



President Report

To: GSA Membership

Presenter: Neela Hassan, GSA President (gsa-president@uwaterloo.ca)

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Summary: The Graduate Student Association-University of Waterloo (GSA-UW) currently serves around 4700 graduate students, offering the following services and programs:

- Political Representation on and off-campus
- Health & Dental Supplementary plans (Including Mental Health)
- GRT & ION Transit UPass
- legal & Tax Aid
- Student Advising and Advocacy
- Graduate House

In 2023-2024, the GSA initiatives were focused on two key areas: improving internal organizational operations and systems and enhancing graduate students' engagement with both the GSA and the University. These efforts translated into establishing suitable systems for hiring, employee onboarding, organizational budgeting, maintaining records of institutional memory, and facilitating more organized and coordinated internal and external communications. Additionally, efforts were made to strengthen relationships with internal partners on campus and promote cross-institutional collaboration with other post-secondary institutions in the region and the City of Waterloo through its Town & Gown initiatives. While these efforts require time to demonstrate their full results, some of the immediate outcomes include strengthened relationships with the University, particularly with Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs (GSPA), increased engagement of graduate students with the GSA Council and Board, and improved collaboration with departmental Graduate Student Associations (dGSAs). The rest of this report outlines some noteworthy initiatives and programs the GSA undertook in 2023-2024.

Ongoing Partnerships

- GSPA - Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs
- Student Success Office
- WUSA
- Writing and Communications Centre
- Alumni Office
- City of Waterloo
- StudentCare
- Grand River Transit



- Organize UW

2023-2024 Accomplishments

- Significant growth of staff members in the last few years (currently 27 members)
- Finalized the 2024-2027 Strategic Plan
- The launch of Graduate Award for Black and Indigenous Students
- Improved student representation in university-wide committees (over 36 committees)
- Enhanced relationships with Indigenous partners/leaders across campus and the appointment of indigenous student representative at the GSA-Council
- Started the process of transitioning to comply with Ontario's Not-for-Profit Corporations Act (ONCA)
- Grad House services (patio renovation, new espresso machine)
- Regular consultations with graduate students
- Improved SLC office and Grad Lounge operations
- Negotiated a Funding Increase of 4.5% (primarily proposed as 4%)

Advocacy

Equity: We have undertaken various initiatives to continue the GSA's commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. The efforts include hosting the BIPOC Collective Meetings, relaunching the Graduate Award for Black & Indigenous Scholarship (GABIS) for the second time to address feedback for increased funding, and collaborating with QTWell for a social event supporting the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. The successful launch of GABIS in February and the organization of events such as the Black Student Social for Black History Month and a tote bag painting event for International Women's Day are some of the initiatives taken to advance equity and inclusion, empowering marginalized communities, and nurturing a supportive campus culture.

Housing: Over the past year, The GSA has undertaken various initiatives to support graduate students and address their housing concerns. The GSA's housing coordinator actively participated in the Region of Waterloo's Housing Town and Gown Committee, collaborating with other post-secondary representatives to compile housing information for incoming students on the Region's website. Additionally, the GSA partnered with Waterloo Region Community Legal Services to provide housing legal drop-in sessions for graduate students with housing-related questions, now offered monthly to accommodate varying participation levels. During the winter 2024 term, the GSA initiated two new projects: focus group consultations and an event for graduate students with families. These consultations, conducted virtually and in person in January 2024, will share results with internal stakeholders to support the GSA's ongoing advocacy for student housing. Furthermore, the GSA facilitated an event for students with families to connect and build networks through collaboration with the Make a Home research project, recognizing this underserved population on campus.

International Students: The International Student portfolio undertook various events and initiatives to enhance support for the international student community. These efforts included organizing a garage sale, hosting mixers and drop-in sessions at the Graduate Lounge to welcome and assist new international students, and arranging various social events at the Graduate House to provide opportunities for socializing and networking.



Advising: The GSA continues to offer graduate students to provide support through one-on-one advising and regular policy-related awareness posts on social media platforms. In 2023-2024, the GSA supported an average of 1-2 students through its Advising services.

Administration

Engagement: In 2023-2024, the GSA aimed to enhance the student experience by fostering closer relationships with each departmental GSA (dGSA). This initiative included promoting transparency regarding dGSA termly expenses and subsequently releasing funding for eligible dGSAs in good standing. Termly meetings have been established to allow dGSAs to voice their concerns and work towards solutions. At the individual level, GSA offered volunteer opportunities in social and wellness events, and there is ongoing exploration into the opportunity for GSA representatives to participate in various committees, enabling students to advocate for positive change.

Elections: Over the past year, the GSA Elections portfolio has been dedicated to ensuring the successful election and training of new councillors to serve a 12-month term as their department's representative in the GSA council. This involved facilitating 20-25 termly elections in each department and ensuring that the most suitable candidate was elected to represent their department effectively. Thorough onboarding processes were implemented to prepare councillors for their roles within the council. Being part of the council provided an invaluable opportunity for student voices to be heard and considered in university processes, including policy amendments, bylaws, and decisions directly impacting students, such as setting a minimum PhD funding recommendation.

Events: In 2023-2024, the GSA organized events focused on nurturing our graduate students' social and wellness experiences. We aimed to host 5-8 termly events reaching various niches within our student community, creating a safe and welcoming environment while fostering new connections. These events included mental health workshops, fun activities like painting pots for plants, archery, rock-climbing for physical well-being, and a free mason jar soup day providing ingredients for home-cooked meals. Socially, we organized termly speed friending events, hot chocolate sessions, and cookie decorating, offering students opportunities to meet and engage with peers from other departments and faculties. Notably, the events portfolio collaborated with the COMMS team to launch the first GSA Semi-Formal event, "A Midnight Scholar's Soirée," open to all graduate students as a celebration after months of hard work in their programs.

Communications

The GSA Communications team has actively enhanced communication channels to better serve the graduate student community. This included a comprehensive website restructuring to ensure easy navigation and accessibility, allowing students to find relevant information efficiently. Additionally, a rebranding effort has been undertaken to present a fresh and cohesive identity for the organization, reflecting its values and objectives. Furthermore, the team has implemented a regular newsletter to the graduate student community, providing updates on events, initiatives, and essential information, fostering better engagement and communication among students and the GSA. In addition, we have created pamphlets outlining the main services offered by the GSA, ensuring that students are informed about the resources available to them.



Internal Operations

- Data storage migration to Sharepoint as a more secure location using the Universities system
- Developing partnerships with WUSA to increase the GSA financial support for Food Support Service
- Revamped onboarding training for staff, councilors and directors