GSS has been to shift our focus from pandemic recovery and electoral activities to improving our advocacy models and effectiveness. The first major pillar of this transition will be put in place for April 1, 2024, which is the creation of new board positions. We have kept two positions relatively unchanged: Chair and Director of Finance, who will remain responsible for leading/guiding the board as a whole and monitoring our financial wellbeing respectively. We have made minor changes to the Director of Services, no Director of Student Life, who will have an even great focus on event planning and community building.

Our biggest changes have been the elimination of the Director of Communications and Director of Student Affairs positions and the creation of the Director of Internal/University Relations and Director of External Relations. The Director of Communications positions has been steadily losing areas of responsibility in the last 10+ years, first with the elimination of some GSS publications like *The Unacknowledged Source*, and the creation of a staff Communications and Outreach Coordinator position in 2017. As a result, the majority of D. Communications for quite a few years have had a significantly reduced workload compared to other board members. By comparison, the Director of Student Affairs position was not kept up to date as our membership demographics shifted significantly. This one position was individually responsible for all distance students, all international students, and all one-on-one advocacy work done by the GSS. To say this was an overwhelming portfolio is an understatement. The new Directors of Internal and External Relations will bring the best of communications and outreach AND advocacy work to the table. These positions will work collaboratively to enhance the GSS's capacity to create and sustain systemic change by targeting both the University and off-campus partners.

You can find a short description of the new/revised board positions below.

Chair: leads the Board and guides the Board and GRC in accomplishing their goals. They are responsible for oversight of the Annual Plan and GSS governance. Chairs the Bylaw and Policy Committee.

Director of Internal/University Affairs: acts as the primary liaison between the Society and University administration. Jointly with the Director of External Relations, they lead the Society’s advocacy campaigns. Vice-Chair of the Advocacy and Campaigns Committee

Director of External Affairs: acts as primary liaison between the Society and all levels of government and with media. Jointly with the Director of Internal/University Relations, they lead the Society’s advocacy campaigns. Chair of the Advocacy and Campaigns Committee.

Director of Finance: prepares the annual budget and oversees the annual audit of the Society. Ensures the financial health and transparency of the GSS. Chairs the Finance Committee and Appeals Committee.

Director of Student Life: is responsible for planning GSS-sponsored activities and participation in campus-wide events like Orientation. Liaises with student groups, clubs, etc. Chairs the Events Committee.

My thanks to the entire board for their work on restructuring for the next board term. Greg Gaube and Lindsay Beal have ensured that the Directors of Communications and Student Affairs positions went out on a high note. I couldn’t be prouder of their work.

Coming up in the next few years for the GSS, to continue our transition to a community building and advocacy focused organization, will be: restructuring our fund accounting to significantly simplify the GSS’s finances and reduce bookkeeping/accounting labour, the further establishment of peer support positions, and, perhaps, a constitutional change to enshrine advocacy work as one of the most important cores of the GSS for the next 10+ years.

### 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.

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

Term	Opt In	Opt Out
May-August	6	4
September-December*	15 students, 204 dependents	1051
January-April**	(please see Health and Dental report)	64

\*This was provisionally reported at the 2023 AGM, but have since been updated with the final numbers for the term.

\*\*These numbers were last updated January 30, 2024. The deadline to opt in or out was Jan 22.

### 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 fees. 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](#).

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

Term	Opt In	Opt Out
May-August	37	54
September-December*	57	74
January-April**	36	61

\*This was provisionally reported at the 2023 AGM, but have since been updated with the final numbers for the term.

\*\*These numbers were last updated January 30, 2024. The deadline to opt in or out was Jan 22.

## 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 up to January 30, 2024, 15 Special Project department grants were distributed to Biology, History, Linguistics, Physics and Astronomy, Chemistry, Pacific and Asian Studies, Environmental Studies, Anthropology, Writing, Biochemistry and Microbiology, Neuroscience, Art History and Visual Studies and the Association of Graduate Education Students. In total for the year (to January 30, 2024), the GSS distributed \$8150.00 in Department Grants.

From April 1, 2023 to January 30, 2024, the GSS has distributed \$8150 of a budgeted \$17500 in Department Grant funding, or ~47%. Our total Department Grant budget was increased by \$5250 this fiscal year compared to last, and it appears it will not be fully utilized, in large part due to the increase of events hosted by the GSS rather than being organized by individual units using Department Grant funds. We will return our total grant budget for the 2024-25 year in line with current uptake. Grants are available until March 31 for this year's budget or until funds run out and members are *strongly* encouraged to apply. Please see below for a brief overview of the fluctuations in funding and uptake for this budget item.

Year	2021-22*	2022-23**	2023-24	2024-25
Budgeted amount	\$9,000	\$12,250	\$17,500	\$12,000
Distributed	\$1,800	\$11,482	\$8150	TBD
% Used	20%	94%	47%	TBD

\*The GSS re-opened their doors to in-person services and meetings in the Spring of 2022 and reduced the budget for events and gatherings due to pandemic related conditions.

\*\*This year, the GSS implemented two grant streams: Special Projects and Academic Unit Association (AUA) Grants. Only ~10% of grants distributed were AUA Grants. The following year, we eliminated the separate streams and simplified the application process to better align the amount of funding available per grant and the application workload. Of the Special Project grants distributed, a large number were joint projects between multiple departments.

## Modo Car Sharing Service

The GSS maintains a group membership with Modò Car Sharing Service. Modò 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 Modò group plan.

As of January 2024, all available Modò 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, which offer members an inviting study and dining space. We strive to keep food affordable, nutritious, and delicious. The Grad House hosts events such as trivia nights, Winter Pride, and many other GSS events.

During this reporting period, the Grad House hosted the Ice Cream Social (Sept 6), Welcome Back BBQ (Sept 13), two Pancake breakfasts (Sept 20, Jan 10), multiple drag shows (Sept 15, Feb 1, 8, 15, 29), trivia nights (Sept 8, Jan 12, Feb 16), Pride Maker Markets (Summer and Winter Pride) and, of course, end of term parties. Winter Pride has also expanded to include a comedy night and queer tango, zine making, and literotica workshops.

In October 2023, the GSS hosted the inaugural Graduate Student Appreciation Week (GSAW) with funding from the Faculty of Graduate Studies and the VP-Academic’s office. While our wonderful board (in particular Greg Gaube!) did the organizational work of GSAW, in the Food and Beverage Services section of this report, I’d like to highlight the successes of multiple pub nights and the Excellence in Graduate Research Symposium which took place in the Grad House and established the Grad House as an event space for all aspects of academic conferences, and not just the after-hours socials.

Attendance and patronage has strong for both our big events, as well as on a day-to-day basis as more and more labs and student groups return to the Grad House as their primary on-campus hangout place outside their home departments.

Last, I’d like to report on the financial health of the Grad House. In the first complete year of operation, from September 1, 2022-August 31, 2023, the Grad House had a revenue of \$233,250.81. In the first three quarters of the 2023-24 fiscal year (Apr 1, 2023-March 31, 2024), revenue was \$256,758.37, or 91% of projected revenues for the year. We therefore expect to exceed our sales targets for the year. Our year-over-year growth for the Sept-Dec term between 2022 and 2023 was:

Month	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Growth	435%	237%	273%	142%

We do not anticipate maintaining this degree of growth for the 202401 term, as our sales for 202301 were significantly better than 202209. However, the Grad House is still continually growing. It should be noted that as sales have steadily, and quite dramatically increased this academic year, we have made adjustments to staffing and inventory to meet higher demand, so our better-than-expected sales will need to be considered in context of our expenses. The full audit for the 2023-24 fiscal year will be presented at the 2024 AGM in Fall.

## 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. Side Project/David Clode Room maintains a library of board games that members are encouraged to enjoy. Room bookings during this reporting period include student study space/meetings, CUPE union meetings, language learning groups, and campus partner meetings.

Since re-opening our catering services in January 2023, we have seen a steady rise of uptake for catering functions that are booked in the Grad House, Side Project, and the board rooms. Catering functions have included faculty-wide celebrations, like the launch parties for major UVic initiatives, faculty retirement parties, alumni events, community events like United Way fundraisers, etc.

## Advocacy Support/Student Cases

The biggest change to note in this area is that the GSS now has 300 hours available during the academic year (Oct-April as hiring generally takes place after orientations are complete due to staff capacity to put on a hiring committee) for Peer Support Workers who are tasked with:

### Peer Support Work

- Meet regularly with graduate students experience issues around supervision, equity and human rights, and university policy
- Maintain knowledge of campus social activities and communities to refer graduate students to in order to support their wellbeing and sense of belonging on campus
- Attend meetings with the University faculty and staff to support students in resolving conflicts

### Advocacy Campaign Support

- Work with the Student Affairs and Communications Committees to promote and advance the GSS's advocacy campaigns to support graduate students on matters brought forward by individual student cases

### Knowledge Translation and Systems Navigation

- Develop and utilize tools to assist graduate students in learning about available support systems/networks
- Refer students to UVic and community supports needed to allow students to succeed within their programs
- Refer systemic issues to the Student Affairs Committee

Bhagyashri Khimsuriya has been primarily working on meeting with graduate students and raising the profile of this new program. She's run morning yoga and regularly checks in with members at Wednesday Coffee. Emma Hender has been primarily working on researching more systemic issues, like the forthcoming revisions to the Graduate Supervision Policy and bringing the RentSmart and SafeTALK programs to UVic campus. We intend to increase our Peer Support capacity in line with uptake as the years go by and the program is better known and utilized.

GSS office 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
2. Degree progress
3. Program leaves of absence
4. Affordable housing
5. Mental health crises
6. Food insecurity
7. Discrimination, harassment, and violence around the university

## Staffing

The GSS typically maintains an office staff of two full-time managers and 4 part-time unionized positions. This year, the GSS received 300 Work Study hours to bring part-time Peer Support Worker positions to the GSS. Over this reporting period, we welcomed the following new office team members:

- Bhagyashri Khimsuriya and Emma Hender – Peer Support Workers

Additionally, our Food and Beverage Services team includes many individual staff members ranging from casual to full time in positions including Head Cook, Line Cooks, Dishwashers, Server/Bartenders, and Front of House Coordinator. Welcome to the following new hires:

- Ben Atchison
- Zach Titizian
- Ashley Costa
- Lara Whalen
- Jacob Thorpe

## 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. Board training and onboarding in their new and revised positions
2. Health and Dental Insurance Renewal preparations – we receive our first offer of renewal for the insurance plans in April-May
3. Orientation planning for September 2024
4. GRC recruiting and onboarding in September-October 2024

## Conclusion

Over the last two year, the GSS has brought back services that have been much beloved, utilized, and supported by members. We have stabilized these services for the post-pandemic period, and created new path forward to meet our members' needs. We will, as always, 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.