



University of Victoria's Graduate Students' Society

2017-2018 Strategic Plan

*Prepared by the Executive Board and presented to the Graduate Representative Council on
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Introduction

This document outlines the priorities and goals of the 2017-2018 University of Victoria Graduate Students' Society (GSS).

Each goal is informed by four overall purposes that are foundational to the actions of the GSS, and are situated at the forefront of the organization's Constitution.

The purposes of the Society 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.¹

Extracted from these purposes, and in the interest of seeing the completion of the previous years' work, this 2017-2018 Executive Board has carried on with the "four key themes to guide the work"²: Wellbeing and Community, Advocacy, Visibility, and Governance and Policy.

Below is a backgrounder section providing some context on the previous year, followed by a section illustrating how this plan came about based on said context. The rest of this document will list the Executive Board's goals for the year, accompanied by a brief list of actions identified as necessary for movement towards achieving the goals laid out.

¹ University of Victoria Graduate Students' Society. (2015). Constitution and Bylaws. Victoria, BC: University of Victoria Graduate Students' Society. p 2.

² University of Victoria Graduate Students' Society. (2016). 2016-2017 Strategic Plan. Victoria, BC: University of Victoria Graduate Students' Society. p 3.

Background

Context

Last year saw major ongoing and new shifts in various circumstances that impact the graduate students of the University of Victoria: chronic federal and provincial underfunding of post-secondary institutions, the dropping value of the Canadian dollar, shockingly high fees for library journal subscriptions, Executive Orders from the United States limiting international travel, and a decoupling and increase of international student tuition fees³, to name a few.

However, graduate students also saw progress on several beneficial fronts, including the updating of the graduate supervision policy⁴, the institution of mandatory department graduate handbooks, initial research on graduate student mental health resources, the development of a university-wide sexualized violence policy (University policy #GV0245)⁵, the creation and election of a graduate student representative on the Board of Governors, and more. Much of this good work was done with the involvement of dedicated graduate students, each providing their own invaluable student perspectives and expertise.

Within its own structures, the GSS successfully continued with its member engagement initiatives, handling its internal growing pains, while increasing its advocacy presence on campus through the work done on the research assistants' legal status, #FighttheHikes, Orientation and Welcome Week, to name a few.

Process of Developing this Plan

This year, the GSS will continue with the previous year's plans so as to reduce institutional amnesia, while also focusing on the organization's long-term health and sustainability. The work of the previous years' Executive Boards on strengthening the internal operations of the GSS has provided this year's Executive the opportunity to reflect on the future of the GSS, establish a vision, and lay down the groundwork for future development. By devoting energy into completing last year's goal, the Executive team is affording themselves the intellectual capacities and time to address such long-term thinking. Additionally, the organization finds itself during a rare moment for pause and reflection, with the renovation of the Grad House Restaurant.

The development of this plan saw the Executive team consulting several times with the previous Executive, learning from their outgoing transition documents at what level of progress those goals were sitting, and being fortunate enough to have two returning Executive members on this year's Board. During the Executive Board's strategic planning retreat, the Executive Director, the Operations and Services Manager, and the Executive team listed and analysed macro- and micro-factors that influence the GSS' abilities. PESTLE and SWOT analyses went on to inform how the strategic plan's

³ University of Victoria University Secretary. (2016, March). Draft Agenda – Open Session. Victoria, BC: University of Victoria.

⁴ University of Victoria Faculty of Graduate Studies. (2017). Faculty of Graduate Studies Graduate Supervision Policy. Victoria, BC: University of Victoria.

⁵ University of Victoria University Secretary. (2017, June). Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response Policy. Victoria, BC: University of Victoria.

goals would make the most of the GSS's strengths, minimize its vulnerabilities, and best leverage the campus environment in achieving these goals.



2017-2018 Executive Board (left to right): Susan Kim, Jessica Wyatt, Olga Gould, Gillian Dornan, Danny Martin

The Strategic Plan

Wellbeing and Community

Fostering Community

Graduate studies can be quite isolating, socially and academically. The GSS, in its move to promote social welfare, mental wellbeing, and recreation among its membership, will continue to organize events to foster a sense of community. Beyond being a means for a graduate student community, events embody a crucial juncture for the GSS, wherein they provide excellent opportunities for collaboration with other campus groups and a platform to heighten the visibility of the GSS and its services.

This year's events will see ongoing improvements based on lessons learned from previous years. Strategies include the creation of reference documents, with an especial sensitivity to producing streamlined volunteer frameworks and responsibilities. Events will continue to strive for the promotion of physical and mental wellbeing and family-friendly activities.

Next Steps

Build on the success of last year's Welcome Weekend and present institutional memory to create a reference document for Welcome Weekend Events;

- Document the needs and relevant timelines for communications/publicity for staff reference;
- Feed any created documents into the development of the long-term strategic plan (see section "Long Term Strategic Plan").

Mental Wellness

Graduate students comprise a diverse population that fills multiple roles and spaces both on and off campus. Due to the varied and precarious nature of graduate studies, as well as existing within an academic structure with inherent power imbalances, graduate students often face unique circumstances and pressures that can negatively impact their mental wellness. Several other factors that affect graduate student mental wellness usually involve financial strain from rising tuition and stagnant or absent stipends, low housing vacancy, and a sky-rocketing cost of living in the Greater Victoria Region.

Currently at the University of Victoria, a distinct lack of graduate student specific resources and a continued social stigma against mental wellness issues aggravate the already-stressful nature of graduate studies. The University of Victoria is coming to the end of its mental health strategy and is seeking a renewal, creating a unique opportunity to create new resources and develop existing policies to encourage a positive change surrounding the culture of academia with regards to mental wellness.

Next Steps

- Seek and connect with the appropriate university services and committees (i.e., Student Mental Health Steering Committee) to develop graduate student specific resources;
- Create an internal Ad Hoc Mental Health Committee to further develop ongoing graduate student-led initiatives;
- For addressing financial factors, please see the “BC Graduate Scholarship” section.

Advocacy

Graduate Student Advocacy Programme

The Graduate Student Advocacy Programme (formerly referred to as the Office of Graduate Student Advocacy) was a major item from the 2016-2017 strategic plan. Due to unforeseen circumstances, there was a delay in addressing this item. The need for stable graduate student advocacy remains, and the number of cases that arise are increasing every year. In short, the GSS currently addresses graduate student advocacy issues where a neutral party - the Ombudsperson - might not be sufficient. Several factors affecting the ability of the GSS to address these issues include limited resources (people and time, advocacy and confidentiality training) and that students often seek GSS assistance as a last resort. To mitigate these issues, the aim of the Graduate Student Advocacy Programme will be to provide trained advocates to assist students in difficult situations. Advocates will represent an individual student’s interests by directing students through university policies, available options, and being present at meetings or proceedings.

Thus far, past research on student advocacy models at similar Canadian institutions has been conducted and the Student Affairs Committee is in the process of analysing two models of student advocacy programmes.

Next Steps

- Identify specific duties, roles, and purposes of the student advocate;
- Consult with university administration, other student unions, and other community members as required;
- In coordination with the relevant GSS Executive, develop a proposal for the establishment of the Graduate Student Advocacy Programme.

Research Assistants’ Legal Status

Graduate student research assistants (RAs) are students who are employed by associates or employees of the University of Victoria. These RAs are often employed by their supervisor and paid via tri-council or other granting agency. Under the current UVic policy (HR6305), Employees Under Externally Funded Grants and Contracts, the RA is an employee of the Supervisor who received the grant.⁶ If RAs experience issues surrounding their employment (e.g., loss of wages, supervisor conflict, etc.), as the grant-holder is deemed the employer, the University will not provide support.

⁶ University of Victoria University Secretary. (1995, May). Employment Under External Funded Grants and Contracts. Victoria, BC: University of Victoria.

The GSS Executive sees this policy as problematic for student wellbeing. A legal briefing obtained on the case law related to the employment status of Research Assistants at other Canadian universities revealed that universities were ruled to be the employer.⁷ During the 2016-2017 term, the GSS executive board was invited to revisit this issue with several members of the University executive and the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies. While headway was made, there were no changes to policy HR6305, and graduate student RAs continue to be vulnerable.

Next Steps

- Continue to lobby the relevant parties for changes to policy HR6305 (see also section entitled “Provincial Funding”)
- Draft proposed changes to policy for endorsement from stakeholder groups;
- Update the GSS website and handbook to reflect pertinent information.

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.”⁸ In the past year, the cost of living in the Greater Victoria Region has continued to rise significantly while funding for graduate students remains stagnant.

The BC provincial election occurred May 9th, 2016 and the new government has mandated the Minister of Advanced Education to make movements towards a BC graduate scholarship. The GSS Executive has managed to establish initial connections to MLAs in the Greater Victoria and Island region during the campaigning. Given these factors, this year promises to be an excellent opportunity to continue to push for graduate student financial resources.

Next Steps

- Lobby MLAs to increase awareness of the needs of graduate students;
- Provide suggestions on policy and public budgets (e.g., funding for higher education institutions, an informed and strategic roll out of the BC Graduate Scholarship, etc.) in ways that will assist graduate students in the short and long terms.

⁷ Cedar Law. (2013, October). University of Victoria Research Assistants – Employment Remedies. Legal Briefing, Victoria, BC.

⁸ University of Victoria Graduate Students' Society. (2016). 2016-2017 Strategic Plan. Victoria, BC: University of Victoria Graduate Students' Society. p 7.

Visibility

Increasing Visibility

While ostensibly minor, the goal of increasing visibility is in fact a complex job, requiring extensive consultation with various Committees, maintenance of partnerships, meaningful collaborations, and intellectual and creative labour. Continuing the work initiated in 2016-2017 Strategic Plan, the GSS aims to continue updating its communications to connect and engage with the graduate student community. Having taken some time to reflect on the organization's strengths and weaknesses, the Executive feels that increasing awareness of the organization's history of strong student advocacy and services will help in furthering the reputation of the GSS moving forward. In so doing, the GSS can build on current campus partnerships, find new collaborations, and provide graduate students with a visible sense of community.

Next Steps

- Refresh visible materials, which includes producing a new handbook, and launching a new website and brand;
- Have a strong and stylish visual presence during Orientation and events;
- Develop a social media strategy in consultation with staff.

Governance and Policy

Long-Term Strategic Plan

The GSS has been described as “a medium-sized organization that still operates like a small-sized organization.” The number of services and functions the GSS provides its membership has been recognized as having grown over the years, and the long-term sustainability of the organization's operations must now be critically evaluated in order to maintain this level of work. As a result, the GSS Executive has decided to focus its activities on carrying over and completing the previous year's strategic plan items to the best of its abilities, while committing the remainder of the 2017-2018 term energies to developing a long-term organizational strategic plan.

This long-term plan will determine a long-term vision for the GSS that will allow the organization to grow its capacities sustainably while maintaining the same or greater levels of performance. Much of this work will involve an internal examination of current needs, predicting future needs, what barriers exist, and potential allies.

Next Steps

- Undertake an inspection of the organization's long-term financial health and capacities;
- Create a financial plan, one that will include the creation of financial governance policies and a long-term vision for the restaurant;
- Consult with internal Committees to determine limitations to success, current and future needs.

Graduate Representatives

Volunteers are the foundation of many of the GSS's services, and the volunteers who have stepped forward to serve on the Graduate Representative Council are among the most invaluable. Graduate students from each academic unit elect their representative Councillors annually, and while the GSS Executive does their best to orient and familiarize new Councillors at the start of every term, the yearly turnover proves to be a difficulty for long-term institutional work.

Many Councillors also go on to be involved in other areas of graduate student representation and University governance. In an effort to shorten the learning curve for these student leaders, strengthen internal cohesion, as well as provide a gesture of thanks, the GSS Executive will be focusing on improving the GRC experience in ways big and small.

Next Steps

- Organize a series of University-provided trainings and professional development opportunities for graduate student representatives (i.e., Truth and Reconciliation Commission workshop, Indigenous Cultural Acumen Training, test run the University's new Trans Inclusivity Training, etc.);
- Liaise with the University's Office of Student Affairs to solicit further opportunities;
- Delegate various GRC responsibilities to Councillors, such as time keeping and continuing to provide Committee reports, to develop professionalization and comfort with organizational norms.