

Graduate Students Society Annual Plan 2023-2024

The previous two years have seen the onset and continued impacts of the global COVID-19 Pandemic. Graduate students have been significantly affected by travel restrictions, isolation mandates, and the move to online school. As this board is initiated, many restrictions have been lifted, and general life is shifting towards familiar normals. Reestablishing the trajectory of the Graduate Students Society's advocacy from COVID-related responses to the short and long-term support of the members is foundational to this annual plan. We thank the previous two boards for their ceaseless advocacy in ensuring the safety of our members and access to education for all during the height of the pandemic.

In creating this annual plan, the GSS Board has considered many causes and issues impacting graduate students, particularly those who are vulnerable or marginalized. Critical housing needs, lack of community cohesion, and chronic underfunding represent the most pressing issues University of Victoria graduate students are facing. In identifying these issues, which require both short-term and long-term solutions, the GSS Board has chosen to target advocacy campaigns and direct energy to those goals that are achievable within the board term (April 2022-March 2023) in order to maximize timely impact. We believe that this plan will set up our successors on the next GSS Executive Board for success in improving housing availability, funding equity, and community development.

Events

Due to increased health and safety-based responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by public health authorities, the GSS and political governing bodies in 2020 and 2021 restricted the abilities of the GSS to deliver in-person events and services to students. The isolation imposed on students by well-warranted mandates resulted in deteriorating community mentality for current students and absent foundational connections for incoming students. As a core pillar of the GSS and one of four constitutional mandates, it is imperative to provide engaging community-stimulating events.

Events will be centred on community building to facilitate a sense of comradery, peer support, and inter-faculty cooperation for graduate students. In particular, programming will be designed to promote the engagement of international students, marginalized students, and students with families. Priority in event planning is to broaden the range of events to capture the interest and accessibility of all students. Regular events will occur weekly, biweekly, and monthly to maximize community building through routine availability. Hybridizing of events to provide accessibility to students off-campus or facing other barriers will promote the inclusion of previously underserved members. To foster community, the GSS aims to develop a robust event schedule with accessible, safe, and community-building events.

These will include the return of Wednesday Coffee, a weekly meet-and-greet event with free coffee for GSS members, the re-opening of the Grad House restaurant with regular events like trivia nights, and monthly events organized by the Events Committee.

Housing

In recent years, rental housing costs in Greater Victoria have increased significantly (20% from October 2020 to November 2021, Chek News). In September 2021, student feedback on public forums indicated that high cost (>\$1,600 1 bd, >\$2,600 2 bd, CBC), lack of availability (<1%, 0.2% for 2 bedrooms, VicNews), and scams were causing some students to reconsider attending UVic. These issues are predicted to worsen in the coming school year. Many students that secured accommodation are living in sub-standard and often illegal conditions while attending UVic. The impact of short-term rentals on the vacancy rate is currently under investigation by the City of Victoria and garden suite construction has been legalized in the District of Saanich. These approaches do not address the short-term ramifications of the housing crisis on students.

UVic administration has requested the support of the GSS in petitioning the Provincial Government to allow further debt to cover the cost of building on-campus infrastructure for graduate students. The GSS supports UVic in this approach and will commit to furthering this agenda. We have further been asked to guide UVic administration in the design of the next planned dormitory build: a live-learn space for graduate students. This consultation provides the GSS with opportunities to address both the need for family and mature student housing, as well as dedicated work spaces for graduate students. As a long-term goal and process, this proposal does not address the current housing issues.

We will continue to work with the UVic offices for Campus Planning and Community and Government Relations to petition the municipalities of the southern island to allow for significant long-term increases to the rental housing market, including:

1. Supporting In-Fill (garden suite, small apartment, etc.) Housing in Oak Bay
2. Supporting Secondary Suites (basement suites, etc.) in Saanich
3. Supporting further builds of apartment buildings in Cadboro Bay

To ensure graduate students are not declining positions or forfeiting their studies at UVic due to housing concerns, the GSS will undertake a strategy of letter writing/petitioning campaign, approaching news outlets, and supporting UVic in advocacy with government relations to ensure adequate, affordable, and available housing to UVic Graduate Students.

The primary goals that the GSS seeks are increased rental protections in Provincial and Municipal law, faster response times and better support from the Provincial Residential Tenancy

Board (currently 4-6 month wait for response to concerns), and improved minimum standards for rental units including external inspections of rental spaces for health and safety concerns.

Additionally, we are supporting a petition started by the GSS at the University of British Columbia calling on Minister David Eby, Minister for Housing, to implement a rent freeze for 2023. This call for a rent freeze is supported by GSSes around BC, and we are working with the UVSS to ensure the Capital Regional District is targeted explicitly as a high-cost area.

Communications

Dissemination of information from the GSS to the membership is a prominent issue due to the lack of direct communication tools available. According to the BC Societies Act Section 20 - 1(h):

Records to be kept:

(1)A society must keep the following records:

(h)the society's register of members, organized by different classes of members if different classes exist, including contact information provided by each member;

The current information policy between UVic and the GSS does not provide the GSS with contact information for members as required by the Societies Act. As a result, GSS information must be disseminated through an opt-in bulletin ([link to sign up here](#)), the GSS website, faculty administrative staff (at a low volume), social media, and the marquee letter sign near the bus loop. This does not provide the direct communication required for appropriate contact with membership to ensure services provided by the GSS are accessible.

To bring the GSS in line with the legal requirements of the Societies Act, a new policy will be drafted in cooperation with UVic to ensure contact information for all members will be available to the GSS. An appropriate method for receiving, maintaining, securing, and destroying records will be developed within the policy to ensure no breach of privacy may occur. Updates to the privacy policy of the GSS are under development by staff. Changes to the Societies Act by the Ministry of Finance have been confirmed to the GSS. These updates should ensure that the GSS can meet the members' communication obligations by removing restrictions imposed by the university on how we can send emails to all currently enrolled GSS members.

BC Graduate Scholarship and BC Access Grant

The cost of living for students continues to increase in Victoria. Following prior advocacy efforts by the GSS, we have an opportunity to coordinate with other graduate student societies in BC to improve access to public funding sources. The two specific funding sources we would like to

focus on are the BC Graduate Scholarship and the BC Access Grant. The BC Graduate Scholarship is available only to Canadian citizens and Permanent Residents and is more likely to support students conducting research in STEM fields. The BC Access grant is available to non-Citizen and/or non-PR students who meet the criteria for either low or middle income; however, it is not applicable for graduate students.

Next steps:

The GSS will conduct a campaign, possibly aligned with graduate student orientation, to inform its members about the current availability of the BC Graduate Scholarship. The BC Graduate Scholarship has recently been renewed for two years; however the GSS supports sending a robust slate of applicants to this scholarship to demonstrate the need for this source of funding to become a permanent government program. We are also seeking to increase funding to UVic from \$630,000 to \$750,000.

We will maintain our collaborations with the GSSBC and continue working on expanding the availability of these resources to more significant numbers of students. In particular, the BC Access Grant is a needs-based award that, if available to graduate students, would improve access and equity for graduate students living near or below the poverty line. Fortunately, other board members of GSSBC are interested in this campaign, and we can create a joint action campaign regarding the expansion of these fundings.

RA Employment Status

The role and relative importance of research assistantships (RAs) varies widely in various graduate programs at UVic. Still, it is the view of the GSS that the work completed by students in an RA is a valuable resource to the university as well as the host departments. As such, we would like to move toward employee status for students completing RAs as part of, or in addition to, their graduate degrees. This would bring employment opportunities for graduate students at UVic in line with other research-focused universities that facilitate research training opportunities for graduate students. These RA-ships form an integral part of the professionalization training for research-focused graduate students.

We will collaborate with the UVic EQHR and VP-Research and Innovation departments to make hiring practices for RAs more equitable and transparent through creating a centralized job board for RAs and encouraging principal investigators to apply for a minimum of the living wage for grant-funded RAs.

We aim to promote improved supervisor-employee relationships by advocating for the integration of constructive and accessible materials and workshops for each party. Collaboration with the Ombudsperson will be ongoing to create tools for resolving conflict and improving communication.